

"Blow ye the Trumpet and warn the People."

"The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds."

"Take the Sword of the Spirit which is The Word of God."

Founded in 1929 by Geo. R. Brunk I

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THE SWORD AND TRUMPET monthly magazine is a faith ministry directed by a Board representing various constituencies of the Mennonite Church. It is committed to defending, proclaiming, and promoting the whole Gospel of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It emphasizes neglected truth and contends for "the faith which was once delivered to the saints." This publication exposes and opposes doctrinal error which compromises that faith and leads to apostasy.

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IN THIS ISSUE

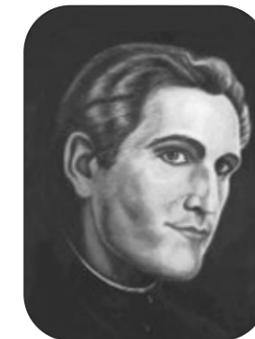
1. PERSON OF THE MONTH: Israel Bowman Good	1
2. The Carols of Christmas	2
3. FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: "Good Tidings of Great Joy"	5
4. THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS	7
5. NEWSLINES	12
6. What's the Big Issue?	15
7. SERMON OF THE MONTH: Money Management	18
8. The Sanctifying Shepherd	20
9. COUNSELING FROM THE WORD: Who's Captivating Whom?	22
10. "Pornified" Men in the Church: How Bad Is It?	26
11. BEGINNING ISSUES: Male and Female He Created Them.....	28
12. SONG OF THE MONTH: "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"	30
13. Social Networking	32
14. Steps to Revival in the Church	34
15. Index	38

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— THE CAROLS OF CHRISTMAS . . . cont'd. —

were modified when it was put to music in 1872. Today it is known as "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." It is a classic carol offering a message of hope that God is in control and that peace will return to the earth. Stanzas four and five:

*And in despair I bowed my head:
 "There is no peace on earth," I said,
 "For hate is strong, and mocks the song
 Of peace on earth, good will to men!"*
*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep;
 God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!
 The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
 With peace on earth, good will to men!*



Joseph Mohr

On December 24, 1818, priest Joseph Mohr (1792-1848) was in trouble. He needed a hymn for the midnight Christmas Eve service at St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria. The story goes that the organ of his church was bro-

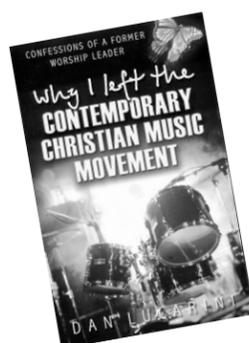
ken. So he walked more than a mile in the cold to the neighboring town of Arnsdorf to visit Franz Gruber (1787-1863), the church's organist and choirmaster. Two years earlier, in 1816, Mohr had written a simple poem. He hoped his friend could put it to music.

According to popular legend, Gruber composed an uncomplicated melody arranged for two solo voices, choir, and guitar. Just in time for the midnight service on a snowy evening in 1818, the most famous Christmas carol of all time was sung. It literally became a song that was to be heard around the world: "Stille Nacht," or "Silent Night." The song has been translated into a multitude of languages. Its dominant message of heavenly peace has crossed all borders and cultures, and it has conquered the hearts of people everywhere. Stanza three:

*Silent night! Holy night!
 Son of God, love's pure light.
 Radiant beams from Thy holy face
 With the dawn of redeeming grace,
 Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,
 Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.* ■

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Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement



by Dan Lucarini

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Person of the Month:

Israel Bowman Good (1861-1945)



In the year 1861, Israel Bowman Good (later referred to as "I. B. Good") was born southwest of Bowmansville, Pennsylvania, to John H. and Lavina Bowman Good.

Good's only schooling was received at the Good School near Center Church.

In the year 1878, at the age of 17, Israel Good took and passed the qualifying teacher examination. As a result, he immediately began teaching at Conestoga and later taught at various schools in Earl Township.

As a youth Israel did not think much of religion and he and some of his friends were regarded as atheists.

On September 8, 1885, at the age of 24, Israel Good married Fannie Witmer. The Lord eventually blessed their home with two sons and two daughters.

The family first lived near Blue Ball but by 1889 they had moved to east of Union Grove.

In 1898 Good, at the age of 37, was asked to become the principal of the Terre Hill School. Along with his principal duties he also instructed a school for training teachers.

The next year, having been convinced by the marvels of creation that there must indeed be a Creator, Israel and Fannie both accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Israel was now 38 years of age. The Goods were then baptized and became members at Weaverland. Brother Good became active in Sunday school work and the next year started having Sunday school teachers' meetings in homes.

Four years later, on December 17, 1903, Israel Good was ordained as minister at Weaverland. He became part of a growing ministry who had great influence because he spoke English, promoted the Sunday school and Bible reading for the youth, and was mission-minded as well.

By 1904 the Sunday school meetings for teachers, which became known as the Goodville Teachers' Meeting, expanded and I. B. Good's name was on the program for the all-day November 22nd meeting.

That same year I. B., after more than twenty years of teaching, retired from the rigors of his profession in order to farm. Two years later, on April 1, 1906, at the age of 45, Brother Good bought his own farm.

At this time, in Lancaster Conference, several men were feeling the call to evangelism—I. B. Good being one of them. At his meetings in River Corner in 1909 it is reported that 43 people were converted to Christ. Good was widely used in the following years and was considered as one of the leading evangelists in the conference with reported conversions of over 1,000.

Brother Good was an intellectual, though he did not have a lot of formal schooling. Weaverland considered him a liberal thinker for the time period. Apparently a man of wisdom, he was exacting, could make and follow through on good decisions, and would provoke thought in others.

With a heart and concern for young people, Israel Good organized the Weaverland Young People's Meeting in 1912.

(continued on page 6)

The Carols of Christmas

by Peter Colón

It began with praise! “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!” (Luke 2:14). Since then, the birth of Jesus the Messiah has inspired many wonderful songs. Although some would argue that singing carols began with the angel’s pronouncement in Bethlehem, the exact origin of the Christmas-carol tradition remains a mystery.

The word *carol* comes from the Italian word *carolare*. It refers to a “circle dance” accompanied by songs of praise and joy. However, these melodies were actually associated with Celtic pagan fertility rites and festivities of medieval Europe. Later, as churches were established, carols—with pagan words and sentiments replaced—were incorporated into Christian liturgy. At first only the priests and choirs sang them in Latin. But by the end of the Middle Ages, the tunes were fused with common folk songs; and traveling singers and shows throughout Europe popularized the carol.

According to church tradition, Christmas carols should adhere strictly to Luke’s narrative, which has three distinct points: the proclamation of an angel of the Lord, the chorus of the multitudes of angels, and the response of the shepherds.

Today Christmas without carols is almost unimaginable. The histories behind many known songs are lost in obscurity. However,

for some, knowing their amazing stories will make the carols all the more dear.

Irish poet James Montgomery (1771-1854) was six years old when his Moravian missionary parents died in the West Indies.



James Montgomery

Astonishingly, at age seven he began seminary training at Yorkshire near Leeds, England. There he made a public profession of faith and united with the Moravian Church. As he grew, he began writing poetry and became active in foreign missions and the abolition of slavery. In 1816 he penned the words to the familiar carol “Angels From the Realms of Glory.” His missionary heart is seen in stanza one by his call to the angels to tell the whole world about Jesus’ birth:

*Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o’er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation’s story,
Now proclaim Messiah’s birth:
Come and worship,
Come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King!*

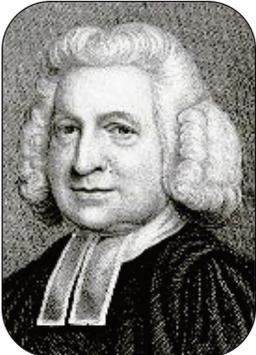
John Byron (1692-1763) truly loved his little daughter, Dorothy. One day, using his own system of shorthand, he penned some choice words for her. (His shorthand system later became the Universal English Short-



John Byron

hand method.) When Dorothy awoke on Christmas morning 1745, she found the poem among her gifts. The original title was “Christmas Day for Dolly.” Later, when music was added, it was changed to “Christians, Awake, Salute the Happy Morn!” His inspiration was Luke 2:10, when an angel of the Lord said, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” Stanza two:

Then to the watchful shepherds it was told
 Who heard the angelic herald's voice:
 "Behold,
 I bring good tidings of a Saviour's birth
 To you and all the nations upon earth.
 This day hath God fulfilled
 His promised word;
 This day is born a Saviour, Christ the
 Lord.



Charles Wesley

There is at least one author and one composer who today might not recognize a carol they both helped pen. Charles Wesley (1707-1788), brother of John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church, was a great hymn writer. When

the English Puritan parliament came to power in the 17th century, it had abolished Christmas festivities as too pagan and worldly. Eventually the church was left with a void of hymns and carols. To help fill this need, Charles wrote his most famous carol that opened with the words *Hark, how the welkin (heaven) rings*. But over Wesley's objections, his friend, the great revivalist George Whitefield, changed the words to *Hark the herald angels sing*. Later, in 1840, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), a Jewish believer in Jesus, composed a secular cantata to celebrate Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press.

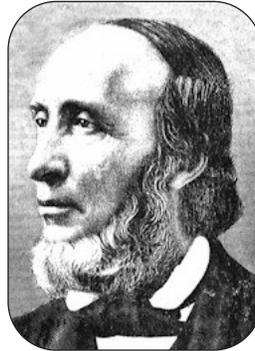
In 1855 English musician William H. Cummings put Wesley's words and Mendelssohn's music together to create the well-known carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Through this combination, the fundamentals of the faith—the virgin birth, the incarnation, and eternal life through Jesus Christ—are reaffirmed in the hearts of the faithful even today. Stanza one:

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn King;
 Peace on earth and mercy mild;
 God and sinners reconciled."*

*Joyful, all ye nations rise;
 Join the triumph of the skies,
 With the angelic host proclaim,
 "Christ is born in Bethlehem."
 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn King!"*

The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) had ended.

But racial and political skirmishes waged throughout the frontier of the United States. In 1849 a Unitarian minister in Wayland, Massachusetts, was encouraged to write a carol. As



Edmund Sears

a "humanist," Edmund Sears specifically emphasized the social significance of the "on earth peace, goodwill toward men" message. His tune was later put to a traditional English melody, and the familiar carol "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" was introduced. The fourth and final stanza anticipates the peace on earth that shall come someday:

*For lo! the days are hast'ning on,
 By prophet bards foretold,
 When with the ever-circling years
 Comes round the age of gold;
 When peace shall over all the earth
 Its ancient splendors fling,
 And the whole world give back the song
 Which now the angels sing.*

A 15-year-old boy complained to his father that church hymns were boring and meaningless. His father, a member of a strict Independent Congregational church, challenged his son, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), to do better. At 18 Isaac wrote his first hymn. By the end of his life, he had written more than 700. He is considered the father of English hymnody.

In 1719 God impressed Psalm 98 on Isaac's heart. He wrote only the words to his carol, called "Joy to the World." In 1839 Lowell Mason, an American composer and music educator, took the lyrics and wove



Issac Watts

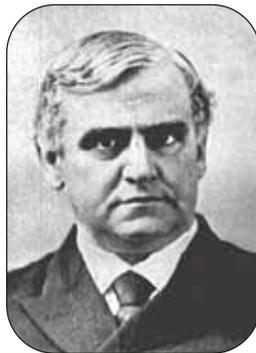
them into two musical phrases from George Frederick Handel's (1684-1759) "Messiah, Lift Up Your Head" and "Comfort Ye." The result is the familiar tune used today. Of all the sacred carols, "Joy to the World" is perhaps the most uplifting declaration of the Christmas message. It speaks of Messiah's First and Second Comings. Stanzas one through four:

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,
And heav'n and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills,
and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace;
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.*

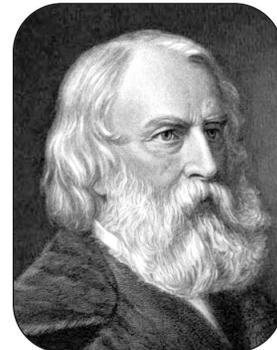


Phillips Brooks

The organist at Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, could not sleep. His pastor, the Rector Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), had penned a poem in 1865 when he had visited Bethlehem. Now, in preparation for a spe-

cial Christmas service for children, Lewis H. Redner (1830-1908) was asked to compose a simple melody for the poem. He struggled all night. Tired, he fell asleep. The story goes that during the night, he awoke with "an angel strain" sounding in his ears. He immediately jotted down the melody, which he called "a gift from Heaven." Later that day, in December 1867, the children's choir of the church introduced the modest and now classic "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Interestingly, people outside the church did not learn of the carol until it was published in a newspaper 10 years later! Stanza one:

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



Henry W. Longfellow

A mood of severe melancholy overtook American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His wife had accidentally set her clothes on fire while lighting candles and died in 1861. The American Civil War had broken

out in April the same year. Longfellow's oldest son ran off and enlisted in the Union Army. On November 27, 1863, while in a skirmish during the battle of New Hope Church, Virginia, 17-year-old Lt. Charles Appleton Longfellow was severely wounded. His father brought him home to care for him.

Reflecting on all the horrors associated with the bloody conflict and the wounding of his son, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sat at his desk on Christmas Eve 1863 and penned a poem he called "Christmas Bells." Originally, it was a strong antiwar tune. But later some of his political partisan phrases

(continued on page 45)

From the Editor's Desk



Paul M. Emerson

GUEST EDITORIAL

“Good Tidings of Great Joy”

by Glenn E. Auker

More than two millennia ago, an angelic messenger proclaimed to humble shepherds the wonderful message, “I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10). The angel also proclaimed the joyful news that Christ the Lord had been born. This wonderful message was then confirmed by a host of angels praising God in glorious harmony.

Even before the angel brought these glad tidings, God had revealed to some of the faithful that Christ’s advent was very near. Among these was Zacharias the priest, the father of John the Baptist. Before Christ’s birth, he rejoiced to see by faith the rising of the “dayspring from on high.” Being filled with the Holy Ghost after John’s miraculous birth, Zacharias prophesied concerning the joyful blessings signified by the coming of Christ (Luke 1:68-79). Why was this message one that brought such great hope and joy to this priest of God? Why does it give us abundant cause to rejoice today?

God “*hath visited and redeemed his people. . . . The dayspring from on high hath visited us*” (Luke 1:68, 78). Zacharias both

began and concluded his prophetic psalm with joyful praise. Christ’s coming is supreme evidence that God has been mindful of man and has visited him. About four hundred years had passed since God had last spoken “by the mouth of his holy prophets.” Now He visited mankind in a far more glorious way by sending His Son Jesus Christ. God’s work of mercy toward mankind was continuing and still continues today.

God “*hath raised up an horn of salvation for us*” (Luke 1:69). Although Zacharias’s prophecy focused on Israel, the angel proclaimed to the shepherds good tidings “which shall be to all people.” The message of Christ’s coming signified that salvation was being offered to “whosoever will.” Before Christ’s coming, the world was very dark because of man’s sin. Because of Christ’s coming, that dark world now contains the glorious light of the Gospel of Christ Jesus. The “horn of salvation” that God has raised up, everlasting life, is available to all who believe (John 3:16).

God has fulfilled His promise spoken “*by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began*” (Luke 1:70).

Zacharias rejoiced that the imminent coming of Christ signified the imminent fulfilling of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. God, in mercy, had remembered His holy covenant (1:72). How great Zacharias's joy as he realized that he was witnessing the early dawning of the fulfillment of those precious prophecies! How great our joy as the significance of His coming dawns in our hearts! How glorious to realize that all the prophecies regarding God's work with His people will surely come to pass!

God has opened the way "*that we should be saved from our enemies*" (Luke 1:71). The work of Christ has opened the way to deliverance from the power of Satan, "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). Christ's coming as Saviour signified deliverance from the guilt of sin and its power today and from eternal death and the presence of sin in eternity. As we faithfully remain in the love of God, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38, 39).

God has opened the way that we "*might serve him without fear, in holiness and righ-*

teousness" (Luke 1:74, 75). God's Old Covenant was glorious, yet the New Covenant brought far more excellent glory (2 Corinthians 3:10). The New Testament provides the Sacrifice for sin that the Old Testament sacrifices anticipated. It provides for us a perfect love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18). We can come to the throne of grace with confidence rather than needing to remain separated from God's presence (Hebrews 4:16). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit calls us to a higher standard of holiness and provides the power for us to fulfill that high calling.

We, like Zacharias, can rejoice that God has visited His people in mercy. We have the privilege in this life to receive the horn of salvation, which God so graciously offers to us through Christ. The coming of Christ includes the call and the power to follow a higher standard of holiness as we present our bodies a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1, 2). As the Day Star has arisen in our hearts, we are prepared, by grace, to joyfully show forth the glorious Gospel of Christ Jesus to those that still sit in darkness, and to eagerly anticipate the glorious reappearing of our Lord Jesus Christ from Heaven. ■

—Reprinted with permission from *The Eastern Mennonite Testimony*, December 2008.

— ISRAEL BOWMAN GOOD . . . cont'd. —

Once World War I broke out Good and another brother were appointed by Lancaster Conference to the Peace Problems and Camp Visitation Committee. Over the years, Good had ties with some local politicians who helped with the matter of the CO issue. Brother Good, along with two other ministers, met with the Secretary of War, Newton Baker, in Washington, D.C., to make their nonresistance belief clear, while affirming their loyalty to America and its government. Good visited the COs in their camps. Congressman Griest from Lancaster County apparently allowed Brother Good to help draft the wording for legislation to get permission for the COs to work on farms to fulfill their service rather than sitting in their camps with nothing to do. The legislation passed and permission was granted for the request. Israel Good also argued for release of a draftee who had been ordained a minister in 1917. The release was given. After the war Good was rejoicing that so many of the Mennonite young men had stood firm in their belief of nonresistance. During World War II Congressman Kinzer, a former student of Good's, was a great help with the CO issue.

In 1922, at the request of the Weaverland Mission Committee, Brother I. B. opened Loag's Corner and in 1926 he helped with the dedication of the Reading Mission.

In 1925, I. B. Good had a hand in the formation of the Goodville Mutual Casualty Company. The name of Israel Bowman Good was placed in the lot for bishop twice but he was not chosen.

(continued on page 19)

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS



A Devotional Commentary



by David L. Burkholder

Introduction to Winter Quarter's Lessons

The lessons for the winter quarter, December–February, are all taken from the Gospel of Matthew with the exception of one (December 13). These lessons all focus on “Christ, the Fulfillment.” They point to Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation. That overall theme should be kept in mind as we study the individual lessons. A reading and rereading of the Book of Matthew throughout the quarter will help to rivet this theme in our minds as we follow Jesus from prediction, through birth and ministry to the eve of His betrayal and crucifixion.

December’s lessons focus on the historical Jesus—prophecies and birth. January’s focus on evidences of Jesus as Messiah. February’s share testimonies to Jesus’ Messiahship by those whose lives were touched and changed through their contact with Him.

As we study these Scriptures let’s allow them to touch and change our lives and reaffirm our understanding of God’s plan worked out through His Son who is our Saviour.

Brief teacher helps will again be included at the end of each lesson.

DECEMBER 6, 2009

Of the Lineage of David

Ruth 4:13-17; Matthew 1:1-6, 16, 17

It is important that we know where we have come from—our lineage, our heritage—because it helps us understand who we are and how we came to the place we are in life. It also help us develop respect for those in our past whose sacrifices have enabled us to become what we are. It should also help us see and develop the potential we carry for being a blessing and a challenge to the generations who follow us.

In this our first lesson on “Christ, the Fulfillment,” we learn of Jesus’ lineage and heritage. It was important for Matthew’s readers to know of Jesus’ human heritage. The Jews put much emphasis on lineage so Matthew, writing primarily to a Jewish

audience, started at the beginning, with Abraham, and worked his way generation after generation to Jesus.

Our first section of verses from Ruth establishes Jesus’ human lineage from the Old Testament writings. At least 14 times in the New Testament Jesus is referred to as the “Son of David.” These verses establish that link starting with David’s grandfather, Obed, born to Boaz and Ruth, the Moabitess.

It seems as though God was honoring Ruth’s choice to be identified with the people of God, as well as indicating the broad reach her offspring would have in offering redemption to all men, that she, a non-Israelite, was included in His lineage.

Naomi’s townswomen recognized in the birth of her grandson a kinsman-redeemer, one who could succor and care for her in her old age. They also gave high praise for Ruth,

declaring her to be “better [to Naomi] than seven sons.” Naomi became nursemaid to the child, named Obed (servant) by the townswomen in indication of his future role in Naomi’s life. Obed’s larger role was that of being grandfather to King David and thus figuring in the lineage of David’s Son, Christ the Messiah.

Matthew wishes to firmly establish Jesus the Messiah’s Jewish roots, so he begins his genealogy with two of the most important figures in Jewish history, Abraham and David. Abraham was revered as the father of the nation; David was looked up to as perhaps their greatest king and progenitor of the One who would reign upon his throne for ever and ever (see Gen. 22:18; Isa. 9:7; Luke 1:30-33).

Matthew breaks the genealogical record into three groups of 14 generations, obviously naming only significant persons in the lineage. What is most intriguing is his inclusion of four women, three of whom certainly had little to commend them in terms of moral rectitude. But doesn’t that in itself show us something of the breadth of God’s love and mercy? Certainly. It gives hope in showing that no one is beyond His reach of love and compassion and usefulness to His cause.

Matthew highlights three significant eras in Israel’s history—from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, from the exile to the Christ. Matthew was writing to convince the Jews that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Therefore he uses established facts in the history of Israel and from the prophetic writings as convincing evidence that this Jesus of whom he is writing was indeed the Promised One.

Matthew presented convincing evidence of Jesus as Messiah by establishing His genealogical record. Not only was He God’s Son; He was also a son of David and descendant of Abraham. That should assure His credentials in the Jewish mind.

For thought and discussion

1. Why is it important to know our ancestry? What does it teach us?
2. Can you think back to an ancestor who has played a significant role in your life?

Thank God for faithful ones in the past who have paved the way for us today.

3. Why do you suppose God chose non-Jews and individuals of less than sterling character to be included in the human lineage of His Son? Discuss.
4. It will be helpful to your study to look up some of the Old Testament references regarding this Son of David spoken of by the prophets.
5. It is true that “God has no grandchildren.” But where would we be without a rich heritage of faith? Allow this lesson to impress you with a concern to be faithful for the benefit of future generations.

Help for teachers

Lesson emphasis: To see the importance of a rich spiritual heritage and of continuing that heritage for the benefit of future generations.

Key verse: Ruth 4:14

DECEMBER 13, 2009

Messiah’s Birth Foretold

Isaiah 7:10-17; Luke 1:26-38

Isaiah is often referred to as the Messianic Prophet for his repeated references to the coming Messiah. Today’s passage is one of these. Judah, the “house of David,” was under threat by the confederacy of Syria and the Northern Kingdom, identified here as Ephraim. King Ahaz of Judah was understandably concerned and was apparently looking to Assyria for help.

Isaiah’s message to Ahaz was that he should depend on the Lord and that those threatening from the North would ultimately be defeated by Assyria and that “the house of David” would not be utterly annihilated as would their northern neighbors. As proof of this Isaiah told Ahaz to “ask a sign of the Lord God.” Ahaz refused, perhaps because he did not himself enjoy a good relationship with the “God of Israel.”

Isaiah then stated that “the Lord himself shall give you a sign.” He went on to declare that “a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,

and [she] shall call his name Immanuel [God with us].” How all of this prediction fits into the historical setting is a bit difficult to determine and is not especially relevant to the thrust of today’s lesson. What is important to note is that Isaiah’s prediction refers to a future extraordinary and miraculous event that plays out in the New Testament setting and specifically in our lesson portion from Luke 1.

Isaiah was here prophesying that in spite of calamity (v. 17), the house of David, through which would come God’s ultimate gift of a Deliverer, would survive. The proof of which, though not seen for many generations, would be the visible presence of “God with us” in the person of the virgin’s Son.

As we turn to our passage from Luke we see the beginning of the outworking of Isaiah’s prophecy. Once again the angel Gabriel plays a significant role in announcing God’s plan (see v. 19). Isaiah certainly didn’t understand all he prophesied. Neither did Gabriel. But how blessed we are to be able to see the fulfillment of prophecies over vast stretches of time. Certainly these should strengthen our faith.

Gabriel’s announcement was stunning to Mary. Blessed of the Lord? A child—from a virgin? Son of the Highest? The kingdom of David? An everlasting reign? Mary had reason to question what all of this meant. And who was she, a simple peasant girl, a nobody, to merit such favor? Mary’s questions were legitimate but the angel calmed her fears and assured her that this was all of God.

Though Mary did not comprehend it all, she willingly submitted her apprehensions, her fears, her very life, to the will of God. As confirmation of God’s ability to do the unimaginable, the angel informed Mary that her cousin Elisabeth, formerly barren, was now with child in her old age. After securing Mary’s commitment, the angel left her to ponder on her own the strange and troubling words he had spoken.

Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, was destined to participate in the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, given some 700 years before. Certainly we call Mary blessed and rejoice

in her commitment to participate in God’s great plan. And our hearts are stirred, too, as we observe the literal fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy to the letter after many centuries of time.

Truly our God is great. He is faithful to His promises. He uses unassuming individuals and He has a great plan for all mankind. Praise Him.

For thought and discussion

1. A review of the historical setting of Isaiah 7 will help you to better understand Isaiah’s message to King Ahaz.
2. Ponder the many “words from the Lord” spoken by Isaiah (and other prophets), which they did not understand nor live to see fulfilled. What motivated their ministry?
3. What does our observance of the fulfillment of these biblical prophecies mean for us?
4. Why did God choose Mary to be participant in His plan? What was key to Mary’s usefulness? How about you?
5. What is the significance of the virgin birth to our understanding of God’s plan of salvation? Explore.

Help for teachers

Lesson emphasis: The literal fulfillment of biblical prophecies. A secondary theme could be God’s choice and use of willing individuals to forward His plan.

Key verses: Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:31-33

DECEMBER 20, 2009

The Birth of Jesus, the Christ

Matthew 1:18-25

The fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy was close at hand. The virgin Mary had given her consent to be used of God to bear His Son. One hurdle remained: Joseph. To provide legitimacy for the child and support for Mary, there needed to be a human father-figure in the picture. Mary and Joseph were betrothed in marriage, but Mary, seemingly, had been unfaithful. Joseph, a just and

upright man, was minded to put her away, divorce her quietly, so as not to cause undue disturbance or humiliation.

Though obviously unsettled by Mary's pregnancy, Joseph was not a harsh, unfeeling person. And isn't this why he was chosen to be guardian of the Son of God? Under Jewish law the yearlong betrothal was a serious and binding agreement and could be severed only by formal divorce. This Joseph was prepared to do until an angel appeared to him in a dream, explained the situation with Mary, and encouraged him to follow through with his commitment to her.

Notice that Joseph is addressed as the son of David (verse 20; see also verses 1 and 17). This was significant in establishing his "son" in the lineage of David as prophesied beforehand, and thus giving him legitimacy as the Messiah. Joseph is told by the angel that Mary's pregnancy is the work of God through the Holy Spirit and not the result of an unfaithful alliance with another man. This must have been as difficult for Joseph to comprehend as it was for Mary. (See last Sunday's lesson from Luke 1:26-38.)

To further emphasize the nature and work of the son to be born of Mary, He was given a name before birth, Jesus, meaning Jehovah is salvation. He was to be the long-promised One to deliver His people from the bondage of sin. Furthermore, the angel gave Joseph additional assurance of Jesus' divinity and the fulfillment of God's promise by identifying this special son with Isaiah's prophecy some 700 years previously. His betrothed Mary was to be the channel of God's blessing upon mankind. She was to deliver a Son who would be known as Emmanuel, God with us.

Though undoubtedly filled with uncertainty and apprehension, Joseph responded in obedience to the angel's message and took Mary to be his wife. He became her protector and guardian and lived with her honorably and without sexual contact until after the birth of her miraculous Son. We are thus assured that Jesus was indeed born of a virgin as foretold by Isaiah.

Though submissive to God's will in this

experience, we can easily imagine the wonder, the fears, and the questions shared by this special couple. There was no doubt some social stigma attached. How could they convince their neighbors that this coming child was actually the Son of God, destined to save them all from their sins?

Regardless of the hurt and ostracism they may have faced, Joseph and Mary remained steadfast in their commitment to each other and firm in their faith in God. Here was a special child to be placed in their care. Here also was a special couple, ordinary people called and committed to a special task by the God of Heaven. Thank God for them and their commitment.

For thought and discussion

1. A study of the marriage and divorce laws among the Jews will help your understanding of Joseph and Mary's dilemma.
2. Why do you suppose God chose to send His Son to earth this way, and why He chose ordinary people to be His guardian? Discuss.
3. Why is the virgin birth an essential tenet of our faith?
4. Has God ever asked you to do some seemingly very difficult task? How did you respond, and what were the results?
5. As we look at Joseph and Mary we should realize that God can use ordinary people in His program. What was the key to Joseph and Mary's usefulness? Discuss.

Help for teachers

Lesson emphasis: Rejoice in God's great gift of a Saviour. *Secondary emphasis:* Willing obedience to God's call for commitment to serve Him.

Key verses: 23 and 24

DECEMBER 27, 2009

Reactions to Jesus' Birth

Matthew 2:1, 2, 7-11, 16-23

(Read entire chapter for context.)

The birth of Jesus caused a variety of reactions. In Luke's account we see the joy

of the humble shepherds and their exuberant sharing of this good news. In today's lesson we see the visit by the far-traveling Magi with their rich gifts. But here we also see the jealous reaction of King Herod and his futile attempt to destroy what he saw as a potential threat to his throne. We also witness again the prompt obedience of Joseph to the angel's charge to take the young child to Egypt for preservation from Herod's wrath.

Little is known of the "wise men from the east." They were likely either from Persia or Arabia where contact with Jews would have led to their knowledge of a coming king, a special person. These men undoubtedly studied the heavens and upon seeing some significant astrological phenomenon set out for the logical place a Jewish king would be born, the capital city of Jerusalem.

Herod was upset to learn of this potential threat to his throne although he was likely at this point only several years from his death. Upon learning from the Jewish scholars "where Christ should be born" he sent the Magi on their way with orders to report their findings back to him. His hypocrisy was not apparent to them, but God knew the treachery of his heart, so He sent the wise men home a roundabout way.

The Magi, led on their way by a guiding star, rejoiced when it revealed the source of their search. Upon entering the house where the little family now resided, they fell down in homage before this holy child. Their gifts reflected both their status and that of the child. They were undoubtedly men of wealth and their gifts were fit for a king.

To escape Herod's wrath when he discovered he had been ignored by the wise men, and set out on his plan to destroy the two-year-old male children in Bethlehem, the angel spoke again to Joseph and instructed him to take mother and child and flee to Egypt. The approximately 75-mile journey was begun under cover of darkness to avoid detection or suspicion. There were colonies of Jews in Egypt so Joseph and family would have found refuge among their own countrymen.

It is uncertain how long they stayed in

Egypt, but likely several years at least. Upon Herod's death the angel spoke again to Joseph, telling him that it was now safe to return to the land of Israel. Again Joseph responded in obedience and set out on the journey homeward (see Hosea 11:1).

However, upon learning that Herod's wicked son Archelaus reigned in Judea, Joseph hesitated to settle there. Again God spoke to Joseph in a dream and directed him to Galilee where he settled the family in Nazareth, among family and friends. Jesus the child was safe in this more remote, nondescript place (see John 1:45, 46). Nazareth, however insignificant and belittled, was destined to lend its name to the greatest person who ever lived there and to the movement by which His followers would be later identified (see Acts 24:5).

Jesus' birth was greeted by both joy and fear. These two reactions clearly identify the heart attitude of those expressing these emotions. Where there is nothing to fear, joy can readily be expressed. Where fear rules the life there can be no joy.

In this season of the Christ-child's birth, how are you responding to the good news?

For thought and discussion

1. The visit of the wise men is more than just an interesting story. What does it tell us about the One they came to honor and His plan for all mankind? Discuss.
2. Some historical background on Herod will help you better understand his reaction to the birth of the "King of the Jews."
3. Notice throughout this account the sovereign control of God in thwarting the evil intentions of man.
4. Have you noticed Joseph's repeated prompt obedience throughout this account? What lesson(s) does that hold for us?
5. What are proper Christian responses to overt evil in our day? Discuss.

Help for teachers

Lesson emphasis: Reactions to the Saviour reveal attitudes of the heart.

Key verses: 10 and 16 ■

Newslines . . .

by Hans Mast

incidents events occurrences facts illustrations episodes committees vignettes proceedings problems
experiences crises adventures transactions meetings tragedies scoops reports conferences happenings
bulletins questions reports affairs dramas encounters personages actions tidings et cetera

Carter, Obama on Race, ObamaCare

Jimmy Carter stated that, “I think an overwhelming portion of the intensely demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black man, that he’s African American.” Those who are strongly against a socialist health-care system were not impressed that they were being dismissed as racist, when they believed strongly that a socialist health-care system was bad for America. I think this is validated by the same animosity from the Right toward white folks like Sen. Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, and others from the Left that have advocated government-run health care. Obama has been commendably honest on this issue, rebuking Carter by saying, “Are there people out there who don’t like me because of race? I’m sure there are. That’s not the overriding issue here.” Excellently stated.

—Sources: AP, Washington Post

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Unreached People Groups—in Chicago

“LEN ELLYN, Ill. (BP)—Cody Lorance doesn’t knock. He just pushes the door open and ambles into the apartment. A little girl runs to hug him and the rest of her family filters into the room to greet their guest.

“They give each other a traditional South Asian greeting—the palms of their

hands pressed together in front of them—but what they say in Nepali is anything but traditional: ‘Jay Masih,’ which means ‘Victory to the Messiah.’

“Lorance is a church planter in Chicago. Since 2005, he and a five-member team have been working among immigrants in the city. Since they started meeting as a house church four years ago, they have seen the Lord pull together congregations among Nepali, Ethiopian, and Karen people who live in rundown little apartment buildings scattered around Chicago’s western suburbs.

“Lorance makes himself at home, dropping casually onto the couch and peppering family members with questions in their heart language. A young woman brings him a steaming glass of tea that gives off an aroma of cardamom, and Lorance sips it appreciatively. He will sit and chat with the family for hours.

“Back on the street outside, Lorance gestures at the nearby businesses and homes.

“ ‘This is a white, upper-middle-class neighborhood, but these little apartment buildings are chock-full of refugees,’ he points out. ‘So many church people pass by every day and have no idea what’s going on here.’

“The refugees come from all over the world, and some churches are reaching out to them in ministry. Most of the visitors, however, don’t spend the time necessary to develop a real relationship with the refugees.

“This is not a superficial, drive-by ministry. You’ve got to be willing to move beyond the American 30-minute visit,” Lorange said. ‘You’ve got to get past the first cup of tea and eat a couple of meals with them. It takes three-hour, six-hour visits. You have to get to the point where you run out of the Nepali phrases you know and they run out of English—and you still stay with them. You become more a part of their lives—a fixture, a part of the family.’

“‘Chicagoland’ is a gateway to the ends of the earth, Lorange said. Its 9.6 million residents speak a couple of hundred languages—147 officially documented by the public schools—and many of those are the heart languages of overseas people groups that have never heard the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

“‘When the International Mission Board tells us the first church among an unreached people of the world could begin in Chicago, we are overjoyed and looking for partners,’ Draper [director of the Chicago Baptist Association] said. ‘Cody is doing that kind of groundbreaking work.’

“That Nepali congregation is the only organization in the city for Bhutanese Nepalis, Lorange added. When a new family arrives at the airport, the Nepali congregation picks them up and takes them to a home where they enjoy a Nepali meal. They help them get moved into an apartment, work with them on getting the necessities of life in America, and the next Sunday members of that new family usually are in the congregation’s service.

“‘It’s amazing,’ Lorange said. ‘Eighty percent of the Bhutanese Nepalis in our county are in church with us on Sunday, even if they are Hindu.’”

—Excerpt from “Chicago: Gateway to the ends of the earth” (<http://lj.mp/1c9fAO>) in Baptist Press (Thanks to Collier Berkshire for recommending this article.)

U.S. Kills Top Qaeda Militant in Southern Somalia

“NAIROBI, Kenya—American commandos killed one of the most wanted Islamic militants in Africa in a daylight raid in southern Somalia on [September 14], according to American and Somali officials, an indication of the Obama administration’s willingness to use combat troops strategically against Al Qaeda’s growing influence in the region.”

Republicans have worked to paint Obama as soft on national security. This would seem to indicate otherwise.

—First paragraph excerpted from “U.S. Kills Top Qaeda Militant in Southern Somalia” (<http://lj.mp/bZeRb>) in *The New York Times*

Noose Tightens on ACORN

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is a liberal organization that Obama worked for in his “community organizer” days and whom he paid in his presidential campaign to get votes. ACORN’s most prominent specialty is voter registration fraud. Of the 1.3 million voter registrations they submitted in 2008, only 35% were legit, with most of them being rejected for fraud, duplication, etc. ACORN is being prosecuted all across the country for their voter fraud.

However, another of ACORN’s specialties has come to light in recent days. ACORN gives free tax advice. Two conservative activists posed as a pimp and prostitute and visited four ACORN offices across the country to see what kind of advice they would get. They videotaped the responses with a hidden camera. ACORN gave them helpful advice on how to start a house of prostitution, avoid taxes, get new identities for sex slaves smuggled into the U.S., and hide child prostitution.

ACORN has received \$53 million in federal funding since 1994. One of the first versions of the Democrats’ original

stimulus bill included \$100 million earmarked for organizations like ACORN, with ACORN being the leading candidate for receiving it. Republicans defeated that measure. A later version of the bill provided up to \$5.2 billion for ACORN, but Republicans prevailed on that as well. Now that the above videos have been released, both Democrats and Republicans have scrambled to totally defund ACORN from receiving any federal money.

—Sources: *New York Times*, *Acorn.org*, *Wikipedia*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsmax*

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ER Doc Lets Patient Die to Steal His Watch?

A lawsuit filed in San Francisco paints a horrifying story. According to the lawsuit's citation of witnesses, Dr. Enmon stopped trying to resuscitate retired police officer Mr. Kubena when he saw Kubena's Rolex (worth \$67K). One of the nurses noticed the watch was gone from Kubena's wrist and saw a watch-shaped bulge in Enmon's pocket. The nurses called security, but Enmon fled to the parking lot. One of the nurses who followed him saw him throw something into the grass. She led security to that spot where they recovered the watch.

Enmon has been indicted on grand theft charges, but the family is suing Enmon and the hospital for wrongful death. They are particularly suing the hospital for failing to report any of this to the police and trying to pull off a cover-up. The family found out about this incident 11 days after Kubena's death from an anonymous source (a nurse?). Also, because of the furor surrounding the event, the family was not told of Kubena's death until an hour after it had occurred.

Another question in this case is how a retired police officer was able to afford a \$67K watch.

—Sources: *San Francisco Weekly*, *Courthouse News Service*

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Waste Turned Into Oil

New technology has enabled a plant to open in Washington, D.C., that converts plastic waste to oil for \$10 a barrel.

—Source: *Inhabit*

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Hate Crime in Buffalo, NY

In Buffalo, NY, a white highschooler and his black girlfriend had people stop them on the street asking the girl why she had a white instead of black boyfriend, had a group of blacks threaten them, and had paintball pellets shot at them. This harassment culminated with a group of 10-15 blacks attacking the white guy, causing a three-inch gash, broken jaw, bleeding on the brain, and brain swelling. Police are refusing to classify this as a hate crime.

CNN writes, "At first, it didn't affect me the way that it would have if I heard it was a black teen attacked," said the Rev. Darius Pridgen, who spent years fighting for civil rights for African-Americans.

"But after I saw his father on TV pleading with the community to find the assailants, I decided I had to go after the people who beat this kid."

"Pridgen said he felt that the community has turned a collective blind eye to the beating. So he gave a fire-and-brimstone sermon at the True Baptist Church on a Sunday after the attack, appealing to his congregation to help find the culprits.

"He didn't deserve to be beaten this way," Pridgen recalled saying at the service. "If you believe this, put your hands together."

"If it was a black teen, Pridgen said, 'We would have been protesting with flags and everything else.'"

—Excerpt from "Father wants son's beating treated as a hate crime" (<http://j.mp/4BDkT4>) in *CNN*

Feedback: hansmast@hansmast.com

What's the Big Issue?

by Simon Schrock

Here I am, at threescore and twelve, with a flood of memories. The range is from the cornbread-and-milk supper around the Amish family table during the "Great Depression," to the present age of technology with a mobile phone in my pocket that lets me stay in touch with my wife as to being on time for her gourmet supper. Squeezed into these years are a lot of memories of issues being discussed by the people of the church. Memories of overhearing serious discussion when I was a boy, the Sunday after-dinner conversations, and in later years attending public meetings where words of concern were raised. Then, there are my archives with piles of church periodicals and conference papers I'd received over the years.

A brief review of my memories. Not many folks would remember the issues outside the Anabaptist circles of "bobbed hair" and "drive-in" movies. In the Anabaptist-Mennonite arena, the front burner issues were nonconformity and the drift of the church into the mainstream of the world. The argument was that we cannot win the world by being so different. Then it was the woman's head covering. Asking a woman of the world who wanted to be part of the church to wear a covering was too much of a legalistic demand. Then came remarriage after a divorce. As these issues were emerging into harmony with the surrounding culture, the issues of the woman's place and function in the church boiled on the front burner.

Recently the hot butter issue of permitting lesbians and gays into church membership has surfaced in the Mennonite press with a front page article in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* entitled "Open Letter Laments Exclusions of Gays." The

article was about a letter on the web with 100 signatures with the invitation for others to sign. "We are distressed by our church's exclusion of sisters and brothers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Our hope for a church guided by the radical hospitality of Jesus Christ compels us to invite all to confession and healing."

The letters of response were enlightening. In fact, so much so that I have decided the issue is secondary to a greater issue. Most responses made some reference to the Bible or to Jesus. There were definitely two strong-held beliefs expressed. These responses raised the vigorously debated (gay) issue to a different level. Robert Kauffman wrote, "I believe we cannot use the Bible as a legalistic guide to belief and practice." Alongside of this letter was another one representing five persons from Iowa. They stated their belief that the Bible is still "relevant today." Kauffman further stated, "Some have used the Bible as a basis for requiring woman to wear head coverings and not to wear jewelry. I thought we were past that type of literal interpretation. A few passages speak against homosexual behavior, but can we not accept these references in their historical and cultural context?"

The "historical and cultural context" makes the point. Things have changed. It is now acceptable for women to come to worship services with uncovered heads and short shorn hair, and decorating with jewelry is commonplace. Several responses referred to divorce and remarriage, reminding the readers that it is now an accepted practice.

Memory of my teenage years recalls the frequent summertime guests in our home from the Mennonite Publishing House

community. Issues in the church slipped their way into some of the conversations. Comments on the departure of long-held beliefs and practices invaded their vacation time on the Amish farmstead. In later years, I've attended church meetings and conferences on various issues. I've observed conferences and church bodies debating issues and changing their confession of faith. News stories of some of the denomination's conference and conventions appear to be more about getting enough votes to change their statements of belief to fit into the present culture than about being true disciples of Jesus Christ.

As late as 1963, the Mennonite Church Confession of Faith stated, "The New Testament symbols of man's headship are to be his short hair and uncovered head while praying or prophesying, and the symbols of the woman's role are her long hair and veiled head." The statement refers to the Scriptural teaching of 1 Corinthians 11. This statement is no longer a practice of the Mennonite Church.

Years ago I was in a meeting where a group of brethren were discussing concerns within the church. Walter Beachy, former President of Rosedale Bible School, made a point that stayed in my mind. He had been involved in the Faith and Life committee of the Mennonite Church. His observation was that when the church decided that the first part of 1 Corinthians 11 was culturally dated, when it looked at Scripture through culture and decided it was no longer relevant for our time, that opened the floodgates to do the same with any other issues of the Bible. It's like starting down a slippery slope with no end. The readers' comments verify that prophetic insight to be true. . . . That approach to Scripture is now being promoted in relation to the gay issue in the church.

One wonders what the next issue of debate will be? How about admitting prostitute "sisters" or "sexual abusing" brothers into the communion of the church? How about blessing a kleptomaniac? After all, these folks were born with these instincts

and can seldom change.

What have the recent responses on the gay issue done for me? They clearly brought the debated issues to a secondary level. After all these years of debate and discussion on issues, I have concluded the foundation issue is how a person views the Bible. That is the big issue! Do you trust it for your faith and practice? Do you hold the issues under the magnifying glass of the Bible and examine what the Bible says about a subject? Or do you look at the Bible under the issues and try to interpret it through the foggy lenses of culture, historical context, and psychology? Do I have to sort through all of that to decide what part of the Bible I can trust for today's living?

It takes a lot of faith and denial of many Scriptures for me to believe that God continues to change His definition of sin, or His code of righteous living to fit around a given culture or a majority conference vote. "Thou shalt not steal" means just that; it applies to every culture and will be in effect until the end of time. Reference was made to "requiring women to wear head coverings" and being past that literal interpretation. The Scriptures say, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head" (1 Corinthians 11:5). When did God decide this Scripture no longer applies to His people? When was it no longer a dishonor for the Christian woman to pray and worship with an uncovered head?

My memory goes to Scriptures that were implanted in my mind during my younger years. Isaiah wrote: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (40:8). The Lord gave us this reminder through His Prophet Malachi: "For I am the LORD, I change not" (3:6). The New Testament declares, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8).

The cultural and psychological approach to the Bible reminds me of the New Testament warning of those "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." The very thought and idea of

spending a large time of my life wading through culture and history to decide if homosexuality is sin, feels like trying to drive through a dense mountain fog at midnight. For me to get a sense of direction through this sinful world, I need to examine the issues carefully by looking at them through and under the Bible. When I read the Bible through and under the American flag, I get a different impression from looking at the flag under and through the Bible. The Bible is the magnifying glass with which to examine the issues.

Cal Thomas commented on the Episcopal perspective in a July '09 column, "Church of What's Happening Now." But for the Episcopal leadership, biblical reference no longer has the power to persuade, much less to compel them to conform. That's because Episcopal leadership has denied the teachings of Scripture in favor of, well, inclusivity, a word that appears nowhere in Scripture. Even if it did, Episcopal heretics—for that is what they are—would choose another word to make them feel more comfortable, since accommodation with the world seems to be a more important objective than the favor of God.

The "On Faith" page of the August 9, '09 *Washington Post* posed the question, "The Diocese of Los Angeles has nominated two gay Episcopal priests, a woman and a man, as candidates for assistant bishop jobs. If you believe God made human beings in His own image, can you be against the ordination of lesbians and gays in the church?" One published response was by Charles "Chuck" Colson. His response touched on the issue of issues, the Scriptures. "I find myself sharing the conviction of a vast majority of Americans. The Bible is the Word of God. I have studied this long and hard and am both spiritually and intellectually convinced. Therefore, a church that ordains openly gay men or women may belong in the category of religion, but not in the category of the Christian Church. The Episcopal Church, in doing this, loses its biblical legitimacy. It is not Christianity: it is liberalism run amok."

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is roiled in the debate of permitting sexually active gay people to serve in the clergy. Ryan Swartz, a lay leader in a conservative group that opposes the proposal says, "For us, this is not about sex. It's a matter of the authority of the Word."

Once a year I am reminded by Oswald Chambers' devotional, "My Utmost for His Highest," to walk in the light while we have the light. "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you" (John 12:35). Chambers wrote, "If you do not obey the light you have it will turn into darkness." Every step of disobedience is a step down into darkness. Every step of obedience is a step into the light of God. As I observe the various demonstrations and the decisions they make at their conferences and conventions, it seems to me it's another meeting with another step into further darkness.

Now I'm not against learning the manners and customs of the Bible, or against history itself. The New Testament clearly teaches believers to not be ignorant of Old Testament history, and that we have examples written for our admonition to take heed lest we also fall. There is a difference in using history to water down clear teachings of Scripture and learning from history to remain faithfully obedient.

As I reflect on the issues debated in past years and on issues making news today, it's clear that the major issue is your view of the Bible—whether you believe the Bible is relevant today and can be trusted so that you can literally live by its teachings, or do you believe you must sort through the culture of this present world to interpret its meaning?

I'm on the side that the Bible is our word from God and it is the trustworthy guide for my life, including the head covering my wife wears. I'm also of the persuasion that God does not change His will at the wish or vote of the majority. When it began to rain on the earth, the forecast flood came. The eight people who believed God's Word were safely inside the ark. The majority vote failed and they perished, literally, as God said. ■



Sermon of the Month



Each month we will feature a Biblical sermon in this column. We would like to emphasize expository preaching and ask our readers to submit good expositional sermons for consideration. Please send typewritten copies by "snail mail" or email to: Editor, Sword and Trumpet, Box 575, Harrisonburg, VA 22803; swandtrump@verizon.net.

Money Management

by J. Otis Yoder

Some economists claim they can deal with money management in an ethically neutral way simply by noting the degree of utility associated with any goal or project.

However, when any project is implemented, a moral value must be placed upon that project. It cannot simply be judged purely from the standpoint of utility.

This discussion will not focus on the business world. Rather, I will address common people like you and me. It will bring the Bible teaching into the subject of **Money Management** on the personal level.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 we see what the Apostle Paul has to say about money management.

The Apostle Paul brings together several prudent **counsels** we should respect to be successful in money management.

The first counsel,

Be Conscientiously Exemplary.

Here is a challenge; others are watching! The Apostle brings together two of the churches where he was ministering: the churches of Macedonia and the churches of Achaia. One was associated with Philippi and Thessalonica; the other with Corinth. He showed how the churches of Macedonia had exemplified proper management. They went beyond their power.

Note the very interesting collection of words in verse 2: *joy, poverty, riches*. "How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty

abounded unto the riches of their liberality." That is a statement of great worth. It is the challenge he is bringing to the Corinthians, that they, like the Macedonians, should be conscientiously exemplary.

Next, he brings forward their consecration. They willingly went beyond their power. They did it out of a heart of desire. They besought Paul that he would take upon him the ministry of the saints, and they first gave themselves to the Lord. That certainly is a noble, necessary act, a consecration.

Others are watching us. Therefore our conduct should be exemplary. Do it so others can follow you. That's the challenge he brought to the Corinthian churches, to follow the pattern of the Macedonian churches.

A second counsel is this,

Be Conclusively Explicit.

There are certain graces that these Corinthian people had. They abounded, Paul said, "In faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love." That is a nice list. To abound in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, in diligence, and love, is a commendation.

But the Apostle said he wanted Titus to finish in the grace of giving. "That you may abound in this grace also." How would this be accomplished? Think about what Jesus did. Think about how He came, what His condition was. He left the mansions of glory to come to the manger of Bethlehem. "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he

became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.”

Think of the condescension of Jesus: born in a lowly manger, in a little town of Bethlehem, an obscure town, there to come into the world as King of kings and Lord of lords. It’s amazing. Meditate and see how to perform in this way.

It is important to perform even as you profess. So Paul goes on after this backdrop of the ministry of Jesus to tell them it is important not only to be ready, but also to perform; not only to profess, but also to produce. He tells them, “Now therefore perform the doing of it, so there may be a performance also out of that which you have.”

One should be conclusively explicit, not simply spout off at the mouth. Reach down in your pocket. Somebody put it this way, “Put your money where your mouth is!”

We should be conclusive in our performance, explicitly doing what we talk about.

And there’s a third counsel,

Be Confidently Expectant.

This should be based on the willingness of heart. Someone asked a fellow one time, “Sir, if you had \$2,000,000 would you give \$1,000,000 to the Lord?”

“Oh, absolutely, I sure would.”

“Well, if you had \$10,000, would you give \$5,000 to the Lord?”

“I sure would.”

“Well, if you had two pigs, would you give one to the Lord?”

“Ah, you knew I had two pigs, eh?”

You see, it’s not required of a man what he doesn’t have, but it is required of a man what he does have. So it’s based on a willing heart.

This expectancy is also based upon an equality of sharing. The Apostle said, “I am not taking it away from you, for good, but I am taking it away from you because it will come back to you. There will be an equality. I don’t expect you to be burdened and other men eased. No, when you supply their want, then they will supply your want.”

This is equality of sharing. It is based on the blessing of the Lord. “He who gathered little had no lack. And he who gathered more had nothing left over.” God has a way of bringing things together in a beautiful fashion. When you recognize the blessing of God in your life, you can be confidently expectant. We should be confident in management, expecting God to bless us as we faithfully manage our money for God.

In the management of money, then, let us adhere to Paul’s prudent counsels. Let us be conscientiously exemplary, do what we know we ought to do. Others are watching and will take their cues from us. Let us be conclusively explicit; let us do what we talk about doing. And let us be confidently expectant, looking for God’s blessing. As we follow these counsels, He will bless us abundantly. Remember:

**GOD WILL BLESS YOU WHEN YOU
MANAGE YOUR MONEY FOR HIM!**

—Reprinted with permission from *Hope Horizons*, September 2009.

— ISRAEL BOWMAN GOOD . . . cont’d. —

With all the many efforts and endeavors, his local church was still Good’s foremost concern. During his time as a minister he had a special responsibility for the Martindale and Churchtown congregations. With his help and encouragement these congregations began to grow and flourish which brought I. B. great joy.

Much of the theology of that time was shallow but Brother Good was not taken in by it. He was a deep thinker. His sermons were not filled with emotionalism or entertainment. His concern was for spiritual growth in the lives of his church members. He knew that what people needed most was Christ. His influence was not felt in his congregations alone but also in his district and throughout Lancaster Mennonite Conference.

On May 14, 1939, at the age of 78, Good suffered a mild stroke, which curtailed his preaching ministry, but he continued to give counsel and encouragement.

After sixty years of marriage Israel lost his faithful companion, Fannie, to death on February 25, 1945. Seven weeks later on April 17, Israel Bowman Good followed Fannie to Heaven. Brother Good was 84 years of age.

—Gail L. Emerson

The Sanctifying Shepherd

by John MacArthur

There is a growing but false legend that churches are designed for non-believers—a “contextualization movement,” according to David Wells, founded on *sola cultura*, not *sola scriptura*. As a result, true Christianity hides its face, resulting in the death of sanctification. Seeking only numbers and affirmation, he adds, this new evangelicalism uses the culture to attract, with no interest in the deadly poison that lies below the surface of it.

Contextualization is nothing but an overexposure to the world, the flesh, and the devil, leading to a rise in antinomianism. History shows that antinomianism follows hard on the heels of a recovery of the doctrines of grace. Because the doctrines of grace can be pressed hard in the direction that everything is settled and secured, it leads easily to blatant and outrageous antinomianism.

Contextualism of the gospel today has infected the church with the spirit of the age. It has opened the church’s doors wide for worldliness, shallowness, and in some cases a crass party atmosphere. The world now sets the agenda for the church—it has done it musically, and is now doing it in terms of the message. A survey by James Davidson Hunter, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia, found that young evangelicals have become significantly more tolerant of activities once viewed as worldly or immoral, including smoking, using marijuana, attending R-rated movies, and premarital sex.

In *No Place for Truth*, David Wells writes, “The stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now dammed up by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness

because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself. It may be that Christian faith, which has made many alliances with modern culture in the past few decades, is also living in a fool’s paradise, comforting itself about all the things God is doing, while it is losing its character, if not its soul.”

Clearly the New Testament church is focused on godliness and the edification of the saints so that they might reflect the image of Christ. That was Paul’s foundational principle of ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11:29, he asks, “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” In Galatians 4:19 he adds, “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.” The sanctification of God’s people involves agonizing, excruciating pain, in a world without anesthesia. It’s not about how clever you can be to reach the culture by looking like the culture, because then you’ve just opened the sewer and let it seep in.

Today, everything seems directed away from this. We want to get as close to the world as possible. But we don’t need culture to define the life of the church. When Paul says he became all things to all people, he simply means he would make any personal sacrifice to reach a person. Holiness of the church is Paul’s objective, and must be ours. To fulfill this mandate, the shepherd must recognize seven things:

The power of the flesh. Do you understand the power of the flesh, how easily temptation is excited? Your people need to be protected from their own flesh. The battle has to be won on the inside (Romans 7; James 1). I never want to be a person who is used to solicit any kind of

evil in the mind of anyone. Because “whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). That’s the first instruction given to the church—protection from temptation. The church should be a haven, not a place people are tempted.

The power of the world. Whatever you borrow from the world has the potential to corrupt. Friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4; 1 John 2). The last thing you want to do is kick the church doors open and bring the world in—rubbing out the line between the world and the church. I want to build a wall so when you come to church your experience is disconnected from the world.

The power of Satan. “The devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Corinthians 2:11; John 17:15). Shepherds not only feed and water sheep; they also protect them. You never want to be the instrument by which the devil gains access to your flock. The sanctifying shepherd recognizes that his people have a high level of susceptibility to corruption through the world, the flesh, and the devil, to which they’re over-exposed constantly. The battle is fierce in their hearts—at work, at school, watching television, etc. The shepherd must be their protector.

The power of the Scripture. A sanctifying shepherd recognizes the power of the Scriptures to sanctify. “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17; cf. Psalm 119:11; Titus 3:5). We are pruned and purged by the Word, and that is why the shepherd is committed to the exposition of Scripture and thereby unleashing its sanctifying power.

The power of the Holy Spirit. “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall

not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). Being filled with the Spirit basically means to let the Word dwell richly within you (cp. Ephesians 5:18 with Colossians 3:16). As shepherds, we want our people to come under the sanctifying power of the Scripture and the sanctifying power of the Spirit. They go together.

The power of confrontation. There is power in confrontation (Matthew 18:15-17). How can you do that in a church where the members aren’t Christians? That’s impossible by definition. How can you do that in a church where you just want everybody to feel good about being there?

The power of example. Your people know what’s in your heart by what you say. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). You can tell what a man thinks by his speech. Furthermore, when you stand in your pulpit, your people are getting the most sanitized version of you. The real you is not that sanitized! There’s a reality about our fallenness that we don’t need to display. But when you see someone who is openly flagrant, coarse, and profane (and that’s the most sanitized version of him?), the conclusion is obvious.

Christlikeness is the goal of ministry in the church (Ephesians 4:13). Martin Luther, noting that the power of your ministry is inseparable from your character, called antinomian teaching the “crassest error, designed to grind me underfoot and throw the gospel into confusion. Such teaching,” he contended, “kicks the bottom out of the barrel of God’s saving work.” We need to be sure that we understand that we have been called to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2), which means to travail in pain, until they come to Christlikeness.

My prayer for you is that you would be sanctifying shepherds. ■

—Reprinted with permission from *The Master’s Mantle*, Summer 2009.



Counseling From the Word

Who's Captivating Whom?

by Donna Thoennes

A Review of John and Staci Eldredge's *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul*

John and Staci Eldredge recently wrote *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul* (Thomas Nelson, 2005), and already the female counterpart to John Eldredge's best-selling *Wild at Heart* (Thomas Nelson, 2001) promises to be as popular as the version targeting men. The high school and college women in my life are carrying it with them. Just what is it about this book that quickly captivates young women?

Three potential reasons come to mind. Perhaps it is the clear message that God is accessible and knowable. They emphasize the immanence of God who is personal and involved in the daily lives of His people. Surely this is comforting to the reader.

Perhaps readers are also refreshed by the authors' emphasis on the wonderful, unique creation that is *woman*. There is no hint in this work of blurring the differences between the genders. On the contrary, women are special, beautiful, and responsible to reflect certain aspects of God's character. In an age when distinction between the genders is unpopular and when the idea that the Creator may have intended these distinctions is antiquated, this book bucks the cultural trends.

Further still, readers may feel a measure of camaraderie with Staci as she reveals examples from her life of disap-

pointments, struggles, and sins. She provides hope for those who have struggled with the issues that, sadly, are common among women, affirming that God can and will heal relationships and emotional pain. Many women will surely find an emotional connection with her as she speaks of their experience while sharing her own.

While these positive points draw readers in, some caution is necessary before recommending it to the women in your life. When compared with the biblical view of God and humanity, the work offers a low view of God and a heightened view of women. For instance, instead of beginning with an understanding of God that comes from His Word, they observe the women in their lives and claim that they want to be romanced, want to play an irreplaceable role in a great adventure, and want to unveil beauty. While these tendencies may be true of women, the authors' conclusion proves problematic. They conclude that these desires are true of God as well. Their theological method begins with human experience rather than God's revelation of Himself. This "theology from below" invariably leads to distorted, human-centered conclusions.

One of the central points of the book is represented by this statement: "This may

PAGE 22

SWORD AND TRUMPET

be the most important thing we ever learn about God—that He yearns for relationships with us. . . . He yearns for us. He cares. He has a tender heart” (28). They claim that the prevailing view of God fails in its breadth. They aim to remedy what they deem an incorrect view of God “as strong and powerful, but not as needing us, vulnerable to us, yearning to be desired” (29). They believe a proper view of God includes all of these. As a means of defense against those who do not agree that God yearns to be desired, the authors claim, “[I]f you have any doubt about that, simply look at the message he sent us in *Woman*” (28). It appears that rather than turning to Scripture or the synthetic work of theologians, the Eldredges want to begin with woman to understand the complexities of God’s nature. This becomes more clear in the statement, “After years of hearing the heart-cry of women, I am convinced beyond a doubt of this: God wants to be loved” (29). One would expect the sentence to say that after counseling women, the authors are convinced that women want to be loved. Somehow the needs of women become the needs of God in their worldview.

The authors have flipped the process of understanding who God is and who we are. Because women are made in God’s image, they are like Him and represent Him. Therefore, they can look to God to infer things about themselves, but they should not assume that conclusions can be drawn in the opposite direction. Just because we have certain tendencies or desires does not necessitate that God shares those. God is high and lifted up; He is transcendent as well as immanent. In Psalm 50:21 God corrects man with a strong accusation, “Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes.” We must look to God to learn who we are, not the other way around.

This method of drawing theological conclusions is flawed and, therefore, results in

flawed views of both God and woman. We must guard against any view of God that is unworthy of Him. When an idea of God subtly veers from truth and appeals to our emotions, we must discern the flawed method that surely has profound ramifications. Not only does our view of God determine the priorities and trajectory of our lives, but our very purpose is to know Him. To know Him, we must seek Him where He has most clearly revealed Himself.

As the authors’ starting point is faulty, it proves difficult to salvage the rest of their message. Surely, God is a relational being. We do not have to look any further than the Trinity and its perfect fellowship to know this about Him. At the same time, one of His attributes that has most powerfully provided peace and courage for believers has been God’s independence and self-sufficiency. This doctrine indicates that God has no unmet needs, is independent from His creation, provides for it, and has authority and control over it. Further, in His omnipotence He cannot be harmed by outside forces. In His omniscience, He is not vulnerable from something outside Himself over which He has no control or of which He has not foreseen. In the Bible, God is often praised for being different from His creation in this way—He is not needy as we are and that is reason for our trust and our worship. In Psalm 50, God asserts His independence by declaring, “I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness therefore” (Psalm 50:9-12). He is saying, I have no needs that you can meet! Paul distinguishes the true God from pagan gods in Acts 17:24, 25: “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with

men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." He is wonderfully different from us in His self-sufficiency.

Another unworthy conception of God is revealed in the Eldredges' assertion that a woman's need to be romanced is an indication of God's desire to be romanced. Speaking of God's heart, the authors posit, "What would it be like to experience for yourself that the truest thing about his heart toward yours is not disappointment or disapproval but deep, fiery, passionate love?" (113). When the Eldredges speak of the loving relationship between God and a believer, they mean a romantic one. They instruct the reader, "We must choose to open our hearts again so that we might hear his whispers, receive his kisses" (116) which come in the form of sunsets and swaying trees. They encourage the reader not to worry that they might be rejected, for "He knows what takes your breath away, knows what makes your heart beat faster" (116). God, as our Lover, "[W]ants to be known as only lovers can know each other. . . . [Y]ou are the one who takes his breath away" (120-21). They write that each woman is "made for romance, and the only one who can offer it to you consistently and deeply is Jesus" (125). They suggest imagining yourself in a romantic scene with Jesus. They offer five romantic movie scenes and then suggest that you "put yourself in the scene as the Beauty, and Jesus as the Lover" (114). They base this conclusion on the passage in Matthew 9:15 where Jesus calls Himself the Bridegroom, "the most intimate of all the metaphors Jesus chose to describe His love and longing for us, and the kind of relationship He invites us into" (114).

Is our relationship with God intended to be so sensually conceived? Scripture tells us that "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Creator and creature demonstrate love in necessarily different ways. His sacrifice on our behalf communicates His love for us, and

our obedience most clearly communicates our love for Him. This is radically different from the romantic love between a beauty and a smitten lover!

Beyond the low view of God, another major misconception of the work is its inflated view of women. The Eldredges point to women as the pinnacle of God's creation. "She is the crescendo, the final, astonishing work of God" (25). To aid the reader in personalizing this, the authors suggest taking in a beautiful vista and declaring, "The whole, vast world is incomplete without me. Creation reached its zenith in me" (25). It may be tempting to empathize with this attempt to build a woman's self-esteem, but the sins of pride and self-centeredness are only encouraged with this declaration. A more appropriate response would be to praise God rather than self after gazing upon His handiwork. Such instances should humble us as we realize God's goodness in choosing us and bestowing His grace upon us, not because His creation was lacking, but because He is good.

Throughout the book, the Eldredges look to movies that attract women as evidence of her deepest desires. This is further confirmation of their inflated view of women. When they raise a new issue, they suggest "think of the movies you love" (9), as proof of what the reader really values. Unfortunately, many of us are intrigued by movies that are blatantly contrary to Christian values. The simple fact that a romantic movie scene resonates with our hearts does not suggest that the scene is worthy of our desire. Rather, because we are fallen, we need to exercise caution when we find our hearts piqued with interest at something inconsistent with what is true or right. While there is truth to be found in general revelation, we must always measure that against the special revelation of Scripture.

The authors suggest that the central question that steers a woman's life is "*Am I lovely?*" They answer, "Our God finds you lovely . . . The King is enthralled by

your beauty. He finds you captivating” (146). Further, they state that beauty indwells every woman. It is her essence: “The essence of a woman is Beauty. She is meant to be the incarnation—our experience in human form—of a Captivating God” (130). This beauty is “a soulish beauty” with physical implications. What woman does not want to read that her very essence is beauty? The idea may appear encouraging at first glance, but a woman’s essence is not really beauty. Rather, her essence, or the central core of her being that gives her immense worth, is the very image of God in her.

The Eldredges may desire to encourage women by identifying beauty as their essence, but even more they want to inspire women to *unveil their beauty*. One explanation they offer is that unveiling beauty “just means unveiling our feminine hearts” (147), which is a woman’s greatest expression of faith, hope, and love. Again, the authors demonstrate their inflated view of human nature. The act of unveiling our beauty, or revealing our heart, may not bless the world and express faith, hope, and love. Rather, this unveiling and revealing might, on occasion, expose the indwelling sin that we still seek to overcome, horrifying both us and our loved ones. It is foolishness to conceive of everything in a woman’s heart as good and beautiful. Perfection of the heart is the draw of Heaven, and every godly woman longs for it, rather than a fictitious perfection this side of Heaven.

Thankfully, God loves us out of His own loving character, not because we are lovely and incite that love. This should be a relief to us. His image is imparted to us, and when He chooses us, we are His children to be loved forever because of the mediating work of Christ, regardless of anything in ourselves. Women may think that they want to be lovely in and of themselves, but true security lies in the truth that we are loved in Christ whether we look or act lovely or choose to unveil our beauty. The truth is that we are loved, and we need not

ask God whether we are lovely. God sets His affection on us through Christ; He is the Initiator, not the Responder, in our loving relationship.

It is easy to see how the Eldredges’ conceptions of God and women could develop. Out of a desire to be loved and known and appreciated for who we are, we can create a god who appreciates us and responds to us and yearns for us. But is this the God of the Bible, or the god of our felt needs? Our God is relational; the Bible says He has emotions and He responds to our moral status. Certainly His relational nature is evident in Jesus. But He does not need us! The Eldredges seem to assume that if God does not need us, He does not really love us. But God’s love is more secure and provides more hope and stirs more obedience when it grows from His eternal, unchanging, loving character.

Isaiah 57:15 answers the cry of a woman’s heart for intimacy with God: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” God tells His people that intimacy will result when their estimation of Him increases. When God is high and lifted up, women are humbled as a result, and then He draws near and revives the heart of the contrite. The Eldredges’ effort to lift women high and lower God does not result in a contrite heart or intimacy with Him. The reader must, instead, keep God lifted high and herself humble if she is going to know her Creator deeply.

Let us wisely alter our inquiry and devote our efforts toward knowing God and answering the question, “*Isn’t God lovely?*” May this pursuit captivate us, and may the answer cause us to praise Him. Surely, then, we will be less concerned with being captivating ourselves. ■

—Taken from

www.christiancounseling.com.

“Pornified” Men in the Church: How Bad Is It?

by Dan Wilson

Editor’s Note: A word of caution—Dan pulls no punches here, and the content may be shocking and embarrassing because this is a shocking and embarrassing subject that needs desperately to be addressed in today’s Church. He is, in our view, operating within the bounds of Ephesians 5:11-13, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reprov’d are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light.”

What do I mean by “pornified”? You remember the old-fashioned word *fornication*, which has most often been defined for us as illicit premarital sex. The Greek word underlying the English *fornication* is *porneia*.

Paul used this word in First Thessalonians 4:3 when he wrote, “*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication [porneia].*” Paul was not telling the Thessalonians to abstain from just premarital sex because the meaning of *porneia* is not limited to premarital sex but is the general “garbage can” word for all kinds of sexual sins or sexual immorality. The Greek New Testament, by the way, uses several very precise words to label patterns of sexual sinning that often outstrip our current glossary in terms of descriptive accuracy.

Being “pornified” can grimly describe a person who is saturated in pornography use, whatever the format. Where there is pornography use there often lurks all manner of other forms of *porneia*, or, to use today’s coinage, “acting out” or “being sexually active,” which are just euphemisms for the older, more morally accurate terms “promiscuity” or “infidelity.” With *porneia*, there is also what I call the “acting in” sexual sins of

lust, sexual fantasy, and masturbation.

According to our Lord in Matthew 5:28, looking at a person with lustful intent—whether physically, via a picture, or in one’s mind—is adultery at the heart level. So the X-rated mental movies a man makes in his mind, where he is the star who always gets the girl (in bed) are also expressions of *porneia*.

The semantics of this new term “pornified” aside, how bad is it? How many of the men in the Church—in your church—are deep-fried in various kinds of sexual immorality?

It’s Bad

Pornography is a plague across our entire nation, and this can be seen just from the money angle—revenue from pornography in USA was \$13 billion in 2008. Among Christians, 47% say pornography is a major problem in the home. What about the men of the American Church? In surveys, 59% of married Christian men admit to regularly fantasizing about having sex with someone other than their wife. 61% of Christian married men admit they masturbate regularly, and 16% say they use pornography to masturbate. That’s a lot of “acting in.”

On the adultery (“acting out”) front, 25% of married Christian men admit they have had an affair since their conversion to Christ. Another 15% have had inappropriate physical contact with women other than their wives. Staggering stats, aren’t they?

After five years in sexual brokenness ministry, I am often asked, “Do you believe these statistics?” Sadly, I really do. I am also sad to say that some pastors with whom I consult respond to such numbers by saying something like, “Not in my church.” Honestly, brothers, unless you pastor a church where a vast majority of your men are retirement-aged and beyond, then these numbers apply to your church. And even if they are only half

as bad as the “national average” evangelical church described statistically above, don’t you have a serious pastoral problem with men living hidden “pornified” lives?

Another pastoral problem is struggling pastors themselves. This sexual crisis extends to the clergy. 75% of pastors do not make themselves accountable to anyone for their Internet use, and 37% of pastors admit that pornography is a current struggle for them. Five percent of pastors have committed adultery. Who shepherds the shepherds? But that’s a separate question from our examination of the overall state of men of the Church.

Then there’s the issue of homosexuality in the Lord’s Church. Yes, in your church too. “*There is no new thing under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and homosexual temptation and sinful behavior is not new. Also remember, homosexuality is not a political issue—it is about people, many professing conservative evangelical Christians, who struggle with unwanted same-sex temptation.

Today’s moral landscape is less like the idealized America of the 1950s and more like the A.D. 60s and the Greco-Roman paganism of Paul’s and the Apostles’ mission field. Cultures are not static; they rise and fall. So does public morality, and American culture is increasingly pagan.

Historically, paganism always has involved poly-idolatry, moral relativism, materialism, violence, injustice, sensuality, sexual license, and sexual perversion. American materialism (wealthy idolatry), moral relativism, and, most importantly, the disintegration of manhood and marriage have consequences. The consequence of the decay of manhood, fatherhood, and marriage—seen in rampant divorce and spiritual fatherlessness—are the seed bed of the common factors in the development of same-sex attractions. All these have increased exponentially since the 50s. We shouldn’t be surprised in the increase of those from “Christian” homes (yet with significant dysfunction) that have unwanted same-sex desires rise up in their hearts.

In the general population, 2.8% of adult men and 1.4% of adult women identify themselves as gay or lesbian. And while just 3% of men and 4% of women report having same-sex sexual contact in the past 12

months, 6% of men and 11% of women have reportedly had same-sex sexual contact at least once in their lives. Even where same-sex attraction does not lead to regular episodes of acting out, it has a profound effect on the self-perception and spiritual life of these struggling evangelicals.

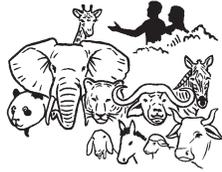
So rest assured that some young people and adults in your church experience same-sex attraction. While they do not identify themselves as homosexual, they often feel extreme guilt, shame, and fear, and wall themselves off from others. These hidden feelings often lead them to see themselves as unlovable or irredeemable in God’s eyes.

The Badness Goes Deeper

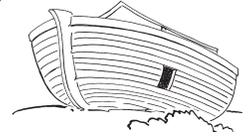
Hidden “pornification” has deep costs. Consider this question: Is having the men of the Church sinning sexually a worse problem than the women of the church gossiping? I think the answer is yes. Why? Because of the doctrine of headship.

The sinfulness of *porneia* goes far beyond the sinfulness of a sexual act. What does adultery do to a Christian man, to his life, to his heart, to his heritage? King David is an example for us. Beyond the sinful act with Bathsheba were a myriad of sinful consequences. There is an awful destructiveness of sexual sin in the heart and life of a “pornified” man because he is the head in covenantal relationships with his wife, children, grandchildren, and in the life of the family of God, the household of faith, the Church. The costs and losses, brokenness and corruption form a bitter heritage. Just like Adam, our first father, whose sin, though not sexual, is generational and environmental.

Not only is the adulterer or porn addict breaking covenant with his wife, he, for example, suffers the internal damage of being a hypocrite at worship services or of finding his Bible too heavy to take up and read. Under heavy loads of guilt and shame, he fakes it in many settings at church, like when he prays in Sunday school, or when he chickens out of prayer, acts of service, or evangelism. Likewise, his self-absorption, lack of confession, and harboring guilty and evil thoughts doesn’t do much for fellowship, friendship, being mentored, or discipling others. *(continued on page 29)*



Beginning Issues



Male and Female He Created Them

by John Mullett

*“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27 ESV).*

“Evolutionary theory continues to be plagued by persistent problems that defy solution via rational thought. This is true whether one examines the origin of the Universe—or the origin of life. But **nowhere is the glaring inadequacy of evolutionary theory more evident than in its feeble and failed attempts to explain the origin of sex.** The pervasive presence of the male and female sexes (whether in plants, animals, or humans), and the ubiquitous nature of sexual reproduction based on differences in gender, deftly defy any naturalistic explanation.”¹ (emphasis mine)

The presence of the male and female sexes *in any form of life* creates significant difficulties for advocates of evolutionary theory. It’s not enough to believe that all life evolved, in spite of what we observe in real operative science, but the evolutionist must also believe that at some point paths diverged and both male and female evolved independently. The odds of one of these happening is nil based on what we observe in science today (there is no mechanism to generate new genetic information), but in the case of the sexes we’re asked to believe it twice! Not one fossil form has been found that can be used to make a watertight case as evidence for evolution and much less so as evidence for the evolution of the sexes.

“Biology texts are quick to illustrate amoebas evolving into intermediate organisms, which then conveniently give rise to amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and, eventually,

humans. Yet, interestingly, we never learn exactly when (or how!) independent male and female species ‘evolved.’ Somewhere along this evolutionary path, both males and females were required in order to ensure the procreation that was necessary to further the existence of a particular species. But how do evolutionists explain this? **When pressed to answer questions such as, ‘Where did males and females actually come from?’ or ‘What is the evolutionary origin of sex?’ evolutionists become as silent as the tomb in which they have laid this perennial problem.** How is it that, at one point in time, ‘nature’ was able to evolve a female member of a species that produces eggs and is internally equipped to nourish a growing embryo, while at the same time evolving a male member that produces motile sperm cells? And, further, how is it that these gametes (eggs and sperm) conveniently ‘evolved’ so that they each contain half the normal chromosome number of somatic (body) cells?”² (emphasis mine)

In my research for this article I attempted to find evolutionary resources explaining the origin of the sexes. Considering the wealth of information available online it was to my surprise I found they are almost non-existent (online). Many resources discuss the evolutionary maintenance of sexual reproduction, but it is extremely difficult to find resources discussing the *origin* of the sexes. The voices of evolution are indeed largely silent on this matter. When I did find

PAGE 28

SWORD AND TRUMPET

a resource addressing the issue, typical evolutionary language prevailed. Note the following quote: “So, how did sex cells modify to eggs and sperm? **It seems** that a gene underlying a more primitive system of reproduction **was likely** co-opted during evolution to participate in sex-specific sperm development”³ (emphasis mine).

Why is such speculative terminology used? Quite frankly speculative language is used because that’s what the statement is; it’s pure speculation. The article discusses the findings of a Japanese team of scientists concerning this issue. “Japanese researchers found the genetics basis of sex dimorphism (two genders) by investigating two closely related species of green algae that practice different forms of sexual reproduction.”⁴

Here is what they found that led to the speculative comments above.

“But now the scientists have successfully identified a version of the MID gene in *Pleodorina starrii*. This “PlestMID” gene is present only in the male genome, and it encodes a protein abundant in the nuclei of mature sperm. **This means that *P. starrii* maleness evolved from the dominant sex (MT-) of its isogamous ancestor.** This breakthrough discovery can answer many questions about the evolution of oogamy and the origins of male-female differentiation”⁵ (emphasis mine).

Notice the speculation is gone and a firm claim is made, but based on what? It wasn’t because *P. starrii* maleness was observed to evolve from the isogamous “ancestor,” but simply because it is present in both the isogamous and oogamous species, evolution is *assumed*. If the information was present genetically for this kind of variability in the so-called ancestor then this kind of change could possibly occur, but there is no mechanism available in nature to generate new information to be added to the genetic makeup of an existing life form. As I’ve discussed here before, certainly natural selection and genetic mutations do not provide the information generation needed for evolution to be possible as they both represent information loss, not gain.

1. *The Origin of Gender and Sexual Reproduction* [Part I] by Bert Thompson, Ph.D. and Brad Harrub, Ph.D. Apologetics Press: Rea-

“PORNIFIED” . . . cont’d.

Besides squelching church relationships, *porneia* is uniquely effective in rendering a man an “empty suit” at home. The opportunity, cost, and loss of a man being spiritually and emotionally disengaged with wife and children, when it comes to his covenant responsibility to lead and disciple, are hard to fathom but seen everywhere. The chaos of the many 30- and 40-year-old “boys”—often sexual brats—is sadly normal. I think this largely explains why the largest and wealthiest church in history—the American Evangelical Church—is characterized by impotence in ministry, evangelism, and culture-transforming power and has subsequently become feminized and postmodern. Where are all the men?—real men, mature men with a vision and passion of home, heritage, Church, and Kingdom? These are the costs of hidden “pornification” of churchmen.

It’s Bad, but the Gospel Is Good News

The Gospel is really good news for sinsick men. The Gospel is not just the plan of salvation, it is the reality that Jesus is the crucified and risen King. The almighty, sovereign Christ accomplishes all His holy will. This plague of *porneia* is not just a crisis, it is a Gospel opportunity.

All the bad news above is news from the front. I hope it pops everyone’s bubble of the illusion of normalcy and peace. We are at war, and as bad as it is among “pornified” men of the American Church, this is our time to participate in the glory of battle (Romans 16:20) with King Jesus, and see Him overcome evil with good, turn enemies into sons, idolaters into worshipers, and in turn defense into offense. ■

—Reprinted from *Pulpit Helps*, published by AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN 37421.

son & Revelation, October 2002 - 22[10]:73-79.

2. Ibid.
3. Anitei, Stefan (Dec. 20, 2006) *How Did Males/Sperm Emerge? The origin of the sexes*, Science Editor. Website: <http://news.softpedia.com/news/How-Did-Male-Sperm-Emerge-42827.shtml>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.



Song of the Month

Douglas A. Byler, Music Editor

This column welcomes the submission of original hymns. Please send hymns, as well as applicable information about the author and/or composer to: Douglas A. Byler, Sword and Trumpet, Box 575, Harrisonburg, VA 22803.

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

Lyrics: Few Christmas carols capture the essence of Christ's coming to earth with the depth and profundity that is present in "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." While fitting into a Christmas context, this hymn also describes in broad terms the larger picture of the Messiah's work. Some of the text is a little ambiguous and could be taken several ways, but the hymn seems to outline four basic events or stages of the Christian story: Advent, the present age, second coming, and eternity.

The only part of the hymn that specifically discusses the Advent is the first stanza. God's "Christmas gift" to us should be received with joy and celebration, but also with a sense of deep respect, awe, and even fear. As the text states, Christ did not come *only* with "blessings in His hand"; He also came "our full homage to demand." It is impossible for us to accept His free gift of Salvation without recognizing His supreme lordship in our lives.

The second verse jumps ahead in time to the present, looking back on Jesus' time on earth from the vantage point of a communion service. It ponders the vast leap that Christ took to become a man, and marvels at His willingness to give His body and blood for our salvation.

In the third verse, we see a picture of hosts of angels advancing ahead of the "Light of light" as He descends from heaven.

If one is mindlessly singing this hymn as a Christmas carol, this may seem to bring to mind the shepherds and the chorus of angels in Bethlehem. However, this description sounds much more like the second coming of Christ as described in Matthew 25. This interpretation also makes more sense with the last two phrases of the verse. Jesus' time on earth began the process of clearing away the darkness, but it will not be complete until He returns as king.

The final stanza brings to mind the temple scene from Isaiah 6, but given the chronological flow of the first three verses, it could fit just as well into the similar passage from Revelation 4. Either way, it describes a scene that we humans will not see until after the final resurrection, and therefore it makes sense to think of it as a description of our future life with our Lord.

Music: The tune for this hymn comes from a French carol and is named after the French province of Picardy, where it most likely originated. It first became popular when the British composer Ralph Vaughn Williams arranged it for this text in 1906.

Musically, the tune is simple and repetitious, which adds to the flavor of reverence that the text suggests. The second phrase is an exact repeat of the first, and the last two lines are very similar to one another as well. ■

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

Liturgy of St. James
Tr. Gerard Moultrie, 1864

French Carol Melody
arr. D. A. Byler, 2006

1 Let all mor - tal flesh keep si - lence, And with fear and
2 King of kings, yet born of Ma - ry, As of old on
3 Rank on rank the host of hea - ven Spreads its van - guard
4 At His feet the six winged ser - aph; Cher - u - bim with

5

trem - bling stand; Pon - der noth - ing earth - ly mind - ed,
earth He stood, Lord of lords, in hu - man ves - ture,
on the way, As the Light of light de - scend - eth
sleep - less eye, Veil their fac - es to the Pres - ence,

10

For with bless - ing in His hand, Christ our God to earth de -
In the bod - y and the blood, He will give to all the
From the realms of end - less day, That the powers of hell may
As with cease - less voice they cry, Al - le - lu - ia, A -

15

scend - - - eth, Our full hom - age to de - mand.
faith - - - ful His own self for heav'n - ly food.
van - - - ish As the dark - ness clears a - way.
- - le lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia, Lord most high.

Arr. © 2006 Douglas A. Byler
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Social Networking

by Timothy Myers

Social networking has taken the world by storm. The Internet has opened the door to blogs, blog-rings (like Xanga), Facebook, Twitter, and others. Of course, there are the ever-present cell phones with their texting capabilities. People are communicating more than they ever have. Or are they?

About two years ago I was asked to give a presentation on blogs, from which the following is taken:

What is a blog? A blog (an abbreviation for weblog) is basically a diary on the Internet in which you can post text, photographs, video clips, music, or anything else that can be digitized.

As a means of communication blogging can be good, bad, or neutral. It has, however, some inherent problems. I would like to identify five. The examples I give are from sites with Anabaptist connections.

1. The semi-anonymity encourages a reckless revelation of things personal. Blogs may contain personal thoughts and issues, like the woman who said, "I hope to soon be pregnant." There are some very personal photos.
2. Among Christians there are many expressions of one's dedication to God which seem very shallow. Some examples are "God is awesome," "God is #1," "I love God so much." The words sound good, but in the context of frivolity like slang, a party spirit, fan support for professional sports, love of contemporary Christian music, and discussion of movies it has a hollow ring.
3. The culture of blogging is that of boldly inviting people into your life with little reserve. It's a little like putting your photograph albums and diary on display at the public library. Of course many other people are doing the same, so that takes away some of the embarrassment.

Although there are blogs that are tasteful, reserved, and sincere, they seem to be in the minority. Some appropriately have locks which prevent access to anyone who is not willing to sign in.

4. These social networking sites often have a form to fill out which tells about yourself in terms of popular culture. You are asked about your music, movies, or even sexual orientation, which reveals something about the general blogging culture.
5. Blogging can consume large quantities of time. Some people are addicted to it.

In conclusion, many (but not all) blogs reveal people who seem to be bold, insecure, and without much spiritual depth. While the medium is neutral, blog culture encourages people to shed their inhibitions and reveal more of themselves than is in good taste, or sometimes, godly. Blogs can serve as a way for families and friends to stay in touch, especially as we become increasingly global, but they can also be a means of drawing people into the wake of popular culture, accepting as normal that which should appall us. We should be careful of our associates, as well as those of our children, whether in our communities or on the Internet.

Two years later Facebook (a site where one can communicate by brief notes with others who have been selected as "friends"), and Twitter (where you answer the question "What are you doing?"), and no doubt others, have risen to the fore.

Two articles which I received recently, as well as anecdotes shared by various people, have all raised concern about the proliferation of empty digital communication. These have confirmed that alarm is not narrowly confined to this editor's desk.

In the first article the editor of a secular fruit grower's trade magazine spoke of working in his garden, but in contrast to

much of contemporary culture, he didn't tell anyone about it on the Internet.

He wrote, ". . . so far, I am utterly unimpressed with social networking. I recently took a small tour of Facebook pages. The comments I found there were ordinary, uninteresting, uninformative, banal and hardly worth keyboarding—and certainly a waste of time reading. . . . When people e-mail to say they'd like to 'follow me' on Facebook or Twitter, I wonder about the quality of their lives and whether they have some huge fear of solitude. Are they stalkers? Don't they like themselves well enough to be alone with only themselves for just a few fleeting moments?"

The second article, an editorial from the *Alliance Newsletter* entitled "Tricky Complex," speaks of those who are spoiled and lack an understanding of Christian discipleship. The author suggests that the cure lies in a willingness to do mundane Christian service in the setting where one is, and leading a disciplined life. In that context he addresses digital communication: "In your *limited* use of communication technology save your 'pearls' for special people rather than vomiting your life details all over the public face."

Both of these writers express the same concept: there are far more important things to do than to articulate the miniscule details of our lives, and keep up with all those of our friends. Doing so can become an obsession that is detrimental to family and other social relationships, to the fulfillment of the responsibilities that it replaces, and to our own souls as we expose ourselves to wrong influences.

Yes, people do the same thing on the telephone, and maybe even with the *Budget*. That doesn't make it good. Parents, leaders, be aware of what is happening. We are responsible for our homes and churches.

Communication is good—if it is good, purposeful communication. How can we judge whether or not our communication is worthwhile? Consider what the Bible says:

- ♦ We are justified or condemned by our words.
- ♦ We will answer to God for idle words.

- ♦ Our speech should not include filthiness, foolish talking, jesting, but instead thankfulness.
- ♦ A fool is characterized by the multitude of his words, their hastiness, and by uttering all his mind.
- ♦ A braggart is loathsome to God.

I don't paint all social networking with a broad brush; there are people who use it in a godly way. My burden is for those who fail to apply Biblical principles to their "posting." Rather than making it an extension of personal godliness, they slip into the pattern left by the world.

A friend wrote about the distinction we need to make between good and bad uses of social networking:

Being far away from home, I loved the way it kept me somewhat informed about life at home, in touch with former students and co-workers, and abreast of Mennonite young people and their lives (for good or for bad). There were times when it really did give me an opportunity to speak into people's lives in a vital way, I believe.

At the same time, it is easy to run to something like Facebook as kind of a drug of choice to avoid dealing with the bigger issues at hand. I recently read an article called 'This Is My Flattered World,' which spoke about how 21st-century technology is designed to make us feel so important (examples from Facebook could be: how many friends we have, somebody wrote on my wall, so many people 'like' my status, etc).

Are we really communicating more, or just using more words? Does it represent God's kingdom? Does our communication fit within the boundaries set in Titus 2:6-8? "*Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned.*"

A sign posted to discourage loitering read, "If you don't have anything to do, don't do it here." Maybe we could paraphrase it for the Internet: "If you don't have anything to say, don't say it here." ■

—Reprinted with permission from *Life Lines*, September-October 2009.

Steps to Revival in the Church

by Harold S. Martin

The key to the true meaning of the word *revival* is found in Psalm 85:6, where David prays, “Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?”

The word *revival* means “to make fresh and strong again; to bring back to a good condition.” Revival is the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God’s own people, whereby they turn to a closer walk with God and with each other.

It is the nature of all created things to wear out and wind down. It is the nature of a fire to go out; of sheep to wander; of love to wax cold; of the church to drift; and of people to forget. Therefore, from time to time, all of us need to be revived, and restored to the early devotion we had for Jesus.

Most churches today have a number of non-committed members who merely give lip-service to the Lord. They attend church services—if it is convenient; if the weather is nice; if company doesn’t come; and if there are no special services on television. They are haphazard about Bible reading and prayer and family worship in their homes. They often have not separated themselves from the questionable activities of the world. Most of us wish our local churches did not have those kinds of members—but most readers are familiar with such indifference on the part of church members.

I have intermingled with Christians in many parts of the world. I have spoken with some who were tortured and imprisoned for their faith, and whose loved ones disappeared simply because they were committed to faith in Jesus Christ. There is something about hardship and persecution that brings out the best in people! Christians in America tend to be lazy, careless, and complacent. J. I. Packer says that Christianity in America extends from Maine to California; it is 3,000 miles wide, but often it seems to be only one-half-inch deep.

All of us need to experience times of special awakening, and of fresh commitment to Christ. Christ’s last word to the church is not the Great Commission in Matthew 28;

it is instead the message found in Revelation 2 and 3, where *the church* is called to repent. What can be done to stir up the fires of revival in the church? For a genuine revival there must be a major emphasis on a number of areas. We want to look at some of those areas.

1. *We must embrace biblical authority.*

We will never build a strong church unless it is Bible-centered. Only as we respect and seek to obey the written Word of God will the church be revived. We must repeatedly renounce our own human opinions, and gladly accept God’s instructions as given in the Bible.

Jesus accepted the Bible as authoritative. He spoke of:

- the creation of Adam and Eve (Matt. 19:4)
- the Flood in Noah’s time (Luke 17:27)
- the miracles performed by Elijah (Luke 4:25)
- the big fish that swallowed Jonah (Matt. 12:40)
- the life of David (Mark 2:25)
- the glory of Solomon (Matt. 6:29)
- the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28-30)

In all this record of Jesus’ words, there is not even the slightest intimation at any time that the Scriptures may be inaccurate at any point! Jesus never contradicted anything in the Old Testament. Sometimes He *expanded* upon Old Testament truths, but He never *contradicted* the message of the Old Testament. As for the New Testament, He expressly declared that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles, and bring to their minds all that He had said to them (John 14:26). To Jesus Christ, the Scriptures were the infallible Word of God; not one word could be broken. When we discover what Jesus thought about the Scriptures, that is what we are to think about them.

If we *believe* that parts of the Bible contradict other parts; if we *wonder* whether the Red Sea actually parted during the Exodus from Egypt; if we *doubt* that Jonah could have been swallowed by a big fish—then we

can hardly help but wonder whether or not Jesus is really the Son of God.

If the Bible is wrong about Jonah—it might be wrong about Jesus! There can never be a genuine revival among God's people as long as the Bible is not accepted as the authoritative Word of God.

2. We must rediscover human depravity.

All of us are human beings, and as such we are damaged, scarred, and lopsided—to a far greater extent than we often realize.

Early in the history of the human family, there was a great fall. It is described in Genesis 3. The effects of that transgression have been passed down from generation to generation. Each person from birth inherits Adam's sinful nature. As a result, there are tendencies in each of us to rebel and to go the wrong way.

The tensions in families, the strife between races, and the misunderstandings among nations—are all the result of a corrupted nature in human beings. We don't have to teach a child to be selfish. In fact, a great deal of our time and effort as concerned parents goes toward trying to overcome this tendency from the child's early years.

But when a person believes the message of the gospel—his sins are forgiven; he's given a new nature; he sets out on a spiritual journey with the Holy Spirit in his heart.

Sometimes, after conversion, we testify about the fact that once we were blind, but now through Christ we have been brought to life. We've been transformed and given a new nature—and indeed our lives should be different! The old nature has been crucified (put to death), but remember that death speaks of a *separation*, not of *extinction*.

When a person dies, he does not go out of existence; he's not extinct. And just so, when the old nature is crucified, it doesn't go into extinction. The old nature still exists and occasionally rears its ugly head (even in the best of God's saints). Therefore, the spiritual health about which we testify is only partial and relative.

All of us (because of our partial sanctification) are prone to damaging delusions:

- There is the delusion of doubt and unbelief. If things go well, fine, but if something terrible happens, we are inclined to doubt, and conclude that perhaps God has

forgotten about us.

- There is the delusion that interrupts good relationships. We sometimes misunderstand each other's motives and purpose, and find it easy to blame others for generating hostility—when all the while we are blind to our own part in provoking trouble.
- There are delusions about the nature of the Christian life. We sometimes are given the impression that serving the Lord is easy and exciting—and that temptations to get angry, and to be envious, and to lust after persons of the opposite sex—that those things don't bother genuine Christians.

If we are inclined to think that we are strong—then we need to take special heed, lest we fall. We still discover that the Christian life is a warfare that will not end until we are safe in the arms of Jesus. If we want to experience revival, we must come down off our high horse of pride and humble ourselves, recognizing that we are but redeemed sinners saved by the grace of a merciful God.

3. We must resolve internal conflicts.

If we want God to send the showers of revival blessing, then we must resolve to become a united community. Too often, petty little differences among us stifle the work of God in our churches.

One source of internal conflict in the church is related to what are called "neutral matters." In the early years, the conflicts centered on the issue of observing special days and eating certain foods. There are many issues that fit the category of neutral matters today.

Some genuine Christians hold complete faith in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, but they think that Jesus died on Thursday instead of Friday—and they make much ado about it. Others wait eagerly for the return of our Lord Jesus. They believe sincerely in His Second Coming, but they don't see the chart of end-time events in the same order that many Bible teachers do. Should parents send their children to a public school, or to a Christian day school, or is it better for the parents to homeschool? (You can get temperatures to rise on that subject in some quarters today.) Or, how should parents discipline their children? There are many different opinions

about what to do when children disobey.

In Romans 14, Paul says that we should “receive” that brother (with all his scruples); count him as a brother; don’t argue with him just because he has some viewpoints that differ from yours. Accept him without trying to settle all the petty differences. But Romans 14:3 says that those who hold many scruples about debatable issues (that is, the “weak” brothers in the church) should not “judge” (harshly condemn) those who don’t share their convictions.

God wants us to get along with each other. He urges Christians to be at peace with each other. Second Corinthians 13:11 says, “Finally, brethren, . . . be of one mind, live in peace,” and Jesus says that we are to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). If we want to experience revival in the church, there must be a warmth of love between fellow-believers in the congregation.

4. We must practice ethical behavior.

Research done by one of our nation’s polling groups has concluded that *“there is no significant difference in ethical behavior between church and unchurched citizens of America.”* When it comes to things like honesty, integrity, diligence, and moral uprightness, the church and the world have about the same values.

Nearly half of all the younger people in the United States see nothing wrong with:

- calling in sick when you’re not really sick
- spending time secretly looking at pornographic pictures
- going on a credit-card spending spree
- occasionally telling a lie to members of one’s family
- stealing from an employer (under some circumstances)

Compare the looseness and carelessness and dishonesty that I have just described with the ethical behavior of many people one hundred years ago. The following letter was written to the President of the United States in September 1895. It came from a youth, addressed to President Cleveland. This is perhaps the most quaint letter in the whole White House collection:

*To his majesty, President Cleveland:
Dear President: I am in a dreadful state
of mind, and I thought I would write*

and tell you all. About two years ago I used two postage stamps that had been used before—and put them on letters. Perhaps I used more than two stamps, but I can only remember of doing it twice. I did not realize what I had done until lately. My mind recently has been in constant turmoil on that subject, and I think about it night and day. Now, dear Mr. President, will you please forgive me, and I will promise you I will never do it again. Enclosed, please find the cost of three stamps, and please forgive me—for I was then about 13 years old. I am heartily sorry for what I have done. From one of your subjects.

May all believers in our local congregations have the same earnest desire to be carefully honest in all that they do. That kind of honesty will be a mark of genuine revival.

5. We must downplay sports and television.

The sports mania around us today borders pretty close to idolatry. *Time* magazine describes the Super Bowl games each winter as “a religious holiday.” People worship a 250-pound idol wearing cleats and dressed in a football uniform. A single 30-second advertisement at the 2006 Super Bowl game cost \$2.5 million.

Many a pastor wishes that his church members could muster up as much enthusiasm for *Bible study* and *family worship* and *visiting the sick*—as they do for the ball games.

Interest in sports is not all wrong—but it is harmful if it becomes so demanding that there’s not a *greater amount of time* for devotion to the things of God. I’ve had dates for preaching services changed because the local high school had a football game that night—and the pastor said, “We might as well change the date; hardly anyone will come out that night!”

Our society pays a prize fighter \$10 million (for one evening)—to see him pound his fists into another man’s face and body. Some baseball players are paid \$25 million a year (ten times as much as the President of the United States makes in a year). Does any believer really think that it’s right to give financial and moral support to a system that pays exorbitant sums of money to its performers?

And as for television—almost every minute of the programming (commercials, entertainment, and even the news) is a tremendous wasteland, which really incriminates human intelligence. Advertisers know that television has a wide influence on the habits of audiences, or they would never pay \$2 million for a half-minute of advertising (\$66,000 per second).

People who watch a regular diet of television get a grossly distorted view of the real world. On TV programming, women are the weak satellites of powerful men; doctors, athletes, and lawyers are glamorized; farmers, preachers, and factory workers are considered eccentric. One newsmagazine writer describes the TV talk shows as “loaded with sleaze” and “filled with nasty trash.” The emphasis is on *consumption* and *greed* and *shallow entertainment*.

People who are hooked on television spend less time on Bible reading and prayer. They find it easier to stay home from evening church services. They discover that it’s increasingly difficult to censor what they watch. Violence and immodesty become less shocking than it seemed at first. The church will never experience genuine revival as long as the loyalties of its members are focused on sports and television.

6. We must experience repentance for sin.

To have a great revival there must be honest repentance for sin. Second Chronicles 7:14 concludes by saying, “*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, . . . and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven . . . and will heal their land.*”

God will never send revival as long as we tolerate open sin in our midst. Nothing short of a broken heart over sin (with full confession and repentance) will lead to revival in the church.

Several decades ago there was a young brother who worked for a boat construction company. His boss was an unbeliever who made fun of Christianity and laughed at the people of God. The young man, in his spare time, began to build a boat for himself—at home in his basement. He wanted to use copper nails (rather than iron nails) because copper nails don’t rust. But he felt he

couldn’t afford to buy them. And so, every day he put a few copper nails (belonging to the company) in his lunch box—and took them home with him.

But one Lord’s Day, he heard his preacher speaking about the matter of repenting and making restitution, and restoring things that were wrongfully taken. The young man was convicted of his sin, and after confessing his sin to God, he went to his boss, told him what he had done, and made restitution by paying for the nails he had taken.

Can you guess what the boss said? He said, “*Jim, I always thought you were an old humbug [a religious quack], but I’m beginning to think now that there’s something real in your religion after all.*”

If we want to experience revival in our churches, we must get rid of those “copper nails” on our consciences. God will never send revival as long as we cover up sin! Maybe the sin is *bitterness against* other people, maybe it is *dishonesty at work*, maybe it is *playing around* with another man’s wife, or perhaps spending time on the Internet (which is far more dangerous than time with television). Whatever it is—the answer is to repent, to confess, and to turn from our wicked ways.

All of us would like to see a fresh breeze of revival flowing across our churches—but revival must begin with each one of us as individuals. Maybe you are a member of a local church. You have been baptized and received into church fellowship, but you’re just play-acting. Your heart is not in it. You haven’t even been *trying* to walk close to the Lord. This is a good time to start over. *Draw a circle of chalk; step into the circle; and ask God to start a revival inside the circle!*

Keep in mind too that you cannot be revived if you have never received Christ in the first place. If you have never given your life over to Jesus and in simple faith promised to live for Him—then, the invitation is simply this: Come to Jesus and find forgiveness and rest for your soul. You will never regret stepping out on the Lord’s side. ■

—Copies of this article are available free upon request from BIBLE HELPS, P. O. Box 391, Hanover, PA 17331.

Index, Vol. LXXVII, 2009

Index by Title

- America's Softening of the Brain—John Dewey, 1859-1952, —*Kairos Journal*, Feb 36
- Anabaptism 101: Walking in the Ordinary Way of Peace, James Toews, Jun 34
- Beauties of the Law, The, Jerram Barrs, Jun 24
- Beyond Closed Doors, Bill Commons, Jul 17
- Bible, The: Is It Accurate?, John Mullett, Sep 34; Part 2, Oct 34; Part 3, Nov 21
- Biblical Light on Cremation, John J. Forry, Oct 35
- Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not, John Stonestreet, Oct 19
- Blessed Are the Hungry, Kevin Bauman, Mar 29
- Blind Faith or Logical Faith?, John Mullett, Jul 32
- Brotherhood in Pilgrimage, The, John R. Mumaw, Mar 30
- Burial or Cremation?, Arno Froese, Nov 13
- Call to Repentance, Renewal, and Revival, Mark D. Avery, Feb 20
- Can God Be a Loving God in a World of Suffering?, John Mullett, Apr 34; Part 2, May 15; Part 3, Jun 30
- Carols of Christmas, The, Peter Colón, Dec 2
- Cell Phone Abuse and Its Effects, Diane Truitt, Feb 24
- Chosen by Grace and Called to Faith, Paul Shirk, Jun 19
- Church at the Crossroads, Steve Gallagher, Oct 2
- Church's Response to Homosexuality, The, Alex D. Montoya, Mar 2
- Come Now, Let Us Reason Together, E. O. Jack Jones, Jan 17
- Common Designer or Common Ancestry, A?, John Mullett, Feb 35
- Community Call, A, Michael G. Loftis, Feb 27
- Coping With Culture Shock and Stress, Floyd Stoltzfus, Apr 32
- Counseling Those in Sexual Sin, Steve Gallagher, Nov 31
- Courtship, Engagement, and the Wedding, Harold S. Martin, Aug 16
- Critical Spirit, A, Dale Eby, Jun 14
- Culture of Anger, The, James Rudy Gray, Jun 18
- Current Church Issues, Research Project: Christian Counseling, Anonymous, Aug 21
- Distinguishing Mark of Christianity, The, John MacArthur, Feb 29
- Do We Need a *New New Deal*?, Burton W. Folsom, Jr., Jun 28
- Drug-Addicted Babies: Who Is Responsible?, Haven Bradford Gow, Apr 35
- Elders Extending the Call, David Blackney, Jan 29
- Erotic vs. the Spiritual, The, Steve Gallagher, Feb 5
- Evidence for Creation or Evolution?, John Mullett, Jan 24
- Exodus en Masse: Could We Have Sent Them?, Jerry Hoover, Oct 24
- Five Advantages of Church-Based Counseling, Deepak Reju, Oct 14
- Frugality in a Wasteful Society, Dale Eby, Jan 2
- Glory and Honor and Majesty, Sylvan Ressler, Mar 34
- God's Promises Always Come True, P. Daniel Stetler, Feb 15
- Good News for America's Families, Robert Parr, Oct 10
- "Good Tiding of Great Joy," Glenn E. Auker, Dec 5
- Good Works and the Justified, Horatius Bonar, Feb 31
- Great Music Emanates From Greatness of God, Haven Bradford Gow, Jul 29
- Greener Grass, Ben Waldner, Jan 4
- Guarantee for Child-Training?, A, Howard Bean, Jul 22
- His Work—Our Generation, Mark D. Avery, Jul 28
- Holy Men and a Holy Mount, Charles J. Woodbridge, Feb 2
- Honest Men Must Warn, J. C. Ryle, Apr 22
- How I Ascertain the Will of God, George Mueller, Jun 4
- How to Become an Adulterer, a Fornicator, or Worse!, Bruce Oyen, Sep 2
- How to Profit From Bible Reading, Bruce Oyen, Nov 26
- In Spirit and in Truth: Let's Talk About Worship!, Robert Leslie Holmes, May 2
- I Shall Not Want, Jason Padgett, Jul 35
- Is Life Spinning Out of Control?, Andrew Gehman, Jun 27
- Is *This the Best We Can Do*?, Steve Gallagher, May 4
- Jesus Christ Is Lord, Timothy L. Cooley, Aug 2
- Let's Do Something, P. Daniel Stetler, Apr 7
- Lights and Sirens, Roger Swihart, Feb 23
- Listen Up!, Mark Bailey, Feb 16
- Male and Female He Created Them, John Mullett, Dec 28
- Man's Revolt: God's Pursuit, Willard Mayer, Jul 2
- Mennonite Nazis?, Clifford Schrock, Jan 27
- Ministry of Deliverance, A, Timothy Gombis, Nov 36
- Ministry Trends for the Post-Everything Generation, Mark Irving, Jan 25
- Money Management, J. Otis Yoder, Dec 18
- My Work or His Work?, David L. Burkholder, Sep 19
- Navigating Grief, Dan Zink, Aug 26
- New Testament Day of Rest, The, Jacob T. Brubaker, Jun 13
- Nonconformity to the World, John Horsch, Mar 22
- Offended, Timothy J. Myers, Apr 23
- One in Heaven, the Other in Hell, Oswald J. Smith, Aug 28
- Our Contribution in Public Worship, Curtis Witmer, Apr 18
- Overstimulation, James Rudy Gray, Sep 27

PAGE 38

SWORD AND TRUMPET

- Parents Providing a Disciplined Home Life, Joel Martin, Apr 36
- Partakers of Christ's Suffering, J. Mark Horst, Jul 8
- Passion or Passivity?, Eugene Sommers, May 19
- Personal Financial Management, Richie Lauer, Sep 35
- Personal Responsibility for Congregational Stability, Harold Good, Nov 18
- Plea for Those in Secret Sin, A, Charles Spurgeon, Nov 15
- "Pornified" Men in the Church: How Bad Is It?, Dan Wilson, Dec 26
- Preaching as Expository Exultation for the Glory of God, John Piper, May 31
- Preparing Next-Generation Leaders, Mel Shetler, Apr 29
- Prosperity Religion, John Poff, Nov 3
- Protecting the Pearl of Purity, David Lamar Hurst, Apr 17
- Purpose of Parables, The, J. Otis Yoder, Jun 36
- Pursuing a Pilgrimage, Edwin R. Eby, Jun 2
- Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism, The, Richard Winter, Mar 24
- Reader's Review of THE SHACK, A, Tim Challies, May 21
- Restored by the God of All Grace, Scott Lowery, Jan 33
- "REVEAL" Is Revealing, J. Mark Horst, Jun 32
- Revelation 5—The Sealed Book, Delmas I. Gehman, Sep 22
- Sanctifying Shepherd, The, John MacArthur, Dec 20
- Shall He That Contendeth With the Almighty Instruct Him?, David Finley, Oct 17
- Simple Living by Design, Aaron W. Crider, Nov 22
- Social Networking, Timothy J. Myers, Dec 32
- Spiritual Stimulus Plan, A, Allen Shirk, Nov 2
- Steps to Revival in the Church, Harold S. Martin, Dec 36
- Stick to Your Standards!, Hugh Pyle, Sep 28
- Stormy Peace, Mark D. Avery, Sep 5
- Taking Thankfulness a Step Further, George Quick, Aug 5
- Teaching Honesty and Truthfulness, Wilmer Ebersole, Jul 36
- Teaching to Give and to Share, Charles E. Steiner, Oct 32
- Ten Critical Questions for Marriages, *Association of Biblical Counselors*, Apr 20
- That Comfort Zone, Paul L. Miller, May 36
- Theology of a Mere Worm, The, James R. Haga, May 18
- Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer, Harold S. Martin, Jan 35; cont'd., Feb 25
- Three Views of the Christian and War, Charles Lehigh, Jan 19
- Transiency of Tears, The, Clovis G. Chappell, Apr 25
- Truth About Heaven and Hell, The, Harold S. Martin, Apr 2
- Unchanging Truths, John J. Forry, Jul 18
- Virus Protection, David Ravenhill, Jun 33
- What Is True Science?, John Mullett, Mar 36
- What's the Big Issue?, Simon Schrock, Dec 15
- What/Whom Do I Fear?, Dan Beachy, Jul 21
- When Relationship Is Not Enough, Shea Oakley, Nov 17
- Who Are We?, Timothy J. Myers, Oct 5
- Who Can Stand Before Envy?, Jason H. Martin, Jul 33
- Who Keeps Your Heart?, Carl L. Sensenig, Apr 21
- Who's Captivating Whom? Donna Thoennes, Dec 22
- "Who Then Is Willing?," A. Clair Auker, Jan 14
- Why History Matters in Mennonite Schools, Patrick Heatwole, Sep 15
- Why I Believe in Creationism, John Mullett, Aug 35
- Works of the Flesh, The, Harold S. Martin, Jul 23
- Wrinkles Don't Hurt, Enos D. Stutzman, Mar 12

Index by Subject

Beginning Issues, John Mullett

- Bible: Is It Accurate?, The, Part 1, Sept 34; Part 2, Oct 34; Part 3, Nov 21
- Blind Faith or Logical Faith?, July 32
- Can God Be a Loving God in a World of Suffering?, Part 1, Apr 34; Part 2, May 15; Part 3, Jun 30
- Common Designer or Common Ancestry?, A, Feb 35
- Evidence for Creation or Evolution?, Jan 24
- Male and Female He Created Them, Dec 28
- What Is True Science?, Mar 36
- Why I Believe in Creationism, Aug 35

Book Evaluations

- Reader's Review of *The Shack*, A, Tim Challies, May 21
- Who's Captivating Whom?, Donna Thoennes, Dec 22

Christian Life

- Blessed Are the Hungry, Kevin Bauman, Mar 29
- God's Promises Always Come True, P. Daniel Stetler, Feb 15
- Good Works and the Justified, Horatius Bonar, Feb 31
- How I Ascertain the Will of God, George Mueller, June 4
- How to Profit From Bible Reading, Bruce Oyen, Nov 26
- Is Life Spinning Out of Control?, Andrew Gehman, June 27
- Is This the Best We Can Do?, Steve Gallagher, May 4
- Listen Up! Dr. Mark Bailey, Feb 16
- My Work or His Work?, David L. Burkholder, Sept 19
- Passion or Passivity?, Eugene Sommers, May 19
- Pursuing a Pilgrimage, Edwin R. Eby, June 2
- Stormy Peace, Mark D. Avery, Sept 5
- Theology of a Mere Worm, The, James R. Haga, May 18
- Who Are We?, Timothy J. Myers, Oct 5
- Who Keeps Your Heart?, Carl L. Sensenig, Apr 21
- Works of the Flesh, The, Harold S. Martin, Jul 23

Christmas

Carols of Christmas, The, Peter Colón, Dec 2
Good Tidings of Great Joy, Glenn E. Auker, Dec 3

Church

Brotherhood Pilgrimage, The, John R. Mumaw, Mar 30
Church at the Crossroads, Steve Gallagher, Oct 2
Current Church Issues, Research Project: Christian Counseling, Anon., Aug 21
Exodus en Masse: Could We Have Sent Them?, Jerry Hoover, Oct 24
Five Advantages of Church-Based Counseling, Deepak Reju, Oct 14
Personal Responsibility for Congregational Stability, Harold Good, Nov 18
“Reveal” is Revealing, J. Mark Horst, Jun 32
Sanctifying Shepherd, The, John MacArthur, Dec 20
Steps to Revival in the Church, Harold S. Martin, Dec 34
Virus Protection, David Ravenhill, Jun 33
What’s the Big Issue?, Simon Schrock, Dec 15
When Relationship is Not Enough, Shea Oakley, Nov 17

Church Leadership

Preaching as Expository Exultation for the Glory of God, John Piper, May 31
Preparing Next-Generation Leaders, Apr 29

Contentment

Greener Grass, Ben Waldner, Jan 4
I Shall Not Want, Jason Padgett, Jul 35

Counseling From the Word

Culture of Anger, The, James R. Gray, Jun 18
Current Church Issues, Research Project: Christian Counseling, Anon., Aug 21
Distinguishing Mark of Christianity, The, John MacArthur, Feb 29
Five Advantages of Church-Based Counseling, Deepak Reju, Oct 14
Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism, The, Richard Winter, Mar 24
Restored by the God of All Grace, Scott Lowery, Jan 33
Ten Critical Questions for Marriages, ABCounselors, Apr 20
What/Whom Do I Fear?, Dan Beachy, Jul 21
When Relationship is Not Enough, Shea Oakley, Nov 17
Who’s Captivating Whom?, Donna Thoennes, Dec 22

Current Issues

Counseling Those in Sexual Sin, Steve Gallagher, Nov 31
Current Church Issues, Research Project: Christian Counseling, Anon., Aug 21
Do We Need a New Deal?, Burton W. Folsom, Jr., Jun 28
Drug-Addicted Babies: Who Is Responsible?, Haven B. Gow, Apr 35
His Work—Our Generation, Mark D. Avery, Jul 28
Mennonite Nazis?, Clifford Schrock, Jan 27
Ministry of Deliverance, A, Timothy Gombis, Nov 36

PAGE 40

Ministry Trends for the Post-Everything Generation, Mark Irving, Jan 25
Overstimulation, James R. Gray, Sep 27
Passion or Passivity?, Eugene Sommers, May 19
Sanctifying Shepherd, The, John MacArthur, Dec 20
Social Networking, Tim Myers, Dec 32
Spiritual Stimulus Plan, A, Allen Shirk, Nov 2
Stick to Your Standards! Hugh Pyle, Sep 28
What’s the Big Issue?, Simon Schrock, Dec 15
What/Whom Do I Fear?, Dan Beachy, Jul 21

Death/Dying

Biblical Light on Cremation, John J. Forry, Oct 35
Burial or Cremation?, Arno Froese, Nov 13

Doctrines/Ordinances

New Testament Day of Rest, The, Jacob T. Brubaker, Jun 13
Nonconformity to the World, John Horsch, Mar 22

Education

America’s Softening of the Brain—John Dewey, 1859-1952, *Kairos Journal*, Feb 36
Why History Matters in Mennonite Schools, Patrick Heatwole, Sep 15

Emergent Church

Virus Protection, David Ravenhill, Jun 33

Eternity/Eschatology

Revelation 5—The Sealed Book, Delmas I. Gehman, Sep 22

Gospel

Man’s Revolt; God’s Pursuit, Willard Mayer, Jul 2

Grace

Chosen by Grace and Called to Faith, Paul Shirk, Jun 19

Grief and Suffering

Can God Be a Loving God in a World of Suffering?, Part 1, John Mullet, Apr 34; Part 2, May 15; Part 3, Jun 30
Navigating Grief, Dan Zink, Aug 26
Partakers of Christ’s Suffering, J. Mark Horst, Jul 8
Shall He That Contendeth With the Almighty Instruct Him?, David Finley, Oct 17
Transiency of Tears, The, Clovis G. Chappell, Apr 25

Heaven/Hell

Honest Men Must Warn, J. C. Ryle, Apr 22
One in Heaven, the Other in Hell, Oswald J. Smith, Aug 28
Truth About Heaven and Hell, The, Harold S. Martin, Apr 2

History

Why History Matters in Mennonite Schools, Patrick Heatwole, Sep 15

Home and Family

Good News for America’s Families, Robert Parr, Oct 10
Guarantee for Child-Training?, A, Howard Bean, Jul 22
Parents Providing a Disciplined Home Life, Joel Martin, Apr 36

SWORD AND TRUMPET

Teaching Honesty and Truthfulness, Wilmer Ebersole, Jul 36
Teaching to Give and to Share, Charles E. Steiner, Oct 32

Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is Lord, Timothy L. Cooley, Aug 2

Marriage

Ten Critical Questions for Marriages, ABCounselors, Apr 20

Ministry

Counseling Those in Sexual Sin, Steve Gallagher, Nov 31

Ministry of Deliverance, A, Timothy Gombis, Nov 36

Ministry Trends for the Post-Everything Generation, Mark Irving, Jan 25

Miscellaneous

Beauties of the Law, The, Jerram Barrs, Jun 24

Let's Do Something, P. Daniel Stetler, Apr 7

Lights and Sirens, Roger Swihart, Feb 23

Purpose of Parables, The, J. Otis Yoder, Jun 36

Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism, The, Richard Winter, Mar 24

That Comfort Zone, Paul L. Miller, May 36

Unchanging Truths, John J. Forry, Jul 18

Wrinkles Don't Hurt, Enos D. Stutzman, Mar 12

Missions/Evangelism

Beyond Closed Doors, Jul 17

Community Call, A, Michael G. Loftis, Feb 27

Coping With Culture Shock and Stress, Floyd Stoltzfus, Apr 32

Elders Extending the Call, David Blackney, Jan 29

Holy Men and a Holy Mount, Dr. Charles J. Woodbridge, Feb 2

Money/Wealth

Frugality in a Wasteful Society, Dale Eby, Jan 2

Personal Financial Management, Richie Lauer, Sep 35

Prosperity Religion, John Poff, Nov 3

Simple Living By Design, Aaron W. Crider, Nov 22

Morality/Sexuality

Church's Response to Homosexuality, The, Alex D. Montoya, Mar 2

Counseling Those in Sexual Sin, Steve Gallagher, Nov 31

Erotic vs. the Spiritual, The, Steve Gallagher, Feb 5

How to Become an Adulterer, a Fornicator, or Worse!, Bruce Oyen, Sep 2

Ministry of Deliverance, A, Timothy Gombis, Nov 36

Pornified Men in the Church, How Bad is It?, Dan Wilson, Dec 26

Music/Singing

Great Music Emanates From God, Haven B. Gow, Jul 29

Newsletters, Hans Mast

Jan 11; Feb 11; Mar 19; Apr 14; May 12; Jun 10; Jul 14; Aug 13; Sep 12; Oct 11; Nov 10; Dec 12

Person of the Month, Gail Emerson

Clarence H. Benson, Jun 1

Frederick J. Gingerich, Aug 1

Isaac Stoltzfus Mast, Apr 1

Israel Bowman, Dec 1

James Chalmers, Jan 1

Jonas B. Miller, Sep 1

Lemuel Haynes, Feb 1

Lewis Shantz Weber, Mar 1

Melchior Hoffman, May 1

W. Ray Wenger, Nov 1

Yost H. Miller, Oct 1

David L. Miller

Christian Nafziger, Jul 1

Verna Schlabach

Patriotism/Nonresistance

Anabaptism 101: Walking in the Ordinary Way of Peace, James Toews, Jun 34

Three Views of the Christian and War, Charles Lehigh, Jan 19

Prayer

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer, Part 1, Harold S. Martin, Jan 35; Part 2, Feb 25

Relationships

Critical Spirit, A, Dale Eby, Jun 14

Culture of Anger, The, James R. Gray, Jun 18

Offended, Timothy J. Myers, Apr 23

Who Can Stand Before Envy?, Jason H. Martin, Jul 33

Repentance

Call to Repentance, Renewal, and Revival, A, Mark D. Avery, Feb 20

Plea for Those in Secret Sin, A, Charles Spurgeon, Nov 15

Salvation

Come Now, Let us Reason Together, E. O. Jack Jones, Jan 17

Sermon of the Month

Beauties of the Law, The, Jerram Barrs, Jun 24

Brotherhood in Pilgrimage, The, John R. Mumaw, Mar 30

Come Now, Let Us Reason Together, E. O. Jack Jones, Jan 17

Exodus en Masse: Could We Have Sent Them?, Jerry Hoover, Oct 24

Listen Up! Dr. Mark Bailey, Feb 16

Money Management, J. Otis Yoder, Dec 18

One in Heaven, the Other in Hell, Oswald J. Smith, Aug 28

Plea for Those in Secret Sin, A, Charles Spurgeon, Nov 15

Preaching as Expository Exultation for the Glory of God, John Piper, May 31

Transiency of Tears, The, Clovis G. Chappell

Works of the Flesh, The, Harold S. Martin, Jul 23

Song of the Month, Douglas Byler

Glory and Honor and Majesty, Sylvan Ressler, Mar 34

Great God, How Infinite, Feb 22

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, Jan 22
 Holy, Holy, Holy, July 30
 Lead Us, O Father, June 16
 Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence, Dec 30
 Lift Your Glad Voices, Apr 30
 Mighty Fortress, A, Sept 20
 Nearer, My God, to Thee, May 16
 Praise to God, Immortal Praise, Nov 24
 Prayer for Strength, Aug 36
 Tread Softly, Oct 22

Sunday School Lessons, David L. Burkholder
 Jan 6; Feb 6; Mar 13; Apr 9; May 5; Jun 5; Jul 9;
 Aug 7; Sep 7; Oct 6; Nov 4; Dec 7

Technology
 Cell Phone Abuse and Its Effects, Diane Truitt,
 Feb 24
 Social Networking, Tim Myers, Dec 32

Thankfulness
 Taking Thankfulness a Step Further, George
 Quick, Aug 5

Worldviews
 Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not,
 John Stonestreet, Oct 19

Worship
 Our Contribution to Public Worship, Curtis Wit-
 mer, Apr 18
 In Spirit and in Truth: Let's Talk About Worship!,
 Robert L. Holmes, May 2

Writing
 Who Then Is Willing?, A. Clair Auker, Jan 14

Youth
 Courtship, Engagement, and the Wedding, Harold
 S. Martin, Aug 16
 Protecting the Pearl of Purity, David L. Horst,
 Apr 17

Index by Author and Source

Anonymous
 Current Church Issues, Research Project: Chris-
 tian Counseling, Aug 21

Association of Biblical Counselors
 Ten Critical Questions for Marriages, Apr 20

Auker, A. Clair
 "Who Then Is Willing?," Jan 14

Auker, Glenn E.
 "Good Tidings of Great Joy," Dec 5

Avery, Mark D.
 Call to Repentance, Renewal, and Revival, Feb 20
 His Work—Our Generation, Jul 28
 Stormy Peace, Sep 5

Bailey, Mark
 Listen Up!, Feb 16

Barr, Jerram
 Beauties of the Law, The, Jun 24

Bauman, Kevin
 Blessed Are the Hungry, Mar 29

Beachy, Dan
 What/Whom Do I Fear?, Jul 21

Bean, Howard
 Guarantee for Child-Training?, A, Jul 22

Blackney, David
 Elders Extending the Call, Jan 29

Bonar, Horatius
 Good Works and the Justified, Feb 31

Brubaker, Jacob T.
 New Testament Day of Rest, The, Jun 13

Burkholder, David L.—SS Lessons
 Jan 6; Feb 6; Mar 13; Apr 9; May 5; Jun 5; Jul 9;
 Aug 7; Sep 7; Oct 6; Nov 4; Dec 7

Articles
 My Work or His Work?, Sep 19

Byler, Douglas A.
 Great God, How Infinite, Feb 22
 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, Jan 22
 Holy, Holy, Holy, Jul 30
 Lift Your Glad Voices, Apr 30
 Mighty Fortress, A, Sep 20
 Nearer, My God, to Thee, May 16
 Praise to God, Immortal Praise, Nov 24
 Prayer for Strength, Aug 36
 Tread Softly, Oct 22

Challies, Tim
 Reader's Review of THE SHACK, A, May 21

Chappell, Clovis G.
 Transiency of Tears, The, Apr 25

Colón, Peter
 Carols of Christmas, The, Dec 2

Commons, Bill
 Beyond Closed Doors, Jul 17

Cooley, Timothy L.
 Jesus Christ Is Lord, Aug 2

Crider, Aaron W.
 Simple Living by Design, Nov 22

Ebersole, Wilmer
 Teaching Honesty and Truthfulness, Jul 36

Eby, Dale
 Critical Spirit, A, Jun 14
 Frugality in a Wasteful Society, Jan 2

Eby, Edwin R.
 Pursuing a Pilgrimage, Jun 2

Emerson, Gail L.
 Clarence H. Benson, Jun 1
 James Chalmers, Jan 1
 Frederick J. Gingerich, Aug 1
 Israel Bowman Good, Dec 1
 Lemuel Haynes, Feb 1
 Melchior Hoffman, May 1
 Isaac Stoltzfus Mast, Apr 1
 Jonas B. Miller, Sep 1
 Lewis Shantz Weber, Mar 1
 W. Ray Wenger, Nov 1

Finley, David
 Shall He That Contendeth With the Almighty
 Instruct Him?, Oct 17

Folsom, Jr., Burton W.
 Do We Need a New New Deal?, Jun 28

Forry, John J.
 Biblical Light on Cremation, Oct 35
 Unchanging Truths, Jul 18

Froese, Arno
 Burial or Cremation?, Nov 13

Gallagher, Steve
 Church at the Crossroads, Oct 2
 Counseling Those in Sexual Sin, Nov 31

Erotic vs. the Spiritual, The, Feb 5
 Is *This the Best We Can Do?*, May 4
Gehman, Andrew
 Is Life Spinning Out of Control?, Jun 27
Gehman, Delmas
 Revelation 5—The Sealed Book, Sep 22
Gombis, Timothy
 Ministry of Deliverance, A, Nov 36
Good, Harold
 Personal Responsibility for Congregational Stability, Nov 18
Gow, Haven Bradford
 Drug-Addicted Babies: Who Is Responsible?, Apr 35
 Great Music Emanates From Greatness of God, Jul 29
Gray, James Rudy
 Culture of Anger, The, Jun 18
 Overstimulation, Sep 27
Haga, James R.
 Theology of a Mere Worm, The, May 18
Heatwole, Patrick
 Why History Matters in Mennonite Schools, Sep 15
Holmes, Robert Leslie
 In Spirit and in Truth: Let's Talk About Worship!, May 2
Hoover, Jerry
 Exodus en Masse: Could We Have Sent Them?, Oct 24
Horsch, John
 Nonconformity to the World, Mar 22
Horst, J. Mark
 Partakers of Christ's Suffering, Jul 8
 "REVEAL" Is Revealing, Jun 32
Hurst, David Lamar
 Protecting the Pearl of Purity, Apr 17
Irving, Mark
 Ministry Trends for the Post-Everything Generation, Jan 25
Jones, E. O. Jack
 Come Now, Let Us Reason Together, Jan 17
Kairos Journal
 America's Softening of the Brain—John Dewey, 1859-1952, Feb 36
Lauer, Richie
 Personal Financial Management, Sep 35
Lehigh, Charles
 Three Views of the Christian and War, Jan 19
Loftis, Michael G.
 Community Call, A, Feb 27
Lowery, Scott
 Restored by the God of All Grace, Jan 33
MacArthur, John
 Distinguishing Mark of Christianity, The, Feb 29
 Sanctifying Shepherd, The, Dec 20
Martin, Harold S.
 Courtship, Engagement, and the Wedding, Aug 16
 Steps to Revival in the Church, Dec 34
 Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer, Jan 35; Feb 25
 Truth About Heaven and Hell, The, Apr 2
 Works of the Flesh, The, Jul 23
Martin, Jason H.
 Who Can Stand Before Envy?, Jul 33
Martin, Joel
 Parents Providing a Disciplined Home Life, Apr 36
Mast, Hans—Newslines
 Jan 11; Feb 11; Mar 19; Apr 14; May 12; Jun 10; Jul 14; Aug 13; Sep 12; Oct 11; Nov 10; Dec 12
Mayer, Willard
 Man's Revolt: God's Pursuit, Jul 2
Miller, David L.
 Yost H. Miller, Oct 1
Miller, Paul L.
 That Comfort Zone, May 36
Montoya, Alex D.
 Church's Response to Homosexuality, The, Mar 2
Mueller, George
 How I Ascertain the Will of God, Jun 4
Mullett, John
 Bible, The: Is It Accurate?, Sep 34; Part 2, Oct 34; Part 3, Nov 21
 Blind Faith or Logical Faith?, Jul 32
 Can God Be a Loving God in a World of Suffering?, Apr 34; Part 2, May 15; Part 3, Jun 30
 Common Designer or Common Ancestry, A? Feb 36
 Evidence for Creation or Evolution?, Jan 24
 Male and Female He Created Them, Dec 28
 What Is True Science?, Mar 36
 Why I Believe in Creationism, Aug 35
Mumaw, John R.
 Brotherhood in Pilgrimage, The, Mar 30
Myers, Timothy J.
 Offended, Apr 23
 Social Networking, Dec 32
 Who Are We?, Oct 5
Oakley, Shea
 When Relationship Is Not Enough, Nov 17
Oyen, Bruce
 How to Become an Adulterer, a Fornicator, or Worse!, Sep 2
 How to Profit From Bible Reading, Nov 26
Padgett, Jason
 I Shall Not Want, Jul 35
Parr, Robert
 Good News for America's Families, Oct 10
Piper, John
 Preaching as Expository Exultation for the Glory of God, May 31
Poff, John
 Prosperity Religion, Nov 3
Pyle, Hugh
 Stick to Your Standards!, Sep 28
Quick, George
 Taking Thankfulness a Step Further, Aug 5
Ravenhill, David
 Virus Protection, Jun 33
Reju, Deepak
 Five Advantages of Church-Based Counseling, Oct 14
Ressler, Sylvan
 Glory and Honor and Majesty, Mar 34
Ryle, J. C.
 Honest Men Must Warn, Apr 22

Schlabach, Verna
Christian Nafziger and the Amish in Canada, Jul 1

Schrock, Clifford
Mennonite Nazis?, Jan 27

Schrock, Simon
What's the Big Issue?, Dec 15

Sensenig, Carl L.
Who Keeps Your Heart?, Apr 21

Shetler, Mel
Preparing Next-Generation Leaders, Apr 29

Shirk, Allen
Spiritual Stimulus Plan, A, Nov 2

Shirk, Paul
Chosen by Grace and Called to Faith, Jun 19

Smith, Oswald J.
One in Heaven, the Other in Hell, Aug 28

Sommers, Eugene
Passion or Passivity?, May 19

Spurgeon, Charles
Plea for Those in Secret Sin, A, Nov 15

Steiner, Charles E.
Teaching to Give and to Share, Oct 32

Stetler, P Daniel
God's Promises Always Come True, Feb 15

Let's Do Something, Apr 7

Stoltzfus, Floyd
Coping With Culture Shock and Stress, Apr 32

Stonestreet, John
Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not,
Oct 19

Stutzman, Enos D.
Wrinkles Don't Hurt, Mar 12

Swihart, Roger
Lights and Sirens, Feb 23

Thoennes, Donna
Who's Captivating Whom?, Dec 22

Toews, James
Anabaptism 101: Walking in the Ordinary Way of
Peace, Jun 34

Truitt, Diane
Cell Phone Abuse and Its Effects, Feb 24

Waldner, Ben
Greener Grass, Jan 4

Wilson, Dan
"Pornified" Men in the Church: How Bad Is It?,
Dec 26

Winter, Richard
Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfection-
ism, The, Mar 24

Witmer, Curtis
Our Contribution in Public Worship, Apr 18

Woodbridge, Charles J.
Holy Men and a Holy Mount, Feb 2

Yoder, J. Otis
Money Management, Dec 18

Purpose of Parables, The, Jun 36

Zink, Dan
Navigating Grief, Aug 26

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PAGE 44

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