

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

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# Dayspring

*By Foy Valentine*

Christmas is a time for celebrating.

No wonder that when I was a kid we shot off firecrackers, lit Roman candles, waved sparklers, killed the fatted chicken, feasted on fruit cakes, and generally made merry.

Christmas is a time for happiness.

It is a time for gifts, for angels, for stars, for music, for joy, and for lights.

When Christmas comes, the winter solstice is already past. The days are getting longer already. In the natural order of things, day has begun to conquer night. Things are looking up.

The people of God have special reason to rejoice for "the dayspring from on high hath visited us" (Luke 1:78). Consider this profundity in its context.

When pregnant Mary went from Nazareth "into the hill country" to see her cousin Elisabeth, herself six months pregnant with John, there was at their meeting a spirited exchange of epiphanies. Elisabeth burst forth first "with a loud voice" glorifying God; and then Mary's very soul overflowed with what we have come to call her Magnificat, her inspired utterance of praise to the Lord. Then, after an unreasonably long visit of three months with her kinswoman Elisabeth, Mary finally went home. Then, Elisabeth had her baby, and her husband Zacharias, mute since the angel of God first broke all this good news to him, lifted his own voice and "prophesied:"

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,

And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;

As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began;

That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;

To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;

The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear,

In holiness and righteousness all the days of our life.

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The Oxford English dictionary, the best in our language, says that dayspring means daybreak or early dawn. The word is now said to be chiefly poetic or figurative. It is generally designated as archaic. Our vocabularies are poorer; however, for our abandonment of this remarkable word, dayspring.

As Zacharias understood, dayspring speaks of Christmas, of the dawn of grace, of the light of the world, of unconquerable hope.

Dayspring's spirit is caught in Suzy Best's beloved Christmas poem:

That night when in Judean skies the mystic star dispensed its light

A blind man moved in his sleep and dreamed that he had sight.

That night when shepherds heard the song of hosts angelic choiring near

A deaf man stirred in slumber's spell and dreamed that he could hear.

That night when o'er the new born babe the tender Mary rose to lean

A loathesome leper smiled in sleep and dreamed that he was clean.

That night when to the mother's breast the little King was held secure

A harlot slept a happy sleep and dreamed that she was pure.

That night when in the manger lay the Sanctified who came to save

A man moved in the sleep of death and dreamed there was no grave.

And dayspring's spirit brings to mind the conversion to Christ of the authentically pious Blaise Pascal. Of this remarkable French scientist, philosopher, and mathematician, William L. Hendricks has written, "It would be overly dramatic, but not without a kernel of truth, to say that everyone who has had an injection, used a thermometer, ridden a bus, used an adding machine, or studied higher mathematics has been influenced by Blaise Pascal" who "was instrumental in the discovery or advancement which made possible all of the above." Like Saul's encounter with God on the Damascus road when "there shined round about him a light from heaven," Pascal's experience of meeting God was bathed in the ineffable light of what he perceived to be God's "FIRE." That experience of grace came in 1654. His account of it was written on a fragment of parchment found sewn into his clothing after his death. His enlightenment came, his note revealed, "from about half past ten in the evening until past midnight; and issued in "certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace...joy, joy, tears of joy...everlasting joy..."

Does not his experience capture something of the miracle of the new birth? Does it not communicate something of the wonder of God's grace? And does it not radiate something of the glorious light of our God whom James referred to as "the Father of lights?"

Our Creator-Redeemer whose shekinah glory, whose shining presence, incarnated, has come as the dawn to our dark world.

The Dayspring from on high has visited us.

Hallelujah.

Amen.

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# ...And to All a Good Night

By Edwin S. Gaustad

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The Christmas season is a time for joy to the world, and good will among men and women. Sometimes. Certainly not in Jerusalem, rarely in the courts or the public schools of the United States, and generally not in the mixed memories of what tradition may suggest or require. All these perplexities and confrontations, and we have not even yet arrived at the new millennium with its intensified demands and expectations.

Let us begin with what more or less sacred tradition seems to require of us in America. And where better to begin than with the Puritans and their strong religious commitment? How did they celebrate Christmas? They didn't. Christmas was part of that papal calendar, along with the Feast of the Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Ascension Day, All Saints Day, and whathaveyou, that the Puritans were at pains to reject. December 25 could come and go, with Puritans not so much as nodding their heads in the direction of a special holiday, and certainly not one of revelry, indulgence, and wild abandon. As a scandalized Cotton Mather asked his congregation in 1712, "Can you in your Conscience think, that our Holy Saviour is honored by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Revelling; by a Mass fit for none but a Saturn, or a Bacchus, or the Night of a Mahometan Ramadam?" And the sober, disciplined, temperate members of Mather's church would solemnly shake their heads at the thought of such a defilement of the memory of the newborn Christ.

Sunday, the Puritan Sabbath, should of course be observed: not with games or sports or frivolous recreation, but in the reverent contemplation of the power, the justice, and the mercy of an everlasting God. Every Sabbath commemorated the resurrection of Jesus, not just a particular one in the springtime. Every Sabbath required self-examination and fresh resolve, not just those when the Lord's Supper was observed. Every Sabbath demanded self-denial, not just those associated with a papal Lenten season. And every Sabbath was dedicated—self-consciously, earnestly, sacrificially to the greater glory of God.

The Quakers were even harder on the ecclesiastical calendar. All time and all places were holy unto God, and one erred in creating special sacred sites and dates. Indeed, the very names of the days of the week betrayed their pagan

origins. One, therefore, should avoid using them, and speak rather of the "first day of the fourth month," or the "fifth day of the ninth month." Sacraments? Who needs them, or—more to the point—who commands them? All righteous activity is a channel of God's grace; all life must be given to redeeming the time and sanctifying the world. Idleness and "the holiday spirit" are foreign to doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly before a sovereign God.

So where did all the bustle and bazaar quality of today's Christmas cacophony come from? Leigh E. Schmidt, in his excellent book *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, 1995), describes the steady and not always edifying evolution of the Christmas-New Year holidays in American culture. In the 1820s and 1830s, the giftgiving associated with the beginning of the New Year gradually shifted to Christmas where family values could compete with the noisy rowdiness of New Year celebrations. And the Wise Men had, after all, brought gifts. Much Protestant resistance to observing Christmas as a festivity gradually wore away, though for decades many struggled to keep some uniquely Christian flavor in the growing commercialization and emphasis on holiday shopping.

In Philadelphia, the Presbyterian John Wanamaker and his ever enlarging department store, represented this service to two masters. In his new emporium, opened in 1911, Wanamaker took every advantage of the commercial possibilities that the birthday of Christ represented. "He kept up a formidable flow," Schmidt writes, "of store souvenirs, gift catalogues, newspaper advertisements, trade cards, window decorations, musical concerts, Santa Claus stunts, and other holiday entertainment." At the same time, Wanamaker gave over his Grand Court in the new store, with its enormous pipe organ, to religious hymns and devotional messages. People came to the Philadelphia sanctuary to shop but they stayed to pray, with as many as fourteen thousand persons crowded into the Grand Court during the Christmas season. There they sang not only "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" but also the much more explicitly evangelical "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name." It was like going to church—for some, even better. One female shopper/worshipper reported that the whole Wanamaker experience "made me feel that Christ my Lord and Savior was in the midst of it all."

Increasing commercial development and ever more extravagant catalogue allurements led to an inevitable backlash by midcentury as many called for putting "Christ back

into Christmas.” But by the end of the twentieth century, Christmas remained an assortment of contradictions: self-denial versus self-indulgence, recommitment to discipleship versus reassertion of “meism,” religion as transcendence of culture versus religion as its victim. “Jingle Bells” and “Come All Ye Faithful” do not always produce a single and pleasing harmony.

In the public schools, many teachers and administrators dread seeing December roll around. For the season of good will often turns out to be the season of misunderstanding, injured feelings, and parental complaints. But haven’t “we always celebrated Christmas in the public schools? Yes and no. In the first place, we have not “always” had a public school system. And when Horace Mann set the pattern in Massachusetts in the late 1830s, he did so in a state that had only recently (1833) disestablished its own Congregational Churches. Naturally, therefore, a pervasive if more or less nonsectarian Protestantism flavored his schools as well as those in other states created after his model. Second, this pervading Protestantism including the celebration of Christmas did not go unchallenged in the nineteenth century: for example, in New York City and in Cincinnati, Ohio. But if it took a long time to disestablish Congregationalism in New England, it took even longer to disestablish Protestantism in the public schools. Indeed, that task has not yet been accomplished everywhere.

When Archbishop John Hughes in New York City looked at the public schools in the 1840s, he saw students hearing the King James Version of the Bible ritually read to them, heard them singing Protestant hymns, and learned of their version of history in which the Roman Catholic Church often emerged as the Antichrist, sometimes in language extraordinarily colorful and graphic. Since public monies supported these (Protestant) schools, he reasoned that public monies should also support the Catholic schools. His request firmly denied, Catholics went on to create their own separate school system that they called parochial schools. Protestants already had their school system that they called public schools. Or so it seemed to large numbers of citizens in the nineteenth century.

That heavy hand of tradition stayed in place through much of the twentieth century, with the flash points of controversy evident in Bible reading, classroom prayers, and of course Christmas. To be sure, Christmas is undeniably *there*—there in the national calendar, in the school calendar, in the shopping mall, on the Internet, and (with much ado) on the White House lawn and in Rockefeller Center. Is it fair for the public schools to bear all the burden of explaining, justifying the omnipresence of Christmas in American culture? Of course, it isn’t fair. But it also is inescapable since compulsory attendance laws (not universal until the twentieth century) insert the public school agenda into nearly every home, Christian and non-Christian, religious and nonreligious. So, what to do about Christmas?

The “Teahouse of August Moon” drama shows us what not to do. There, the exasperated colonel, in the post World War II era, explodes that he is going to make the Okinawans lovers of democracy if he has to kill every one of them to do it. He serves as a marvelous negative role model. School children of all faiths and ages cannot be made to love, or even appreciate, Christmas if carols, stories, and scriptures are crammed down their constricted throats just because this is what “everybody” believes and “everybody” does. In this matter, at least, the public schools cannot afford to be parochial; they cannot afford to turn the season of potential good will into an exercise in subtle evangelization or notso subtle indoctrination. Neither ethical nor educational responsibility can permit this to happen.

The public schools must recognize, first of all, that churches and homes still exist, still bear their major responsibilities, still possess rich opportunities for teaching as well as for celebrating. Second, the public schools must see their first and primary task as an educational one, being always careful to distinguish between learning on the one hand and worshipping on the other. The line between the two is not that fine. If it seems obscure or wavering, some careful reflection and discussion long before the season of good will arrives can help enormously. Careful planning can even help to preserve, possibly even enhance, that good will.

Christmas cannot be ignored: neither calendar nor culture will permit it. But the classroom, always the arena for teaching and for learning, can turn its attention to the rich lode of religious festivals, sacred holy days, and the liturgical rhythms of many traditions of faith. Students need to learn from and about their classmates, that not all Americans are cut from identical cloth. They also need to learn both of pluralistic possibilities and constitutional limits. One’s own experience and background is not the sum of all experiences and backgrounds not in a single classroom or single school or single community, to say nothing of the nation and of the world. Moreover, the public school, no matter how homogeneous the community in which it finds itself may be, cannot, must not, offer its own profession of faith. Of course, the Constitution prohibits it, but ethical sensitivity prohibits it as well. Blessed be the teacher (and the administrator) who sees in Christmas the possibilities for enhanced good will rather than aggravated stridency and rancor.

Finally, the courts, without a lot of obvious joy, must also confront Christmas. The U. S. Supreme Court has done just that on two occasions: in 1984 and in 1989. Both cases pertained to nativity scenes such as may be found on many a church lawn or private yard in December. These many, many portrayals of Mary and Joseph, the cradle, the stable, the shepherds and their flocks, and even a Christmas star, create no problems for the courts, for these displays are on private property. The difficulty arises when such clearly religious symbols are found on government

property: on land owned by a city, a county, a state. If a public school cannot make a profession of faith, may a city do so? or is such a nativity scene really a profession of faith, or only a cultural outcroppinglike, say, the Washington Monument? These nagging questions ultimately required the thoughtful deliberations of nine supreme court justices who, as matters turned out, could not agree on the answers.

The 1984 case (*Lynch v. Donnelly*) arose in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where the city government had for over forty years paid for an annual Christmas display that included a nativity scene. The entire display, placed in a busy shopping mall, also featured a Santa Claus house, a sleigh pulled by cutout figures of reindeer, candy-striped poles, carolers, and hundreds of colored lights. (If I had been one of the harried shoppers in the Pawtucket mall and had stumbled upon the young mother Mary, surrounded by all the glitz and gaud, my instinctive reaction would have been to inquire, "What is a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?")

The justices, less flippant, worrying about the constitutional implications of the crèche on city property, considered whether this might be a violation of that portion of the First Amendment that prohibits an establishment (or endorsement) of religion. After no doubt much discussion (not open to the public) and exchange of internal memos, the Court emerged with a five-to-four decision. The slim majority of five concluded that Pawtucket had not violated the First Amendment, that if there were some benefit to a single faith, that benefit was "indirect, remote, and incidental." Pawtucket was no more at fault than the national government itself in setting aside Christmas as a federal holiday. One justice (Sandra Day O'Connor) in a separate opinion agreed that the "overall holiday setting" keeps the Pawtucket display from being an endorsement of Christianity. She added that "The display celebrates a public holiday, and no one contends that declaration of that holiday is understood to be an endorsement of religion."

The other four justices, dissenting from this point of view, argued that the case should not have required all the careful deliberation and nice distinctions. For the Pawtucket display was, quite simply, "an impermissible governmental endorsement of a particular faith." The fact that Christmas was so familiar, so agreeable, lulled the majority into thinking that a crèche on public property posed no legal or constitutional difficulty. On the contrary, the dissenters concluded, this action by the city of Pawtucket was in fact "a coercive, though perhaps small, step toward establishing the sectarian preferences of the majority at the expense of the minority." If Pawtucket could claim a victory, that victory was far from clear cut as events five years later proved.

In 1989, an even more complex case arising from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, reached the Supreme Court (*County of Allegheny v. Greater Pittsburgh American Civil Liberties Union*). Here on county property outside the

courthouse, a forty-five-foot tall decorated Christmas tree was joined by an eighteen-foot tall menorah to commemorate the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Inside the courthouse on the main staircase, a crèche, donated by a Roman Catholic group, was displayed. This case, demanding even more fine distinctions, required more than one hundred pages of close reasoning to reflect the opinions of a Court, once again badly divided.

Six of the nine justices agreed that the outside display (of tree and menorah) was "not an endorsement of religious faith but simply a recognition of cultural diversity" though that diversity was clearly limited to Christian and Jewish. The nativity scene inside, however, was more obviously sectarian. For one thing, it stood alone: no Santa Clause, no sleigh, no striped poles, and no reindeer (which led some cynics to refer to the "reindeer rule" when trying to determine the constitutionality of a nativity display). Moreover, the crèche bore a banner with the Latin words *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, a more explicit profession of religious faith. A majority of five now found this scene to be unconstitutional on the longrecognized grounds that "government may not engage in a practice that has the effect of promoting or endorsing religious beliefs."

Four dissenters, however, remained unconvinced. The religious symbols both inside the courthouse as well as outside were "passive": that is, they demanded no response, certainly no acquiescence. "Passersby who disagree with the message conveyed by these displays are free to ignore them, or even to turn their backs." The minority worried about the indifference toward religion, if not hostility toward it, that the majority demonstrated. On the other hand, of course, the majority worried about governmental intrusion into the realm of private belief. Two complicated decisions, each five-to-four but pointing in opposite directions, do not blaze a clear trail ahead. So what is the solution? More cases? More litigation? More contentiousness in the season of good will?

Justice Felix Frankfurter long ago, perplexed as he himself often was with exactly where the constitutional axe should fall, cautioned that the American public was in danger of treating every question, every issue, in purely legalistic terms. He begged that we, as citizens, begin to ask about the wisdom of our actions. Are they good or bad, wise or foolish, sensitive or callused? These, in the long run, are even tougher questions than the constitutional ones, demanding as they are. But these are the very questions we cannot dodge or escape. Our consciences demand it, our faith demands it, and the hope of bringing somewhat more joy to the world demands it. ■

# Blessing

By Myron Madden

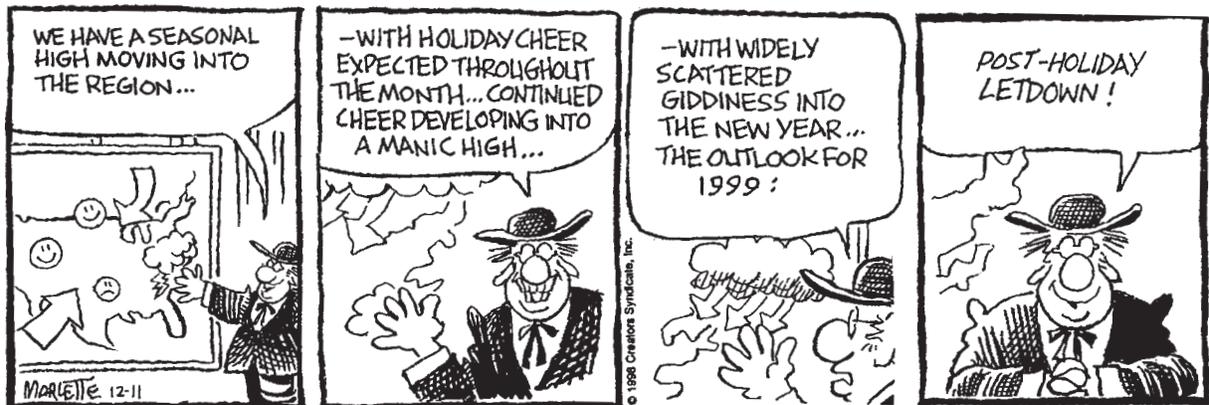
[Dr. Myron Madden is an internationally recognized authority in the field of pastoral care. He pioneered the clinical pastoral education program at the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. For 27 years he wrote a popular column for *Home Life Magazine* on Questions and Answers about family life. He is the author of *The Power to Bless* and has just completed another book due to be published this month, *Power to Bless, No. II.*]

In Old Testament practice the laws of inheritance were spelled out in great detail. Upon the death of a father, his property including his material possessions was divided into shares, with each son being given a share; but the eldest son got a double share. Nothing is said about a share going to a daughter unless there were no sons. If a daughter having no brothers inherited a portion of land she was forbidden to marry outside the extended family. The land was treated as “holy” land, never to belong to outsiders. Each portion of the inheritance was the blessing of the father given to a son. The double share in due time would come to be called *the blessing*. Most of us have had the experience, in our community or in our extended family, of witnessing unequal distribution of the parental estate. Many of these cases land in court with the cost of litigation reducing an inheritance to a pittance. I saw it happen in the village when I grew up. It has happened twice on the block where I now live. And it happened with my great grandfather. He chose to leave his estate in the care of the husband of his favorite daughter. This left the bitterness of Esau to last for five generations. To this day it still casts a dark shadow.

At the parting of Elijah and Elisha, Elijah asked what Elisha wanted. The reply was, “Let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” In other words, he was saying, “Treat me as if I were your first-born son.” In the story of Job we have sort of a parallel. At the end of all his suffering, we are told that Job got back everything double. But what Job got that meant most of all was involved in the words, “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee” (Job 42:5). To put it in plainer language, Job is saying that through all his suffering, he has come to see into the mystery of who God is and what God is about.

The New Testament does not speak of the inheritance of houses and lands but more about “our inheritance in the saints” or “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom.” The apostle Paul often reminds us of our inheritance as Christians. In his own break from his Jewish roots he likely gave up all rights to any earthly inheritance. In the first chapter of Ephesians he breaks forth into a chorus of praise that God let him see what God is about in the creation. The same idea applies to old Simeon in the temple when he laid eyes on the infant Jesus, “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation....” The mystery of God’s purpose was seen in that moment. It was equal to a double share, a lasting blessing.

What Simeon saw in the Christ-child could be the very essence of Christmas. Maybe the old man saw in Jesus more than he could assimilate as a human being. He felt the need of new receptors to take it all in. It was seeing just a touch of what God is about. Christmas does that, we hope, for many of us. Ordinary things become extraordinary. The songs take on more mellowness. The food



becomes more tasty. The laughter is more joyful. The time takes on the character of what Robert Bly calls “ritual time.” In ritual time all things become possible. Of course, we have to become as children to enter it. It is too full of fun and magic for most adults.

### The Blessing as God’s Gift to All

For Christians, our story about Blessing begins with Abraham. Abraham’s father, Terah, set out from Ur to go to Canaan, but he paused in Haran, apparently to gather up his courage to leave the grazing lands of the Euphrates River bottom and head for the mountains and desert of the west. But his pause lasted until his death. Then Abraham got the call with the promise of God’s blessing and a mandate to share it with “all the peoples of the earth” (Gen. 12).

From the experience of Abraham, it is commonly accepted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that it is God’s intention to bless all the peoples of the earth.

God’s blessing to Abraham was interwoven with the promise of the land of Canaan as a land that his descendants would get as their inheritance. So inheritance and blessing came to be more or less identified with each other. Yet to speak more strictly the birthright is the special status of the eldest son, the right to the double share of the inheritance. Along with the birthright came the right of the eldest son to become the replacement of the father upon the death of the father.

The laws regarding inheritance vary from state to state in the United States. Yet there is no law written that will bring justice in every case. How can the law rectify a situation like that of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother? Or that of Jacob in his strong and special affection for Joseph? When you are dealing with an inheritance, it doesn’t take long to discover that the parental inheritance is treated as a blessing. The ones inheriting deal with an inheritance in terms of emotional value rather than market value. I have observed that children who get little blessing in their growing up years will put excessive value on what they inherit. Even an acre of land or an old piece of furniture will be cherished above every other thing they own.

If we look at the court battles among siblings over the inheritance, they are really dealing emotionally with the blessing. Very often the child who got more blessing is the one that winds up with more property; and this is what stirs the anger of those feeling dispossessed.

What we have never learned is that you can’t pay an emotional debt with cash.

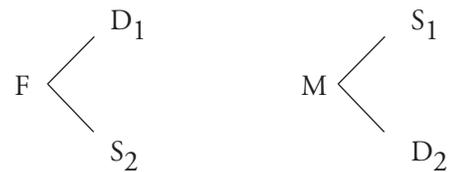
### Blessing Patterns in Families

There is a common American assumption that fathers tend to bless their first son above the rest of their children. One evening a few years ago, I was invited to the home of a psychiatrist for a small dinner party. He invited

four of his psychiatrist friends. The subject of parental partiality was discussed among us as the six of us sat in the den. I asked the question, “which son does the father bless?” They all agreed that it was the first son. I followed that up with my next question, “Which of you does that?” Not a single one of them could claim that he did. As we settled down and got honest, four of them agreed that they had a special feeling for their second son that was stronger than they had with son number one.

If you bring the mother into the picture, you will find that she is the one who specially blesses the first son.

In looking over the counseling cases I’ve had over the years I have noticed a definite pattern. It goes like this:



To spell it out, father blesses daughter number one and son number two while the mother reverses the picture. I am not saying that it always follows this model, but if it doesn’t there is usually a big story in the family system that explains the variation.

Perhaps you ask about the other children. Let us say there are six or eight children, or more. There usually develops a kind of hidden line in the structure that divides the children, leaving about half of them on the mother’s side and the others on the father’s side. Nearly all will claim the youngest to have a “baby blessing.”

Again, you ask about blended families. Let us say a man with two children marries a woman with three children. Those least blessed by their own parent will be picked up and given a little extra blessing by the step-parent.

I do not have an answer about why the father tends more toward blessing his eldest daughter. Perhaps the first daughter is the mother’s potential replacement person, and she works hard to be that. Does the father come in to make up for the fact that his wife just can’t bless her competition? Would the opposite be true for father and first son?

At least the competition factor is absent for the father and second son. Does the same hold true for mother and second daughter? There must be many other factors.

There is another false assumption that we need to challenge. It is: “If you are a good parent you will love all your children just the same.” I had a lady to challenge me on this. She said, “I have five children and I work very hard to love them all the same.” My reply was that if she loved them all the same she wouldn’t have to work at it.

Let us now examine issues around blessing, family, power, and permission.

## What is Blessing?

We all know what a blood transfusion is. Expand on that idea, and you might call blessing a kind of life transfusion. At its peak in family the blessing is infusing one's life into the child. It is a gift of all one has, bestowed upon the next generation. In the Old Testament it was ritual in which the father in extreme old age emptied himself in affirming his offspring. Jacob did that to Joseph (Genesis 48:15ff). He went on to speak a blessing to the other eleven sons (Genesis 49). He did this when his eyes were so dim with age that he could barely distinguish one from the other.

Blessing takes on a special cast when it refers to the transfer of the parent's life to ignite a sense of destiny in the child.

This can be divided into two parts: 1) What is the blessing in the family and 2) What is the blessing beyond the family?

### Blessing in the Family

The blessing in the family is the blessing of one or both parents. Occasionally, it comes from a grandparent, an uncle, or an aunt. Now and then it comes from an older sibling. It comes from anyone in the family that a person authorizes.

Children usually authorize only a person of power. The younger the child the more power is perceived in terms of the physical. The child seeks the blessing from the parent whose eyes sparkle over that child. From my own life, I will share an illustration. It was my sixth year. Our habit was to move in the evening from the supper table to the living room where the children would do their lessons. I was the youngest and first on this particular evening to get the living room. My father was next, then any oldest brother. My father watched my brother, and I watched my father. He gave no special attention to my oldest brother. Then my middle brother came in. Our light in those days was given by a kerosene lamp. In that dim light I could detect a sparkle as I looked at my father's eye. That sparkle was not present for my oldest brother, and I felt that I myself must have failed to stimulate my father any more than the oldest brother had done. It set off in me a wish that I could do something to make my father's eye sparkle. I never could; neither could my oldest brother. The first time I ever saw a tear in my father's eye was when that middle brother was shot down in the Philippines years later in World War II. That brother was his sparkle, and that brother knew it well. He was the prodigal son. By that I mean he had the freedom to go against my father without much fear that he would lose the blessing. I grieved that his

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death prevented his return to enjoy what he and my father had in common.

What it means to me to be a Christian is the faith that I put a sparkle in God's eye. That is what the Gospel is about. That allows us to go on beyond the family bond. This leads us to the next section of how the blessing is gained beyond the family.

### Blessing Beyond the Family

I wonder if anyone ever gets enough blessing and affirmation in the childhood years. Blessing is a way of being affirmed as we are, not as we would like to be, not as we hope to become. It is an "as is" proposition. It has no past or future tense. It only comes in the now. It does not await some act of restitution nor a promise to do better. The gift of blessing is offered to us in the act of creation, not at the end of a life of good works. If parents understand relaying of blessing to children, they become the "creators" who pass it along as gift, never as a reward for being or doing good. It is a reward upon one's being, a reward that raises life to the second power.

People outside and beyond family mostly think in terms of rewarding a person for good behavior and high achievement. To that end we often collect enough diplomas to paper an office wall and enough trophies to fill a room or two. But that is seldom the real thing as far as blessing is concerned.

Blessing that puts infinite value on the life of the receiver comes close to being what the Gospel intended we all should have. It comes not in discovering that we can do what pleases God, but in becoming aware that God gave it originally in an act of creation. This includes the belief that I am not an accident, but am in the plan of the Creator from the beginning. Either in my beginning or the beginning of all things. It puts one's life in sync with ultimate reality.

The chief blessing of the family is that of preparing us to go beyond family. Psychologically speaking we need to sever the cords and strings that bind us in emotional dependence on parents, siblings, and the extended family. The only way the wonderful world beyond family can be opened to us comes in closing that door behind us. Nobody can close that door for us. I think we can make a good case for the fact that Jesus had that in mind when he spoke of the second birth. The original birth brings us into a family; the second birth delivers us out of the family of origin. Is this what Jesus had in mind saying, "Call no man your father upon the earth" (Matthew 23:9)?

When blessing is offered only after good behavior or good grades, it may not pass the test of being real. Smart children with a keen sensitivity may refuse to perform for a pay-off of praise when there is little genuine love behind it all.

## What is the Power to Bless?

Sometimes the parent seeks for the child to grow up and justify the parent's investment by doing noteworthy and newsworthy things. In that case the parent is unable to bless truly and genuinely. If you look more carefully here, it looks like the parent is trying to get a blessing from the child's performance.

People have the power to bless only when they are authorized by the one receiving. Children will take what parents give, but will turn away if their discernment tells them of narcissism, manipulation, or control. There's something in a child's soul that rebels against counterfeit love. They demand the real thing. If they don't get the real thing, they may keep holding to a parent in the hope that reality will one day enter the relationship.

When parents do not genuinely love their children, they will, in the living of life, lose the power to bless. Here are some quotes:

A son: "It has taken me fifteen years to fully realize that my father doesn't have it. I feel like a fool in being such a slow learner."

A daughter: "I have tried for more than 60 years to do something that would cause my mother to tell me I did well. She never did and she never will. I'm giving up on looking for a good word. If she spoke one now, I would think it was to control me."

Many "children" never come to the insight of the above. They just keep on hoping and plugging along blindly. Those who do that may never get blessed because they hope for it in the wrong place. This means they don't look for it in another place.

The blessing is only received in faith. It is not given with documentation nor legal papers for registration in the county courthouse. It is not a thing you come to possess as a piece of merchandise. You can prove to no one that you own it. Others are always left free to challenge any claim you make. In the matters of the spirit we cannot get one step beyond faith. We are left being believers, not knowers. The Gnostics of the early church claimed that they had proof and certainty about God's favor. For them, it wasn't enough to have faith.

The simplest example of this is the power of a parent to bless a child.

It is as if nature endowed a child to expect blessing from a parent (or parents). Since blessing is an act of bestowing power, the child tends to seek the blessing of the parent with most power. Or at least the parent perceived to have most power. This means the child looks to parents to be affirming and loving along with being nurturing and supportive. I don't see blessing being bestowed as a reward for doing, striving, or behaving. It is not a reward for good grades, nor for mopping the floor.

Parental blessing is not given to a child for a good report card, unless that blessing would also be there when failing grades come. Indeed the failing grades could be a sign that blessing is absent. By this I mean lack of blessing could leave a child with poor motivation to achieve. Yet one will need to consider the opposite possibility. Some children are driven to achieve in the assumption that a parent will finally open up and affirm as a result of positive performance.

It is easy for your own child or children to authorize you, as a parent, to love them and affirm them in their being. The offspring is usually in denial about genuine parental love and affirmation. Pat Conroy says it in *The Prince of Tides*, speaking of his parents, "I longed for their approval, their applause, their pure uncomplicated love for me, and I looked for it years after I realized they were not even capable of letting me have it" (p. 100). We all have an inborn need to be affirmed by the people who gave us life in the first place.

As a clergy person I have studied and worked much of my life under the assumption that I was getting myself more able to bless people. And that is very important. Yet I had to admit that no matter how well prepared I myself might be, the "power" rested with the one receiving. He or she could just be waiting for someone in the past to bless them, especially a parent or grandparent. Usually they are able to take a little from us substitutes, however, perhaps enough for a day.

A lot of people allow a little affirmation from parent substitutes. All the while they may be hoping to get bless-



ing with uppercase letters from the ones in the past that were authorized.

I repeat, nobody can bless who is not authorized. You can be an authorized teacher, therapist, doctor, clergy person, or whatever, but you cannot authorize yourself to bless the unblessed. They are the ones who do the authorizing. At the same time, the unblessed are not often able to authorize a substitute until they can settle the issue about not being blessed by those that they had originally authorized. This means the need to mourn the loss and give up the hope where there is none.

The power to bless is held by the person given authority to bless and affirm. In affirming under these conditions, the one receiving is empowered, perhaps not so much by what is bestowed as by what is released within the one receiving.

The term "blessing" is usually thought of as a church and religious word. We need to recall that it was originally a family thing with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the forebears. Perhaps it has come to be a church oriented term because we no longer think much in terms of a family blessing or a parental blessing.

### Who Has the Power to Bless?

As we have already said, the one with the power to bless is the one who is authorized by another who is in search of blessing and affirmation. The most primary example is that of a child almost by nature giving parents the right and power to bless. But remember, only the truth blesses.

The parental blessing is most effective as it seeks to bless and affirm the child as is. The blessing needs to help the child affirm and accept the self in all its uniqueness and specialness. This does not keep a child from imitating parents or playmates in growing up. But it helps the child claim and hold on to the self given in creation, a self different from all the others. It takes special and powerful affirmation from respected and loved authority to prevent self rejection in the growing years, or even in later years if one did not get it early on. What does it mean when a person rejects the God-given help. Nobody has been able to answer that one adequately.

I firmly believe that only the truth blesses and only in the truth can you bless.

You do not have to be one who is nearly perfect to be one who blesses and affirms. Blessing is not a move toward perfection, it is a move toward independence and freedom. Blessed people are not always the good, but they are the free. Take for example the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother. Give me the Prodigal Son for a neighbor

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every time, for he is the truly blessed. I assume that he could take the trip into the "far country" because he already had enough affirmation to go.

For me to be able to bless, certain things must be in place. It is presumptuous for me to assume that I can take the place of a parent in a person's life. Yet you have many situations where a parent is never going to bless. In such cases, it may be my task to help one come to the awareness that they are living with a false hope. The next step is for that person to go through the grief of such a loss. It often is as if the parent died. There may be all kinds of feelings of disloyalty, or even betrayal. But when one faces the reality of "never," there will be much pain. There will certainly be despair. After these

things are processed the only way past the despair is the birth of a hope to be blessed by someone else. Along with it all comes the awareness that blessing is not limited to the genetic line. If I am relating to a person going through this process, I just might be elected by them to bring the word of blessing and affirmation. Again that depends on the one going through it.

In order to be sure that I am given permission to be the one to bless, I need to ask for it, and hear it said that I am chosen. It then becomes my task to carry through. My suggestion here is that the blessing of persons is best done in a ritual. If your church doesn't have one, then invent one. The ritual will serve as a way of burning the act into the emotions. Leave it to the one receiving about time, place, and persons involved in the ritual.

In order to save me from the pride of power it is needful that I recall that all blessing is ultimately from God. I do not so much have the power to bless, as I have the belief that God seeks to bless through me and all other people willing to share that truth. That makes me an agent of blessing, not the originator.

There is a theological assumption here. It is the assumption that God seeks to bless persons, all persons. No one is excluded. If I call myself one who seeks to bring blessing, then my task is one of bringing the word of God's intent to bless all people. This is the focus of the Bible in Genesis 12:3 where he says to Abraham, "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV). I assume that this theme carries through to the New Testament where Jesus says to a crowd of listeners, "...You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32, NIV).

One who has the power to bless is one who has the ability to communicate the truth in love. Yet that truth may or may not be received, depending on the authorization of the one receiving.

The basic truth that liberates is the convincing belief that the Master Architect of the Universe lays particular

claim to each person. That claim includes release to each person from the bondage of working to prove the self to be worthy and deserving. This comes out of the false assumption that blessing can only be had after a person reaches a point of near perfection. Blessing is never earned, either within the family structure or in the larger community. There are many institutions that give what we can call their blessing in the form of a diploma for work accomplished. Parents can praise a child for being good, or doing well or achieving in sports. This may feel like blessing. Yet if you examine it closely, it relates to doing rather than being. These are quite different, yet they look so much alike.

The blessing does not come as a result of doing what pleases the person of authority. It comes as the person of authority is able to affirm one's very being. This means that positive regard is given no matter what. It takes the form of blessing when it is received in such a way that the one receiving is without obligation to repay, reciprocate, change course, or refrain from any intent as a result of such affirmation.

What I am trying to communicate is the fact that the truth liberates a person from any obligation or mandate to be or to become anybody but the self. When Jesus said, "Deny yourself" I interpret it to mean, "Deny yourself the right to be anybody but yourself."

The truth, when it is accepted, liberates a person from the struggle to remake the self or to prove one's worth, or to disprove some charge or allegation. The truth helps one know the value of a fully affirmed self.

The truth that sets one free rests on a belief that a human self has infinite value. Not only one's own self has

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that value, but the potential is there for every other self in the creation. It is my faith assumption that this truth liberates persons to communicate it to others. That is a picture of one who has the power to bless. We need to remember that the truth makes one angry before it liberates. The one who brings blessing needs to know that his or her task is always one of holding up the truth. If one dilutes or dodges the demands of truth, the authority to bless could get lost.

### Conclusion

After all, the blessing is not what we inherit from our parents. The love and the gifts from our parents are symbols of God's blessing. For Abraham it meant turning loose of all he had and at seventy-five "going out not knowing." Unless he put Haran behind him, he would not have been able to move toward the city he sought, the one "whose builder and maker is God." Abraham dwelt in the land of promise "like a stranger in a foreign country" (Heb. 11:9). For him, God was a God of promise, and he claimed promises beyond human imagination. So in Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul makes the claim about how Abraham's blessing manifested itself.

"Christ redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:14 NIV).

The "promise of the Spirit" brings us all the way to advent, letting each in whatever way possible have a glimpse of what God is about. Like Old Simeon, that's about all any of us can manage. ■



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# Two Poems: One to Chew on and One to Lick

*By Kenneth Chafin*

[Dr. Kenneth Chafin has been pastor of the Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville and of the South Main Baptist Church in Houston and has held distinguished teaching posts at Southwestern and Southern Theological Seminaries. He and his wife Barbara divide their residence between Louisville and a farm near Brenham, Texas.]

## Today's Prophet

If he were operating  
on the State Fair Midway,  
They would call him  
"Fast Eddie,"  
but since he pastors  
big city churches,  
they just call him  
"Doctor What's-His-Name."

He read books  
and collected ideas  
for his sermons,  
but his teflon mind  
kept the ideas  
from coloring convictions.  
He developed thick  
calluses on his soul  
from straddling fences.

From the pulpit  
he urged the people  
to resist culture's mold,  
but they modeled after him  
and sought safe stances  
on complex issues of life.  
They never understood,  
nor did their leader,  
why the church seemed  
so irrelevant to outsiders,  
and oftentimes to themselves. ■

## Eskimo Pie

There are days  
when the juices flow  
a mile a minute  
and I can do  
anything I try.

And there are days  
and this is one of them  
when the most I can do  
is stand in the sun  
in front of the store  
and eat an Eskimo Pie. ■

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# Truth-Telling: An Exercise In Practical Morality

*By Charles Wellborn*

[Dr. Charles Wellborn is Professor of Religion Emeritus, Florida State University, Tallahassee and for 20 years was Dean of the Overseas Campus in London where he now lives.]

Any respectable list of aphorisms must include the time-honored words, "Honesty is the best policy." Most of us pay sincere lip-service to that admonition, but in everyday life the translation of the words into action can often present a puzzling challenge.

I was reared in a Christian home. Again and again my parents instructed me always to tell the truth, and I was sometimes punished when I failed to do so. I identified truth with the facts of the matter, insofar as I knew them. The apochryphal tale of George Washington was a familiar story. "I cannot tell a lie. I chopped down the cherry tree," the future "Father of Our Country" declared, to the moral applause of ensuing generations.

I began my formal schooling with a firm conviction that it was always right to tell the truth, but I soon faced a worrying problem. Clearly, to many of my fellows, there was something dishonorable and unmanly about being a "tattle-tale"—telling the truth about some less than honorable act committed by another person. Thus arose one of my first small moral dilemmas. Was it more virtuous always to tell the truth or tactfully to hold one's tongue in certain situations? That this was not just a childish problem was driven home to me in my later years as a college professor when I witnessed students struggle seriously with the decision as to whether to report another student for cheating on an examination.

American high schools, in my day, usually presented a "junior" and a "senior" play each year (some may still do so). I played a small part in my senior play. The play was a popular potboiler entitled "Nothing But the Truth." The slender plot revolved around a decision by a group of people to speak nothing but the truth—the facts—for a specified period of time. As the play progressed, scenes of comedy, chaos, and even tragedy were depicted, all as the result of rigid "truth-telling."

My role in that play did not make me a theatrical star but it did start some wheels turning in my mind. Is honesty always the best policy? Is it universally wrong to tell a lie, regardless of the consequences? Are there such things as "white lies" which are morally acceptable, in contrast to other lies which are not?

Some years after my high school days I became a soldier in the United States Army during World War II. As part of my military training, I was told that, if I should be captured, I was obliged under the Geneva Convention to tell the enemy only my name, rank, and serial number. But I was also instructed that in certain circumstances it would be appropriate to supply the enemy with false information. As a simple illustration, if I were to be asked about the rate of casualties in my unit, it would be acceptable for me to say that the rate was very low, even if, in fact, more than half of my unit had been killed or wounded in recent fighting. This, I was told, would be a "useful lie." Are "useful lies" morally acceptable?

I have dredged up these random reflections from my own experience in order to make the important point that "truth-telling," as a practical moral exercise, is often far from simple. Christians regard the Old Testament Decalogue as a God-given and dependable basis for moral conduct. The ninth commandment tells us that we are not to bear false witness against our neighbor. At this point we are faced with the inevitable problem of interpretation. The commandment is stated in human language. What do the words mean, when applied to real-life situations? A narrow understanding of the meaning of "bearing false witness" might be that it forbids us to falsify facts when we are giving testimony under oath in a court of law. But both Jews and Christians have understood the commandment to extend much further, placing upon us the moral obligation to tell the truth.

Does this understanding of the commandment relieve us of difficulty by dictating a simple, uncomplicated responsibility to tell the factual truth under any and all circumstances? It would be comfortable to think so, but my life experience leaves me with nagging problems. One of those problems is the definition of truth. That, of course, is an age-old question. Even Pontius Pilate asked, "What is truth?" Is there more to truth than simply the replication of facts? And is the ninth commandment our final moral authority in this area? What are we to do if it seems that the obligation to tell the factual truth conflicts with another commandment, such as that of Jesus that we should love our neighbor as ourselves?

In the 18th century the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, dealt with the overall moral problem involved in telling the truth. Relying mainly on philosophical reasoning, he insisted that, indeed, truth is identical with facts and, fur-

ther, that woven into the moral fabric of the universe are certain moral absolutes which he called “categorical imperatives.” One of those imperatives is the obligation to tell the truth under any and all imaginable circumstances. His only concession was to say that it may sometimes be acceptable to remain silent.

Ever since Kant ethicists have debated his conclusions. They have worried, for instance, over a sample application of Kant’s position. In modern terms the situation is this. Suppose that you are in the front yard of your house, trimming your hedge. Out of the next-door house runs your neighbor’s wife, obviously terrified. She dashes into your yard and hides herself behind the hedge. Seconds later, she is followed by her husband, brandishing a hatchet. He calls out to you, “Did you see my wife? Where is she?”

The facts of the matter are clear. You do know where she is. Are you obligated to tell him the truth? Kant would grant only that you have the option to remain silent. Is that the good thing to do in this situation? Would it possibly be better to point down the street and say, “She went that way”? To say those words would be to lie, in terms of the facts, but it might well give you time to get the wife into the safety of your house and even to call the police. Of course, some “macho” types might suggest that you tackle the irate husband and take the hatchet away from him, but not all of us are supermen. I do not choose at this point to try to solve that moral dilemma. I use the story simply to raise questions.

Some thirty years ago an American theologian, Joseph Fletcher, published a book which for a brief period caused a stir in religious circles. His book was called *Situation Ethics* and it set forth the argument that what we call moral absolutes are not absolute at all but only general moral guidelines. Fletcher believed that every actual situation of moral choice is almost completely unique. It is the context of action—the “situation”—which dictates the “right” action. What is good in one situation may be bad in another. Fletcher went on to argue that, for the Christian, there is finally only one moral absolute—*agape* love, the love which Jesus taught.

Fletcher’s presentation left large logical gaps, and his critics were quick to point those out. The overwhelming number of human moral decisions are not nearly so unique as Fletcher believed. The similarities among decisions are, by and large, more important than their supposed uniqueness. Fletcher was accused of, in actuality, discarding

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almost completely the moral wisdom of such dicta as the Ten Commandments. In addition, he seemed to fail to take seriously the ingrained propensity of men and women to interpret his sole absolute—love—in twisted and perverse ways. It is not enough to instruct individuals to “do the loving thing”; that command leaves people with a suspect and highly subjective standard of right and wrong. Fletcher’s arguments faded into obscurity, leaving only the term “situation ethics” as a sort of “bete noire”—a convenient whipping post, especially for many conservative moralists.

Several years before Fletcher another theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had raised more searching questions, specifically in the area of truth-telling. Bonhoeffer took as his central concern the question, “What is truth?” Is truth simply a replication of the facts or is it something more than that? He sought to put the understanding of truth within a larger context—the loving purposes of God in the world. Well aware of human sinful tendencies, Bonhoeffer did not discard the moral injunction that it is right to tell the truth. Rather, he refused to identify truth with bare facts. Truth is always and everywhere, Bonhoeffer thought, consistent with the compassionate purpose of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. To be totally “true”, therefore, a word or act must somehow be loving and redemptive.

Like Fletcher, Bonhoeffer argued (on far more solid ground, I think) that the situation or context of action is important in determining the right or wrong thing to do or say. No moral decision can be divorced from the circumstances in which it is made. It is the concrete situation which assists us in applying the love ethic of Jesus and in determining what is redemptive in real-life decisions. Like Fletcher, Bonhoeffer insisted that the final moral imperative is the command to love our neighbor as ourself. But the moral wisdom of the Ten Commandments, for instance, is of indispensable value, if we seek to act in accordance with the redemptive purposes of God. The burden of proof is certainly on us when we decide to depart from the facts of the matter.

How then do we arrive at the truth in a specific decision-making situation? Bonhoeffer argued that one significant component of the truth is that it must be “coherent” with the actualities of the situation. To put this simply, if one is called on to answer a question, it is important to try to understand what the questioner is actually asking. Perhaps this idea can be clarified with some real-life

examples, one rather minor and oft-used, the other two more serious.

Suppose that you are a husband, greeting your wife who has just returned from a shopping expedition. She is obviously excited and pleased. She goes into the bedroom and shortly returns, having put on an expensive new dress which is the fruit of her shopping. She models it before you and then asks, "Do you like it?" In this particular situation, imagine that you actually do not like the dress. In fact, you do not like it at all. What do you say to your wife? Do you tell the truth—that is, give her the facts?

Bonhoeffer suggests that it is important in this situation to understand what the wife's question means. She obviously likes the dress; otherwise, she would not have bought it. Is she asking for your honest opinion? Or is she asking for your support for an action which she has already carried out? Would any loving or redemptive purpose be served by your giving her the full blast of your negative views?

Granted, the "right" answer will depend a great deal on the personalities of the two people involved. If the relationship is such that the husband knows that his actual opinion is important to the wife and that she will have no real difficulty accepting that opinion, then it might be best to give her the facts. My judgment is that there are many marital relationships where more harm than good would be done by giving a brutal, honest opinion.

In a more serious situation, consider a doctor attending a patient who is terminally ill, according to all of the available medical knowledge. The patient asks the doctor, "Am I going to die?" What does the doctor say? Does he simply impart the tragic facts, or is there a morally acceptable alternative?

I have discussed this situation with several of my Christian doctor friends. I am impressed that in every case my friends have said, in one way or another, "It would depend on the patient. It would depend on the situation." They seem to be saying that an important factor in their decision would be "What is the patient really asking?" Some people would be asking for the bare facts of the matter, and they should certainly be given those facts. But others are not asking for that. They require some kind of

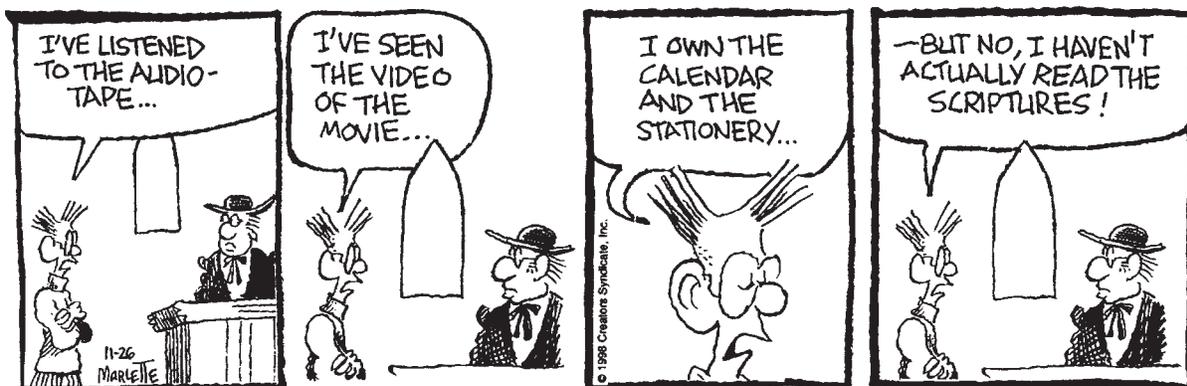
support, some sort of hope, else their last days may well be horrible and unbearable. Should not the sensitive, caring physician frame his answer in a way that, even though it is not entirely consistent with the facts, contributes redemptively and lovingly to the welfare of his patient?

I would offer one other example which comes out of my experience years ago as a pastor and counselor. A sincere, Christian young man, recently married, came to his pastor for advice. He told me that, as a teen-ager, long before his marriage, he had led a dissolute and promiscuous sexual life. He had become a Christian, had repented his sexual sins, and felt that God had forgiven him and wiped his moral slate clean. Now, his conscience was troubled. Did he have a moral obligation to tell his wife the whole truth about his past?

How would you have counseled this young man? Of course, again, a judgment must be made, imperfect at best, as to the character of the persons involved. Acting on my best judgment, my advice to the young husband was that there was nothing to be gained, in terms of the supreme importance of his relationship with his wife, by giving her all the facts. It seemed to me that such a response might have done irrevocable damage to his relationship. I did not think that his wife either wanted or needed to know the "truth."

I realize how open to criticism I am at this point. There is the possibility, remote but real, that at a later date, the wife may have found out that her husband had not given her all the facts. But I gambled on the belief that, even if that happened, the husband could justify his action on the basis of his love for his wife and his overwhelming desire to maintain the marriage relationship at its best. What seemed to me most important in the situation was not the facts, but the persons involved. Looking back, I feel more comfortable with my decision now, since that particular marriage has happily endured for almost forty years.

I have used these simple illustrations to point up the fact that decisions about "truth-telling" are not always simple and straight-forward. Where does this leave us, as Christians? Are we totally at sea when it comes to deciding whether or not to tell the "truth"? I think not. First, it is



clear we are not free to play fast and loose with the facts. The ninth commandment is not only a basic moral guideline, it is also an essential component of society. We could not operate unless we were reasonably certain that, in all ordinary cases, people told us the factual truth. Chaos would result if, when we asked someone on the street what time it was, we had always to wonder whether they deliberately gave us the wrong answer.

The law is essential in the operation of ordinary life. But this does not allow for the extraordinary circumstances which sometimes present themselves. Thus, there is a second basic proposition. The law, however practical in ordinary circumstances, does not cover everything. Legalistic adherence to the letter of the law is not sufficient. Here, Christians must turn, as always, to the teaching of Jesus.

Clearly, Jesus finally put love above law. He said that he had come to “fulfil” the law. To me, that means that he came to give the law new meaning—a meaning that derives from the priority application of “Jesus-love” to the dimensions of the law.

Jesus did not hesitate to violate the letter of the law if it conflicted with the demands of love and compassion. He ignored the Sabbath law in order to heal the sick and suffering. Even more significantly, in the case of a woman taken in adultery, he put compassion first. The law prescribed the penalty of death but Jesus defied the woman’s self-righteous accusers and said to her, “Go, and sin no more.” He acted redemptively and, thus, “fulfilled” the law.

Strict legalism always involves its practitioners in a maze of conflicting demands and illogical conclusions. In a particular situation two or more laws may seem to contradict

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one another. And to be certain of rigid obedience to a law, its meaning and implications must be spelled out in great detail, as with the Jewish regulations for Sabbath observance. In practice, if not always in theory, this narrow stance, understanding that, in the final analysis, living persons are more important than dead laws.

What I am suggesting here does not provide a simple method of making moral decisions, either in the specific area of “truth-telling,” or in other situations of choice. Difficult judgments must be made. One must not narrow the range of love or unrealistically individualize it. In the case of a crime, for instance, God’s love must be acted out, not only toward the guilty criminal, but also toward the victim and, indeed, toward society as a whole. The demands of justice must be factored into the moral equation.

Doing the “loving” thing is, therefore, rarely easy and often risky. One could argue that with the woman taken in adultery, Jesus took a sort of moral gamble, trusting in the redemptive power of love and forgiveness to make the woman a better person. There was no absolute assurance of that actually happening. But Jesus obviously felt that the risk was worth taking. Crucial moral decisions by Christians almost always involve an element of risk, but I believe that we are called to be daring in the name of love.

To return, finally, to our earlier Kantian illustration, I have decided upon reflection that when the angry husband rushed out of his house, I would have said to him, “She went that way,” pointing in the wrong direction. Factually, that would have been a lie. But I hope that I am not self-righteous when I say that, at that moment, I believe Jesus might have smiled. ■

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# Hal Haralson Vignettes

By Hal Haralson

[Hal Haralson practices law in Austin and contributes frequently to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

## Anything Exciting Happen in Anahuac Today?

My “international law practice” has taken this country lawyer to a lot of out of the way places.

Once upon a time I had a divorce case scheduled for trial in Anahuac, Texas.

A splendid story comes out of this case. Anahuac is in the swamps south of Beaumont.

You can go to Anahuac but you cannot go *through* Anahuac.

The other lawyer and I met in the courthouse that morning and worked out a settlement agreement in a short time.

The judge asked us to prepare an order and we went to the lawyer’s office and dictated the terms to his secretary.

We were in an old house across the street from the courthouse in surroundings that were something less than ostentatious. I could tell that his was not a “booming” law practice.

“Anything exciting ever happen in Anahuac?” I asked, half seriously.

He replied, “Yes, as a matter of fact, something exciting did happen about two weeks ago.”

“My secretary buzzed me and said that a Mr. Abraham Schwartz was calling from New York City.”

“I knew no one by the name of Schwartz and I had never had call from New York City. My curiosity was aroused. I picked up the phone, saying, ‘This is Gene Wilson, may I help you?’”

“Mr. Wilson, my name is Abraham Schwartz. I’m an attorney in New York City. Do you represent the Chambers County Water District?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I’m their attorney. I’ve represented them for several years.”

“Good, you’re the man I’m looking for. My client is working on plans for a deep water port off the shore near Anahuac. We are having a meeting at 10:00 a.m. tomor-

row in New York City and we need you to be present.”

“You can’t be serious,” I replied, somewhat irritated by his demanding tone. “I have to be in court here tomorrow and I have clients who have appointments...”

“Mr. Schwarz sounded a little put out as he said, “You don’t seem to understand. I said we have to have you here for a meeting in the morning. How much would we have to pay you, Mr. Wilson?”

“I decided to put an end to this nonsense and replied, ‘Mr. Schwartz, you would have to pay me \$5,000.00 per day to get me to your New York meeting.’”

“That’s a fair sum, Mr. Wilson. If you will stick your head out the door, I think you will hear our jet circling Anahuac. My assistant will be at the door with cash in hand. You’ll need clothes for about 5 days.”

“I went to the door,” he continued, “and sure enough, I heard the roar of a low flying jet. Since Anahuac isn’t on a scheduled airline route, I figured Schwartz was for real.

“The man at the door of the plane handed me 25 \$1,000 bills and took my luggage. He took his seat and the small jet lifted off the runway and headed for New York City.

“The next 5 days were spent listening to Schwartz talk about a super port. They talked in terms of billions of dollars. I regretted that I had not told them \$10,000 a day. I don’t think it would have made any difference.

“I was rarely called on and had little to say. What they wanted was me, so they could say someone from the Chambers County Water District was present at the meetings.

“The hotel was elegant. There seemed no end to the variety of superb cuisine.

“After 2 days, I became bored and longed for the quiet, calm routine of Anahuac.

“Those places in life that are familiar are the best. The home-cooked meals, the familiar living room, the same faces. Johnson’s barber shop.

“Anything exciting happen here in Anahuac? Not very often.

“I still flinch when I hear a jet overhead and am thankful it’s not for me.”

The divorce agreement was signed by the Judge, and I turned my car toward home, thankful to have been taught a lesson about the important things in life. ■

# The Saga of Old Red

By Hal Haralson

It's hard for me to let go. Old age causes me to mellow and cherish the experiences shared across the years.

In 1970 my father died. I was thirty-five years old and a second-year student in law school at the University of Texas.

I inherited his old Pontiac which was stolen from our house and wrapped around a tree in Austin. After months of fierce negotiations, I settled with the insurance company for \$600.00.

With this and another \$600.00, I purchased a 1967 Ford Pickup. It was bright red, six cylinders and no air conditioner.

Now, twenty-nine years later, "Old Red" is beat up and scarred with faded paint and one black fender.

Old Red is like one of the family. Jill, Brad, and David learned to drive in her. Operating the clutch and manual gearshift taught coordination that would come in handy in many ways in the future.

The gearshift was originally on the steering column. Now it's on the floor.

It happened about twenty years ago on the deer lease at Junction. I hit a big rock and the pickup wouldn't come out of low gear.

I drove 20 miles into Junction at 5 mph and the guy at the filling station showed me how to raise the hood and manipulate the elbows of the gearshift and put it in the gear I wanted.

I placed the elbows so I was in high gear (there are only three forward gears) and drove the 100 miles into Austin.

This continued for nearly a year. If I wanted to change gears, I lifted the hood, manipulated the elbows, and put it in reverse, or another forward gear.

I found this had an advantage. When people called and wanted to borrow my pickup, I told them they were welcome to use it...then explained the method of shifting gears.

"I think I'll look somewhere else," was the usual reply.

I suppose I would still be lifting the hood and manipulating gears but for the man who issues inspection stickers. We didn't pass. That's how the gear shift got to be on the floor board.

Old Red's horn is a small black button on the dash. The one on the steering wheel doesn't work.

One cold winter night, about 3:00 a.m., Old Red's horn began to honk. I couldn't get it to stop, so I got a hammer and beat on it until it quit.

The inspection guy at the filling station came back later

that year, "You are going to have to have a new horn. That one won't work. It looks like someone's been beating on it."

I rather sheepishly told him the story and he installed a new horn.

The front bumper is bent forward about 15 degrees on the passenger side. David was learning to drive and got a tree between the bumper and the fender.

After much maneuvering, he got Old Red separated from the tree but not without significant alteration of the bumper.

The head light on the driver's side has no chrome cover.

Brad, David and I were sleeping in our tent on our deer lease at Johnson City. We had covered the sacks of deer corn in the back of Old Red and were sound asleep in our bed rolls.

Our slumber was interrupted by the shrill whinny of a horse. The rancher's horses had discovered the corn.

They kept fighting each other over the corn and making all kinds of noise.

Brad says, "I heard the zipper of the tent. Then I heard Old Red start and there were horses whinnies, the sound of glass breaking and hoofs hitting metal."

"Pops zipped the tent flap back up and got into his bedroll and went back to sleep."

The next morning we saw what had happened. One of the horses had kicked out Old Red's head light while fleeing the charging pickup.

The same year I got Old Red, I had traded a used deep freezer for a used john boat.

The boys and I fished Onion Creek, near Wimberley, many times during those law school years. We would load the john boat into the bed of Old Red and we were off.

Judy and I made many trips to Laity Lodge this way. I caught my share of bass (two five-pounders) in the Frio River under the great hall.

I parked Old Red down by the river so I wouldn't embarrass the participants at the conferences.

One of Brad's buddies from Laity Lodge youth camp told him he was returning to Austin from camp and came up on an old man driving an old pickup with a john boat in the bed of the pickup.

Charlie Duke said, "I pulled up along side the pickup and this old man was reading a book while driving down the highway. Then I recognized him. It was your father."

I could buy a new pickup but it wouldn't be the same. There is something about the pride of survival.

Old Red has paid her dues. I figure in pickup years, we are about the same age—mid sixties.

I think we both have some good years left in us. You don't discard something just because it's old. ■

# The Private Was a Preacher

By Hal Haralson

The first thing Judy does when we get home from work is turn on the answering machine.

She is a psychotherapist. The calls are usually her clients. My law practice doesn't generate many calls at home, so I'm seldom the subject of the request.

Today was different...very different. The voice on the machine said, "If you are the Hal Haralson who lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico forty years ago, please call this number."

I called the next day and the lady who answered the phone identified herself as the secretary for Westside Baptist Church in Las Cruces.

"We are planning our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. The church records indicate that you were our first pastor. Can you come speak for us?"

I told her I would talk to my wife and call the next day. (That's how you stay married for forty-four years.)

I called the next day and told her we would be there.

Talk about past history...40 years ago.

Following graduation from Hardin-Simmons University in 1957, I volunteered for the draft. We had been married six months and Judy followed me to Ft. Riley, Kansas, Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri and then to "advanced individual training."

The wisdom of the U.S. Army placed me in Ft. Gordon, Georgia where I went to MP school. I learned how to shoot a 45-caliber pistol and direct traffic. I can still make it flow with the best of them.

Our permanent station was White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico. We lived in Las Cruces because there was no base housing.

We hadn't been there long when there came a phone call one Saturday night.

"My name is J.W. Ray. I'm a member of Westside Baptist Mission. We are sponsored by First Baptist Church. There are twelve members. We meet in a Oldfellow Hall. Could you come visit us in the morning?"

I assured him we could. This was exciting. I had been preaching for about five years and we hoped to be involved in a mission.

When J.W. Ray introduced me the next morning it was obvious he meant more than "visit." He intended for me to preach!

All of us who have preached have two or three "sugar sticks" we can deliver standing on our heads. So preach I did.

They called us as pastor and wife at a salary of \$25.00 per month. This was later doubled before I was discharged.

There was only one problem with this arrangement.

My military police duties called for three day shifts. I wasn't off on Sunday but 1/3 of the time.

I went to the Colonel (base commander) and explained the situation and asked to be assigned to an 8-5 job. He was not sympathetic at all and said emphatically that he would not make an exception on my account.

I did some research. (Probably my first legal research...and my last.)

Army regulations said if an enlisted man's duty assignment interfered with his worship, he must be reassigned if there is an opening.

I found an opening. An MP was making security badges and was about to be discharged. It was an 8-5 job.

I typed a memo to the Base Commander that cited the regulation. I attached the letter from the associational missionary that authenticated my claim to being an ordained minister.

Also attached were letters to two Congressmen and a United States Senator. (I didn't have to mail these.)

The Colonel read this as I stood at attention. He was furious. The transfer was made.

What we needed was a revival! I called my mentor, Leonard Hartley, and he agreed to come.

I took the information about the coming revival to the base newspaper. I was in my MP gear and the man at the paper asked what I was doing bringing this story about a revival. I told him I was the pastor of the church.

He asked some questions and took notes. Then he asked if he could take my picture in the pulpit of the base chapel...with a 45-caliber pistol on my hip.

Two weeks later the story came out in daily papers in El Paso, Albuquerque, and Alamogordo. "White Sands GI Pastors Church." That was the boost we needed. The revival was a success and we were off and running.

When Judy and I left Las Cruces on June 11, 1959 with my DD214 (discharge papers) in hand, Westside Baptist Mission had become Westside Baptist Church. We had baptized 75 people and built a building that would handle 200 in Sunday School. It was full. All of this in 18 months.

We called a full-time seminary graduate as pastor. He stayed 17 years.

When I met the lady who called, I asked her how she found us. "Through the Internet."

After being introduced as the first pastor, I spoke to the congregation. I told them that some of them would be very disappointed, and some would be elated.

I wasn't going to preach a sermon. I have not been a preacher in 35 years. I've practiced law for the past 27 years.

It was a memorable occasion for us. There aren't many things I helped begin 40 years ago that still exist.

This is one Military Policeman who is thankful he was given more to do than direct traffic. ■

# The Night Cometh

By Hal Haralson

Lanny Henninger could have passed for John Wayne's brother.

He was over six feet tall. Lean and rumped in appearance. This was topped off with a thick head of wavy brown hair.

Lanny was a student at Abilene Christian College in 1955. I was attending Hardin-Simmons University with a minor in agriculture at ACC.

We were both studying for the ministry.

Our paths didn't cross until forty years later when I was a member of the Downtown Rotary Club of Austin.

Lanny was President of the club. He was a very effective communicator and had a gift of making people feel at ease around him. He was pastor for 26 years of the University Church of Christ on the campus of The University of Texas. His health was excellent.

Lanny was a writer...a good one. He kept a journal. The following appeared in his journal October 5, 1997.

For reasons I dare not divulge, I find myself thinking of time's passage. And of the milestone's with which we mark it. Like birthdays and anniversaries.

Baseball's regular season ended last Sunday. The Dodger's Brett Butler closed out a 17-year career at age 40. He remarked "I'm surprised at how fast it went." So say we all. One of Neil Diamond's old songs has it: "Done too soon." And in somber measure the New Testament intones: "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14)

So what to do? Two things, it seems to me. At least two. One: Use up each day. Fill it to overflowing with good. Deliberately enjoy. And two: Begin now. Mend a fractured friendship. Mail an overdue letter. Correct a misunderstanding. Repair a broken heart. Lay aside a grievance. Act on a noble impulse. As we all know, "The night cometh."

Lanny Henninger died of a heart attack the next day, October 6, 1997 while driving on the expressway in Austin. Gotta go. I have a couple of fences I need to mend. Fill your day with good. ■



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# Bigotry: An Ethical Evaluation

By John M. Swomley

[Dr. John Swomley is professor emeritus of social ethics at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He is a frequent contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

Is it ethical to criticize the doctrines of a church or denomination to which we do not belong? Fear of being anti-Catholic or guilty of bigotry has silenced some Protestant theologians who otherwise would have given vocal support to Catholic theologians who openly seek changes in Vatican doctrines or discipline.

Stated another way, is it ethical to remain silent when one church uses political pressure or legislative action to impose its doctrine on others who do not recognize its authority? Or is there a virtue of silence when a dominant church asks smaller denominations to accept its doctrines, bureaucracy and “infallible” leadership as the price of ecumenical unity?

It is important to wrestle with such questions from a secular as well as a religious perspective. From a secular political perspective it is both unwise and unjust for a church hierarchy to insist on theocratic rule over both believers and non-believers as if they are too immature or unable to think for themselves and to determine their own political destiny.

The defensive reaction of some religious adherents is to label critics as bigots or anti-Catholic. The word bigot is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “a person of strong convictions or prejudice, especially in matters of religion, race, or politics, who is intolerant of those who differ with him.” Is one necessarily intolerant of Catholics because one opposes papal politics or doctrines? Certainly there are numerous progressive Catholics that are more outspoken critics than are Protestants.

Recently I had an occasion to examine my own reaction to an accusation of being anti-Catholic, and to assess whether my opposition to doctrines implied lack of respect for those who espouse them.

A Benedictine nun accused me of

being anti-Catholic because I opposed an effort to persuade an interfaith organization to which we both belong to take the papal position against abortion. Her comment led me to examine what I oppose in the Roman Catholic Church that differs from the position of those currently in that church who seek its reformation. It also led me to list my actions and responses toward Catholics that may speak louder than words.

I am opposed to any system of absolute monarchy where the monarch is elected by people appointed by the previous monarch. Democratic selection is always preferable to election by an appointed elite. I am also opposed to the assumption that any monarch by virtue of his office is the exclusive spokesperson for God or Christ. This is an arrogance which history has proven in error with respect to numerous pronouncements of the Vatican.

I am also opposed to the doctrine of papal infallibility if only because all humans make mistakes, but also because serious efforts by a powerful monarch involve injury to millions of his followers or subjects.

The papacy as it has continued throughout history has developed into a theocracy wherein the Pope rules or attempts to dominate secular governments with his decisions. A recent case in point is Pope John Paul II's March 25, 1995 encyclical, “*Evangelium Vitae*” in which he forbade Catholics in the United States to obey a U.S. law permitting abortion or euthanasia or “to take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it.” This, he wrote, “is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.” Since there is no statement against abortion in the Bible, the Pope is the author of the “Law of God” and his morality, which is not “written in every heart” or no one would need the Pope's instruction. Then the same encyclical said, “Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for [the Pope's] morality.” The Pope also acknowledged the conflict between

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democracy and theocracy with his statement, "As a result we have what appear to be dramatically opposed tendencies."

I am firmly in favor of democracy, human rights and separation of church and state, and cannot forget that the Vatican has never encouraged democracy, but moved swiftly in Europe to collaborate with fascism in Croatia, with Nazism through a concordat with Hitler Germany, with fascism via a concordat with Mussolini in Italy, a concordat with Salazar's Portugal, support of Vichy, France and Franco's Spain in return for special favors to Roman Catholicism.

I also oppose a secret bureaucracy, the Curia, which administers the church's finances and investments in secrecy, and makes decisions about the authority of bishops, theologians, professors and priests, including whether they may continue in their vocation or be arbitrarily dismissed. Even murder can take place within the Vatican without an autopsy or customary investigation by objective police authority.

Are the above the essence of the Roman Catholic Church, or could that church flourish without the aspects which I oppose? In other words, is there a possibility of a constructive ecumenism that could include mutual criticism of one another's denomination?

This led me to examine the theology of Catholicism. I realized that the differences about sacraments did not disturb me as much as the administrative and political aspects. Yet there are some serious major theological differences and inconsistencies. One is the fact that priests are barred from the sacrament of marriage. The idea that they are deprived of family life and theoretically of any enjoyment of sexuality is a serious criticism.

The idea that women are theoretically equal to men but barred from certain functions of the church and viewed as not having the same reproductive freedom or freedom of conscience as men is also a serious problem. Although the condemnation of homosexuality and the primacy of sexual sin is shared by numerous other denominations, it is also a major criticism.

I am also troubled by the built-in superstition or perhaps antiscientific aspect of Catholic theology. The idea of the bodily assumption of Mary to some place above the global earth, prayers to her and the belief that her images shed tears or exude blood, or that she can cure disease troubles me. This of course is not the only superstition but it is illustrative.

It is not surprising that all of the above criticisms are also those of an extensive reform movement of Roman Catholics.

The statement of these criticisms by a Protestant does not necessarily result in personal hostility or anti-Catholicism. In my own long life I have had many fruitful associations and taken many of the following actions because I saw them as the right thing to do, and certainly

not done to disprove bias or bigotry:

- I served as African correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* while on sabbatical leave in Africa in 1977. Much earlier when the Catholic bishop of Kansas City had condemned and questioned the continued existence of that independent paper published in Kansas City, I wrote a statement and secured the signatures of fifty leading clergy in Kansas City in the euphoric days following Vatican II, appealing to the Bishop to change his mind. He did.
- When the same bishop dismissed certain faculty at Conception Theological Seminary, I helped three of them to find creative positions elsewhere. Earlier, I had been the first non-Catholic theologian to lecture there, and was invited back on two other occasions. I persuaded the President and faculty of the school of theology where I taught to invite a Netherlands priest to teach on our faculty. As chair of the lecture and assembly committee I invited Catholic priests and bishops to speak to our student body. I was on the executive committee of the American Society of Christian Ethics when we unanimously invited the first Catholic professor to join the Society.
- When on sabbatical leave to teach in Argentina, I met numerous times with priests en route to discuss nonviolence and liberation theology, lectured at the largest Catholic seminary in Argentina, and organized a 24-hour vigil at her church as part of an effort to free a Catholic woman arrested under martial law. I wrote the letter to the Cardinal, signed by more than a hundred participants in the vigil, which resulted in her freedom.
- In Kansas City I organized and participated in a regularly scheduled ecumenical dialogue of five Catholic priests, five Jews and five Protestants. On a number of occasions I lectured at Incarnate Word College in San Antonio and in 1976 I accepted an invitation to give the summer Commencement address.
- While on sabbatical in 1977 in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, I learned that the most creative group there was the Catholic Peace and Justice Commission, a mixed-race group. At their request I met with the full Commission for their first full discussion of the philosophy of nonviolent action. The meeting lasted three hours and led to subsequent discussions with their officials.
- After a visit to Nicaragua in 1981 I joined with Tom Fox, then the editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, to form a Kansas City regional committee on Central America. And in 1993 when the U.S. was threatening a military strike and there was fear of nuclear action against North Korea, I formed the American Committee on Korea, which included six well-known Roman Catholics among thirty-six members. On my first visit to North Korea in 1994, well before the U.S. and North Korea had begun to resolve the conflict, I

visited the small Catholic church in Pyongyang as well as the Presbyterian church, accompanied by North Korean government officials so as to make visible our concern for religious liberty.

These by no means exhaust ecumenical activity with Roman Catholic leaders. The longest and most beneficial cooperative relationship which continues to this day is with the Sisters of Loretto, a genuinely progressive and non-violent group.

I have also had a long though less frequent relationship with the Catholic Workers movement beginning in Boston in 1938 and including their houses in Kansas City and St. Louis.

The most contentious of my experiences with Catholics occurred in 1979 when I was scheduled to be a speaker at the national Pax Christi conference. My topic was to be nuclear power and war. Pax Christi is an international Catholic peace organization. Although I had been asked months in advance of the October conference, I did not learn until September that Father Gerald Senecal, the President of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas where the conference was to be held, had told Pax Christi authorities that I could not be permitted on campus.

Angie O’Gorman, a friend of mine who was the local Pax Christi coordinator, said, according to the September 14 *National Catholic Reporter*, that Senecal told her that “Swomley was ‘anti-church and a ‘bigot’.” O’Gorman said Senecal told her Swomley could not appear on campus because of Swomley’s views on separation of church and state and abortion. O’Gorman asked for specific examples of writing or speeches by Swomley proving the allegations of bigotry, but none was provided.”

Gordon Zahn, a friend of many years and a prominent Catholic sociologist who was also scheduled to lead a workshop told NCR, “If they are characterizing him as a bigot they are mistaken. I do not consider him anti-Catholic, though we differ on certain topics.”

The first intimation that I had been banned came not

from any Pax Christi leader but from a staff member of the *National Catholic Reporter*, who asked me for a statement for their next issue. I decided not to make an “off the cuff” statement, but to give the *NCR* a written one.

I said, in part:

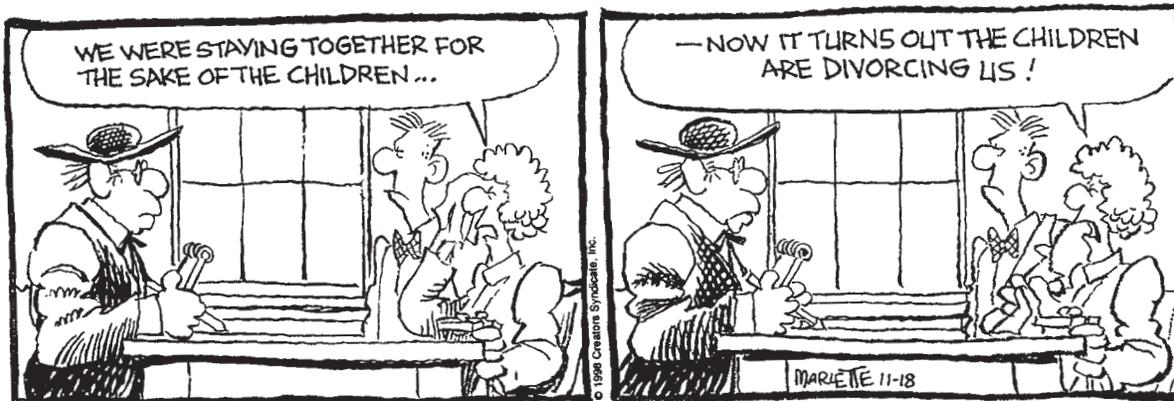
“The withdrawal of the invitation comes as a surprise but not as an affront. My surprise is because I had assumed the term ‘Catholic’ describes an inclusiveness that tolerates difference.

I have the greatest respect for Pax Christi and its leadership, so I don’t want to do or say anything to harm it. The world needs all the peace activity it can muster. Pax Christi is making a very significant contribution and will do so whether I attend the conference in Atchison or not.

There are, without doubt, people in Pax Christi who are concerned about free speech and the desirability of differing points of view on some questions. If they have been unable to persuade the college president, Father Senecal, that Pax Christi should be able to determine whom they will invite to speak, nothing that I say will be persuasive.”

I went on to indicate my belief that “conscience as well as medical judgment should determine whether abortion is to be chosen, just as I believe conscience should determine whether anyone prepares for war or participates in nuclear or other war.” I also indicated that I would not have raised either the abortion or separation of church and state issues at the conference “if only because I respect religious convictions that differ from mine.”

The November 2 *National Catholic Reporter* in a report from the conference said: “The Benedictine College ban of the respected nuclear disarmament expert was an issue that popped up constantly at the Pax Christi U.S.A. national assembly here last month. It was the item of discussion for participants and organizers whose meetings were almost entirely tied up with how to deal with it. Even students protested the ban.”



Pax Christi's executive council...issued a statement censuring Father Senecal in which they said the Council 'profoundly regrets the decision taken by the president of the host college.' The statement also said the problem showed "a failure in the Council to handle the situation in a concerted fashion."

According to the NCR, Joseph Fahey, the new Pax Christi executive council chairman, said he was going to drop out of the conference altogether in protest, but decided to attend "to keep negotiations with Senecal going and to keep Pax Christi together." The NCR also said, "Swomley, a Methodist who is called by Fahey "more Catholic than many of us," said, "unless there was a recognition of differences in faith, there is no real ecumenism possible."

A Protestant periodical, *The Christian Century*, reported only briefly the ban on my speaking but did report Father Senecal's charges. As a result there were a number of letters from Roman Catholic nuns in the November 7, 1979 *Century*. Four Kansas City nuns, Sisters Marie Frances Kenoyer, Mary McNellis, Barbara Doak, and Shirley Koritnik, objected to the characterization of me as a 'bigot.' Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler of Chicago wrote, "I am indignant over his rejection by the President of Benedictine College.... The very stones of Benedictine College must cry out protesting the slander against John Swomley."

Is my critique of the Roman Catholic church unique? Not at all. I have important criticisms of the Southern Baptist Convention, fundamentalist Protestant groups, the Mormons, Christian Science, and the Methodist Church in which I was reared, but I have never been accused of being anti-Baptist or anti other Protestant groups. It is the heritage of Protestant attacks on Catholics and the memory of such discrimination that makes certain Catholics view any sustained verbal or written critiques of any major Catholic sins such as abortion, or any public criticism of the papacy or the Pope's pronouncements or his politics, as anti-Catholic. For this reason many Protestants are silent

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*If I were redefining bigotry it would be the expression by the adherents of any faith that non-believers or dissenters must conform or yield to their political or religious demand in order to be respected or accepted.*

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when they should feel able to express at least what many progressive Catholics already espouse in terms of doctrinal and organizational change.

The problem for real ecumenism is silence to avoid being called anti-Catholic, when it should involve criticism as well as healthy cooperation on areas of mutual interest.

Moreover, if I were redefining bigotry it would be the expression by the adherents of any faith that non-believers or dissenters must conform or yield to their political or religious demand in order to be respected or accepted.

Why should people of diverse religious groups or none cooperate in spite of their differences? One answer is our common humanity. We learn to respect and value those with whom we work on common problems. Another answer is that few if any religious organizations are so monolithic that their members agree on all issues. People differ from

their religious colleagues on numerous issues such as the rights of women, treatment of workers, sexual orientation, poverty, war and peace, environmental protection, and others. Such issues cannot be resolved by any one denomination because the vested interests of males, or capitalists, or militarists, or others, are so powerful.

Religious dogma, habit, or socially conditioned beliefs and prejudices are not adequate for our increasingly complex and power-driven society. For example, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews who at one time had large families or did not practice birth control or family planning, are doing so today, driven by many reasons—poverty, desire to send children to college, both parents working outside the home, divorce, and single-parent households, among others.

Few if any of us like to have the major decisions of our lives made for us. We want to have a voice with respect to our future as well as the immediate decisions of life. We want all the rights accorded to free persons, without subordination to any special interests, economic, political, or religious. ■

# Sowing and Reaping

By William H. Griffith

[This is a sermon preached on October 30, 1998 by Dr. William H. Griffith, who is senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Terre Haute, Indiana.]

Choices matter and there are consequences. This was the point of the prophet Hosea's warning to the people of Israel: "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." It is a law of nature that cannot be refuted. When you plant corn, you reap corn. When you plant soybeans, you reap soybeans. You cannot expect to sow wild oats and not reap wild oats.

We read in Hosea 3:1-5 that God asked the Prophet to go and love a woman who already had a lover and was an adulteress. This account sounds like God is making a very indecent proposal. In fact, it is so bizarre that it gets our attention immediately. It is a proposal that is intended to confront God's people with their own sinfulness.

A widely discussed movie of the year 1993 was entitled "Indecent Proposal." It is now available in video stores. It too contained a bizarre offer, one made to a married couple, and it got our attention. The story line is about a young couple who were faced with a debt that they could not pay, and they decided to risk all to get the money they needed. They decided the solution to their problem lay in Las Vegas.

When the film was first shown, it was widely discussed on television and in the print media. Nowhere did I hear or read anyone who criticized their decision to turn to gambling to solve their problem. What that tells me is that gambling has become an accepted part of the world in which we live. Even regular churchgoers play and even occasionally win the lottery.

Gambling has become a socially acceptable dream for getting rich quickly. Folks dare to hope that their financial worries can be erased. I've told some of you why I never play the lottery. It is because if I should win, then the newspaper headlines would proclaim: "Ex-pastor wins lottery!"

In the movie the suggestion that they could solve their difficulties through gambling may be just as subtle and dangerous, and even more of an "indecent proposal" than that which was to follow. We watch the couple gamble away what they have, only to discover that it doesn't solve their problem. They lose everything. But then a multimillionaire, played by Robert Redford, makes the Indecent Proposal which gives the film its title. He offers to give them one million dollars in return for allowing him to spend one night with the wife. The rest of the movie captures the emotional roller coaster ride the two experience as they struggle with the offer, and then with the decision they eventually make.

This struggle is the reason for the film's popularity. Viewers are brought face to face with the question of "Would I do that?" It confronts them with the question of moral accountability and vividly portrays for us the confusion which the couple go through as they wrestle with making a decision.

The movie accurately reflects our cultural values. We live in a culture that thumbs its nose at moral absolutes and moral accountability. Five years after the film's release, we see these same cultural values acted out, not at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas but at the White House in Washington, D.C.

*The movie raises the serious question as to whether we are*



to be held accountable for what we do. Some people live as though there is no price to pay for how they act. Then when the payment does come due, they discover that it is far more than they had bargained for.

There exists within our society a mythology about evil. One of the myths is that a person is not fully responsible for his or her actions. This is a “Devil made me do it” theology, and we can hear it not only from comedians but also from television evangelists. It is a belief that excuses a person from acknowledging full responsibility for some irresponsible action. It is the same myth that Ronald Reagan used when he called the former Soviet Union “The Evil Empire.” It attempts to define evil as a force that is someone or something outside one’s self. We recognize this reaction taking place within ourselves any time our own actions are criticized, and we search desperately to find somebody or something to which we can point the finger of blame.

Another part of this myth is our fascination with winning. The movie, “Indecent Proposal,” is set within the environment of casino life, a place where people are very much concerned about winning and losing. Here we see the rich man doing everything he can to win against the poor man. The same fascination is found in university athletic programs where individuals break the rules to recruit top-notch ball players. The rules are violated because we believe that winning is more important than anything else. In other words, if there are no rules or unalterable standards by which human behavior and actions may be measured, then what we have left is winning and losing.

The movie confronts us with the possibility of becoming morally tolerant, but at the very high cost of losing our values and ideals, indeed of losing any sense of standards. Our morality has become: if it works, its right. If something gets me what I want, then it is okay. If it helps me, then why not? If it pays off, then it is acceptable.

I believe this cultural myth is what causes pervasive confusion about the recent behavior of the President. Our economy is healthy. Our nation is prospering. Thus we

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*...many voices are trying to convince us that there are no indecent proposals; rather, there are only opportunities.*

*Something deep within us, however, gives us a different message. You may call this the voice of conscience, the moving of God’s spirit, the exercise of common sense or the teaching of experience.*

*Whatever one may label this, it makes us very much aware that abiding standards for morality do exist within the fabric of our being.*

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become tolerant of behavior that we formerly regarded as immoral.

When someone is brave enough to express a contrary opinion and say that some actions, even though they pay off, are still wrong, that voice is not welcome. Someone who maintains that relationships require commitment and sacrifice will be dismissed as “old fashioned.” Someone who suggests that there is more to life than winning will be accused of not playing by the rules.

When we look outwardly at our society and inwardly at our own lives, we discover many voices are trying to convince us that there are *no indecent proposals*; rather, there are only opportunities. Something deep within us, however, gives us a different message. You may call this the voice of conscience, the moving of God’s spirit, the exercise of common sense or the teaching of experience. Whatever one may label this, it makes us very much aware that abiding standards for morality do exist within the fabric of our being.

The headlines of the past decade include names that remind us of the moral confusion that exists throughout society—Ivan Boesky in the world of finance, Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in the world of religion, Oliver North, Newt Gingrich, and now President Bill Clinton in the world of politics. In each case the message is that the end justifies the means. These also remind us, however, that there is a price to pay and it is usually bigger than we bargained for.

The lesson we gain from the lives of these people, and from the movie as well, is that we too can be seduced. We, too, can be wrong. We too can suffer from the self-inflicted wounds caused by our own bad decisions. Most of us have no difficulty understanding how we may suffer from the actions of others, but we prefer not to recognize that our hardships and

pains are all too often the result of our own choices and actions.

Accountability is a major lesson we can draw from the writings of the biblical prophets. All the prophets tried to persuade the people of Israel that they were responsible for their own circumstances and troubles. As Hosea’s telling line put it, God’s chosen people had “sowed the wind and

reaped the whirlwind.” They had become people who lived for themselves. They measured right and wrong by how it suited them. They were lords of their own morality. They were the “yuppies” of their day. And, they would reap what they had sowed.

The account in chapter three does sound like God is asking Hosea to consider a very indecent proposal, but it emphasizes just how indecent Israel had been when they chose to be unfaithful to the Lord God. He had selected Hosea to demonstrate clearly and unequivocally to Israel how deeply he loved them and desired them to return, seeking forgiveness for their sins.

The movie deals with the ideal that indecent proposals cannot simply be forgotten and swept under the carpet. When we live beyond the moral boundaries God has set for us, it does no good to pretend that terrible things didn't really happen. The movie laid this truth out squarely with the line: “Couples stay together not because they forget, but because they forgive.” The precept was true for the relationship between Israel and God; it is just as valid for us, as well as for our nation.

The prophets showed the people that a connection existed between how they chose to live and what would result from this. Paul reaffirmed this in Philippians 4:8, 9:

Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Here is a summons to live life as God meant life to be lived. This is not a call to life based on Paul's own view of reality, but on that which God shares with us through Christ.

The movie reflects well the teaching of the Scriptures: choices matter, and there are consequences. Because that is true, we ought now to be asking ourselves, what are our indecent proposals? What are the choices we make that distance us from God? Which of these have we rationalized and hoped that forgetting them would somehow let everything work out all right? Are we dealing with issues by shading the truth? Are we facing matters of our own sexuality? Have we convinced ourselves that the matter will simply go away? Are we deaf to the voices that say there will be a payday some day?

I could not begin to name all the areas of life where we meet temptation—for that is what indecent proposals are all about. We do not easily recognize temptations in our own lives. My suspicion is that if I were to ask you to identify your three major temptations, you would find it impossible to do so.

The difficulty may rest in the fact that we rarely think about such matters. Or we cling to a definition of temptation that includes only the seven deadly sins or at least those of the seven which we are too old, too tired, too lazy, or too scared to commit; and naturally we would never have any part in such doings. However, let me emphasize this point. The strongest temptation is to believe that *there are no temptations*, and the most indecent of indecent proposals is to believe that *there are no indecent proposals*.

God does hold us to his standards and demands that we be faithful to him. He is indeed a jealous God who will have no other gods before him. We must not be lured away from the path he has laid out for us simply because there may be “opportunities” for us. Our actions do have consequences, and what we sow we will surely reap. The *same* principle is valid for all people, for every human being, whether they occupy the White House, the halls of Congress, executive office suites, or pews or the pulpit in the church. Let us choose the way God has set before us. ■



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# Watching the World Go By

By Ralph Lynn

[Dr. Ralph Lynn is Professor Emeritus of History at Baylor University and is a regular contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

## Room for God

The evolution theory and the creation theory of the origin of the universe seem equally preposterous. But it is even more preposterous that this battle is still being fought 135 years after Darwin published his *Origin of the Species*.

Although the creation theory is the clear loser, belief in a creator may still—with some reason—be compatible with the evolution theory.

That the continually expanding universe with its uncounted solar systems and its countless space objects could have emerged from one small, highly emerged mass in one big bang is beyond easy acceptance.

That living things from slugs to surgeons and from geraniums to giant redwoods should have a common beginning in a unique accidental melding of life-giving chemicals is equally incredible.

That some extra cosmic intelligence of infinite power, knowledge, wisdom, and love should have created this physical universe which regularly punishes its inhabitants with fire, flood, storms, earthquakes, avalanches and volcanic eruptions also strains credibility.

That this extra cosmic intelligence of infinite power, knowledge, wisdom, and love should have created the world of the “lower animals” most of which must live in situations blood “red in tooth and claw” also passes belief.

Even more staggering: Human beings bear a double burden. We, alone, among our fellow creatures, are painfully aware that we could, conceivably, live in a world of peace and plenty. But we find that, in frustrating fact, we live in a world of endless stress, poverty, war, famine and disease eternally aware that our inescapable end is physical annihilation.

It is not easy to believe that an all-powerful, infinitely wise and loving creator could have deliberately designed this kind of world.

In the current battle between evolution and creation, the evolution theory is the hands-down winner for the convincing reason that the tangible evidence supports it. The creation theory not only has no tangible evidence but the very finding of tangible support would destroy religion.

How, despite all this, can we—with some claim to ratio-

nality—still believe in a creator?

Instead of seeking scientific proof, the intelligently religious person recognizes that religion is merely—but triumphantly—mystical.

The religious person comes to terms with his or her finitude and assumes against the evidence that some extra cosmic infinite intelligence has been, is, and will ever be at work in the universe.

Thus, in a fashion beyond, but not contrary to reason, the world with all its tragic, mysterious contradictions, still makes sense.

The making of such an assumption can save the sensitive and thoughtful from concerning themselves with passing controversies, including the ongoing evolution-creation argument. ■

## A Case for Orthodoxy in Ethics

A professional student of history as well as a professed follower (from afar) of Jesus, I have been dismayed all of my adult life by the depressing fact that much of the Christian world—aided and abetted by prominent Christian spokesmen—has been, and still is, on the wrong side of almost all human rights issues.

An obvious exception to this statement, of course, is that Christian forces have stood for the “right” of all people around the world to have the Christian gospel preached to them.

A startling statement in this December’s *Harper’s* magazine started me on this essay: “Among the 17 leading industrial nations, the United States has the largest percentage of its citizens living in poverty.” So little has changed over the years!

To support these sweeping statements, I offer a few abbreviated specifics which, given space, could be massively adduced.

In the United States of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, sponsors of church schools opposed public schools with the same argument now mounted against public health care.

One must note that public morals were, as can now best be ascertained, no better when the churches—with much praying and preaching—had, by public default, a monopoly on education.

People who now think prayer in public schools would solve all social, moral, and personal problems should read

*The Education of Catholic Americans* written by the Roman Catholic Andrew M. Greeley and the non-Catholic Peter H. Rossi, as well as Ronald L. Johnstone's *The Effectiveness of Lutheran Elementary and Secondary Schools as Agencies of Christian Education*.

These readers would discover that church schools are seldom successful in improving the characters and habits of at-risk students most needing help. The graduates of whom the parochial and private school people are really proud arrive at their elitist schools with desirable character traits and admirable habits already established by home influences.

The picture on the class struggle front is no better. In 1886 in Chicago's Haymarket Square, some trade unionists conducted an orderly meeting calling for an eight-hour day. As the unionists were dispersing, some policemen "for no apparent reason," entered the area seemingly intent on using force. Somebody (a few anarchists were fishing in troubled waters) tossed a bomb which killed a policeman.

At the trail of the eight men arrested, Judge Joseph E. Gary admitted that the eight had not been convicted of any crime but maintained that they had been "influenced to do so."

Four of the eight were hanged, one committed suicide, and Illinois Governor Altgeld pardoned three after they had spent six years in prison. The agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, protested against the whole travesty but "Dr. Lyman Abbott, the great religious leader," condemned Governor Altgeld as "the crowned hero and worshipped deity of the anarchists of the Northwest."

Even the civilized, intelligent, reformist Theodore Roosevelt attacked Altgeld as a man who "condones and encourages the most infamous of murders."

One more of these: In 1902 the miners in Pennsylvania were on strike for an eight-hour day and higher wages. One of their leaders appealed to the indus-

trialist, George F. Baer, to intervene.

Baer's reply was a classic which shocked and embittered not only the miners but other intelligent readers of the news as well: "The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for, not by labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in his infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country."

When we turn to Europe, we find the same story: Protestants as well as Catholics, then, as now, characteristically survey the society in which they operate and—like God at creation—they call it good. As it is. No change needed. Keep the status quo.

In nominally Catholic France in the 1840s, the premier, Francois Guizot, advised the poor "to work hard, enrich yourselves, and then you can vote." He seemed not to know that wages were so low and employment so uncertain that an entire family trying to work every day in the year could barely survive.

At that time in Britain, as in France, both Protestant and Catholic churches were conducting state-subsidized revivals with the fervent hope of keeping their submerged classes from revolution.

In Russia in the centuries before the revolutions of 1917, the ruling class, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, opposed every move toward the peaceful changes which might have prevented the horrors of Communism.

Our current race problems, our chaos in health care, and our millions living in poverty make further specifics unnecessary.

That Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries do so much better in these matters demonstrates that we could improve our record if we had the will and the leadership, both of which our churches could provide.

Finally, Christian people, especially those who stridently demand pledges of creedal orthodoxy, should be demanding orthodoxy in Christian ethical conduct. ■



# Christmas Wishes

*By Katherine Nutt Shamburger*

[Katherine Shamburger lives in Tyler and is a frequent contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*.]

I wish you pink sunsets  
And Halloween skies  
Fluffy clouds and a rainbow  
Rich coconut pies.  
I wish you the fragrance  
Of freshly cut grass  
And the wave of a neighbor  
Who's hurrying past.  
I wish you soft kittens  
With foam-padded feet  
And the hug of a child  
To make life complete.  
I wish you the smell  
Of fresh coffee and bread  
Warm fires on a cold day  
A soft, cozy bed.  
I wish you worship  
In song and in word  
And the peace and the joy  
Of our dear blessed Lord.  
Merry Christmas! ■

# ~~Sale~~ **Virtual Giveaway!**

This issue of *Christian Ethics Today* is aggregate issue Number 19. While they last, all 19 back issues of this journal will be sent to you free and Priority Postage paid, while supplies last. A paltry \$25 contribution is requested for the work of the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. (Larger contributions will not be spurned, spindled, mutilated, folded, returned unopened, or otherwise denigrated.)

*Caveat:* Issue Number 1 is in very short supply, and when these are depleted, we can send you only the other 18 issues. Return this form with your check to:

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# THE CENTER FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

The Center for Christian Ethics exists to bear witness to the relevance of the Christian gospel in the world. It maintains an emphasis on applied Christianity with program activity based on Christian experience, Biblical truth, theological insight, historical perspective, current research, human needs, and the divine imperative to love God with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

## CHRONOLOGY

- In 1988 plans were made and the foundations laid for the Center for Christian Ethics.
- In 1989 the Center for Christian Ethics name was carefully chosen.
- In 1990, on June 14, the Center was chartered as a non-profit corporation.
- In 1991, on June 17, the Center was granted 501(c)(3) standing by the Internal Revenue Service.
- In 1997, a mutually beneficial relationship between the Center and Baylor University was established, with the Center's primary offices situated in the Baylor Administration Building, at 416 Pat Neff Hall, Waco, Texas.

## TRUSTEES

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## SUPPORT

Financial support for the Center for Christian Ethics has come from churches, through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, from Foundations, and from interested individuals.

## CONTRIBUTIONS ARE

- Greatly needed
- Urgently solicited
- Genuinely appreciated

## OBJECTIVES

- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics.
- Champion the moral values without which civilization itself could not survive.
- Publish a Christian ethics journal as a needed voice for the Christian ethics cause.
- Conduct forums to discuss critical ethical issues with a view to recommending practical responses.
- Address the ethical dimensions of public policy issues.
- Prepare and distribute Christian ethics support materials not being produced by others.
- Work with like-minded individuals and entities to advance the cause of Christian ethics.
- Perform needed Christian ethics projects and services for those welcoming such help.
- Recognize and honor those who have made unique contributions to the cause of Christian ethics.
- Utilize the contributions of responsible stewards who designate resources to be used in furthering the cause of Christian ethics.

The **VOICE** of the Center for Christian Ethics is *Christian Ethics Today*. Within the constraints of energy and finances, this journal is published about every other month. It is now sent without charge to those who request it.

**COLLOQUIUMS** are Center-sponsored conversations held several times a year with knowledgeable participants coming together to discuss relevant ethical issues with a view to recommending appropriate actions.

**INITIATIVES** in Christian Ethics (related to such things as race, class, gender, publishing, mass media, translation, teaching, and curricula) are Center agenda concerns.

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