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I am reading the current (July/Aug) issue and have to respond to something . . . that is just plain wrong. The writer concludes the mission fields in the greatest need of the gospel lie in and around the 10/40 window. Now that statement indicates that South America, Catholic countries, are evangelized. . . . Who evangelized these people? Brazil . . . is the mission field in the greatest need and where God has opened a door and prepared a harvest. Instead of kicking and throwing dollars at closed doors, let's use our resources to reap the harvest that God has put in the field today.

Scott Wilson
Brazil

It is always a great joy in my heart to receive the *FrontLine* magazine. This magazine helps and encourages me and my people a lot. I can-

not find any word to express my heartfelt gratitude for this magazine.

David Mang Sum
Yangon, Myanmar

I just wanted to drop a quick note to thank you for the fine job you and your printers did this year on the directory. . . . I'm pleased with the quality of the reproduction. Please pass along our thanks to all those who worked on the project.

Dave McQuaid
Greenville, South Carolina

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We Are All Men under Authority

It is likely that many of our readers have already received reports of Dr. Bell's resignation. We would love to spare him further embarrassment, but avoiding the issue in this space where he has ministered to us for many years is not the best way to do that. Following his example of straightforward presentation of the facts, without excuse, is best.

When this matter first came to my attention on the morning of November 22, this issue of *FrontLine* was already in production, so we regret the necessary delay in getting it to you. The next day, the statement below was read to Dr. Bell's congregation and sent to the board of the FBFI. Since then, his friends have been sympathetic with him regarding his pain and suffering and the public embarrassment and loss of blamelessness that he frankly admits. We love him and are deeply grieved that his leadership of the FBFI, as well as the Tabernacle Baptist Church and many other ministries, has ended as a result.

Official Statement by Dr. Rod Bell Sr.

On Saturday, November 22, 2003, I met with the deacons of Tabernacle Baptist Church, and my personal friends, Dr. Bob Jones III, Dr. John Vaughn, and Dr. Walter Kirk, to acknowledge and admit that I have given the enemies of Christ occasion to blaspheme.

Approximately seven years ago, I received prescription medications from my physician and advice from him to take wine to help me sleep. I admit that I have taken wine, which in combination with prescription medication has affected me severely due to the fact that I had my stomach removed in 1989.

In 2000, I was arrested and convicted for public drunkenness. I confessed to and was forgiven by all who had knowledge of that

incident and other incidents since then. I have brought reproach on the ministry and am no longer blameless. I have resigned as pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church, as President of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship International, and from all boards and ministries in which I have served in leadership.

I ask the forgiveness of all who have been and will be affected by my sin. Christ must increase; I must decrease.

Rod Bell Sr.

In addition to this official statement read by the deacon chairman, Dr. Bell made additional comments to his congregation, including the following:

This statement of resignation is final and is not open for negotiation or debate. My decision is final. It is not the deacons' decision; it is not the church's decision; it is my decision. Now, it may be questioned, but was born in my heart from Biblical conviction and it is right.

Sin has entered into the camp, and it must be dealt with. I have stood behind this sacred desk for 36? years. I have tried to stay pure and clean, and I have tried to set an example for you to follow. However, in this I have failed.

Let me be perfectly clear. I am not above the church's precepts or policies. I do not want nor do I deserve special treatment. I am just a sinner saved by grace, a living stone in God's building. I am a man under authority first to my Lord, secondly to His Word, and His church. I have, therefore, placed myself under the counsel of

the local church—the highest court on earth.

In accordance with Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted," I have also submitted myself to the counsel of godly men—Dr. John Vaughn, Dr. Bob Jones, and Dr. Walter Kirk—in the hope and assurance of His mercy to be restored to complete fellowship with His people.

It is time for me to step aside and allow God to give you another undershepherd whom you can follow as he follows Christ. Rally around him and give him your support. Oh, my dear flock, will you please forgive me, for I have sinned? I have sinned against my sacred office, my calling, my family, but most of all, against my Lord. So I, like Peter after his denial, will go out and weep bitterly.

Rod Bell Sr.

Dr. Bell is exhausted. He has been consumed by the duties of the ministries he has led, and the physical toll has been devastating. His spirit since this matter came to light has been humble and contrite. It will be sad, but not surprising, if the few who have made it their cause to attack him and the FBFI take advantage of this moment of vulnerability.

No one in leadership of the FBFI will make excuses for sin. Of David, we read that he "did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite." May it be so said of this man who has given so much of his life for so many.

The Good Shepherd Is the Reason for the Season

Layton Talbert

A Suggestion for a Family Tradition

Most Christians set aside Christmas as a time for remembering and reflecting on the most momentous and interventional event in human history to date—the incarnation of the Son of God in order to perform His saving work. This coming, His first advent, is the center of the Christmas celebration. (Whether most Christians actually set aside time to remember and reflect on these truths is another question.) Here is one suggestion to help the whole family focus quality time each day on the significance of this season.

For several years our family has regularly made and used an “advent wreath.” Because this family tradition includes the children, ours have grown to love this season of working our way daily and systematically as a family through a variety of Scriptures that touch upon the Christmas event and its implications. For us, it has become an eagerly anticipated and precious time of family worship.

Creating the Wreath

This project should begin a day or two after Thanksgiving, since the daily Scripture readings begin with the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Using a circular form made of Styrofoam™, chicken wire, straw, or vines for a base, create a wreath decorated with greenery,

pinecones, or whatever you like. (You can, of course, simply buy a wreath; but making one is more enjoyable for the children—and cheaper!) However, this is not a hanging wreath. Instead, lay the wreath in the center of your dining-room table or coffee table, and place four candles around the wreath at equal distances. (If you use a Styrofoam™ form, you might want to use candleholders that stick into the foam.) A fifth candle goes in the middle.

The candle colors are up to you. Some people use a gold candle to represent the prophets, a white one for the angels, a green one for the shepherds, and a purple one for the Magi, with a large red candle placed in the middle for Christmas Day. Others make all four candles the same color. We like to use purple (or blue) for the prophets, white for the angels, green for the shepherds, red for worshippers (including the Magi), and a gold one in the center for Christmas Day to mark the birth of the King of kings.

How to Use It

Beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, during your family devotional time, have one of the children (perhaps moving from youngest to oldest, or oldest to youngest) light only the prophets’ candle (the kids, of course, like to switch off all the other lights first). We usually begin by singing a carol (chosen by the children), read select Scripture passages that focus on prophecies relating to the coming of Christ as well as their New Testament fulfillment, then close with prayer and blow out the candle. The same pattern is followed each day

that week, with the same child lighting the candle each day as we work through the prophetic Scriptures relating to the first advent of Christ.

On the third Sunday before Christmas, and each day that week, the angels' candle is lit along with the prophets' candle. The readings for this week focus on the remarkable role of angels in connection with the incarnation of Christ.

Beginning the second Sunday before Christmas, the shepherds' candle is lit (along with the prophets' and angels' candles—so the glow of candlelight increases each week as you draw closer to Christmas when “the people that walked in darkness” saw “a great light” and upon whom “the light shined” (Isa. 9:2). The readings for this week highlight not only the shepherds in the Christmas story, but also passages that describe Christ as our Shepherd.

Starting with the last Sunday before Christmas, we light what we call the worshippers' candle, along with the other three, each day. The readings I have selected for this week draw attention to the various worshippers depicted in the Christmas story—the Magi, Simeon and Anna, and others.

Finally, on Christmas Day (or Christmas Eve, if you prefer) all the candles are lit, including the special Christmas candle in the center, and we read passages that culminate the Christmas event and its implications. Our family likes to do this, along with carols and prayer, to put the day's activities into proper perspective before we open gifts.

*. . . it has become an
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and precious time of
family worship.*

Final Thoughts

There are no “rules” for this family tradition. You can tailor the details to your own tastes. For instance, I felt some of the readings I first came across wandered too far afield from the birth of Christ, so I adjusted a number of passages accordingly. (See the suggested schedule of readings at the end of this article.) The readings are generally brief, allowing plenty of time for family discussion and meditation. There will also be some variables in the readings as Christmas falls on different days each year.

If you are looking for a family tradition that will help establish a Biblical focus for your family's celebration of the Christmas holidays, the advent wreath gives family devotions a helpful structure, a seasonal theme, plus exposure to a wide selection of passages related to Christ's coming. In addition, the wreath provides a useful tool for maintaining a Scriptural perspective during a time of year that is all too often filled with distractions.

After all, Christmas can and should be a treasure chest of opportunities to enrich spiritually the life of each believer. Why not add an advent wreath to your family's traditions?

Dr. Layton Talbert is a *FrontLine* Contributing Editor and Professor of Theology and Bible Exposition at Bob Jones University and Seminary.

Suggested Advent Readings

Fourth Sunday before Christmas

Prophets' Candle

Sunday: 1 Peter 1:3–12; 2 Peter 1:16–21

Monday: Isaiah 7:13, 14; Matthew 1:18–23;
Isaiah 9:6, 7; Luke 1:30–33

Tuesday: Numbers 24:15–19; Matthew 2:1, 2, 7–10

Wednesday: Micah 5:1–4; Matthew 2:1–6;
Luke 2:1–7

Thursday: Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:13–17

Friday: Isaiah 61:1–3; Luke 4:14–30

Saturday: Isaiah 53; Matthew 27:12–14, 38, 57–60

Third Sunday before Christmas

Angels' Candle

Sunday: Luke 1:5–25, 57–66

Monday: Luke 1:26–38

Tuesday: Matthew 1:18–25

Wednesday: Isaiah 53

Thursday: Luke 2:8–20

Friday: Matthew 2:13–21

Saturday: Matthew 4:11; Luke 22:43;
Matthew 28:2–4; Acts 1:10, 11

Second Sunday before Christmas

Shepherds' Candle

Sunday: Luke 2:1–20

Monday: Psalms 23; 73:13; 95:7; 100:3

Tuesday: Isaiah 53:6; Matthew 18:10–14;
1 Peter 2:25

Wednesday: Isaiah 40:1–11; Hebrews 13:20, 21

Thursday: John 10:1–18, 27–30

Friday: Matthew 9:35–38; John 21:15–17;
1 Peter 5:2–4

Saturday: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 23–31

First Sunday before Christmas

Worshippers' Candle

Sunday: Luke 1:39–56

Monday: Luke 1:67–80

Tuesday: Luke 2:8–20

Wednesday: Isaiah 53

Thursday: Matthew 2:1–12

Friday: Luke 2:21–38

Saturday: Revelation 1:10–18, 5:1–14; 19:5, 6

Christmas Day

Christmas Candle

Isaiah 60:1–3

John 1:1–18

1 John 1:1–2:2

The Good Shepherd Is the Creator of the Heavens

Stephen Caesar

How Old Are the Stars?

One of the strongest weapons in the arsenal of skeptics who reject young-universe Creationism has been the alleged great antiquity of the stars. As scientists currently date them, stars appear to be far older than would allow for a Biblical age of the universe. However, new, refined, technologically superior methods of dating the stars have in recent years disarmed much of this arsenal and bolstered the Biblical side of the issue. In fact, these new techniques consistently indicate that the stars are much younger than previously assumed.

A Pulsar Sheds New Light

One recent find involving a pulsar (a collapsed star that emits regular bursts of energy) has demonstrated the faultiness of conventional dating systems. For instance, until last year, astronomers had assumed that a certain pulsar was 24,000 years old. However, a team of astronomers using the orbiting Chandra X-ray telescope discovered that the pulsar in question is actually a remnant of a supernova reported by Chinese astronomers in A.D. 386. (When a star approaches the end of its stellar "life," it explodes into a supernova. In some cases, these supernovae can be seen from earth with the naked eye.) "This connection" between the pulsar and the Chinese record, reported the *Boston Globe*, "proved that the pulsar was dramatically younger than once believed—less than 2,000 years old rather than 24,000."¹

The earlier, incorrect estimate of that pulsar's age resulted from the faulty logic traditionally used by astronomers to date stellar bodies. Victoria Kaspi of McGill University, one of the members of the team that discovered the pulsar's correct age, commented, "Determining the true ages of astronomical objects is notoriously difficult. For this reason, historical records of supernovae are of great importance."²

The *Globe* went into further detail as to how unreliable traditional old-universe dating methods have proven: "Until now, the only way to figure out the age of pulsars was by measuring how fast they are spinning, and the rate at which the spinning is slowing down. By extrapolating backwards to the estimated spin rate when the pulsar was born, this allows an estimate of their present ages. But the new discovery shows that this method can be way off, and shows [that] the process must be more complicated than astronomers have yet been able to analyze."³

Astronomer David Helfand, a pulsar expert at Columbia University, commented that the new findings are "a little disquieting." In the words of the *Globe*, Helfand's disquietude stems from the fact that the young date for this allegedly old pulsar "undermines what the specialists in the field *thought* they knew."⁴

Help from Hubble

Another recent example of improved technology revealing a younger age for a particular celestial body is found in the so-called Veil nebula. The January 2001

issue of *Discover* magazine reported that images taken by the Hubble telescope have caused this revision: "Astronomers believed the Veil, one of the best-studied supernova remnants, was 2,500 light-years away and 18,000 years old. But when astrophysicist William Blair of Johns Hopkins University and his colleagues compared this new [Hubble] image with ground-based photos taken in 1953, they found the consensus was quite wrong. In fact, the Veil nebula is a mere 1,500 light-years away and 5,000 years old. Blair is taken aback: 'This had been considered the prototypical supernova remnant, and we thought it was well understood.'"⁵

Refining the Models

Yet another recent instance of this phenomenon involves not a specific astronomical body, but an improved technique for dating stars in general. Dr. Brian C. Chaboyer, who received his Ph.D. from Yale and currently serves as a professor of physics and astronomy at Dartmouth, is a principal investigator on NASA's Space Interferometry Mission. In an article written for *Scientific American*, Dr. Chaboyer discussed the problems with the older dating methods: "Unfortunately, although astronomers can deduce the total lifetime of a star, it is hard to gauge how many years an individual star has already lived. A star in its prime is a paragon of stability. It must be younger than its theoretical life span, but researchers cannot pin down its age with much certainty."⁶

Next, Dr. Chaboyer goes on to describe a complication in conventional methods for dating closely packed groups of stars called globular clusters: "Theoretical models are *approximations* of what really goes on inside a star. For several years now, studies of the sun have revealed those limitations. Solar sound waves, for example, indicate that helium is slowly sinking toward the center of the sun, as Jorgen Christensen Dalsgaard of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, David B. Guenther of Saint Mary's University in Nova Scotia, and others have shown. The helium displaces hydrogen, reducing the amount of fuel that the sun has at its disposal and therefore its life expectancy. My colleagues and I have also refined the modeling of other processes such as convection and have improved the description of how the gas responds to changes in pressure and temperature. The net effect has been to *reduce* the estimated globular ages by 14 percent."⁷

Star Light, Star Bright . . .

Other problems also exist, as Dr. Chaboyer notes: "The observed brightness of a star depends on its distance as well

. . . these new
techniques
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previously assumed.

as its intrinsic luminosity. But measuring distances is one of the most difficult tasks in astronomy. . . . The errors [in measuring techniques] worsen systematically with distance: telescopes working at the limit of their resolution tend to overstate small parallaxes* and thus understate distance."⁸

To correct this shortcoming, the European Space Agency in 1989 launched the *Hipparcos* satellite, which can measure the distance of stars from the earth with greater accuracy than ever before, including stars ten times farther away from the earth than earlier instruments could measure."⁹ Prof.

Chaboyer reports, "The result has been surprising: globular clusters are about 10 percent farther away than previously thought. That makes them intrinsically more luminous and therefore *younger*."¹⁰

What is particularly interesting to note is that the more advanced scientists' dating methods become, the *younger* they discover stars to be, rather than the other way around. In other words, improved scientific technology has proven to be the friend of young-universe Creationists, not the enemy. Critics of the Bible have traditionally argued that advancements in science will disprove the claims of Scripture. However, just the opposite is happening, which is to be expected from a God who enjoys irony (witness Haman's experience in Esther 6:1–11)!

Stephen Caesar has just completed his master's thesis in anthropology/archaeology at Harvard. He is the author of the e-book *The Bible Encounters Modern Science*, available at www.1stbooks.com.

*Parallax is a technical method of estimating the distance of a star from the earth using a system of triangulation.

Endnotes

¹ D.L. Chandler, "Pulsar linked to old sighting, shining light on star's age," *Boston Globe*, 11 January, 2001: p. A11.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

⁴ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

⁵ K.A. Svitil, "Dream Weaver," *Discover*, vol. 22, no.1 (2001): p. 18 (emphasis added).

⁶ B.C. Chaboyer, "Rip Van Twinkle," *Scientific American*, vol. 284, no. 5 (2001): p. 48.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 49, 52 (emphasis added).

⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 52–53.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 53 (emphasis added).

The Good Shepherd Is the Forgiver of My Sin

Sandy Hartman

Be a Forgetful Forgiver

Forgetfulness is rarely a quality that people are proud to possess. Frequently, forgetfulness is associated with the onset of Alzheimer's or the beginning of senility. In other scenarios people ascribe it to a lack of character or low intelligence (and to the person doing the forgetting, it can certainly seem that way).

However, in the Christian realm forgetfulness can become a valuable asset, especially when it comes to forgiveness. Paul wrote, "Forgetting those things which are behind, . . . I press toward the mark" (Phil. 3:13, 14). Forgetting involves setting aside past hurts and wrongs as well as failures. God Himself forgives and forgets: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34; cf. Heb. 10:17). Furthermore, He admonishes us to do the same: "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25).

In my own life, the Heavenly Father brought both an opportunity to practice godly forgetfulness and to receive a special lesson from it. Some years ago a lady in my church had once been a friend but became an enemy. Bluntly speaking, this woman had mastered the art of gossip. But friendship built

on gossip never stands. Too late I broke away from the friendship, and then found myself the target of her tongue.

This woman managed to rally others to her side and basically make my life miserable. In response, I carried the hurt and nursed my wounds in anger. Before I knew it, my ongoing irritation led to bitterness. Worse, my own bitter attitude was rubbing off on others.

Eventually I realized that I was hurting myself. I couldn't do anything to change the situation, so I spent time in prayer and Bible study asking God's help. The situation worsened, but I determined to leave it in God's hands.

I'm a schoolteacher, and at the end of the year I routinely take down the pictures from my classroom walls. That particular year, while I worked, God impressed on me my need to take down all the hurt and spiteful things that this woman had done to me.

Of course, the offenses were sometimes as easily remembered as dismissed, and I would have to consciously choose to dismiss them again. As I found them hanging like pictures on the walls of my memory, I realized the key to keeping them out of mind for good. I simply memorized Scripture, and each time I was tempted to leave them hanging there in view I would recite a Bible verse.

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One particular Scripture was a particular help to me because it was both relevant and long. By the time I finished quoting it, I forgot for a while which monster I was tempted to release. That passage is Philippians 4:8: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Through this process I learned to conquer the anger and hatred that leads to bitterness. Eventually I was able to forgive the woman, to be kind to her, and to talk with her so that any lingering hard feelings between us could be resolved. Only God could have brought this about, and I praise Him for a trial that turned into a triumph because of His great forgiveness.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). His forgiveness becomes our example and allows us to forgive in turn. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Sandy Hartman served as a Christian school teacher for over twenty years and is now a freelance writer. She resides in Belvidere, Illinois.

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The Good Shepherd Is the Lord of My Life

Dan Wokaty

He Is a Jew

But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Romans 2:29

In the area where I live—Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico—the word “Jew” has been ascribed a horribly bigoted and offensive connotation. Unfortunately, the word is often used incorrectly to describe a man of low ethics who steals when he can, who cannot be trusted with your possessions, and who cannot be expected to keep his word. Sadly, throughout history, the word “Jew” has often evoked similar negative thoughts and emotions. This is an indication of Satan’s attack on a nation that in the Scriptures God repeatedly calls His own.

True, the pages of Jewish history include some unattractive blemishes. For instance, Hollywood’s *Ben-Hur* depicts the Jews as fond of Jesus and the Romans as the ones who desired Christ’s death. In actuality, though, the Jews were the ones who demanded His death, even if they executed Him indirectly by turning Him over to the Roman authorities.

So how does one accurately describe a Jew? Certainly not by using terminology such as “dirty Jew,” the words Phil Donahue thought (without reason) must surely be used by every Fundamentalist Christian. (I’m referring to a 1980s Donahue program in which Donahue interviewed Dr. Bob Jones III with the purpose of ridiculing Biblical Christianity.) As a dispensationalist, I believe God still has

the Jewish race in His future plans, specifically during the literal thousand-year reign of Christ.

There are many types of Jews (ethnic Jew, Messianic Jew, Jew by Jewish proselytism), but in Romans 2:29 Paul refers to the person who is a Jew inwardly. According to the lexical aid *Bible Works* (a very useful Bible study CD program), the primary definition of the Greek word “Jew” is “Jewish, belonging to the Jewish race,” and the secondary definition is “Jewish as respects to birth, race, religion.” Most often, the primary definition comes to mind when one thinks of the word “Jew.” However, Romans 2:29 presents to us the antitype; that is, the spiritual definition of a term normally defined by reference to physical attributes.

Romans 2 teaches clearly that one who believes his good works are his salvation (“whosoever thou art that judgest,” v. 1) will be damned (“thou condemnest thyself,” v. 1). In other words, his judging (*krino*) will be his condemnation (*katakrino*). In its logical progression, chapter 2 directs us to the final thought, seen in verse 29: God’s people are those whose hearts are circumcised (the antitype of the physical procedure of circumcision). In other words, their spiritual condition is based on a heart changed, not on actions performed.

Does that mean we are not responsible to live a godly life? Is it not true that our Christianity is based on our faith in Christ, and not on our works? Doesn’t the Bible say that we are “justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28)? Yes, but let us not lose our place in Romans 2:29. The verse concludes by stating the very purpose for the life of the believer: “whose praise is not of men, but of God.” The Christian’s life purpose is to earn God’s praise. It is not to earn his salvation; nor is it to sus-

tain his salvation. The purpose is simply to do what is pleasing to God in *every* aspect of his life.

There is not a waking minute that is not an opportunity to "work out [or provide evidence of] your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). With this in mind, when you wake up in the morning and meet the Lord in prayer, ask God to direct you in how you may help people understand, through your life, what Romans 2:29 means. Greet the first person you see in the morning and determine to prove to him through your actions and reactions that a Christian is not a people pleaser, but a God pleaser (figure out how to "wash his feet"!). When on visitation, be sure that you are not simply witnessing out of obligation, or so that you will feel good about yourself, or so that your pastor will praise you from the pulpit. Love that one to whom you are witnessing. Don't spin him a line. Definitely don't give him the gospel in a rote, memorized, monotonous tone.

So, Biblically, who is a Jew? According to Romans 2:29, I am one inwardly. How can I prove to the world outwardly what I am inwardly? More specifically, how do I help the world know what a true Christian is? I show my true identity by knowing what the Word of God requires of me, and by fulfilling that responsibility to the best of my ability, in the lives of every man, woman, and child with whom I cross paths.

I am a Christian; therefore I exist only to please my God. Dan Wokaty is a missionary serving under Mexican Gospel Mission (Dr. Dick Mercado, Director). He serves as a teacher and supervisor of financial administration in the Instituto Práctico Ebenezer in Hermosillo, Sonora. Mexican Gospel Mission is a Fundamental Baptist mission board out of Phoenix, Arizona.

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The Good Shepherd Is the Warning Prophet

Rick Barry

Captured by Curiosity?

One morning when my wife dropped by a laundromat, she had no idea what a bizarre chain of events would follow. While Pam was folding clothes, our one-year-old, Jessica, decided to investigate the snack machine. Gazing through the machine's glass, she could see brightly wrapped candy bars, peanuts, and other snacks. Of course, she had no idea how to operate the machine, only that Mommy could make treats drop to the slot at its bottom.

Like the famous monkey named George, Jessica became curious about the machine. She slipped one hand inside the bottom slot and began to probe. She found nothing inside except one tiny hole. Still curious, she shoved a finger into that hole. Nothing there. But when she tried to pull her finger back out, it wouldn't budge. The finger was stuck tight!

Jessica's wails quickly attracted Pam, but even my wife's motherly tugging couldn't free that finger. Next the laundromat owner got involved and tried lubricating the finger with butter and oil—another failure. Customers offered other advice, all in vain.

Help!

By now Jessica's tears were flowing, and her finger was swelling from all the yanking. When everyone on the scene ran out of ideas, someone said, "We'll have to call 911."

The call for help went out, but the first people to respond were a news crew from the local TV station.

Closely following the news team came a policeman, firemen, an ambulance, and then a reporter from the city paper. After all other efforts proved futile, a fireman pulled out tin snips and cut away the entire section of the machine's door surrounding the finger. Next, paramedics transported door, finger, and child to the hospital. There, they elevated the section of snack machine from the ceiling, iced the finger to reduce swelling, and succeeded in pushing it out from the other side.

Throughout this episode, I had been teaching in high school. When I arrived home that afternoon, my wife greeted me with the words, "Guess what your daughter did today." Later I watched the entire drama on the 6:00 news.

By the next morning I wasn't too surprised when Jessica's photograph and story made our local newspaper. What did astonish me was when my brother phoned from 700 miles away and blurted, "Jessica's picture is on the front page of the Kalamazoo Gazette."

Looking back, I'm still amazed that a little toddler's inquisitiveness ended up involving a television station, EMTs, firemen, hospital workers, the police department, and even newspapers from distant states! All of this trouble resulted from childlike curiosity.

Since that day, I've often reflected on how curious adults can also be, and Christians are no exceptions. Obviously, the Devil doesn't tempt adults to poke their pinkies into candy machines, but he does try to ensnare them using their own curiosity.

For instance, more than once in recent days I've heard, with sinking heart, of pastors and laymen who have hurt their testimonies and even lost their ministries when they

grew curious about the dark side of the Internet. "Just how bad can the pornography really be?" one may wonder. However, that question is better left uninvestigated.

We Christians are not naïve. We realize that an abundance of carnal images are available in the world. But there's a difference between naiveté and "holy ignorance." In the matter of pornography, it's a wise believer who retains his purity of sight and soul by resolving to remain innocent of this aspect of the Net. The formula of Psalm 101:3 is simple: "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me."

Internet chat rooms also lure in many a curious computer owner. However, these sites harbor dangers of their own. One danger is the sheer anonymity of the chat room. "Meeting" strangers online and conversing through the keyboard can present a certain intrigue. Questions automatically arise unbidden: "What is this person like? What does he/she look like? Is he or she good-looking?"

This danger struck home to me personally when a relative—who previously took little interest in computers—discovered the "fun" of chat rooms. Her chats eventually led to personal e-mail from men. In time, she announced that she was dissatisfied with her marriage and wanted a divorce while she was still young enough to find "the true love of my life." A unique case? Not in the modern cyber age.

Of course, curiosity also influences people who don't



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word "flee" implies rapid mental distancing. In other words, truly fleeing from lust includes rejecting it from the mind the moment it appears. After all, curiously pondering a sin in the mind is often the first step toward eventually enacting it.

Sure, the Devil will always use idle curiosity as one of his lures. But how much better it is to reject his intrigue and resolve not to set an eye, a foot, a hand—or even one little finger—into a place where our Lord doesn't want it to be!

Rick Barry is a freelance writer and editor living in Bristol, Indiana.

own computers. Certain women's magazines seem bent on piquing curiosity. Their covers impudently entice by-passers with "Hot secrets to make your bed sizzle!" and similar articles. In actuality, they become manuals for carnality and don't bother to distinguish between marital intimacy and casual sex, leading the reader's imagination far astray of moral boundaries.

Of course, not all curiosity is evil. After all, this powerful human characteristic has prompted explorers to cross oceans, discover continents, unlock the riddle of flight, unravel mysteries of medical science. . . . Even Moses was drawn to God through his own curiosity concerning a bush that burned without being consumed.

The key is to distinguish between wholesome curiosity and curiosity about subjects best left alone. God's Word admonishes believers, "Flee also youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). In addition to the physical distancing, that

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The Good Shepherd Is the Lover of My Soul

Carol Robbins

Love Turned

A Look at Michal, the Daughter of King Saul

When I started my most recent read through the Bible, I decided that this time I would focus special attention on the women mentioned in the Scripture. Having reached mid-life, I find that my perspective has changed greatly from that of my youth, and I hoped to find some solace from the examples of ladies given in God's Holy Book.

I searched diligently in order not to overlook lesser-known women. And, of course, bad examples can teach us important lessons just as well as good ones. When I reached the book of 1 Samuel, I couldn't help but notice Michal, the daughter of Israel's first king. As I read her story, I found that this woman has much in common with her father.

The Father's Example

Michal's father, Saul, came from a humble family in Israel, but he was physically built like a king—at least what mankind might look for in a king. And to Saul's credit, he seemed to begin well in ruling this infant kingdom. Note his humility as he “hid himself among the stuff” (1 Sam. 10:22) when Samuel first declared him to be God's appointed ruler. Note again how “he held his peace” (1 Sam. 10:27) when those who despised him brought him no gifts. Finally, reading about the “spirit of God [coming] upon Saul” (1 Sam. 11:6) would give the reader great hope for this newly crowned king.

Sadly, it was not long before Saul began to make unwise choices—decisions that led him to the edge of despair, for “the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him” (1 Sam.

16:14). Saul sought for comfort and found David, youngest of the sons of Jesse, a lowly shepherd boy who was “cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and the LORD [was] with him” (1 Sam. 16:18). Saul's heart was quickly knit to the young man as the Scripture tells us that Saul “loved [David] greatly” and that David “became his armourbearer” (1 Sam. 16:21).

Sadly, Saul is not remembered for his good beginning; nor is he famous as one who loved David. Why not? Because when the women of Israel proclaimed, “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7), Saul was “very wroth . . . and . . . eyed David from that day and forward” (1 Sam. 18:8, 9). Today, when we recall the first king in Israel, we picture a bitter and spiteful man whose ambition degenerated to one primary goal: to kill David.

A Daughter's First Love

The Scripture tells us that “Michal Saul's daughter loved David: and they told Saul, and the thing pleased him” (1 Sam. 18:20). The news pleased Saul, not because he wanted David in the family, but “that she may be a snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him” (1 Sam. 18:21; cf. 18:17).

So Michal loved David just as her father had once loved David. Even though she was the daughter of a king, she had turned her affections toward a common man from a humble family, a man who had once been a mere shepherd boy.

As a female in the culture of the times, Michal didn't have much choice in picking a husband for herself. Saul could have chosen any leader in his army or any man of wealth and power to receive his younger daughter's hand. Instead, Saul concocted a scheme that he hoped

would destroy David—one way or another. By being wed to David, Michal should have been content—even exuberant—for few women in her day were married to men they loved before the marriage vows.

Michal certainly displayed her loyalty to David when she protected him from her own father (1 Sam. 19:11–17). But like her father, she began to make wrong choices. For instance, instead of trusting God to protect her husband, Michal resorted to human reasoning. Through lies and deceit she designed her own plan of protection.

It must have seemed an eternity to the young bride as her new husband raced through the countryside fleeing from the murderous hands of her father. When would he return? When would the struggle in her heart between love of father and love of husband end? Which one of them would have to die so that the other could come back to her?

The Plot Thickens

While David fled, he took three more wives: Abigail, Ahinoam, and Jezreel. Though marrying multiple wives was not uncommon in the culture, certainly the lonely first wife would not have been thrilled by the news. The amount of time David was away from home and the order of events are somewhat unclear; however, at some point while David was away, her father chose to give her as wife to another man.

Imagine Michal's thoughts and emotions during this time. As a teenager she is married to her "high school sweetheart"—for her, a dream come true. But shortly thereafter, her husband is forced to leave as he struggles to stay alive—even as her father pursues him. Alone, she must have hoped that he would soon return. But days lengthened into weeks, and weeks stretched into months, and he was still missing from her side. Over time, perhaps her hope wanes and her thoughts simmer with anger and bitterness—anger at her father, anger at her husband, bitterness at God who permitted this to happen. Then, as she reaches the brink of despair, her father returns and forces her into another marriage. She learns of David's marriage to three other women. How quickly hope can turn to hopelessness!

The next time we hear of Michal is when David makes a league with Abner. David requires Abner to bring Michal to him. By this time, David had six sons borne by his other wives, so certainly some years had passed. Perhaps by this time Michal had grown accustomed to her new home and her second husband. Or perhaps she rejoiced that David sent for her—we don't know. But one has to wonder whether David sought Michal out of affection for her or merely as a means of strengthening his claim to Saul's throne. Very likely, Michal asked herself this same question.

The bitterness that had taken root in Michal's heart is revealed in 2 Samuel 6. As David, now the king of Israel, dances before the Lord with all his might, she looks out a window and sees him "leaping and dancing before the LORD." It was then that "she despised him in her heart" (2 Sam. 6:16). Upon David's return home, Michal greets her husband with sarcasm. She claims that she is embarrassed

by his shameless display. How can a king stoop so low and in front of so many people?

Clearly, Michal does not appreciate David's rejoicing before the Lord. Her eyes see only a king behaving as a "vain fellow" (2 Sam 6:20). As the first wife of this king and as the daughter of a previous king, she is humiliated and vents her bitterness in his face. Michal did not understand that God honors those who humble themselves. As a result, she is cursed with barrenness.

Just as Saul had once "loved David greatly," so Michal had loved David. And just as Saul's love turned to loathing, so Michal's love turned to hostility and wrath. Both rejected an earlier love.

Applications for Today

In the second chapter of Revelation, John records these words from the Lord to the church of Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (v. 4).

Saul's love turned to hatred when he no longer perceived David as a friend but rather as a threat. Michal's love turned to hatred when she no longer perceived David as the husband of her dreams, but rather as a fool. When David served Saul as his personal musician, the king loved him. But when David left to go to battle and the fellowship was interrupted, it was easy for Saul's love to decay. Likewise, when Michal was first married to David, it was easy to love him as they communed daily during the few days following their marriage. But when David fled and the communion was broken, it was easy for her love to give way to resentment.

Meditating on these passages, I can't help but see food for thought. After all, mid-life is often a time of reflection and evaluation. Dreams that we held closely in our youth may not have come true. Goals that we pursued may have dissolved into failure. The "happily ever after" that we read about in our elementary reader may have turned to "hang in there and endure." Have we left our first love? Have we allowed that love to deteriorate into frustration, aggravation, or hatred?

Perhaps it is natural to allow love to turn into resentment when trials come and threats are near and hope is waning. But we must constantly be on guard against falling into that trap. As believers, we must constantly renew our love and faithfulness to the God we serve. Daily communion with our Heavenly Father will help us to maintain (or return to) our first love. Long days of no communion with God leave us vulnerable to Satan's attack and the root of bitterness.

Be careful, Christian friend. Guard your daily time with God, and cherish it. Without a doubt, some days will bring trials, threats, and frustrations with no apparent solutions. But fresh, daily fellowship with God and reliance on Him will strengthen the relationship with Him and keep your love burning brightly.

Carol Robbins is a freelance writer who lives in Greenville, South Carolina.

The Good Shepherd Is the Source of True Satisfaction

Laura MacPherson

Are you satisfied? If you turn on the television, open a magazine, or go to the mall, advertisements will bombard you with reasons that you shouldn't be: "All your dreams come true." "Want a pay raise?" "Work hard, play hard." These ads promise satisfaction if you will only buy their product, make more money, or have more fun.

The problem is that such promises are never fulfilled. Buy the product, and before long, you desire something else. Earn extra money, and you find yourself craving more. Pursue all the fun you can get, and your desire for pleasure will only increase. Today's culture is characterized by dissatisfaction, a restless longing for better circumstances.

God, on the other hand, has a much different message for us. Temporary attractions, whether they are possessions, prestige, or pleasure, will never satisfy. There is only one source of true satisfaction: God Himself.

The Fulfillment of Desires

Christ spoke about this truth after He fed the five thousand. Many people at that time were following Him because they were amazed at the miracles He performed. In other words, they followed Him because of His popularity and

the things He could freely provide.

Nothing earthly would satisfy those crowds. Once they obtained the thing they desired, they would soon find themselves wanting that thing again. Nothing in this world can satisfy for long.

But Christ rebuked them, saying, "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" (John 6:27). Later, in verse 35, Christ identified Himself as that "meat" (or "bread"). He said, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."

Christ was repeating a truth found in Isaiah 55. In verse 2, God asks, "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not?" Clearly, the tendency to look everywhere but to God for satisfaction has been a human shortcoming for centuries.

The sole solution to our continual longing, or hunger, is Christ. He is the Bread of Life. He is satisfaction. We find lasting, eternal contentment in Him alone. God instructs us to stop searching for earthly things to fulfill our desire and, instead, start looking to Him.

Consider a statement I recently came across: "What I have in God is greater than what I don't have in life." If we

stop to realize just how great God is, then we'll appreciate the truth of this proclamation. He loves us as our Father. He guides us as our Shepherd. He's our strength as our Rock. He's our shelter as our Fortress. If we consider all the characteristics of God in His Word, we'll find that He really is everything we could ever need or desire.

David was one of those who found this complete satisfaction in God. In Psalm 145, he proclaims, "Every day I will bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever" (v. 2). David goes on to explain why: God's greatness is beyond measure. He is good, gracious, full of compassion, and merciful. He gives His people what they need at the time they need it. He is near to us. In verse 16 the psalmist testifies, "Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing." He never got over the greatness of God. And neither will we, if only we will realize these truths.

Staying Satisfied

But how can we maintain our satisfaction? What can we do when those longings of dissatisfaction resume whispering their convincing, but empty, promises? Let's go back to the definition of dissatisfaction—"a restless longing for better circumstances."

Usually our problem is that we are focused on the wrong thing. We look, not to God, but at our circumstances—what we don't have. Obviously, our circumstances could always

be better. We can always wish for more things, more popularity, more fun . . . God, on the other hand, is All-in-all. He is, at every moment, everything we could ever desire.

David writes in Psalm 63, "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches" (vv. 5, 6). These words reveal that David's focus was on God. His thoughts were constantly filled with God. Continuing the psalm, he meditates on God's attributes and His wonderful works. He is overwhelmed at His love.

In contrast to David's glowing words, we can't find abiding satisfaction if we fix our gaze on our circumstances. Focusing on God takes concentration. It takes work. It takes effort. But the reward is worth the effort. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee" (Isa. 26:3). Our reward is peace, satisfaction, or contentment.

By looking to God instead of at our circumstances, we find everything we need and desire. "What I have in God is greater than what I don't have in life." And if we bear that truth in mind, we can drown out the whisperings of discontent with praise to God—the Source of genuine satisfaction.

Laura MacPherson is a freelance writer living in Greenville, South Carolina.

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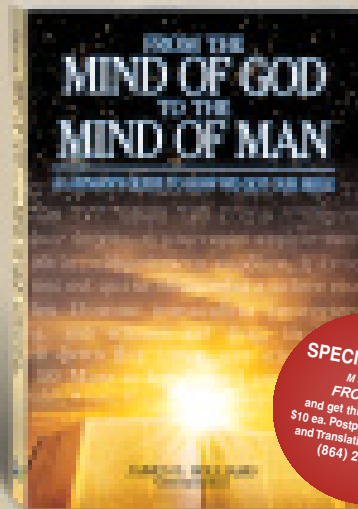
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Regional Meeting Reports

The Alaska Regional Meeting was held at Soldotna Baptist Church in Soldotna, Alaska, July 28–30, 2003. There were over sixty-six in attendance with a tremendous spirit of fellowship. We praise the Lord for the good meeting and the leadership of Pastor Earl Barnett, Regional Moderator.

On September 23, 2003, there was a Western New York Satellite Meeting at Hedstrom Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York. The one-day format of this meeting works well in satellite meetings. It began with a luncheon and afternoon sessions, then an evening service with several churches sending groups to fill the auditorium. Thanks to Pastor Douglas Sexton for hosting this meeting.

The Midwest Regional Meeting was held at Harvest Hills Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 20–22, 2003. Many pastors from the region, including some from Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, were present, and church groups came from the area.

Attendance grew as the meeting continued and ended with over 140 in the Tuesday night service. The music provided by the choirs and members of Harvest Hills was wonderful. The state Reps met with Pastor Larry Karsies to plan next year's meeting for the third Monday and Tuesday of October.

On October 23–24, 2003, Pastor Mark Zahn hosted the New Mexico Satellite Meeting in the Southwest Region. State Rep Dan Mauldin helped coordinate this meeting at Manzano Baptist Church in Albuquerque. Pastors came from all directions within New Mexico, and one came from Denver, Colorado, to enjoy the great preaching, food, and fellowship. The FBFI is increasingly appreciated in New Mexico, and ladies' sessions will be added at next year's meeting on the Thursday and Friday of the third full week of October.

2004 Meetings

January 26–27, 2004

North Central Regional Meeting
Rev. Richard J. Cross
Faith Baptist Church
833 Fifteenth Avenue
Longmont, CO 80501
(303) 776-5655

February 9–10, 2004

Winter Board Meeting
Embassy Suites Atlanta Airport
Atlanta, GA

March 8–9, 2004

Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting
Rev. James Baker
Grace Baptist Church
2901 Galewood Drive
Kettering, OH 45420
(937) 293-7500

March 15–16, 2004

Southwest Regional Meeting
Dr. Michael Sproul
Tri-City Baptist Church
2150 E Southern Avenue
Tempe, AZ 85282
(480) 838-5430

March 15–19, 2004

Northwest Regional Meeting
Dr. Thomas Nieman
Galilee Baptist Church
11517 SE 208th Street
Kent, WA 98031
(253) 852-6282

April 19–21, 2004

South Regional Meeting
Rev. Jeff Davis
Tabernacle Baptist Church
910 Tarboro Street West
Wilson, NC 27893-4757
(252) 243-5369

June 15–17, 2004

National Meeting
Rev. Bradley Smith
Bethel Baptist Church
200 N. Roselle Road
Schaumburg, IL 60194
(847) 885-3230

July 25–29, 2004

Pacific Rim Regional Meeting
Rev. Peter I. Maruyama
Narashino Baptist Church
4-17-10, Moto-Ohkubo
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SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

First Partaker

Theology Matters: Part II

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* recounts Christian's visit to the instructive home of a good brother named Interpreter. This astute believer, charged by the Lord to prepare pilgrims for their journey, conducts Christian through the various rooms of his house. Each contains some parabolic lesson, but the first is especially significant. It contains a picture of a "very grave Person" with "eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his lips, the World was behind his back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over its head."

"Now," said Interpreter, "I have shewed thee this picture first because the man whose picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou art going, hath authorized to be thy Guide in all difficult places thou may'st meet with in the Way."

Last issue this column argued that theology matters. Immensely. In the first place, because it's about God. Since nothing matters more than He does, it follows that theology matters infinitely. It also matters because it's about the whole Bible, all of which is God's thinking and therefore "theology." And theology matters, thirdly, because all people are ruled by their theology. They practice it. Not consistently, but inevitably nevertheless. Everyone goes, each his own twisted way, unless someone intervenes to be his Guide. And Bunyan got it Scripturally right when he posited the Preacher as the one Divinely authorized to be that Guide.

Preachers, by Christ's calling, are some of the Church's

theologians, not merely its pastors, its capable administrators, or even its spiritual examples. And given their weekly access to men's minds with the best of Books held in their hands, preachers must be some of the Church's finest theologians.

"The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits"
(2 Tim. 2:6)

Never has there been an age in which this was more critical. C. H. Spurgeon warned his readers that in their "age of progress, religious opinions move[d] at railway speed." How fast was that? Thirty . . . forty miles an hour maybe? But in ours they fly right around the globe at the speed of light. Anybody with a big idea, though half a world away, can unsettle our people with the click of a key.

So, assessing theology is vital. That was the discussion begun in the last column by explaining that any theology must be examined first of all, *categorically*. Does it fall into the category of strictly Biblical theology or the category of Systematics? The latter, by its very nature, branches out into both interpretation and logical deduction. Therefore it must be more vigorously scrutinized.

Definition

The next check must be definitional. Evaluate teaching *definitionally*. Let me explain the importance of this.

How often have you heard someone say, after hearing two preachers disagree over some doctrinal point, "It sounds to me like they're arguing over nothing but semantics"? *Nothing* but semantics? Wait a minute. Nobody can safely dismiss that. Words have meanings, and meanings matter. That's why we scrutinize contracts and double-check prescriptions. Words or numbers can be a matter of life or death. And words start wars. Sometimes they should.

Athanasius believed semantics counted and took on nearly the whole empire for the sake of a Greek *iota*. Luther believed semantics was critical and went to the mat for the one word "only." J. Gresham Machen believed

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semantics mattered and wrote a classic defending the single word “virgin.”

On a scale of 1–10, how highly would you rate the critical importance of the following italicized words? *Verbal*, *plenary* inspiration. There is *one* God in *three* persons. Or, there is one God in three *persons*. Creation *ex nihilo*. Six *literal* days of creation. Abraham *believed* in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness. A *miraculous* parting of the Red Sea. The *impeccability* of Christ. *Fully* God and *fully* man. *Blood* atonement. *Three* days and nights. *Bodily* resurrection. *None* righteous, no, not *one*. *Sola fide*. *Sola gratia*. *Sola Deo Gloria*.

For instance, many years ago I sat on the ordination council of a good man who mistakenly defined justification as God’s “making us righteous” rather than God’s “declaring us righteous.” The difference, of course, is one of the continental divides between Biblical and Roman Catholic theology.

Are we prepared to give any semantic ground whatsoever on any of those words? Why not? Because words are critical. Especially theological words. Their technical specifications and precise clarifications stolidly safeguard the Faith from semantic revisionism.

We all agree with this. But for the sake of the Truth and the unity of the Spirit we must consistently apply it. How?

Semantic Conscience

First, by developing a semantic conscience about our own use of words. For example, the vast majority of the theological words we use have predetermined meanings. Either the Scripture itself or the consensus of God’s people fixed them long before we began preaching. A semantic conscience concerns itself with using those words according to their fixed meanings, especially when controversy erupts over some doctrinal issue that employs them. I heard a pastor relate his asking an unbelieving professor, who nevertheless taught in a conservative seminary, how he justified resubscribing to its orthodox creed every year. “That’s no problem,” the man replied. “I can make those words mean anything I want to.” That’s unconscionable.

Semantic conscience contends lawfully within a church’s, a denomination’s, a fellowship’s, or a school’s definitional parameters. It doesn’t stoop to sleight of hand, moving ancient landmarks for the sake of keeping a professional position or scoring points in a debate. If we frankly believe a term is being mistakenly defined or that a completely new term is needed for an old definition, so be

it. Let’s say so openly and propose it. Nobody should fault us for that. They may disagree with our reasoning, but they will at least appreciate our honesty. But we ought to feel the sharp prick of conscience if we’re knowingly redrawing the configuration of standard doctrinal terms.

One of Spurgeon’s complaints during the “Down-grade” controversy was that the officers of the Baptist Union were turning a blind eye to some of its members’ deliberate ambiguity about critical theological terms. To the editor of *The Baptist* newspaper he wrote, “I must . . . protest against anyone saying that he believes orthodox doctrines, ‘*but not in Mr. Spurgeon’s sense.*’ I believe these doctrines, so far as I know, in the common and usual sense attached to them by the general usage of Christendom. Theological terms ought to be understood and used only in their general and usual meaning. . . . Whatever the Council [of the Baptist Union] does, let it above all things avoid the use of language which could legitimately have two meanings contrary to each other. Let us be plain and outspoken. *There are grave differences—let them be avowed honestly*” (*The Sword and the Trowel*, March, 1888).

That’s my point exactly. Use words “honestly.”

Self-Education

This leads inevitably to a second necessary application of the importance of definitions. We show our seriousness about this by taking the trouble to learn what theological terms mean. In some cases the necessity for this is simply inestimable.

For instance, many years ago I sat on the ordination council of a good man who mistakenly defined justification as God’s “making us righteous” rather than God’s “declaring us righteous.” The difference, of course, is one of the continental divides between Biblical and Roman Catholic theology. But the misunderstanding was increased when one of the pastors on the council followed up by talking in general terms about the new birth. In other words, about something related but entirely different—regeneration. And when he finished, a second council member further compounded the confusion with more general comments about God’s saving us from our sins. After several minutes of this we all, myself included, let the mistaken definition and generalities stand and proceeded to the next question.

Hopefully, all of us who were on that council would be more exacting today. I use the illustration only to underscore how easily we can overlook or excuse the necessity of theological precision. Augustine made this same mistake of defining justification as “making” rather than “declaring” righteous, and it was a thousand years later until Luther set things right. Perhaps today’s apparent blindness to the errors of Roman Catholicism on the part of some Protestant leaders is due, in part, to a similar imprecision in their theological upbringing. I do know this, that some of the definitions and explanations in the new official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) are a carefully crafted confusion of Scriptural terms that the Bible itself uses in distinct ways to

differentiate various aspects of God's marvelous salvation. So much so, in fact, that I would expect that the average Christian, and probably an alarming number of pastors, would be taken in by the *Catechism's* use of scriptural terms in mistaken ways. Do you agree, for instance, with the following?

Justification: The gracious action of God which frees us from sin and communicates "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:22).

You can see how easily a believer without sound theological training might be entirely disarmed by such a subtly crafted statement. He testifies to his Roman Catholic friend about salvation through Christ and the friend assures him that his local parish priest says the same things. "So, what's the need of evangelizing my friend when his priest teaches that? Sounds right to me."

But it's not. It's the faulty foundation for the superstructure of a works salvation. And it's all in what you mean by "frees." "Frees us from sin." No question about it, God frees us from sin. But that's not justification.

"You're just arguing over semantics," somebody protests. Exactly. It matters. To us, and to Rome. We need to take the effort of finding out why.

For quick reference to definitions I use several sources, a couple of which sit within arm's reach across the top of my desk. These include *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical & Theological Studies*, by F. B. Huey and Bruce Corley (Zondervan), *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, by Millard J. Erickson (Baker), and Alan Cairns' *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Ambassador Emerald International). My favorite theologian for accurate definitions, however, is Louis Berkhof. His *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans) is almost unparalleled for its carefully stated explanations. And, of course, there's the *Westminster Confession of Faith* for being certain of what our Presbyterian brethren believe and, *The 1689 Confession of Faith* (Carey Publications) for the historical statements of what we Baptists have held. Samuel E. Waldron's *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Press) is an almost indispensable guide to the latter. For a helpfully organized and annotated collection of over fifty historic Baptist confessions and catechisms go to www.reformedreader.org.

Accurate Representation

Definitions may matter the most when we disagree, not with false teachers, but with brethren. Now the unity of the Body is threatened.

We dare not label something a "heresy," especially when many of the Lord's choicest servants have believed it, unless we're absolutely certain of the way in which they explain it. Are we calling a teaching "heresy" as that doctrine has been historically defined, or are we redefining, perhaps even unwittingly, and calling *that* the heresy? If we say that "such-and-such is a heresy," are we truly representing what "such-and-such" is? Or are we demonizing historical terms by indoctrinating our unsuspecting people

with exaggerated definitions of those words?

This kind of thing does no end of harm. Our people hear us caricature a teaching and then ever after recoil in undisguised loathing from the very mention of certain terms, when, in fact, they don't even understand them.

The real fact is, hardly anybody believes or teaches what we've attacked. But careless preaching cast the die and no amount of protest can seem to break the mold. So, like poor conscripts mustered to the trenches of a war they don't understand or want to have, the various churches' members dutifully shoot at each other from behind battle lines drawn ferociously but fallaciously by a well-meaning but really ignorant preacher. Initial definitional accuracy about our brother's real beliefs would have generated far less heat.

We show our seriousness about theology by representing even our opponents accurately, not only to their faces but behind their backs. By describing their positions as they would describe them and as they would define them.

We show our seriousness about theology by representing even our opponents accurately, not only to their faces but behind their backs. By describing their positions as they would describe them and as they would define them.

Let's ask them if we don't know. Let's send them a written statement of what we understand them to teach. Send it with unfeigned respect. Send it with a genuine desire to find common ground, not a secret agenda to ensnare them in their own words. There's a lot at stake here: people's lives, families, friendships, happiness, and blessing in the Lord's work. Way beyond that, Christ's cause and name hang in the balance.

We simply *must* get our brother's positions straight and accurately represented if we have to disagree with him publicly. Even the fact that he may not be a Fundamentalist, but an Evangelical or Charismatic, gives no license for caricaturing him or his teaching.

Carelessness in this area is maddening. No wonder it makes people really angry. They vehemently *deny* (!) that they hold a certain position or define it in a particular way, yet the attacker blithely persists in misrepresenting them. This is despicable and must surely fall into the category of things God hates (Prov. 6:19). Charles Wesley was on one occasion so exasperated with this kind of deceit that he abruptly rose and concluded a confrontation with the solemn summons to his attacker to meet him at the Judgment Seat to answer for the wicked caricature of what he actually believed.

Proportion

A third important criterion by which to test our theology is *proportionality*. Within the grid of a rigorously applied Biblical and systematic theology we must define terms and positions conscientiously, and then measure our preaching of them proportionately.

In other words, something can be true definitionally but untrue proportionately. For example, over a period of several centuries the Church hammered out precise statements about the person of Jesus Christ. He is both fully God and fully man. Both propositions are true.

But what would be the effect on a church if “fully God” was conceded but seldom emphasized while at the same time “fully man” was constantly and emphatically preached? What if church members hear one week, “Let’s get this straight, Jesus is *fully* man. Don’t let anyone deceive you about this, He’s a *man*!” Then the next it’s, “Folks, I’m really burdened that we get hold of this. Jesus is human. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that He isn’t God. He is, but, oh, the *blessing* of coming to realize that He was flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone—one with us—a real member of the human race!” Then again, a week later, “Jesus was, and is, and always will be a man! Why are we afraid of this teaching? It’s Biblical. It’s the teaching of the Church historically. It’s a truth we’ve got to get back to—the real, literal, undeniable *manhood* of Jesus Christ! He’s a man! He’s a man! He’s a man! Bless God, He’s a *man*!”

Clearly, there’s not a word of error in those statements. But they’re being preached all out of proportion to the Scripture’s own emphasis. Of course, if the Church has lost a truth like this or if it’s actually under attack, then there’s a need for a recurring insistence that it’s truly taught in the Word of God. But may the Lord preserve us from unduly massaging even a truth into a huge lump that turns ulcerous to the Body of Christ. John Calvin wrote perceptively, “When one [scholar] has gone astray, others, lacking judgement, follow in droves.”

Mutual Accountability

In 1986 American sociologist Robert Bellah authored *Habits of the Heart*, an assessment of individualism in America. He told of a woman named Sheila who told him, “I have my own religion. I call it Sheilaism, just my own little voice.”

Anyone can slip into similar theological subjectivism. A Fundamental pastor doesn’t do it to Sheila’s extreme because he’s committed to putting everything to the test of inscripturated revelation. But on lesser points he can. Anyone of us may. It can happen with the best of intentions due to unfamiliarity with an issue about which one is called upon to give an off-the-cuff evaluation. We feel

like we have to say *something*, and the something may be nothing more than subjectivism. But what we said gets repeated, then gets preached by others who respect us, and before we know it our opinion becomes a position—not just our own, but that of who knows how many other churches.


On the other hand, we can slip into subjectivism for utterly inexcusable reasons—disinclination to study, self-serving motivation, unwillingness to listen to others, mindless parroting of tradition. We subsequently do more damage than a Sheila ever could. Sheila never divided brethren or split a church. Only well-respected Christian leaders have the influence to do that.

So there’s one more way of checking our theology to ensure that we’ve got it straight and don’t, even unwittingly, slip into subjectivism. That’s to take seriously the Scripture’s admonitions to be subject to one another. To be mutually accountable for our theology. “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21). In the context, this is one of the sure evidences of Spirit-filling. “Yea, all of you be subject one to another” (1 Pet. 5:5). In the context, this is one of the sure evidences of humility.

We independents have no formal accountability structure. But we have ministerial friends and faithful church members who have proven their loyalty. They’re in our corner and have stuck up for us many times. They have a track record of consistently encouraging us and following our leadership. Can’t we accord to them a measure of liberty to call into question something we’ve preached that hits them wrong? Such a person probably fears that he’s risking the treasured relationship with his pastor just to come in and ever-so-respectfully express a concern. He probably prayed over the possibility for days or weeks or months before making an appointment. How should we receive him? “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6).

But if there’s not just one—one individual, one couple, or one extended family—but several trusted individuals, or several trusted ministerial friends, who express concern about our emphasis, surely we ought to fine-comb our theology again to see if it’s objectively credible.

No one likes to admit that he’s wrong. Perhaps our biggest fear is that we will lose so much respect that people will ever after suspicion our preaching. I don’t think so. People like that don’t tend to hang around. They find somewhere else to attend.

But regardless, we ought to be so intensely Christ-centered that we jealously guard a precisely accurate theology about Him and all His ways and at the same time vigorously refute what is otherwise. If that means having to adjust our own statements from time to time, then we’re setting the very best possible example for our people. We’re showing them that more than anything else, including ourselves, theology matters. 



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Bring . . . the Books

Evangelists Who Reached Their World

Throughout church history, God has sent wake-up calls to the church in her time of declension. When she has grown cold and dull in her missionary spirit God has sent fresh power to awaken her. He has often done this through the gift of great evangelists. These unique men of God, powerful ministers of the gospel, are sovereignly raised up by the Holy Spirit for “such a time as this.” If God attends their labors with blessing they reap a mighty crop of converts born of God and added to the church. . . . These God-given increases sometimes resulted in wide-scale awakening. Such evangelists have understood that evangelism is the responsibility of the whole church. They have also understood that revival is God’s singular gift, not something brought about by human planning and effort.

With this paragraph, John Armstrong introduces his readers to five key evangelists whose ministries covered a period of two hundred years, affected hundreds of thousands of lives, and were marked by unusual boldness, passionate proclamation, and an outpouring of spiritual blessing on two continents. *Five Great Evangelists* (Christian Focus Publications) focuses on the ministries of George Whitefield, John Wesley, Howell Harris, Asahel Nettleton, and Duncan Matheson. Since this valuable work is relatively unfamiliar, this column will introduce his material on Whitefield; subsequent columns will address other evangelists.

Brief yet thorough, Armstrong provides details generally found only in the larger treatments. Additionally, his material is fervently evangelistic in nature. His communication of the spiritual passion that drove these men transforms the book from a mere biographical sketch, adding a devotional flavor often missing from similar works. He delivers a well-balanced presentation of both the strengths and weaknesses of each man and his ministry rather than recounting only their positive accomplishments as other works of this size tend to do. Finally, Armstrong writes with a burden to inspire a new generation of evangelists to aspire to the boldness of these men in preaching not just to lost men in the world but to multitudes of lost church members.

Armstrong begins with the extraordinary life and ministry of George Whitefield. Born in 1714 in Gloucester, England, George was the last of seven children born to Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield. His growing up years were not easy. His father died before his second birthday, and his mother remarried a man who made life difficult for George and his siblings. As a result, his educational experience during his precollege days was marginal at best. Additionally, he suffered a severe case of measles that permanently affected his eyesight. The sorrow and hardship he experienced in his youth would shape him into a powerful and compassionate preacher of the good news of the gospel.


At eighteen he entered Oxford, intending to become a minister of the Church of England. There he met Charles and John Wesley, with whom he became lifelong friends. Shortly after his conversion in 1735, he returned to Gloucester and God blessed his first evangelistic efforts with several conversions. They would prove to be but the first of thousands that God would bring to faith by means of his preaching. He soon returned to Oxford and began a preaching ministry in London. There he reconnected with his old friends, the Wesleys, who were doing mission work in North America.

As he began to preach the gospel, he experienced rejection from those who should most have embraced him, his fellow ministers in the Church of England. So strong was their opposition that he soon found no open doors available for him to preach in the regular church assemblies in either London or Bristol. The pain this caused him is evident in the following diary entry:

They have thrust me out and since the self-righteous men of this generation count themselves unworthy, I go out to the highways and hedges and compel harlots, publicans, and sinners to come in that the Master’s house may be filled. They who are sinners will follow after me to hear the word of God!

Eventually he made his way to the coal-mining region of Kingswood where no parish church existed. There he took to preaching to the miners in the open air. Soon he was preaching to 5,000, then 10,000, and ultimately to more than 20,000 hearers. God richly blessed this ministry, and many were soundly converted.

Whitefield had thirty-four years of fruitful ministry for Christ. He preached more than 18,000 formal sermons, and if all the informal messages are added the figure exceeds 30,000. He crossed the Atlantic seven times in his missionary endeavors. He made fifteen voyages to Scotland, two to Ireland, and traveled to Bermuda, Holland, and Gibraltar.

His singular passion to preach the gospel and make Christ known was his driving ambition until his death in 1770 at fifty-five years of age. Perhaps a statement made during the difficult time of controversy with his beloved friends, the Wesleys, best captures this sentiment: “May the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified.” Clearly, God honored such humility and exaltation of Christ by preserving the story of Whitefield’s life and labor for the profit of His people. 

“ . . . when
thou comest,
bring with thee
. . . the books”
(2 Tim. 4:13)

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Most Christians are familiar with the virgin birth prophecy contained in Isaiah 7. Wander out of 7:14 into the surrounding territory, however, and the textual terrain bristles with peculiar terminology and thorny questions.

For instance, what is 7:16 talking about? In the length of time it would take the child to cultivate a moral conscience to the point of independently distinguishing and consistently choosing good over evil (1–2 years), the land that Ahaz abhorred would be bereft of both her kings.

But what does that have to do with this beloved Christmas prophecy? A brief history lesson removes the intimidation of this passage and enriches our appreciation for the trustworthiness of God's Word. Its historical context revolves around three kings: Ahaz of Judah, Pekah of Israel, and Rezin of Syria.

The LORD had already used both King Rezin (Syria) and King Pekah (Israel) independently to chasten Judah because of Ahaz's wickedness (2 Chron. 28:2–6). In addition to a massive victory, Israel took 200,000 captives of Judah whom they intended to enslave, until a prophet and several prominent leaders in Israel protested (2 Chron. 28:8–15).

Now the year is 734 B.C. Rezin and Pekah formed a Syrio-Ephraimitic League ("Ephraim" is the northern kingdom of Israel) in order to consolidate their power against the rising threat of Assyria. Judah resisted joining with them and, in fact, tried to bribe its way into favor with Assyria. Consequently, Pekah and Rezin plotted to overthrow Ahaz and replace him with an anti-Assyrian king that would aid them in standing together against the advancing Assyrian menace. Isaiah 7 records God's gracious assurance to the undeserving Ahaz (clearly out of His abiding loyalty to the Davidic covenant), who was then facing the threat of this Syrio-Ephraimitic League between Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel.

7:1, 2—This is where 2 Kings 16:5 seems to fit. Clearly Pekah and Rezin planned a second joint assault against Ahaz. This time, however, their plans were foiled by the LORD (7:1). Nevertheless, the threat was still there (7:2). In fact, that same year (734), Tiglath-Pileaser III, king of Assyria—not graciously pleased with all this insubordination on the part of Syria and Israel—returned to express his displeasure (see 2 Kings 15:29).


7:3, 4—God sent a message of assurance to King Ahaz through Isaiah. The description of Rezin and Pekah as "smoking firebrands" has reference to the tail end of a piece of burning wood; the wood is nearly burned up and

gone, the fire is played out. You might see some smoke, but not to worry—they are just smoldering stubs of wood.

7:5–7—The threat of the Syrio-Ephraimitic league is spelled out. This plot of Rezin and Pekah to conquer Judah, depose Ahaz, and replace him with one "son of Tabeel" not only posed a threat personally to the reign of Ahaz, but to the continuation of the Davidic line. It was that divine loyalty to the Davidic covenant—not personal loyalty to the apostate Ahaz—that prompted God's assurance to Ahaz (7:8). Consequently, *within 2 years* Rezin was dead and Damascus (the capital of Syria) was taken by Assyria (in 732 B.C.). Pekah was also assassinated almost simultaneously. *Just as 7:16 promised!*

7:8–9—Within just 12 more years, the northern kingdom of Israel itself fell to Assyria (in 720 B.C.) and the 10 tribes were expatriated (deported). What, then, about the 65 years mentioned in 7:8? Is this a prophecy with a built-in safety feature, a well-padded buffer zone that allowed for 65 years when it actually took only 12 more years? While Israel was conquered only 12 years later in 720, it was not until the reign of Esar-haddon of Assyria (681–669 B.C.) that the repatriation of Israel with pagans from other conquered territories was complete (see Ezra 4:2). So the year the prophecy was uttered (734), minus the 65 years prophesied in 7:8 before Israel would be broken "that it be not a people," brings us to 669 and the reign of Esar-haddon. He completed the repatriation of Israel with mixed foreigners, so that it was no longer a homogenous people, let alone Israel, anymore—again, perfectly in keeping with the terms of the prophecy!

7:10–14—All of the preceding historical explanation puts this scene in context. Ahaz didn't want a sign; he had already cast in his lot with Assyria, leaning on the arm of flesh by bribing them to help him. Judah would come to rue that arrangement. But in the meantime, God gives a sign to the unwilling Ahaz, and not to him alone, but to all the "house of David"—the miraculous Virgin Birth of Immanuel.

This is the historical setting and significance of a verse we know so well in isolation (7:14). Knowing this context multiplies the meaningfulness of this surface-familiar passage. Moreover, if the study of past prophecy does nothing else, it invites two vital interpretative observations: (1) past fulfillments of past prophecies confirm our faith in the future fulfillment of future prophecies; and (2) the characteristically literal nature of past prophecies and their fulfillments should inform our interpretation of future (eschatological) prophecies and their fulfillments. 

**"Rightly
dividing
the Word
of Truth"
(2 Tim. 2:15)**

God's faithfulness is His reliability, His determination to fulfill all that He promises. His faithfulness is grounded in His absolute truth. God is perfectly sincere in all His undertakings and dependable in discharging all His engagements (A. A. Hodge *Outlines of Theology*, p. 161). God's faithfulness is made possible by His omnipotence. "Thus, he could never commit himself to do something of which he would eventually prove incapable." (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 291). J. Barton Payne (*The Theology of the Older Testament*, pp. 151–166) resolves God's attributes into three aspects of His sovereignty: His cosmic sovereignty (His freedom to do whatever He wished in His universe), His ethical sovereignty (His determination as to what was right and wrong in His universe), and His beneficent sovereignty (His demonstration of kindness to mankind in His universe). Payne further describes God's beneficent sovereignty using the four Hebrew words: *s'dhaqa* (righteousness), *hesedh* (loyalty), *ahava* (love), and *emuna* (faithfulness). God's faithfulness is His steadiness, His firmness (Payne, p.162f): "Faithfulness is the idea of the very name Yahweh, the One who can be counted upon to be present."

Scripture contains numerous declarations of God's faithfulness. God promised to give the descendants of Abraham the land of Canaan, and His faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of that promise. "And the LORD gave unto Israel all the land which he swore to give unto their fathers . . . there failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass" (Joshua 21:43–45).

The psalmist expresses his confidence in Psalm 119:75—"I know, O LORD, that thy judgments (especially those concerning me) are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me." The afflictions themselves are a mark of God's faithfulness to His own. God would not be faithful if He did not do everything that was for our good, and sometimes that involves affliction. Arthur Pink takes up this theme in *The Attributes of God* (p. 60): "There are seasons in the lives of all when it is not easy, no not even for Christians, to believe that God is faithful. Our faith is sorely tried, our eyes bedimmed with tears, and we can no longer trace the outworkings of His love. . . . Cherished plans have been thwarted, friends on whom we relied have failed us, a professed brother or sister in Christ has betrayed us. We are staggered. . . . We find it difficult, yea, impossible, for carnal reason to harmonize His frowning

providence with His gracious promises." At such times we need faith to believe that, in spite of appearances, God is faithful. This means that He is completely sovereign, that He is infinitely wise, and that He is perfect in love (Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*, p.18).

Psalms 146 tells us that the God of Jacob "made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is" and that He is the God who "keepeth truth for ever." God's *faithfulness* is His determination to *keep truth*, and He does this forever.

Thomas O. Chisholm (1866-1960), a Methodist preacher and author of some 800 published hymns, is perhaps best known for his hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." The text for this hymn is based in part on Jeremiah's classic passage: "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22, 23). Though he never revealed the particular circumstances leading to his authorship of this hymn, Chisholm did write to a friend: "My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in earlier years which has followed me on until now" (and, ironically enough, followed him until he was 94 years of age). "I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness" (Guye Johnson, *Treasury of Great Hymns*, p. 191).

Deuteronomy 7:9 tells the reader that Jehovah is "the faithful God." How can they know that He is the faithful God? Look at all He has done (verses 1–8). What kind of God does this past activity reveal Him to be? The *faithful* God, the God you can believe in and rely on, the God you can trust. And what is the essence of His faithfulness? It is that He "keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; and repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them. . . ." (verses 9, 10). The Hebrew term translated *faithful* (*emuna*) refers to God's quality as the *certain supporter* of His people. They did not have to fear being abandoned by God. His loving care was assured. Jack Scott (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, volume I, p. 51) says that this term "expresses the basic concept of support and is used in the sense of the

"To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, 'A window shalt thou make in the ark.'"

Charles Spurgeon

strong arms of the parent supporting the helpless infant.” He even cites 2 Kings 18:16 where the idea of support is conveyed in the translation *pillars*. One of the most reassuring expressions of this loving support is Isaiah 49:15, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.”

Psalm 89 presents the theme of God’s faithfulness to the covenant with David. The various forms of the term mentioned above (translated *faithfulness*, *faithful*, *fast*, *truth*, *amen*) occur here eleven times, a significant concentration. Charles Spurgeon (*Treasury of David*) says of the psalm: “It is the utterance of a believer . . . pleading with his God, urging the grand argument of covenant engagements, and expecting deliverance and help, because of the faithfulness of Jehovah.” The psalm begins: “I will sing of the mercies of the LORD for ever: with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations.”

One of the grandest expressions of God’s faithfulness is the reference to Him as a *Rock* (*sur*), as in Deuteronomy 32:4, “*He is the Rock*, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.” You will notice that the first two words of this verse are in italics in the biblical text, indicating that they are not in the original: “The Rock! His work is perfect!” This becomes a major theme in this chapter, and is mentioned six times (verses 4, 15, 18, & 30, 31). Matthew Henry says of verse 4: “God is the rock, for he is in himself immutable, immovable, and he is to all that seek him and fly to him an impenetrable shelter, and to all that trust in him an everlasting foundation.” Alexander Maclaren, speaking from verse 31 (*Expositions of Holy Scripture*), says “If He is ‘our Rock,’ then we shall have a firm foundation, a safe refuge, inexhaustible refreshment, and untroubled rest.”

One cannot help thinking of the massive monolith rising almost 1400 feet out of the western end of the Mediterranean Sea, the Rock of Gibraltar. Or the imposing Herodian refuge west of the Dead Sea known as Masada, a name derived from the same Hebrew word translated *fortress* in Psalm 91:2—“I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.” Or Bass Rock, the “Alcatraz of Scotland” famous as the prison of many a godly preacher during the dark years after 1662. These could all serve as places of refuge and security, and constitute an appropriate illustration of God’s rock-like faithfulness. “Bow down thine ear to me; deliver me speedily: be thou my strong rock, for

an house of defence to save me” (Psalm 31:2).

“God is called ‘the Rock’ as the unchangeable refuge, who grants a firm defence and secure resort to His people, by virtue of His unchangeableness or impregnable firmness” (C. F. Keil, *The Pentateuch*, p.467). John Hartley (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, volume II, p.762) says: “Yahweh is a Rock . . . in that he is totally reliable.”


Sometimes this term is translated *strength*, as in Isaiah 26:4 “Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength.” That last phrase *everlasting strength* can also be translated *Rock of ages*. Al Smith (*Hymn Histories*, p. 231) relates how a young pastor was overtaken by a sudden and unusually violent storm one day. Looking for shelter off the road, he found a small rock overhang behind some trees. Standing underneath it, he noticed it opened into a cave, and he drew back into it when the wind and rain would have wet him even under the overhang. Waiting out the storm, this text in Isaiah came to his mind: “The Lord Jehovah is the Rock of the ages.” But eleven years would pass before the pastor, Augustus Toplady (1740–1778), wrote of his experience that day.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.
Let the water and the blood
From Thy riven side which flowed
Be for sin the double cure,
Save from wrath, and make me pure.

Years later, in the summer of 1868, a Christian woman was studying the life of Augustus Toplady, and especially the circumstances of his writing of this song. She became interested in this Biblical metaphor for God’s faithfulness, so she studied the references to God as *the Rock*. Slowly the lines of a poem began to form in her mind:

Beneath the cross of Jesus,
I feign would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty Rock
within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness,
a rest along the way
From the burning of the noon-day heat
and the burden of the day.

Through these familiar words Elizabeth Clephane (1830–1869), the author, provides an excellent example of a hymn deriving from the study of God in the Scriptures (Ernest K. Emurian, *Famous Stories of Inspiring Hymns*, pp. 18, 19). ☞



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The Good Shepherd Is the Great Savior

Doris Fisher Harris

The Costume Room

The sheer white silk shimmered on the frame, and the winter light touched it with a snow-like glint. She caught the beloved scent of the fabrics . . . the starch . . . the new-cloth smell. Some people were allergic to the scent, but to her it was perfume. She'd loved fabrics ever since the days when her grandmother shared scraps of silks and brocades for her doll wardrobe.

So it was only natural when she moved to Atlanta that she get a job with a costume company. The clients included an exotic array of theater people with green hair and pierced noses; school directors, harried and tired, with too small a budget and too much to do; and church directors staging Easter and Christmas productions.

Her skills had led her to sewing the finest of the costumes. Each time her scissors sliced into a brilliant brocade, she felt the exhilaration of creativity.

She'd been sickened by the tastelessness of the Halloween season, a favorite season of childhood. However, she was pleased by the efficient principal who demanded that all costumes be based upon good books and that each costumed character be able to discuss the book and character. Then Thanksgiving brought some pageants. Finally came Christmas season, her first with the costume company.

The costumes for angels and wise men had been reserved. Then a tall young man entered the shop.

"I'm planning a white manger scene, a porcelain figurine setting. It's to look like a magnificent Christmas ornament. I've found this fabric." Out spilled the most beautiful white silk, shimmering with iridescent colors.

She gasped and touched it reverently. "It's exquisite."

"No one in our church will put scissors to it."

"I don't blame them."

"Will you cut this and create costumes for a Mary, a Joseph, and wrappings for the child?"

"I'll have to make patterns. Do you have pictures of your concept?"

He pulled out a file, obviously clipped from an old-time pictorial magazine. It contained several manger scenes. Some were just of the holy family. They shuffled through the folder until he came to a madonna and child with Joseph leaning protectively over them.

"I'm fascinated by the way her garment drapes. This fabric would catch the light perfectly."

"That wouldn't be hard," she said. "A simple basic tunic, and then drape the fabric from the shoulders, like a cape." She was already mentally sketching it.

"And as much layering as possible. A tunic, then an aba and a cape. . . ."

"So the lights can pick up the layers of fabric."

"Exactly. It will give an impression of depth."

Before she realized it, she was in front of the mirror with the cloth draped around her. His eyes widened. Embarrassed, she stood still.

"You're beautiful," he declared.

No man, except family members, had ever told her that. She tried to get her voice under control. "Yes, I think it will work." Her voice sounded tremulous.

"Now comes the difficult question," he said. "How much? We have a very limited budget. I've done tailoring and have made many costumes, but I was afraid to cut into this."

She mentally did the arithmetic and looked up the price.

"Wow!" His eyebrows went up in amazement. There was a kindly crinkling around the eyes. "I guess that makes it impossible." He started to roll up the silk.

"Wait," she said. "Perhaps I could help you, as a volunteer or something," she said. "I'm new in town and . . ."

"And what?"

"And I've meant to find a good church, but I've been to several and, well . . ." She flushed.

"Go on."

"They don't seem to too friendly."

"You're the product of a small town. The culture here is different. Everyone doesn't know everyone. We begin working on the Christmas program Monday night. Shall I pick you up here?"

"About 6:00," she agreed. She reproved herself later. She didn't know this man. Perhaps he was lying. All week she tried to get friends at work to join her. She laughed at herself.

On Monday she found herself dressing for work with unusual care.

"This is dumb," she thought.

Then again, perhaps it wasn't so dumb, she decided when he pulled up in a battered pickup truck with a teenage boy beside him.

"Climb in. This is Marcos. He wants to be a tailor. His dad is a great one. He's head of our costume committee."

He's wise, she thought, to have a third party with him. The pickup was clean, smelled good, was swept and had good seat covers.

"We're excited about our program," Marcos said in slightly accented English. "We want to see people saved."

Saved, she thought. From what?

They drew up to a neat white cinderblock building with shining windows. He gallantly rushed to open her door. She considered herself a modern woman fully capable of opening a door, but she sensed a tinge of pleasure at the attention.

The church door opened on a Christmas tableau of its own. Adults were packing bags with gifts and fruit and candy. Teens were setting up a simple but lovely crèche. She was taken to a Sunday school room equipped with an especially large table.

Patterns were spread out, and the roll of silk

shimmered quietly at the end of the table.

She took one look at the silk and quickly began to shake it from the roll. The children stopped. Their eyes were shining. She noticed their clean, but threadbare, clothing. No envy shone in their eyes—only joy that the holy family should be dressed so.

The shining eyes did it. She made the first cut. It was as if magic guided her fingers.

It seemed like just a few minutes, but hours passed before shimmering costumes for the holy family were hanging on sewing dummies.

"We'll have them fitted after church on Sunday. Can you come?"

"All right. By the way, what is the salary for this job?"

"One of my mother's fabulous Mexican meals," Marcos said for the costume department. "We'll pick you up for Sunday school."

And so it was that she sat in the back of an adult Sunday school class listening to a kindly man with a neatly trimmed beard teach a lesson from the Bible about the meaning of Christmas.

She was familiar with all the typical associations of Christmas: Santa, the holy family, the food, the traditions. . . . But this lesson presented a totally new light to her. To her, Christmas was merely a fun, family time. She had had no notion of its true religious significance—until now. She sat transfixed by the simple yet beautiful story.

He came to die. He came to die for me.

Later, the fittings went well. During rehearsal the silk shimmering under the lights and the radiant faces of Joseph and Mary in their white makeup truly did look like a porcelain crèche.

"Imagine," the Mary said, "I've just been saved, and I get to be in the Christmas program as Mary. It's too beautiful." Tears welled in her eyes.

Saved, she thought. She'd heard that term so many times. "Just what does it mean . . . this being saved? It must be hard to receive such a gift."

"It's not hard. It's very easy," the sweet accented voice continued. "I'm a sinner. Aren't you?"

"I never thought about it much."

"Did you ever break a commandment? Tell a lie?"

"Hasn't everybody?"

"That's what the Bible says." She opened a small book and showed her a spot. "Read that."

"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' Well, sure. You'll get no argument from me about that. I know I'm a sinner."

"Just think," the voice said in wonder, "He was God, and He left Heaven and allowed Himself to be imprisoned in a virgin's womb so he could be born in a human body—all so that He could die to pay the debt for my sins."

"That's what Christmas is about?" she breathed.

"That's what Christmas is about," the pastor's

voice echoed from beside her.

She looked at him. "But how does it become yours?"

"The same way you accept any gift. Look over there."

An awkward boy was handing a small, brightly wrapped present to a pretty girl.

"See? He hands it to her . . ."

The girl seemed to hesitate in surprise. "It's still not hers," the pastor whispered.

The girl smiled happily, reached out, and took the gift and ripped into the wrapping paper.

"There, now the gift is hers."

He opened his Bible. "Let me show you how to reach out and take the gift."

The verses were so clear a child could understand. Romans 3:23. Of course she was a sinner. Then John 3:16, read with her name in the place of the "whosoever."

A few minutes later, she sat in the front row of the rehearsal and prayed. When she looked up, her tears added a shimmer to the white silk enshrouding the holy family. Now, she too was part of the family of God.

Doris Fisher Harris is a freelance writer and long-time faculty member of Bob Jones University's Department of Speech.

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Christmas is a time for giving, not swapping.
—Anonymous

Rejoice, that the immortal God is born, so that mortal man may live in eternity.
—Jan Huss

The message of Christmas is that the visible material world is bound to the invisible spiritual world.
—Anonymous

Selfishness makes Christmas a burden: love makes it a delight.
—Anonymous

Christmas is the day that holds all time together.
—Alexander Smith

Christmas itself may be called into question, if carried so far it creates indigestion.
—Ralph Bergengren

The Light that shines from the humble manger is strong enough to lighten our way to the end of our days.
—Vita-Rays

A green Christmas is neither handsome nor healthful.
—Thomas Fuller

Some businessmen are saying that this could be the greatest Christmas ever. I thought the first one was.
—Hal Roach

God loves a cheerful giver, but we settle for a grudging one.
—Mildred McAfee Horton

Filling the world He lies in a manger.
—Augustine

The world asks, How much does he give? Christ asks, Why does he give?
—John Raleigh Mott

Give according to your means, or God will make your means according to your giving.
—John Hall

They talk of Christmas so long that it comes.
—George Herbert

The best of all gifts around any Christmas tree: the presence of a family all wrapped up in each other.
—Burton Hills

Christmas began in the heart of God. It is complete only when it reaches the heart of man.
—Religious Telescope

The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.
—Ralph W. Sockman

Give and spend and God will send.
—Henry George Bohn

God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

After all, Christmas is but a big love affair to remove the wrinkles of the year with kindly remembrances.
—John Wanamaker

Christmas is not a date. It is a state of mind.
—Mary Ellen Chase

It is Christmas in the heart that puts Christmas in the air.
—W. T. Ellis

Christmas, coming so late in the year, reminds us that changes even late in life can make a huge difference.
—Marvin Olasky

The less a voter knows about you, the longer he is liable to vote for you.
—Will Rogers

Religion in a Family is at once its brightest Ornament & its best Security.
—Samuel Adams



*“ . . . what does he want for his birthday?
Hold on, I’ll ask him . . . ”*

Wit & Wisdom is taken from various sources with contributions from Pastor David Atkinson.

The Curse of the Purse

Marilyn Janke

In my life, purses represent a timeline of sorts. I first started using one in sixth grade. When my parents granted me permission to carry a purse to school twice a week, I was euphoric. I stuffed that purse with important things like tissues, a mirror, and my secret decoder ring. By high school, every girl owned a purse, whether she needed one or not. I graduated to a model with a shoulder strap the length of a clothesline. Anything that I imagined I might need went into it. With that purse along, I had no need for self-defense tactics or pepper spray. One swing of that overloaded bag would have flattened the most aggressive attacker.

Following marriage came church work and teaching school. Accordingly, my purse bulged ever wider to meet the demands: prizes for kids, lesson plans, church bulletins, choir music. What if we were away from home and I needed my address book? What if my sunglasses broke and I needed a full set of tiny screwdrivers? No problem.

However, nothing prepared my purse for motherhood. At that stage, the purse usually became part of the diaper bag. I couldn't get rid of it, because I still needed some kind of identification in case I lost my mind:

"Excuse me, ma'am. Someone reported you wandering aimlessly on aisle 173 in front of the diaper section. What is your name?"

"If you'll wait just a minute, sir, I'll look in my purse. I think I have my name right here . . . Oh, no, that's the grocery list."

Sunday was my purse's busiest day. Between the final "Amen" and the commencement of the handshakes, I became quite adept at scooping up cracker crumbs, broken crayons, and wadded bulletins and cramming them into my purse. If a smoke alarm had gone off in there, you wouldn't have been able to find it. But it wasn't just the inside of my purse that attracted attention. Each week, more "graffiti" was

added to the outside. It even developed its own set of stretch marks.

It's really not that I was a slob. It's just that my purse was always in the next time zone. Cleaning it out never quite made it onto my "to-do" list. (That chore ranked about as high as "Polish the underside of the piano bench with a toothbrush.")

It wasn't that I didn't have a good example. My mother's purse was a masterpiece. A total stranger could have found her way around inside it. "You need a pad of paper? Go three pockets past the credit cards and turn left at the blue pen." She even knew if something was out of place. "All right, who took the half stick of gum that was between the last two pieces?"

I, on the other hand, wouldn't have known if a gerbil were living in mine.

"Mom, something in your purse bit me!"

"Oh, it was probably just the hammer."

Then one day—somewhere between the graham-cracker era and the oldest kid's driver's license—it happened. I realized I could whittle down my paraphernalia to some plastic cards, a pen, and a few ounces of makeup,

all of it fitting inside a purse the size of a Ziploc® bag. I could even snap it shut without sitting on it. The other day I actually walked around the block without it. Of course, I needed a mask and a full tank of oxygen. But I'll get better. Short jaunts at first, then maybe even a car ride. For the moment, though, I'll just figure out how to pay for all the chiropractic visits for my curved spine. Maybe I could get a job selling purses . . .

Of course, there's a spiritual point to this discussion of purses. Pause a moment and take inventory: what kind of baggage are you lugging around in your spiritual "purse"? For instance, perhaps you're constantly fretting about things beyond your control. Have you ever been in a stressful situation with someone who appears to be calmly accepting it as the Lord's will—while you yearn to scream, "How dare

*Then one day—
somewhere between
the graham-cracker
era and the oldest
kid's driver's
license—
it happened.*

you not be worried about this”?

What else might you have stuffed in there?

Pride? Do you have to be the center of every conversation? Or maybe you feel as though you (unlike others) have it all together.

Jealousy? Do you tend to avoid speaking to other women at church because they appear to have everything that you don’t?

Bitterness? Is something that happened years ago still in the bottom of your “purse” and causing you to be sarcastic, critical, moody, and/or demanding of others?

Self-pity? Are you like Haman, who got upset when someone stepped on his ego? Or perhaps you feel that no one cares?

These are just a few of the things we might be packing around in our purses. Unfortunately, ridding our lives of this spiritual “junk” isn’t as quick or easy as dumping out our physical purses. But the first step in tossing them out is to recognize and confess such items as sin, and then to ask the Lord to remove them (1 John 5:14, 15). Confess them as often as you need to (1 John 1:9).

“Wait a minute,” you blurt. “Did you say ‘sin’? How can you call it sin? You just don’t know my situation . . .”

While it’s true that some of our problems may have physical origins, most tend to be spiritual (Prov. 4:23).

Next, after acknowledging any sin you’ve found, thank God for the root of your problem (Phil. 2:13). Is it a person? Is it a job? Sounds strange, but try giving thanks for it—gratitude works.

Finally, ask God to fill you with His Spirit (Eph. 5:18–20). Think on Him, and He will give you peace (Phil. 4:6–9).

Marilyn, and her husband David, are missionary church planters in Abbots Ford, British Columbia, Canada. (www.ribtickler.org)

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Intellectual Attainment with Evangelistic Fervor

Jerry Sivnksty

In 2 Timothy 2:15 the apostle Paul writes, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." In Romans 10:1 he also declares, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." Certainly, if there was ever a man of God with the proper balance of intellectual attainment and evangelistic fervor, it was the apostle Paul.

This balance ought to be the cry of God's people today! We need to know the Word of God and have a heart for reaching lost souls. Unfortunately, it seems that many of the Lord's people struggle with maintaining this balance.

For example, many believers emphasize only the intellectual side of faith. Of course, no one should ever knock the pursuit of true Biblical knowledge. After all, the apostle Paul said in Acts 22:3, "I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day." So Paul was an astute man of knowledge! He sat under one of the greatest teachers of his day. He had a hunger for the things of God. In the same way, believers today need to develop an insatiable appetite for knowing more of the Word of God, which is the gold mine of spiritual wealth.

In contrast, many other people neglect the study of God's Word. In fact, some practically boast of the fact that they have no education. A dear friend of mine from West Texas shared with me about a man who had attended college with him. He told me that this preacher boasted that he no longer studies to prepare sermons. He stated, "I do not study anymore. I just get up, and whatever the Lord lays on my heart, that is what I preach." However, this kind of airhead mentality has no place in the ministry of the Lord. Perhaps someone would defend the man, saying, "Well, he is a heart preacher!" That sounds good, but he better be a head preacher as well. By that I mean that every preacher should be a diligent student of the Word of God.

As the Lord's servants, we had better have our tools sharpened to do a work for God. To make an analogy, it could take weeks to chop down a tree with a dull axe head. On the other hand, a sharpened axe head would do the job efficiently and quickly. Likewise, we will be efficient in doing the work of the Lord if we

have our tools of knowledge sharpened through study and education.

So who is the more dangerous of these two: The man who is all knowledge but has no evangelistic zeal for souls, or the man who is zealous for souls but has no desire for intellectual attainment of God's Word? I believe that both are equally dangerous. We must keep our hearts warm for souls and our vision clear for service. When we emphasize one over the other, we create an imbalance. With a one-sided approach, we might have men who are Einstein in their theology and knowledge of God's Word, but are kindergartners in their passion for souls.

George W. Truett declared, "The greatest thing is not to be a great scientist, important as that is: not to be a great statesman, as vitally important as that is: nor even to be a great theologian, which is immeasurably important. But the greatest thing in life is to bring others to Jesus Christ!"

Charles H. Spurgeon said, "What is the ministry if we do not get sinners to the Savior? Why are we here, and what is our motivation if we gather no souls for Jesus? If we fail to win souls, have we not defaulted on the great commission? I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth."

These statements describe the kind of heart and attitude we ought to have. Both of the men just quoted were brilliant and had great intellectual minds. However, they were equally passionate about winning the lost to the Lord Jesus Christ.

When the Lord called me to preach, I wanted to receive the best possible preparation for the ministry. I went to college and then on to graduate school for a year and a half. It was difficult, but necessary for the Lord to prepare me for the ministry of evangelism. Looking back, I can say that those years of preparation were worth all of the effort, study, and grind to see the Lord mold my life for His work.

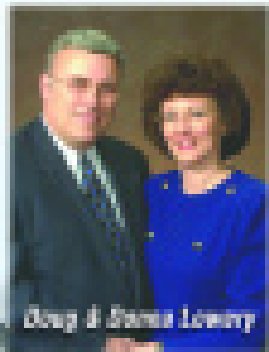
What a thrill to see people saved! There is no greater joy that a person will experience than being used of the Lord to bring others to Christ.

Ask the Lord to help you strike the proper balance in your life. Strive for knowledge of God's Word, yes, but strive for knowledge coupled with a zeal for souls. This is the proper balance the Lord wants us to have.

You may contact Evangelist Jerry Sivnksty at P.O. Box 141, Starr, SC 29684, or via e-mail at evangjsivn@aol.com.

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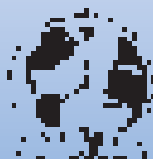
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ECCLESIASTES: A BIBLICAL

This series has addressed Ecclesiastes' neglect and abuse, its inspiration and authority, and its authorship and theology. A thorough discussion of this challenging portion of God's revelation would require a book. Since this column aims at providing an overview of the book's leading features "at a glance," however, this final installment on Ecclesiastes outlines significant elements of the book's message.

God—The Sovereign and Judge over Life under the Sun.

God—The Sovereign and Judge over Life under the Sun. Ecclesiastes' pervasive emphasis on God is crucial. He is the underlying presupposition, His presence and character the governing influence of all that the Preacher says. God is the structural foundation of the book's philosophy of life. This was the focus of the previous column. Other themes dominate the book's literary landscape as well.

Vanity—The Nature of Life under the Sun.

"Vanity" does not convey arrogance or conceit, nor worthlessness or futility (the NIV translation "meaningless" is unhelpful). It is a contextually flexible word that conveys the failure or inability of something to produce what is desired or anticipated. "Vanity" describes that which ultimately disappoints one's expectations, often because it is *elusive* (temporary, fleeting, enigmatical) or *illusory* (unsubstantial, hollow, insufficient). A mirage or dry well would be "vanity" to a thirsty man; to a hungry man, wax fruit or an empty cookie jar is "vanity." And to a man hoping to find in this life "under the sun" his ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment, all its pleasures and experiences are "vanity." Solomon begins (1:2) and ends (12:8) the record of his search for significance and satisfaction in this life "under the sun" with the cry that all of it is, as Robert McCabe colorfully puts it, "frustratingly enigmatic." The word "vanity" occurs 38x, but other expressions elaborate on this theme of frustration and disappointment.

Vexation of spirit (9x) literally refers to "chasing the wind"—a graphic portrayal of man's hopeless pursuit of ultimate fulfillment in this life under the sun.

Under the sun (29x; "under heaven" 3x) is a phrase unique to Ecclesiastes. It defines the boundaries of human

life and experience and opportunity, and repeatedly sets the parameters of Solomon's investigation and observations. Solomon "is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity" (G. S. Hendry). "So throughout the book," adds Derek Kidner, "he shocks us into seeing life and death strictly from ground level, and into reaching the only conclusions from that standpoint that honesty will allow. Yet he is leading rather than driving us." This phrase is more frequent on the front end of the book (20x in chapters 1–6, 11x in chapters 8–10), paving the way for the necessity of faith.

Man's laborious toil capitalizes on Hebrew terms that depict the negative aspects of man's lifelong labor (a result of the Fall, remember) as trouble, misery, pain, drudgery, necessary preoccupation. Again, the frequency of this emphasis is markedly heavier on the front end of the book, with only a handful of references in the latter half.

Life and death dominate the discussion as you would expect in any philosophy. Discussions of the inequities of life and realistic descriptions of death as the great equalizer that does not discriminate on the basis of race or class, religion or intelligence, surface throughout the book.

These and other extensions of the "vanity" theme punctuate the discourse with the realistic reminder that this life is full of frustration and enigma and cannot fulfill our yearning for ultimate satisfaction and lasting happiness. Solomon details his exhaustive investigation into every nook of life as only a man of his stature, power, wealth, and wisdom could: entertainment and experiences, possessions and treasures, architectural and botanical projects, arts and culture, sexual gratification—nothing was excluded from his search, and his report was not encouraging. What, then, is the light beyond his discouraging conclusions?

Contentment—The Divine Intent for Man under the Sun.

The thematic juxtaposition of "joy" with "vanity" may sound strange. Nonetheless, Solomon keeps thrusting our heads periodically above the surface of the dark waters of vanity to permit us a gasp of air and light

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

(2:10, 11; 2:24; 3:12, 13; 3:22; 5:18, 19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9, 10). The Preacher intersperses his unrelenting realism with an emphasis on the joys of life (limited though they are), like a man in a darkened room pointing to the light leaking through a half-open door of escape. Far from calling us to an existential pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, these passages all have a striking feature in common—they all expressly avow that man's capacity to find a measure of pleasure in the simple blessings of life is a gracious gift from God.

That word "measure" is crucial. One man who comes to a cow intent on squeezing out of it more milk than it was ever created to produce until the man is beside himself with frustration and the poor animal is lying unrecognizably twisted and broken. Another man approaches the cow, content to derive only the momentary refreshment it was intended to provide, thanks God for the cow, and continues to find his heart-fulfillment not in anything in this fleeting material world under the sun. "In themselves and rightly used the basic things of life are sweet and good. What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give" (Kidner).

Faced with the meager prospects this brief life has to offer, man is tempted to one of two extremes: (1) total abandonment to despair, or (2) total abandonment to hedonism. Solomon expressly forbids both. He exhorts us to an honest view of reality in a sin-cursed world and a contented use of this world without abusing it (1 Cor. 7:31). He calls us to contentment not covetousness, enjoyment not hedonism, grateful acceptance rather than greedy grasping, satisfaction with what God gives rather than discontent with what He has not given.

Solomon's call to contentment is precisely the spirit Paul describes in Phil. 4:11, 12. It is the same conviction Paul echoes when he asserts that God "giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). It parallels James' assertion that the good we enjoy is a gift from God (James 1:17). The contentment with one's God-ordained lot in life that these passages prescribe is what makes genuine joy in all the circumstances of life possible. Contentment is not an emotion that comes with attaining things; it is an attitude of submission to our God-ordained lot in life regardless of our possessions.

Accountability—The Critical Reality for Living Life under the Sun.

Solomon hints at the theme of judgment periodically (3:15, 17; 5:8; 8:13). In the face of the perplexing injustices of life, he repeatedly affirms that there is a sovereign God, that this is a moral universe, that man is accountable, and that judgment will be meted—although it doesn't always look that way to us in this life under the sun. Slowly, deliberately, Solomon has been leading the pondering reader to this necessary, inexorable reality. It is not until his conclusion, however, that he puts both hands on the reader's shoulders and firmly turns him around to face this certainty point blank. The call to contentment merges with the reminder of accountability in 11:9–12:14.

Ecclesiastes 11:9, 10 is not a sarcastic dare to young people ("Go ahead! 'Do your own thing.' Just remember, buster, God's going to judge you for it!"). It may "preach well" to young people that way, but nothing could be further from Solomon's (and hence God's) intent if you read the passage in light of the book's context. It is the capstone to the joy/contentment theme—a *carpe diem* call to live life to the fullest and pursue every God-given opportunity and experience you can. But pursue it responsibly. Every decision and action must be governed by the reality of accountability, reined in by a conscious remembrance that you are ultimately answerable to God. 'Judgment' is not purely negative. The job of an Olympic 'judge' is not to punish the competitors. The term communicates assessment, evaluation, and passing sentence on the good as well as the bad. Therefore, "remove sorrow from your heart"—don't waste away your youth in frustration or anxiety or discouragement. And by all means, "put away evil from your flesh"—shun any and all sinful pursuits which will only mar and spoil your youth while you have it. Because "childhood and youth are vanity." Any pursuit of perpetual youth is a folly doomed to failure; ultimately, youth itself is fleeting and elusive.

Solomon caps off this exhortation in 12:1. Enjoy your God-given lot in life and pursue your heart's desire, but do so responsibly. "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth"—make your decisions and live your life conscious of Him. Rein in every impulse and choice and action with the sobering remembrance of your personal accountability to your Creator. Now *that* preaches well to

Continued on next page

At a Glance

(Continued from page 31)

young and old *alike!*

The final note in the key of accountability comes in 12:8–14, the book's emphatic final exclamation point. Solomon's opening thesis is still valid—all of life under the sun is "vanity." Don't de-fang the universality of Solomon's message. His point is not simply that life without God is vanity, but that all of life under the sun is vanity. Whether you are a Christian or not, everything in this life is, in and of itself, still incapable of delivering lasting satisfaction or even of lasting. Christians are not immune to the lure of looking for their delight in the vanities of this material world. The frustration of such a search as Solomon so eloquently describes is designed to prod us to remember that ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction for anyone is not to be found in anything "under the sun" but in *Someone beyond it* (cf. Heb. 13:5).

After insisting that his message derives not merely from human wisdom but also from divine revelation (12:9–12), the strongest expression of accountability comes in 12:13, 14. God will assess and pass judgment on every work, every choice, every pursuit, and every secret thing. "The last verse of all drives home the point just made, with a final blow that is sharp enough to hurt but shrewd enough to jolt us out of apathy. It

kills complacency to know that nothing goes unnoticed and unassessed, not even the things that we disguise from ourselves. But at the same time it transforms life. If God cares as much as this, nothing can be pointless" (Kidner).

Putting It All Together

Ecclesiastes furnishes four major building blocks for constructing a Biblical philosophy of life which, when rightly arranged, result in a symmetrically structured house for life. The structure's foundation is theology—a right perception of the presence and character of God. The first story built on that foundation is a realistic admission of the vanity of material life under the sun. The second story built atop that Biblical realism is a settled contentment with and enjoyment of your God-given lot in life. The structure's roof is accountability. Recognizing one's answerability to God governs all our choices, and grounds the entire structure back into the foundational reality and character of our Creator and our responsibility to Him.

Recommended Resources

Biblical Viewpoint. (Bob Jones Seminary Journal) "Focus on Ecclesiastes" (November 1997).

Garett, Duane. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.*

Kidner, Derek. *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes.*

McCabe, Robert. "The Message of Ecclesiastes." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (Spring 1996).

Wright, J. Stafford. *Ecclesiastes in Expositor's Bible Commentary.*

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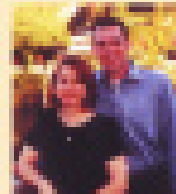


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Partial-Birth Abortion Ban

The Senate voted unanimously September 17 to send its version of a partial-birth abortion ban to conference. By a vote of 93–0 the Senate sent its version . . . to a conference with the House of Representatives, which had already passed its version and sent it to conference. When the House and Senate pass bills with different language, a conference is called to work out the differences. “We as a Senate, members of Congress, should listen to the American people, but more importantly . . . we need to listen to our own conscience,” Senator Mike DeWine, R-Ohio. The Senate version has an amendment that pro-lifers want to see stripped—an affirmation of support for the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling. Pro-choice senators said the vote was a sign that the Senate supports the *Roe v. Wade* decision. (Baptist Press, 09/18/2003)

Gay Primetime

Six years after the famous Ellen DeGeneres “coming out” episode aired on ABC, primetime TV is set to break ground again this fall with the introduction of same-sex parents in lead roles. In October, ABC will debut *It’s All Relative*, a comedy involving two homosexual men whose daughter marries the son of Irish Catholic parents. The

plot focuses on the tension between the two families, whose beliefs clash. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is calling the fall season a “critical step forward” in the portrayal of same-sex couples. “My partner of 22 years and I can finally look at our three children and tell them there is a family on television that looks like us,” GLAAD Executive Director Joan M. Garry said in a press release. A total of 18 prime-time shows—nine on broadcast television, nine on cable TV—will feature homosexual characters, according to a tally by GLAAD. But that count does not include reality programs such as Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and CBS’s *Amazing Race*, which sometimes garner as many viewers as dramas and comedies. CBS referred to a male homosexual couple—which won the most recently concluded *Amazing Race* contest—as being a married couple. (Baptist Press, 09/17/2003)

Metrosexuality

For those people who have become bored with the numerous terms used to identify human sexuality, a new term is making headway in some arenas. Enter the metrosexual. According to a recent report by the marketing communications firm Euro RSCG Worldwide, an increasing number of men age 21 to 48 could be identified as met-

rosexual. A metrosexual is a heterosexual male who is in touch with his feminine side. He is sensitive, urban, and educated. He likes to indulge in expensive haircuts, pedicures, and manicures. The metrosexual likes to buy expensive clothes, spend time at the spa, and maybe even have occasional cosmetic surgery to improve his appearance and attract the opposite sex. Topping the list of famous metrosexuals are actors Brad Pitt, George Clooney, and Johnny Depp, British soccer star David Beckham, and former President Bill Clinton. At its heart, metrosexuality is nothing but narcissism. Metrosexuality is simply old-fashioned self-conceit. The real danger is the incipient androgyny of metrosexuality. It is the latest attempt to blur sexual distinctions in America. (Baptist Press, 09/03/2003)

More Profanity

The use of foul language on television shows in the past five years has increased dramatically on nearly every network and in nearly every time slot—including the so-called “Family Hour” from 8 to 9 P.M. ET—according to a study by the Parents Television Council. The report, released Sept. 15, examined all primetime entertainment series on the major broadcast television networks from the first two weeks of 1998, 2000, and 2002 November sweeps periods, analyzing a total of

400 program hours. Foul language, including curses or intensives, offensive epithets, scatological language, sexually suggestive or indecent language, and censored language, increased by 94.8 percent during the Family Hour between 1998 and 2002. During the 9 P.M. ET time slot, such language increased by 109.1 percent, though the smallest increase (38.7 percent) occurred during the last hour of prime time—the hour when young children are least likely to be watching. (Baptist Press, 09/26/2003)

Ruled and Regulated

What book has 75,606 pages, which no one has read completely but whose contents cost the nation hundreds of billions of dollars? The answer is the Federal Register, which lists the rules and regulations that businesses and citizens of the United States must follow. The Cato Institute, in a study called “The Ten Thousand Commandments,” reports that the register continues to grow under the Bush administration, with federal agencies issuing 4,167 new rules last year. The estimated cost of all these arcane rules to businesses and their customers: \$860 billion, or five times the current projected budget deficit. (*World*, 09/13/2003)

Same-Sex Marriage Rights

California became the

second state to award homosexual couples most of the rights of married couples when Governor Gray Davis signed a domestic partner bill into law Sept. 21. The bill, which won't take effect until January 2005, doesn't use the words "marriage" or "civil union" but nonetheless grants homosexual couples who are registered with the state dozens of rights and responsibilities previously given only to married couples. The California law covers a wide range of areas, including health coverage and parental status. For example, homosexual couples will now be able to take extended unpaid leave to care for an ill partner. Davis . . . signed the bill before a large crowd at San Francisco's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender center. (Baptist Press, 09/23/03)

Domestic Terrorism

Explosions ripped the pre-dawn quiet late in August outside the Chiron Corporation—an Emeryville, Calif., biotech company—shattering windows and rattling nerves among the nearby residents. The animal-rights group "Animal Liberation Brigade" claimed responsibility for the blasts, citing Chiron's ties to another firm that tests pharmaceutical products on animals. The FBI is investigating the bombing as "domestic terrorism," the latest in a chain of such acts tied to left-wing activists. On Aug. 22, fires at four Los Angeles-area car dealerships destroyed about 20 sport utility vehicles. On Aug. 1, flames

NOTABLE QUOTES

Probably the reason we all go so haywire at Christmas time with the endless unrestrained and often silly buying of gifts is that we don't quite know how to put our love into words. —Harlan Miller

There was a gift for each of us left under the tree of life 2000 years ago by Him whose birthday we celebrate today. The gift was withheld from no man. Some have left the packages unclaimed. Some have accepted the gift and carry it around, but have failed to remove the wrappings and look inside to discover the hidden splendor. The packages are all alike; in each is a scroll on which is written, All that the Father hath is thine. Take and live. —Unknown

Pride slays thanksgiving, but an humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves. —Henry Ward Beecher

We ought to give thanks for all fortune: if it is "good," because it is good, if "bad" because it works in us patience, humility and the contempt of this world and the hope of our eternal country. —C. S. Lewis

No people on earth have more cause to be thankful than ours, and this is said reverently, in no spirit of boastfulness in our own strength, but with the gratitude to the Giver of good who has blessed us. —Theodore Roosevelt

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them. —John Fitzgerald Kennedy

We've got to teach history based not on what's in fashion but what's important: Why the Pilgrims came here, who Jimmy Doolittle was, and what those thirty seconds over Tokyo meant. —Ronald Reagan

It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its Mighty Founder was a child Himself. —Charles Dickens

consumed a luxury-apartment construction site in exclusive La Jolla, Calif., leaving \$30 million in damage. The radical environmentalist group "Earth Liberation Front" claimed responsibility for both fires. (World, 09/13/2003)

New Testament Magazine

Today's American adolescents certainly know less about the Bible than any previous generation. The folks at TransitBooks, a division of Thomas Nelson, think they have come up with a way to meet that challenge, at least when it come to teenage girls. Their recently released *Revolve: The Complete New Testament*, is getting a lot of attention. *Revolve* looks more like the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan* or *Seventeen* magazines. The headlines on the book's dramatic front cover promise features like, "Beauty Secrets You've Never Heard Before" and "Guys Speak Out on Tons of Important Issues." Three beautiful and smiling girls look out from the cover photo, and they could just as well be looking out from *Glamour* or *Elle*. What do girls read? "Magazines, magazines, magazines," reports Laurie Whaley, Thomas Nelson's brand manager for *Revolve*. According to *Christianity Today*, 40,000 copies have already been sold, and Thomas Nelson is quickly printing 60,000 more. (Baptist Press, 09/19/2003)

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Six Nations on the Border

Pearson Johnson

Just Say Om" was the cover story about Eastern meditation in a recent issue of *Time* magazine. The lead-in paragraph for the article states, "Scientists study it. Doctors recommend it. Millions of Americans—many of whom don't even own crystals—practice it every day. Why? Because meditation works." The argument was made with statistical data that using different forms of meditation rooted in the Buddhism of Southeast Asia was good for American health. Meditation helps fast-paced Americans relieve stress, gather focus, and reflect on what is good in life. Whatever you might think about sitting cross-legged on a cushion, meditation as a stress-fighting strategy seems to be effective.

However, are meditation and its associated practices a path to enlightenment, or to the attainment of eternal life? "We hope so," say millions of practicing Buddhists in Southeast Asia, our global focus for this issue. Believing that all of life is suffering, many in Southeast Asia live a despondent and hopeless life. Few are able to pursue the purest path to peace through constant meditation, as monks can. The majority is forced to "appease the world of unseen power," as one writer puts it, developing habits "out of fear of the unknown . . . in fear of the spirit world."

What countries are we talking about? Below China, from east to west, lie the nations of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and, nestled above an extension of India, Bhutan. These six nations on the border of the 10/40 window contain a combined population of 205,566,801. Of these millions, well under five percent claim to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. Certainly our hearts should break for these souls!

Vietnam still remains Communist and opposed to Western influence, including Christianity, and persecution remains severe. Lately, Vietnam has become more open to tentmakers due to its desire to move forward in the world economy. Pray for Vietnam to relax its restriction of open worship and foreign missionaries.

Laos, with a restrictive Communist government, a multitude of ethnic groups and varying language dialects, is a very difficult mission field. There is little

evangelical witness in this country. Pray for opportunities for witness in this needy nation. Pray as well for opportunities to train leaders through correspondence courses, radio, and the Internet.

Cambodia, following the decimation of nearly all religious and societal leadership by the Khmer Rouge, saw its economy plummet. A change in leadership brought new economic and religious freedom in the early 1990s. Open

worship and foreign missions work is allowed. There is a solid, though small, core of Independent Baptist missionaries in the country now. Pray for more to join this effort, and for the spread of the gospel in Cambodia.

Thailand, like Cambodia, allows foreign missionaries into its country, though the number of visas given per year is restricted. Thailand is well known for its moral degradation; therefore, a strong, holy, church witness is desperately needed. Though Thailand has some freedom, the church has grown very slowly. More laborers are needed.

Myanmar (formerly Burma) has a strong, though small, indigenous Baptist minority. The gospel that came centuries ago from Adoniram Judson still remains,

though the Christians have been isolated from one another by constant military struggles and persecution from Buddhist military leaders. Pray for opportunities for the gospel to spread. There is a solid number of Myanmarese taking the gospel to various ethnic groups within the country. Pray for this advance.

Finally, Bhutan, a small, landlocked country west of Myanmar and north of Bangladesh, is one of the least evangelized countries in the world. With its combination of occultic and Buddhist practices, this tiny country is in great need of gospel light. While proselytization is forbidden, opportunities for tentmaking are available.

Many missionaries are finding a joyful reception of the gospel among Buddhist people, and for this we rejoice. Southeast Asia is a region where the harvest is truly plentiful, but the laborers are few. Let us move forward in our efforts to pray for and send forth laborers in the Southeast Asian area of the 10/40 window for the sake of Christ's name!

Many missionaries are finding a joyful reception of the gospel among Buddhist people, and for this we rejoice. Southeast Asia is a region where the harvest is truly plentiful, but the laborers are few.

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That Great Shepherd of the Sheep

When Moses was taken up to Mount Abarim to see the Promised Land that he would not be allowed to enter, he talked there with God. He was told that because of the rebellion of his disobedience in the matter of the water at Meribah, he would only be allowed to see the Land, but not to enter. Moses had learned the responsibilities of a shepherd on the backside of the desert and on Mount Abarim he responded like a true shepherd. His greatest concern was not for himself, but for his people.

"Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, Which may go out before them, and which may go in before them, and which may lead them out, and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the LORD be not as sheep which have no shepherd." Matthew and Mark employed this figure as they wrote of the compassion of the Lord as He looked on the hungry multitude "as sheep having no shepherd."

Speaking of His crucifixion, the Lord said, "All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." His discourse on the Good Shepherd in John 10 is one of the most comforting and instructive passages in the Gospels. From childhood, believers are taught the precious 23rd Psalm with its simple, but sublime truth, "The Lord is my

Shepherd . . ."

The writer of Hebrews, near the close of his powerful arguments on the supremacy of Jesus Christ, makes this powerful appeal, "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Volumes have been written on the imagery of the Shepherd and His sheep.

*For ye were as
sheep going
astray; but
are now
returned unto
the Shepherd
and Bishop of
your souls.*

Every Christian is admonished to bear up under suffering and gain the benefit of a clearer testimony just as Christ did when he offered no defense at the crucifixion. As explained by Peter, "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls."

Our Great Shepherd and Bishop (note the unmistakable link between those words) lives to intercede for us, to serve as our advocate, to chasten us if necessary to insure that we do not stray as we did before He saved us. Peter also admonished every pastor

of his duties with these words, "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."

These verses not only connect the three functions of the pastor's role—elders (example setters), feeders of the flock (pastoral teaching), and oversight (the function of the bishop)—but also demonstrate that the shepherding duties of the pastor are under the "Chief Shepherd." As an assistant to Christ in these duties, the pastor is often referred to as an "undershepherd." Any true assistant is committed to the concerns of the one he serves. He loves and cares for the sheep because Christ loves and cares for the sheep. He has a burden for the lost because "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Every Bible believing Christian should know that Christ is the Great Shepherd and Bishop of his soul. He should also seek out and support a church with a leader who truly seeks to represent Christ and serve as His "undershepherd." If you don't have such a relationship with Christ, you should put your trust in Him today. If you don't have such a church or pastor, you should prayerfully seek one right away.



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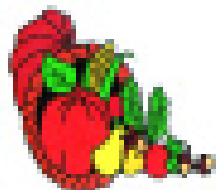
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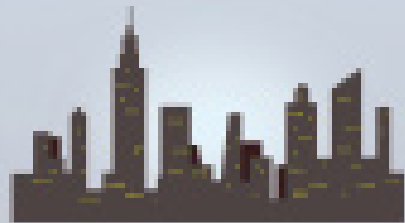
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