

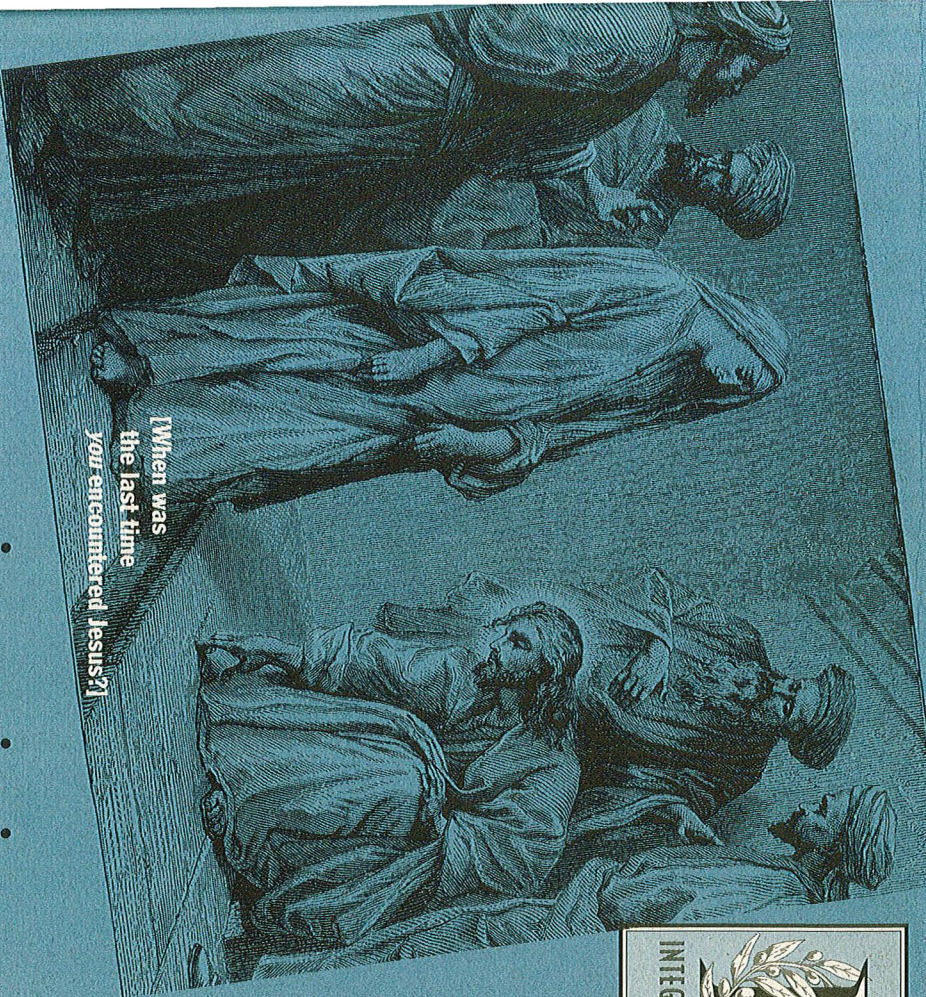
# Encountering Jesus



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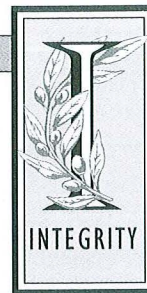
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## Who is this man named Jesus?

Through the years I have become painfully aware that not every person sees and understands Jesus the way I think that they should. My first encounter with this unthinkable and untenable idea that Jesus was other than who he claimed to be happened in my second congregation a number of years ago. A family in the congregation wanted me to talk to their son and try and “straighten him out” because he had rejected the Bible, God and Jesus in favor of some popular philosophers of the 60’s.

On another occasion I had an opportunity to study through the gospel of John with a man who astounded me with his conclusion about Jesus. He thought that Jesus was a “huckster” and just manipulated people to his own desires. And one summer, about four years ago, I studied with two young men the life of Jesus through the gospel of Matthew. One came to the point of almost committing his life to Jesus as his Lord in baptism. The other was from the Baha’i faith and felt that Jesus’ claims were too exclusive and he wanted me to know how narrow-minded I was being. I countered by saying that this call to discipleship came from the heart and lips of a man who was willing to die for him. And if he was right about the Baha’i faith, then it

didn’t really matter. But if Jesus’ claims to exclusive lordship were right, then rejecting that call would have ramifications for all eternity.

### My own journey

My own journey in discovering the person, power, and passion of Jesus has been a long one. I remember it started back when my mother and father presented me with my own personal copy of the Bible, bound in black leather with gold edges, my name and the date inscribed inside. I still have that treasured copy in my study. It is worn, frazzled, and separated by use and the passing of time. But that initial Bible enabled me to first read the words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.” These words from the pen of the apostle John thrilled me, astounded me and awed me to the core of my being. A sort of holy shiver covered me every time I opened the gospels and began to read the text to discover who this Jesus was.

I have learned that my quest for discovering and encountering Jesus was not unique to me. Throughout the centuries of humanity and the history of Christian thought similar quests have been undertaken. Some of these quests were friendlier to the biblical text than others. The French theologian Renan

caused quite a stir in his day when he wrote and published *The Life of Jesus* in 1861. Regarding the resurrection of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, Renan claims, “For the historian, the life of Jesus finishes with his last sigh. Let us say, however, that the strong imagination of Mary Magdalen played an important part in this circumstance (i.e., the creation afterwards of the group of narratives by which it was sought to establish faith in the resurrection” (page 374. New York: A. L. Burt Company, Publishers, 1863).

For Renan, the most important aspect of Jesus’ life and death was the influence he had and the impressions he left on his followers. This influence led to the creation of a resurrection myth because his followers wanted him so badly to go on living.

A modern counterpart to Renan’s work is the relatively recent work by John Dominic Crossan entitled *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. In his scholarly attempt to reconstruct his own picture of the historical Jesus, he proceeds on the assumption that other gospel texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas and Q, provide just as much authoritative information as do the four gospels of the New Testament.

It is Crossan’s methodology that is most suspect. Where three independent sources cross, it is at that point he supposes one can come to some level of historical knowledge about the Jesus of history. He envisions that it is possible to move behind the screen of creedal interpretation and give an accurate but impartial account of the historical Jesus as distinct from the

confessional Christ. But my question is, can that even be done with integrity to the New Testament texts? They are in fact creedal statements and faith interpretations of the events in the life of Jesus. The gospels are the stories of Jesus told by people of faith. History will always look different through the eyes of faith, just as Jesus will always look different through the eyes of unbelieving historians and theologians.

The three independent vectors that Crossan uses are cross-cultural anthropology, Greco-Roman and Jewish history, and literary or textual sources. Crossan says that he never builds on anything that has only a single independent attestation. But my question is, why not? Can we not think of the myriad of ministry events in Jesus’ life that only one gospel writer records? Does this mean that we cannot trust the account? Does this mean that most of the narratives of John’s gospel have no place in our understanding of who Jesus is and what he is about? Did John not think that his account alone was able to provide signs so the reader could believe and live? Even though glowing reviews and positive critiques have come out by the score since his book was published, I am not so enamored.

A Jesus whose virgin birth is questioned and easily clarified by historical fact, whose resurrection is a myth, whose miracles were not so much of physical transformation but rather liberating declarations that sick people were fully acceptable members of society, whose story is told just as ably and maybe even more

ingly by non-believers—this is not the Jesus of the gospels!

### The Christological controversy

The Christological controversy has certainly shifted over the last two centuries. It used to address the question of whether Jesus was truly God or just like God in his essence. Now it concerns whether or not Jesus actually was who the gospels paint him to be. He is presented as more and more human and less and less divine. It is thought that only through human inquiry and the application of modern historical and anthropological assumptions can any vestige of Jesus be rescued. You as the reader probably would not want to wade through my comments regarding the place of Albert Schweitzer's classic work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* and the place of Jaroslav Pelikan's work *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. To my mind both have shown the hollowness of a Jesus painted against the background of humanistic philosophies, liberal theology and cultural re-interpretations of the Jesus of the gospels.

### What does this mean to us?

What difference does this make for us? I think it helps us clear away the empty rubble of human invention and finite intellectualism and return once again to the essential question, Who is this man Jesus? And subsequently, what claims does he make on my life? When we read the New Testament writers themselves we are impressed

with the high Christology they portray. There is a recognition that at points where it was necessary, Jesus was indeed portrayed as a man. But he is more. And it is that "more" that has caused his story to be written and spoken for nearly two thousand years.

I see the person of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels making the following counter-cultural challenges to our society:

- A Christ-centered life vs. a church-centered life
- Transformation and renewal coming from the cross and not from any economic plan
- The kingdom is about service and not position or power
- Every person is of worth because Jesus died for all
- Spirit-powered commitment, instead of the sham and farce of cultural and intellectual religion
- A sense of urgency for the coming of Christ instead of thinking that this world is all there is and living it out in some sort of fateful desire that somehow things will eventually have some meaning

### A picture of Jesus

The other day I went into Borders Books and had a rolled pita and a cup of hot apple cider for lunch. As I was sitting at the table in the afternoon sunshine reading and contemplating, I looked up and saw two large pictures on the wall. One was a chalk drawing of Voltaire and the other was of Hemingway. As I pondered and thought about how each of these men had left their mark on human society, I almost

interestwished that a picture of Jesus was hanging up there, too. Of course, I reminded myself, we do not know what Jesus looked like so there could only be an artist's conception of Him hanging on the wall. But I asked myself such questions as, what if we knew what Jesus looked like? Would that make a difference? Would a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall bring to peoples' minds the mark that He has left on humanity?

My thoughts that afternoon ended with the realization that we do have verbal pictures of Jesus. This man Jesus is the Son of God and he makes claims on my life. This is his portrait

drawn by four people who did not know any better than to write what they had experienced and what they believed about him.

What is your view of Jesus? Who is he to you? Have you allowed the gospel writers to tell you their side of the story? And have your life and heart been touched, molded, and transformed by him? If not, are you ready to begin this quest and journey today? He is coming back. Do not be surprised when he comes to claim his own!

  
Curtis D. McClane



## BIBLE STUDY

### The Glory of Jesus

Leroy Garrett

*What follows is a condensation of remarks made by our good friend, Leroy Garrett, at Integrity's Thirtieth Birthday celebration in September 2000.*

I want first to say a word about my love affair with *Integrity Journal*. I have followed the journal all these 30 years, and I've been there applauding all the way. In looking for something special to say about *Integrity*, the entire *Integrity* family, I thought of how much *Integrity* is like my favorite philosopher, Socrates. There are good things to say about both Socrates and *Integrity*.

Socrates had four virtues that set him apart: courage, humility, honesty, and a sense of humor. His courage was evident when as "a gadfly," which he called himself, he stung the ancient Athenians out of their lethargy and caused them to think for themselves. That may have been a good name for *Integrity* — Gadfly!

The old philosopher's humility is seen in his recognition of his own ignorance. He apparently meant it

when he said, "I know nothing." He meant that in view of the vast world of the unknown, he knew nothing. Like Socrates, *Integrity* has been a good teacher all these years in that it has not pontificated. It has not claimed to have all the answers. Socrates' honesty or integrity was evident in his call for self-examination. As he put it in philosophy's greatest line: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Has not *Integrity's* message to its readers been a similar challenge?

Socrates' sense of humor is reflected in not taking himself too seriously. He took issues seriously, to be sure, but he could laugh at himself. He even joked with his disciples in the hour of death, as he was about to drink the hemlock. When they asked how they were to bury him, he insisted that they could not bury Socrates, or, if so, they would have to be quick, for he would soon take his flight to be with the gods. When they complained that they would have to make some disposition of his body, he conceded that they might do as they like with his body, but that they could never bury Socrates! Through the years I have seen that kind of poignant humor in *Integrity*. (Not the least of which is having women editors!)

### Passion for unity

In addition to being Socratic in tone and style, for three decades *Integrity* has had a passion for the unity of all God's children. In reference to that I want to say some things about our Lord's prayer for unity in John 17. There are three dimensions to this

prayer that I will address.

### 1. In praying for unity Jesus talked about glory.

Eight times during the prayer, Jesus refers to "glory" or "glorified." In verse 1 the petition is that the Father will glorify the Son so that the Son may glorify the Father. Verse 4 indicates that Jesus glorified the Father on earth by fulfilling his mission. Verse 5 relates glory to what the Father and Son shared before the world existed. Verses 1, 4, and 5 refer to the glory shared by the Father and the Son. In verse 10 Jesus says he is glorified in his disciples. Verse 22 points to the relevance of glory to unity: "The glory which You gave me I have given to them, that they may be one just as we are one." This indicates that it was God's glory that made the Father and Son one. That same glory was to make the disciples one. That was the Lord's prayer. In praying for unity he talked about glory!

In verse 24 the prayer for unity reaches into eternity: "Father, I desire that they also whom You have given Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which you have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world." While our Lord was yet on earth, in this prayer He saw Himself as already in heaven — the "where I am" referring to His eternal state. Jesus seems to be praying that his disciples might see something of His eternal glory then and there on earth. Glory was to secure the unity for which he prayed.

### The nature of unity

The divine logic is overwhelming: It was God's glory that made the Father and Son one. Jesus gave that same glory to the disciples that they might be one, even as the Father and Son were one. It was a oneness that would be strengthened by the disciples' witnessing Christ's eternal glory while yet on earth.

If glory is defined as God's presence, then we may conclude that God was in Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. And it was the Spirit (God's glory) that Christ gave his disciples that they might be one. This is consistent with Paul's view that it is "the unity of the Spirit" that is to be preserved through forbearing love (Eph. 4:2-3). This gives fresh meaning to the nature of unity. It is not doctrinal conformity or theological agreement that unites us, but the Spirit which Christ has given us. This makes unity a gift to be received rather than a goal to be attained.

### 2. In praying for unity Jesus talked about joy.

One would hardly expect one facing a cruel execution to talk about joy, and yet as Heb. 12:2 puts it, "Jesus, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame." Joy in this context must be a profound conviction and satisfaction that he is doing God's will, which will lead to a glorious reunion with the Father. That is, the joy of a mission accomplished. This may be the point of what Jesus prayed in John 17:13: "But now I come to You,

and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves." The fulfilled joy would be the glorious satisfaction of doing God's will as Christ did God's will.

**IT IS NOT DOCTRINAL CONFORMITY OR THEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT THAT UNITES US, BUT THE SPIRIT WHICH CHRIST HAS GIVEN US. THIS MAKES UNITY A GIFT TO BE RECEIVED RATHER THAN A GOAL TO BE ATTAINED.**

As a fruit of the Spirit, as Gal. 5:22 indicates, joy is an expression of oneness in Christ. Those who are one in the Body of Christ joyously receive each other "even as Christ has received them" (Rom. 15:7). Unity among believers is seeing Christ in each other, and joy is part of Christlikeness. This is why Jesus would talk about joy in his prayer for unity.

### 3. Jesus' prayer makes unity a means to a greater end.

As important as unity is, our Lord makes it clear that it is a means to a greater end: the conversion of the world: "Not only for these do I pray, but all those who believe on Me through their word, that they may be one, even as we are one, so that the world will believe" (John 17:20). This makes it clear that a divided church cannot win a lost world. We are to be ONE so that the world will be WON.

Our Restoration pioneers realized the significance of this prayer as they launched a movement to unite the Christians in all the sects. This prayer inspired that great motto of Barton W.

Stone: "Let the unity of Christians be our polar star." He understood that if the Old Ship Zion, the church, is to accomplish its mission in reaching the lost world it must keep its eye on the polar star, the unity of all believers.

Thomas Campbell understood the essential unity of the church when he penned that pregnant line: "The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." He saw that church as consisting of all those who believe in and obey Christ, wherever they are. And that church by its very nature is one and cannot be other than one!

Our pioneers saw what Paul was saying when he insisted that Christ cannot be divided (1 Cor. 1:13). They also saw division among Christians as "a horrid evil, fraught with many

evils," as Thomas Campbell put it, and therefore intolerable.

Once we see unity in the context of glory and joy, and as a gift to be received from the Holy Spirit, as did Christ and His apostles, we will think less of achieving it through unity forums or ecumenical conferences, however much these may help.

The Spirit's mission to the church is to make it one by conforming it to the likeness of Christ. As 2 Cor. 3:18 puts it: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

This is when our oneness in Christ will be evident, when we see His likeness in each other. ✱

*Leroy Garrett, a prolific writer and speaker, holds a Ph. D. in the Philosophy of Religion from Harvard University. He was the editor and publisher of Restoration Review for several decades and has written, among other things, The Stone-Campbell Movement. He and his wife, Ouida, send out an occasional newsletter called Once More With Love. He is a sought-after speaker, and has lately been inspiring his audiences with his soliloquies about restoration movement history in the guise of Raccoon John Smith.*



## Encounter with an Alien

Diane G. H. Kilmer

**D**uring the three weeks before Christmas last year I became intrigued with the idea of

Jesus being a kind of "alien" who came to visit our planet from his own dimension. Looking at the gospels' narrative from this sci-fi point of view led me to ponder over the difficulty many people experienced in recognizing Jesus for who he really was. Their preconceived ideas regarding what they thought God would look like or how God would act, if God ever did show up on planet Earth, blinded them to reality.

Interest in the idea of alien beings visiting our planet appears often in our American culture. Stories of angels, demon spirits, and interplanetary visitors pervade our fiction and film entertainment. The notion of a benevolent alien, who has super powers which can fix our problems, is also widely appealing.

When the Superman movie series came out in the 1970s and we moviegoers would watch Superman save people from one disaster after another, I remember once leaning over to my husband in the dark movie theater and whispering, "I wish there really was a Superman!" (However, it always did make me crazy that a little pair of black glasses could keep Lois Lane from recognizing her true love.)

In Spielberg's "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial," anyone who saw E.T. could recognize that this little being was an alien. Those closest to him (the children) knew E.T. used his powers for good. Problems developed when those who didn't know him (most of the adults) assumed E.T. would use his powers for evil. There's even a kind of death and resurrection segment in this story.

For me, one of the most emotionally gripping moments when characters in a story wished for an alien to rescue them was in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof." When a Russian army officer brings news of persecution to the Jewish villagers of Anatevnik, telling them that they must sell their homes and leave the village immediately, the villagers react with words of grief and outrage. One man asks of no one in particular: "Wouldn't this be a good time for the Messiah to come?"

I remember feeling grief for these fictional characters when I saw this movie, and for any Jews who did not believe that the Messiah had already visited our planet. But even in Jesus' day, many Jews didn't recognize him, in spite of the benevolent use of his powers for healing them, feeding them, helping them, providing them spiritual insight; despite the many clues he gave them.

### Authentic alien encounter

One of my favorite eyewitness accounts of a real earth woman encountering an authentic alien who came to visit our planet is found in John 4, where Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman at the well. Try to picture this story through any good sci-fi format and it has all the mystery and excitement of a good Star Wars episode; only better, of course, because it's true:

Jesus, the Alien, enters our planet's system through the womb of a devout young Jewish virgin. It's apparent that he's in fully human form; what is not so obvious is the fact that Jesus is also fully God. He arrives in Samaria with enough supernatural powers to zap all the bad guys. But he doesn't. God, instead, intends to use his supernatural powers for good, and very sparingly, if at all, because God does not want to distract humans from God's true mission.

### IN HER DAY RABBIS DEBATED OVER WHETHER OR NOT WOMEN HAD SOULS.

The other major character at the encounter is the human Woman of Samaria. When it comes to status, she's at the bottom rung of the ladder socially, spiritually, and economically. Rome, her poor nation's conqueror, considered Samaria insignificant. Jews hatefully considered Samaritans spiritual mongrels because the Samaritans had intermarried and did not keep all the religious laws.

Because she was born female, the Woman was a second-class citizen, had few legal rights, and was uneducated. Her Samaritan father considered her unclean from birth (does that mean he never picked her up or held her?). In her day rabbis debated over whether or not women had souls.

For having been married so many times (five), Jewish rabbis would consider her disgusting. Had she been widowed? Divorced? Passed down through the family as brothers died off? Other Samaritan women would judge her as a disgrace, for the Woman certainly acquired no social status by living with her current lover. And if she were childless, that would be worse. [If you've ever experienced discrimination for something you could not change, then you may have a tiny window of insight into the tremendously painful, hopeless existence of this woman.]

Here at the well in Samaria is God, morphed into a male human, encountering a low-class female human. All-Powerful meets all-powerless.

### Clues laid out

In John's account, the authenticity of Jesus' humanity is shown in how tired and hot and thirsty he is. But Jesus resists using his powers to satisfy these needs, because that would interfere with his true mission.

The Woman has chosen to go out in the heat of the day to get water, rather than during the cool of the evening when everybody else goes, and she passed two perfectly good water sources along the way. The Woman arrives at the well at noon, practically

guaranteeing to herself that she would not run into anyone while accomplishing her chore.

Yet sitting at the well at high noon is a male Jew. When he speaks to her, she stops in her tracks, stunned that this man would talk to her. But when he requests a drink from her cup, the Woman is more than astonished, because such a thing would be a totally alien thing for a Jewish man to do. She finds her voice and asks, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" But she might as well have said to him, "What planet did you come from?"

During the ensuing conversation, Jesus gently lays out clues regarding his true identity and power: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The Woman resists this God-and-water talk, a typical human counter-movement whenever God comes near.

Then Jesus lays out another clue to his identity: he claims to have power to quench thirst forever. The Woman's heart softens a bit here, and she expresses wishful thinking for such a possibility, because then she would no longer need to come to this distant well anymore (to avoid seeing people who were hostile to her).

Jesus has led the conversation right to the Woman's point of need: a relationship that is not broken or hostile. [Isn't the point when we acknowledge our need the exact point where Jesus is always willing to meet us? I've noticed that any delusions I

cling to of my own self-sufficiency are exactly what blocks God from moving in my own life.]

At this point Jesus chooses to use one of his powers—the power of omniscience, of all-knowing—to give the Woman another clue as to his real identity. By bringing up the subject of

### BUT SHE MIGHT AS WELL HAVE SAID TO HIM, "WHAT PLANET DID YOU COME FROM?"

her husband, in the course of the conversation Jesus reveals to her that not only does he know everything about the broken relationships in her life, but that he—who she perceives as a religious person—does not find her repulsive, in spite of her past. In fact, he uses the opportunity to respectfully compliment her honesty for saying, "I have no husband."

When Jesus says, "What you have said is true!", this isn't sarcasm, nor does he follow up with words of condemnation or judgment or shaming. If he had, the woman would have displayed anger or tears of emotional pain. Jesus not only clues her in on the nature of his mission—that he did not come to this planet to condemn it or use his powers for evil. But, by being a respectful, non-judgmental sort of religious person toward this powerless person, Jesus's atypical response opens up a whole, new possibility for this human Woman: hope.

Experience has taught me that people will not change or accept help to change until they *know* they are My

accepted and loved as they are, right then. I think this is what Jesus is wanting to do in this encounter with the Woman at the well: show his acceptance and care of her— as she is— so that she can move on to what he knows he can empower her to become.

### **"DID THIS MAN JUST TELL ME THAT HE IS THE MESSIAH? OR GOD? ..."**

But again the female human dances the dance of yielding and resisting that occurs when God offers a closer relationship with him. Uncomfortable with the painful subject of her string of broken relationships, confused by this holy man who doesn't fit her religious stereotypes, the Woman changes the subject.

Jesus meets her where she's at and gamely discusses the differences between the Samaritans and the Jews. But in doing so, another clue suggests that this holy man cannot be from planet Earth: Jesus openly dialogues with the Woman about spiritual matters, an experience unheard of in her culture.

Quickly Jesus explains why debating over where to worship is a moot point, then he casually tosses in another hint as to his own identity: "...for salvation is from the Jews." Then the Alien, Jesus, makes three startling revelations to the Woman which point to his true identity and mission:

1) Jesus offers to the Woman a redefined image of who God is— not a cold-hearted, judgmental God, but a

caring Father God.

2) Jesus redefines the essence of true worship as something not concerned with "where," but as something which engages a human's own spirit in loving, heartfelt worship of a Spirit Father-God that the worshiper truly, personally knows.

3) Then Jesus uncovers the prime directive of his mission on this planet: "The Father seeks such as these to worship him."

### **Secret identity revealed**

We can imagine the direction of this Woman's train of thought after Jesus's three revelations. Perhaps her thinking went something like this:

"A fatherly God who actively goes out searching for children who desire to really know the One they worship?

"How does this man in front of me know these things? Who would know such things?

"Wouldn't the Messiah know about this? Unlike the Jews who are expecting a political, nationalistic Messiah, we Samaritans expect the Messiah to be a great religious teacher, a restorer of true worship, a priest."

As the Woman ponders the clues laid out for her by Jesus, she says out loud: "I know that when the Messiah comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus says (translating from the Greek): "I that speak to you, I AM."

Now her mind races even faster.

"Did this man just tell me that he is the Messiah? Or God? I remember hearing the story of Moses asking God

how Moses could identify the God who sent him, and God had said, 'Tell the Israelites I AM has sent you.' But God? Here? Among us? In skin? Impossible! Audacious!"

And the Woman backs away from the man at the well, turns and runs.

But all the way back to her village the Woman must have been thinking "What if it's really true?", because by the time she gets there, she runs door-to-door, possibly speaking to people who haven't spoken to her in years because of the numerous broken relationships. Yet there she is in each doorway, breathless, saying to them: "Come and see! Could this man be the Messiah?"

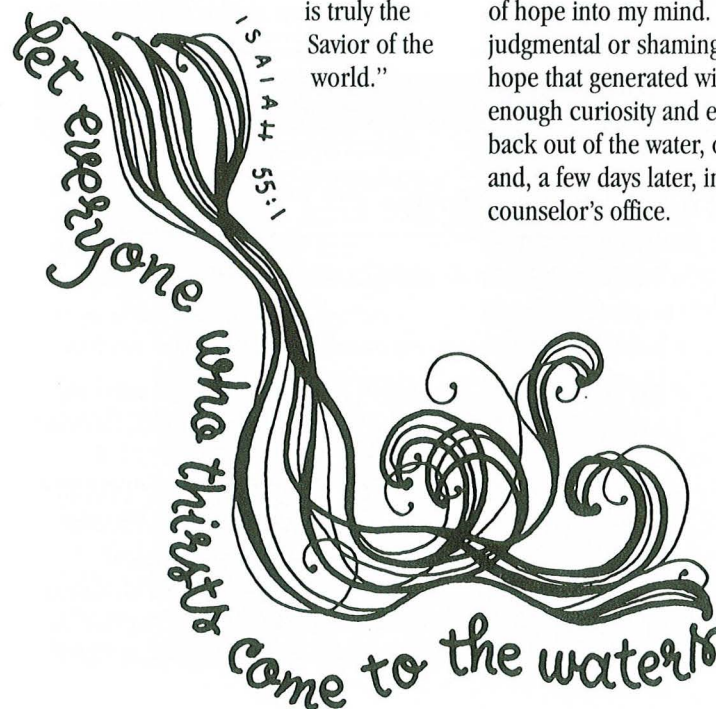
Within two days the villagers' own encounter with the Alien convinces them that "this is truly the Savior of the world."

### **Our own encounter**

I really identify with the Samaritan villagers, because, thanks to the Woman and others who met Jesus and told about their encounters, I investigated this Person for myself to see if he really was, and is, God among us. Now I have my own stories.

One particularly dramatic encounter occurred a few years ago, when I had reached a serious depth of depression. I didn't want to die, but I felt no emotional or physical or spiritual strength to go on living. I happened to be standing up to my neck in Lake Michigan water when I finally acknowledged my desperate point of need, then I cried out to God.

God moved close to me; I felt surrounded by a sense of God's Loving Presence. Then God spoke one word of hope into my mind. Nothing judgmental or shaming. But a word of hope that generated within me just enough curiosity and energy to walk back out of the water, onto the beach, and, a few days later, into a Christian counselor's office.





old, self-destructive ways of coping with life were identified through the work of the Spirit of God, my counselor, and myself. A new, healthier pattern of response to life's problems slowly developed within me. The process was painful. It felt like a part of me was being cut out, like surgery. The good news is that something new and better has been growing in its place.

Scientists and theologians use the same word for this process: regeneration. "Regeneration" was the one word that God spoke into my mind that day he led me out of the water. Like the blind man who said, "I was blind, but now I see!", I can now say that I

was once cripplingly sad, but now I'm not. When I drink from the same living water Jesus offered the Samaritan Woman, life's difficulties do not have the same power over me. In fact, I feel full of God's power, full of hope. I feel free ("For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom"). This is good news.

Anyone who has encountered the living Jesus has a story to tell; each of our stories is unique and meant to be told. Let's tell our stories to whomever will listen, because we are surrounded by people who are longing to know if there really is Someone from another dimension who has the power to save us from life's hopelessness. ❀

*Diane Kilmer, who co-edited Integrity alongside her husband, Bruce, for 11 years, serves the church as a teacher, worship leader, and certified Spiritual Director. She is also occupied in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan as a freelance writer and editor for business and school publications.*



## BOOK REVIEW

# Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament

Wright, Christopher J. H. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992)

Reviewed by Laquita Higgs

The title of this book may sound a bit ridiculous to you. After all, if you grew up in the Church of Christ back when I did, you learned that the New Testament tells us all we need to know about Jesus. Such reasoning told us that, though the Old Testament had some instructive and interesting

stories, it was only a "foreshadowing" of the important gospel which followed, and, as a "shadow," required little intensive study. Wrong again, I decided, after reading Wright's book. Christopher Wright is an Old Testament scholar and the principal of All Nations Christian College in Ware, England. He has written scholarly works on Old

Testament law and ethics, but *Knowing Jesus* is not for his fellow scholars but "for people who want to deepen their knowledge of Jesus and of the scriptures that meant so much to him."

Wright comments that his study of the Old Testament "never fails to add new depths to my understanding of Jesus" (ix-x), and his book certainly did the same for me. Though I first read this book four years ago, I keep referring back to it, and the rereading in preparation for this review has not lessened my regard for it. Wright begins by noting that the average Christian thinks of the New Testament as beginning with the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1:18, rather than with the preceding genealogy. Matthew uses that list of the ancestry of Jesus to connect Jesus to the Old Testament, demonstrating that Jesus had identity within a living culture and that he was shaped and influenced by the history and fortunes of his people. "It is this very Jewishness of Jesus and his deep roots in his Hebrew scriptures which provide us with the most essential key to understanding who he was, why he came and what he taught" (3).

Wright's first two chapters deal with Jesus as the completion of the Old Testament story and the fulfilment of promise. Wright's handling of the unique story of Israel's election, redemption, covenant, and inheritance brought it alive in a new way for me. All of God's dealings with Israel were in pursuit of his unfinished business—the blessing of all nations. "The Messiah was the completion of all that Israel had been put in the world for—i.e.

God's self-revelation and his work of human redemption. . . . The paradox is that precisely through the narrowing down of his redemptive work to the unique particularity of the single man,

## WRIGHT'S HANDLING OF THE UNIQUE STORY OF ISRAEL'S ELECTION, REDEMPTION, COVENANT, AND INHERITANCE BROUGHT IT ALIVE IN A NEW WAY FOR ME.

Jesus, God opened the way to the universalizing of his redemptive grace to all nations" (44). Noting that "the idea of promise is very much at the heart of the word covenant" (77), Wright has a brilliant exposition of the various biblical covenants, showing that the Old Testament covenants get to the heart of God's desire and purpose, i.e., "the election of the people of God, their ultimate role and mission for the sake of all nations, and the ethical characteristics that are required of them as a community in order that such a role and mission may be fulfilled" (85). Only after the resurrection of Jesus could his followers begin to comprehend; they understood the events of Jesus's life "in the light of the whole sweep of Old Testament promise. God had made a commitment. And God had kept his word" (102).

In studying the life of Jesus, we often wonder when or how he began to understand who he was and what he was supposed to be doing. Certainly, the Old Testament helped Jesus understand himself. For example, Wright contends that the words spoken

by God at the baptism of Jesus would have confirmed for Jesus his identity and his mission. The words, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17), were echoes of two and probably three Old Testament passages which would have

### CERTAINLY, THE OLD TESTAMENT HELPED JESUS UNDERSTAND HIMSELF.

been significant to Jesus. Those words were reminders of the authority and sovereignty of the Davidic king mentioned in Psalm 2:7; the obedient son, Isaac, who was willing to be sacrificed in Genesis 22:2; and the suffering servant figure in Isaiah 42:1. "Presumably God the Father knew that his Son, by age thirty, was so steeped in his Hebrew scriptures that he would not only recognize the texts but also understand all that they meant for his own self-identity. The words themselves were not new. What was new was the way the three passages are brought together and related to a single person with a unique identity and mission" (106). The Old

Testament, therefore, "provided the models, pictures and patterns by which Jesus understood his own essential identity" (135).

Wright is particularly adept at showing how the Hebrew scriptures molded the values of Jesus and helped him set the priorities and principles for his life. He demonstrates the importance of certain passages to Jesus: after his baptism, when wrestling in the wilderness with the future direction of his calling, Jesus must have been helped by the words of Moses to Israel given in Deuteronomy 4-11, as he used that section of scripture to find his answers to the Tempter, who was trying to divert Jesus from his calling. Wright also notes that Leviticus 19 had a major impact on the ethical teaching of Jesus, particularly in regard to compassionate and caring relationships. Wright's book helps the reader get into the heart and mind of Jesus; under Wright's hand, sections of scripture come alive in a new way. There's no "fluff" here but solid and useful teaching that will help the reader better to understand and appreciate our Lord. ❁

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M A R K 8 : 2 9  
PETER ANSWERED, YOU ARE  
THE MESSIAH



## New Life: The Forming, Transforming, Reforming Work of God

*Jeanene Reese*

The very act of creation itself attests that spiritual formation is central to human existence. The account of God creating his world in Genesis 1 and 2 portrays two significant attributes of God:

- 1) his terrible, wonderful, unimaginable transcendence which called the world into being and then to order and
- 2) his astounding, affectionate, personal imminence which fashioned the first human being from dirt and made the second from his rib—male and female formed in his image. The first new life was shaped by the spiritual nature of the Creator.

But tragically, sin entered and sullied God's perfection. The nature of the sin was twofold: humans questioned God's integrity and declared their autonomy, thus denying the need for God's guidance. One might conclude, in reading the last half of Genesis 3, that God reversed his earlier actions and punished his creation, but instead his concern is redemption. This concern is manifest in the provision of a covering, the promise of a seed of the woman, and the pronouncement of words of judgment

which were redemptive and not vindictive in purpose.

The very act of creation thus might be called the beginning of the passion of God. God has so entered into the world that God cannot but be affected by its life, including its sinful life. Because this condescending God fully relates to sinful creatures with integrity, and with the deepest possible love, God cannot but suffer, and in manifold ways.

### The ultimate love

The ultimate expression of God's redemptive and suffering love is seen in the cross and resurrection. The primary purpose of the cross was not only to provide for forgiveness of sin (sanctifying lost humanity) but also to offer newness of life (the attainment of holiness). In his ministry, Jesus speaks of himself as the "light of the world" (John 1:4), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and "the way and the truth and the life" (14:6). He declares that his followers "may have life and have it abundantly" (10:10). The apostle Paul speaks of this new life, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has

passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us a ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:17-18, cf. also Romans 6:4).

## GOD MAKES PROVISION FOR RENEWAL AS AN ONGOING PART OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

What is new is the whole world, or creation, and not merely the individual (the "creature" as we are more used to hearing it rendered). . . . The concrete, social-functional meaning . . . is that the inherited social definitions of which each of us is by class and category are no longer basic. Baptism introduces or initiates persons into a new people.

Spiritual formation, then, is a corporate process; God is transforming his people (all of us and each one of us) according to his divine intentions realized in Jesus Christ. The second new life is shaped by the spiritual nature of the Redeemer.

### Renewal

Yet being new is hard to sustain: time passes, sin distorts, experiences damage, relationships fail. So God

makes provision for renewal as an ongoing part of our relationship with him. "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18, cf. also Romans 12:2). The power to be changed from the inside out and reclaim the indelible imprint of God's image upon us is possible every day as we are reformed by him. The continual new life is shaped by the spiritual nature of the Counselor. ✱

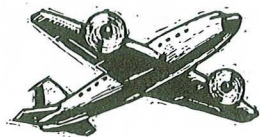
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## REAL-LIFE APPLICATION

### What Jesus Has to Say About Divorce

Pete Brazle

About eight months ago, I was approached by a sister in our congregation about performing a wedding for a co-worker of hers who did not belong to our church, or any other church for that matter. Both she and her fiancé had been previously married, and they wondered if I would have a problem with marrying them. I told them that I would be happy to meet with them to discuss things further. We met several times together to get to know each other, to counsel, and to pray. And this past spring, Katey and John (names changed) exchanged their vows and committed their love to each other.

Katey and John represent a growing number of people in our society and in the church, who have, for a number of reasons, experienced the pain of failed relationships and broken covenants in marriage. Of the last seven weddings that I have performed, five have been for couples where either one or both were married previously. And all of those, with the exception of John and Katey, involved folks from our congregation.

What follows is a sermon from a series that we recently finished from the Gospel of Mark. It is a sermon that I was not looking forward to preaching, just as the text from which it was taken describes a conversation that I

am sure Jesus did not really want to have; at least it's not a conversation that he would have initiated. But the issue of divorce is very real for people in the Church, for people who love the Lord and are committed to doing his will, and so it is an issue that must be addressed. I feel that I need to thank both Rubel Shelley and Rick Atchley for insights that I gleaned from their writings and sermons. More than that, I thank my God, who is "great in mercy and abounding in love" and who calls us all to a life of holiness.



The question came to Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Based on Jesus' answer to this trick question by the Pharisees and the discussion that he later has with his disciples, we have attempted to develop a theology of marriage, divorce and remarriage for the Church.

One thing that is clear to me from what Jesus says is this: The church should neither affirm nor encourage divorce. Divorce dissolves the marriage bond. That's a bond that God created. It is not to be taken lightly. It is to be held in high regard. Jesus refers to the way things were from the very beginning when he quotes from the book of Genesis by saying:

“At the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6-9).

**THE REALITY FOR THE CHURCH IS, HOWEVER, THAT SOME MARRIAGES DO FAIL. JESUS RECOGNIZED THAT, AS DID THE APOSTLE PAUL, AND WE MUST, TOO.**

### **The bottom line**

So, the bottom line. We (the Church) hate divorce! Because God hates divorce. That’s the word that God gives to his servant Malachi. Not only is it not the will of God, divorce also does incredible damage to everyone involved in it. Thus the encouragement from Malachi 2:16; “So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.”

### **The reality**

The reality for the church is, however, that some marriages do fail. Jesus recognized that, as did the apostle Paul, and we must, too. And while we neither affirm nor encourage divorce, we must be very careful not to treat brothers and sisters who have suffered the anguish of divorce as “failure statistics.” As one brother said, “They are people in the image of God whose anguish is deeply felt by the Creator. They are precious souls who bleed when cut, who cry when hurt, and who reach out for help when drowning.”

Our congregation seems to have more than our share of divorced persons. Perhaps that’s because what they find here is healing and understanding, instead of judgment. And while our elders and our members are committed to Jesus’ words about the permanence of marriage, we also see his hand of love and forgiveness extended to all, and his offer of sweet rest given to all who are “weak and heavy laden,” even those who have been burdened by divorce. Who are we to reject anyone that the Lord has called?

### **Jesus speaks**

At the beginning of Mark 10, Jesus and his disciples cross over the Jordan into Perea. The ruler of this region is Herod Antipas. Now here’s a guy who had marital problems. He left his own wife, and stole his brother’s wife (Herodias). When John the Baptist called Antipas on his adulterous lifestyle, he put John in prison. Then, at his wife/sister-in-law’s request, Herod put John to death. Now, Jesus is in his territory and, according to Mark, Jesus’ enemies want to trap him. So they raise the question about divorce as a trick—a “test.”

As he did so often with those who sought his undoing, Jesus doesn’t answer them directly. Rather he poses his own question. “What did Moses command you?” he asked. And his politically correct questioners replied, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” But in doing this, Moses was not endorsing divorce as a good thing.

Jesus explains that the reason Moses required a certificate of divorce was really to protect the woman. Due to the hard-heartedness of people in destroying their marriages, and in that macho culture, the practice of men tossing their wives out in the street when they had no further use for them, God provided for some protection, a “certificate of divorce,” before he could send her away.

A divorced woman had limited and horrible options in those days. She could turn to prostitution in order to stay alive; or steal, or beg. But if she wanted to live honorably, the best thing for her to do was to remarry as quickly as possible. But suppose her former husband “had it in for her?” He could refuse to confirm the divorce. And if she married someone else, the first husband had the option of claiming her as his own property, taking her back, and continuing to make her life a living hell. So then, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is really a protection for women.

Jesus, in discussing this topic, says nothing new or earth shattering to his hearers. He reiterates and emphasizes Moses’ teaching on the subject. God’s nature has not changed from Moses’ time to Jesus’ time to the present. And his moral laws continue to stand. God was not easy on divorce and remarriage at one time only to toughen up on it later.

Jesus, in making the statement that he does, confirms John the Baptist’s condemnation of Antipas and Herodias. They had defiled the institution of marriage. They had

committed adultery. And in doing so, they were guilty of faithlessness. And Jesus says, “That’s what Moses said a long time ago, and it still holds true. And no one had the right to break the covenant of marriage with his wife.”

**GOD WAS NOT EASY ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE AT ONE TIME ONLY TO TOUGHEN UP ON IT LATER.**

Now, here is a point that is critical, I believe, to understanding what Jesus is saying in this text; “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.” Jesus is saying that the adultery committed in this situation is by the man against his first wife, when he discards her for someone else. Maybe you’ve been taught that divorce may have to occur in certain situations to protect a wife from an abusive husband, or children from an alcoholic father, or some other hideous scenario, but she could never remarry because that would constitute adultery. That is not what Jesus says here.

Divorce is adultery. It is the breaking of the covenant—whether someone remarries or not. The assumption in both the Old and New Testaments is that divorced people will remarry. I have found nothing in my study to prohibit it. And couples who are in second marriages are not “living in sin.” The adultery occurred in the breaking of the first union. The sin has been committed. Sin requires repentance, which results in forgive

ness. And that whole process should cause the individuals involved in the new marriage to have new resolve to make it work.

## **COUPLES WHO ARE IN SECOND MARRIAGES ARE NOT "LIVING IN SIN."**

When I was growing up in Montana, my father built a friendship with Hank Snow (not the singer). Hank owned the Texaco station and was a pretty fair mechanic. My dad was a preacher, and that meant driving a car that was in constant need of repair. So Dad and Hank saw a lot of each other. They began studying the Bible together. The Snows started coming to church, and my siblings and I became friends with their four children. I still remember the day that Hank, Maggie, and their two oldest children confessed Jesus as Lord, and were baptized. What a happy day!

About a year later, we moved to Canada, and a young preacher from Texas, fresh out of preacher training school moved in. In talking to the Snows he discovered that, prior to their conversion, in fact prior to the birth of any of their children, Hank had been married to someone else. They had divorced. Then he met and married Maggie. The young (and I'm sure well-meaning) preacher proceeded to tell the Snows the "word of the Lord" concerning divorce and remarriage. He told them that, according to the Bible, they were

"living in sin," and, in order to make things right and please the Lord, Hank needed to be reconciled to his first wife. The Snows left the Church of Christ that day and never returned.

### **What the Bible says**

I believe that the Bible provides no situation for telling someone to leave their second (or third) marriage in order to set things right with God. In fact, if you look at Deuteronomy 24:1-4, one of the things that is strictly forbidden is reclaiming your former wife. If you are in a second marriage, then your priority is to make your present relationship the best that it can possibly be, to sanctify it before God, to commit it to God, to honor Him by making it as divorce-proof as possible.

### **What the church has said**

Sadly, in the church, we have been guilty of treating people who have gone through the pain of divorce as something akin to lepers. Even when they have done everything they can think of to make their marriage work, sometimes it just isn't going to work. So they divorce and are told that they cannot marry again (there was no sexual infidelity), they cannot utilize their spiritual gifts to bless the church, they can't teach. And if one of them does get married, then that person will be "kicked out," which will then free the other to go ahead and get married, because now they are the innocent party, the first one having committed adultery by remarriage. Is your head spinning yet? And in our legalism, we

have scoffed at God's mercy, and his ability to make us righteous.

Who are we to say that divorce is unpardonable? God's forgiveness is big enough for rapists, and hit-men, and drug lords and the Jeffrey Dahmers and the Bill Clintons of the world, but it can't handle the divorcee?

The redemption and grace that I read about in the New Testament is for every human, regardless of his or her sin. And divorce is not a sin that has its own special requirements of celibacy. Divorce so often brings heartache and consequences that will last a lifetime, but the Bible does not support the notion that someone who has offended God by having broken their marriage covenant must live out their life in brokenness.

Jesus Christ forgave those who were murdering him. He most certainly can and will forgive the man who divorces his wife, and vice versa. And God's Word certainly does not support the misguided notion that a woman who is divorced against her will has no right to fall in love and marry again, unless the jerk who threw her out isn't already sleeping with someone else.

Jesus' words to the woman caught in the very act of adultery hold true for anyone who has become an adulterer through divorce, "Go now and leave your life of sin." I think what he is

saying is, "Get on with your life. From now on, live a life dependent on the mercy of God; a life that will help you to quit doing the things that got you into this horrible mess in the first place" (see John 8:1-11).

**AND GOD'S WORD CERTAINLY DOES NOT SUPPORT THE MISGUIDED NOTION THAT A WOMAN WHO IS DIVORCED AGAINST HER WILL HAS NO OPTION TO FALL IN LOVE AND MARRY AGAIN, IF THE JERK WHO THREW HER OUT WASN'T ALREADY SLEEPING WITH SOMEONE ELSE.**

From the beginning, God intended for a man and a woman to commit to each other for life in the covenant of marriage. Divorce was not a part of God's plan. It seems apparent that the way to make bad marriages stronger and good marriages even better is to commit the relationship to God. At the heart of Mark's gospel is Jesus' statement about denying self and taking up one's cross to follow him. Denying self is at the heart of making a marriage work. It is at the heart of every relationship that Christians pursue. And part of following Jesus means trusting in his power to forgive, to heal, and to get us headed in the right direction again. ✨

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There are several striking passages in the New Testament that speak of Jesus' wonderful and beautiful obedience to God's will. In Philippians 2:7-8 we are told that He "made himself nothing" and that He "humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" In Hebrews 5:8, it is said that although Jesus was the Son of God, he "learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him . . ."

Moreover, (in Romans 5:19), His obedience is contrasted in its effects with the disobedience of Adam: "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." It is usually easier for us to comprehend the fact that Jesus' obedience in submitting to a sacrificial death brought us our initial salvation, than to realize that *His* obedience enables *us* to be obedient.

It is not only that Jesus presents us with a model of obedience to follow,

but that He empowers us to obey God. As Paul expresses it in Ephesians 2:10, we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works," and we are able to do these good works because we are secure in His love and grace, rather than being driven by an attempt to earn our salvation. Being new creatures in Christ, we are not so much *bound* to be obedient as we are *free* to be obedient. This is what Paul means when he says, "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

As we meet around this table, we are renewed in our strength and motivation to obey God, because Jesus carried out the ultimate cosmic task of obedience: unfairly but freely taking on Himself the penalty of our disobedience. Partaking of this bread and wine, we realize that our ultimate responsibility is to be at peace in the assurance that our salvation rests not on what we have done or can do, but on what He has done and is continuing to do. We are able to fulfill the spirit of the Law, because He has fulfilled the letter. ❀

*Here is the next in our new series of meditations on the Lord's Supper by Elton Higgs. An Integrity Board Member, Elton is also an Elder at the Trenton, MI, Church of Christ; Professor of English at the University of Michigan; husband to Laquita; and Papa to Rachel. We hope you are blessed by his thoughts.*



## The Centrality of the Cross

### *The Message of Galatians*

Royce Dickinson, Jr.



The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle; I have betrothed myself to it; it is my wife." So said Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who created the set of lenses through which Galatians and Romans have been read in Protestant churches for nearly five hundred years. The doctrine of grace, from the pen of Paul in Galatians and Romans, transformed Luther's life. Luther, in turn, forever changed the course of church history.

Speaking of church history, Galatians has, on more than one occasion, ignited the flames of spiritual reawakening, spiritual revival, and spiritual renewal. I do not believe that it is an overstatement to say that how we understand the issues and teaching of Galatians determines in large measure what kind of doctrine is proclaimed, what kind of message is preached, and what kind of lifestyle is practiced.

#### **Galatians and Christian liberty**

Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty because of Paul's stress on freedom from a performance-based approach to pleasing God. To rely on rules and rule-keeping, even if the rules are

taken from the Mosaic Law, is to abandon the gospel's message of grace. "Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God's grace" (5:4).

Perhaps one of the first things to strike even the casual reader of Galatians is the incredible intensity with which Paul writes. His tone is brutally blunt and his polemic is personal, pointed, and passionate. So, what is the problem? Why is Paul so upset? He is deeply disturbed because the Galatian Christians' preoccupation with keeping the Mosaic Law is splitting their churches along racial lines, separating Jews from Gentiles. Their rule-keeping-gospel is a divisive gospel. As long as their center of attention is on what they are doing, they will be blinded to what God is doing—for where there is no grace, there will be no unity.

Paul refers to some "agitators" or "trouble-makers" who have a selfish motive in advocating their rule-keeping-gospel. These teachers are more interested in making a good showing for themselves and in avoiding persecution than they are in the welfare of the Galatian Christians (1:7; 4:17; 5:10; 6:12-13). In Paul's

absence, these teachers have come along and they are saying something like this:

**AS LONG AS THEIR CENTER OF ATTENTION IS ON WHAT THEY ARE DOING, THEY WILL BE BLINDED TO WHAT GOD IS DOING—FOR WHERE THERE IS NO GRACE, THERE WILL BE NO UNITY.**

“Paul taught you about Christ. We’re here to teach you some fundamentals of the faith that you need to incorporate into your belief system in order to complete your understanding. Jesus was a Jew, and to become like Jesus you need to take up the basic teachings of the Law. You men need to be circumcised, and all of you need to keep the commandments given by Moses. These rules have been the will of God for centuries!

“After all, how are you supposed to live your lives? The only scripture you have is Jewish Scripture. And the only teaching you have received from Paul about living your new life has to do with the language of “Christ in you” or “life in the Spirit.” What does that mean? How much better to have more specific rules, some dos and don’ts, along with some oughts and shoulds!”

### **Paul’s reaction**

Now, I ask you, what is so wrong with all of that? These teachers are simply going back to the Bible—the only Bible they had. Their message is based upon the Law of God. They are not proclaiming a doctrine of human origin nor are they promoting a lifestyle of immorality. So what is the

problem? Listen to Paul’s reaction:

“I am surprised at you [churches of Galatia]! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. Actually, there is no “other gospel,” but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell! We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell! . . .

“You foolish Galatians! Who put a spell on you? Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross! Tell me this one thing: did you receive God’s Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it? How can you be so foolish? You began by God’s Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power? Did all your experience mean nothing at all? Surely it meant something! Does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you because you do what the Law requires or because you hear the gospel and believe it? . . . I am worried about you! Can it be that all my work for you has been for nothing? . . . You were so happy! What has happened? . . .

“Listen! I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, it means that Christ is of no use to you at

all. Once more I warn any man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the whole Law. Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God’s grace. . . . You were doing so well! Who made you stop obeying the truth? How did he persuade you? (1:6-9; 3:1-5; 4:11, 15a; 5:2-4, 7 TEV).

### **The sufficiency of the cross**

For Paul, what is at stake is the very heart of the gospel: the sufficiency of the cross. Anything and everything must be rejected as heresy that seeks to remove the cross as the centerpiece of Christianity. The cross of Christ is sufficient or it is worthless. There are no other alternatives. Listen again to Paul:

“Yet we know that a person is put right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ, never by doing what the Law requires. We, too, have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be put right with God through our faith in Christ, and not by doing what the Law requires. For no one is put right with God by doing what the Law requires. . . . But if a person is put right with God through the Law, it means that Christ died for nothing! . . . As for me, however, I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (2:16, 21b; 6:14a TEV).

### **Where is the Cross in the Church?**

Among the Churches of Christ,

there are those who fear that we are in the midst of disturbing and difficult times. The uncertainty of the future robs them of any certainty for the present. In our quest to be distinctive, we have lost our identity. In our quest to be non-denominational, we have lost our purpose. We are afflicted with

**WITHOUT A CLEARLY FOCUSED CENTRAL CORE GOSPEL EVERYTHING IN THE FAITH BECAME EQUALLY IMPORTANT.**

anxiety because we know neither who we are nor why we are. In our quest to restore the church, we have lost sight of the cross. And where there is no cross, there will be no church—for it is the power of the cross that creates the church.

In his book, *The Core Gospel*, published in 1992, Bill Love traces the trends in the Restoration Movement regarding our preaching of the cross. He concludes as follows: “From Campbell and Stone to the mid-twentieth century the general trend was away from the cross toward a gospel of the church” (p. 305). In other words, our focus moved from the cross of Christ to the Church of Christ. Although this shift was subtle, it was, nevertheless, profoundly destructive. Love offers this penetrating and painful analysis.

“Without the gospels we lost touch with the source of our faith. Without the Suffering Servant we lost our will and reason to serve and suffer. Without the scandal of the cross we more and more sought respectability

and popularity. Without a clearly focused central core gospel everything in the faith became equally important. Almost nothing was a matter of opinion, all was a matter of faith.

### **THERE IS NOT ROOM ON THE CROSS FOR BOTH JESUS AND OUR LIST OF ISSUES.**

Without the nutrition of the atonement we craved more and more the sweets of fads and methods. Without Jesus' death to unite human beings in a consciousness of sin and the joy of salvation, we were powerless to bring about unity. Not only could we not unite Christendom, we could not even avoid division among ourselves. Without the cross of Christ there was nothing to check our pride, convict us of our sin, assure us of our salvation, infuse us with joy for evangelism, and steel us for Christian living in a harsh and cruel world. Without the resurrection there was no sure ground of hope for the peace that passes understanding" (pp. 257-258).

### **Good news**

But there is, as Love points out, good news! Since the mid-twentieth century, "more of our preachers have been moving back toward a Christ-centered gospel" (p. 305). It seems to me that the remedy for our disorientation regarding the church is a re-orientation to the cross.

Too many of us are weary and worn pilgrims seeking a church home that we cannot find. May I humbly suggest that the reason our searches are fruitless, and ultimately futile, is

because we are looking for a fellowship that rightly keeps all of the rules. There is no such fellowship; and even if we could find it, we ourselves would fail, for we are unfaithful rule-keepers. And so we go on seeking and struggling, striving to find a fellowship that faithfully does what we as individuals have never been able to do.

These pilgrims often ask church leaders this question: where do you stand on the issues? This, then, is followed by a litany of issues. My brothers and sisters, if I have correctly understood Galatians, and I certainly pray that I have, I believe Paul's answer to this question would be that "the issues" are not the issue; the issue is whether or not we will make "the issues" the gospel. There is not room on the cross for both Jesus and our list of issues. If the crucified Christ is sufficient, and I believe that He is, then any preaching or any practice that nullifies the sufficiency of the cross is "another gospel," which is really no gospel at all.

We must not forsake the cross by focusing on what we do rather than on what God has done and is doing. We must not quench the Spirit by relying on our 'getting it all right' rather than on His power to make us live right. And we must not forfeit the liberty to love by judging one another's performance rather than loving others as Jesus loves us.

The thrust of Paul's argument in Galatians is this: by giving Himself up to death, Christ has set His people free. They are now summoned by God to live, by the power of the Spirit, in a free

life of loving service. This life of loving service is "the law of Christ." Once again, listen to Paul:

"As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' But if you act like wild animals, hurting and harming each other, then watch out, or you will completely destroy one another. . . . Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ (5:13-14; 6:2 TEV)."

To borrow again from the words of Martin Luther, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."

### **A confession**

I have a confession to make. For several months now, I have been studying the Epistle to the Galatians.



My confession is this: on more than one occasion, I have wished that I was studying something else. Why? Because this little letter has shaken me. It has rocked me so hard that, at times, I have felt as if I had suffered a spiritual stoning. I have been forced to realize that the cross has not always been the focus of my preaching and the foundation of my practice. I have been forced to raise some challenging and convicting questions. Is my faith founded on the cross of Christ and on His cross alone? Is my fellowship with other Christians based upon the cross of Christ and on His cross alone? If the cross is sufficient to save the lost, why has it not been sufficient to unite the saved? If the cross is sufficient to

### **IF THE CROSS IS SUFFICIENT TO SAVE THE LOST, WHY HAS IT NOT BEEN SUFFICIENT TO UNITE THE SAVED?**

draw us to God, why has it not been sufficient to draw us together? If God is so loving, why have His children been so unloving? From this point forward, I have decided and determined, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, that I will subject my words and my deeds to this threefold test: Does it exalt the crucified Christ? Does it draw



people to the cross? Does it unite all those drawn to the cross?

But I must also confess that while I have experienced anxiety, I have also experienced assurance. I have felt peace, knowing that my salvation is not dependent on my rule-keeping but is the gift of the grace of God. I have felt joy, knowing that the transformation of my life is not dependent on my strength but is the fruit of the Spirit of God. And I have felt the freedom to love, knowing that my love for others is

not because of their works but because of their worth in the eyes of the One who died on the cross. I will share with you what has become my personal prayer: I want no life but Christ, no law but the Spirit, no liberty but to love.

And so, with Paul I say, "I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This is the life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me" (2:19b-20). ❀

*Royce Dickinson, Jr. and his family moved to Michigan one year ago. They came from Minnesota where they had ministered with the Brooklyn Center, MN, Church of Christ for 15 years. His wife, Terri, is a registered nurse and they are the parents of three sons. Royce is the pulpit minister for the Plymouth, MI, church of Christ and is an adjunct instructor of Religion at Rochester College, Rochester, MI.*



## BENDING THE TWIG: CHRISTIAN PARENTING ISSUES

### Teaching Manners

Laquita M. Higgs

**F**lexibility and consistency. Those two traits might seem incompatible, but both describe the parenting style of Mark and Cheryl Frost. Add a lot of love and creativity, and you can understand how they have managed to be parents, not only to their own two children, but to 18 foster children, many with severe problems.

Mark is the long-time minister at the Trenton Church of Christ (Michigan), and Cheryl is the coordinator for

children's education. Both truly love children. Mark has served for 18 years as a popular teen-week leader at Michigan Christian Youth Camp, and Cheryl, against great odds, has led the effort to begin Children's Outreach, a ministry to the underprivileged in River Rouge, a Detroit suburb, which is to open in February 2001. Cheryl has been a director of Headstart and now conducts workshops on child development and discipline.

Elton and I recently spent a fascinating evening with Mark and Cheryl, during which we interviewed them about their approach to parenting. Their daughter, Caren, who recently graduated from Abilene Christian University, was also present, so we had her perspective as well. The conversation provided us with food for thought regarding our own role as parents, and we think you will learn from them, too.

### Prepare for the future

According to the Frosts, a parent's goal should be to help a child prepare for the future, especially to love God. Clear, concise boundaries, appropriate to the age of the child, should be consistently enforced, with much attention given to the clear communication of those boundaries. Caren confirmed that her parents spent a lot of time talking and explaining. Those boundaries, enforced with love, do much to develop a strong sense of trust and security within a child.

What should a parent do when a child steps over those boundaries? The child should have to suffer the natural consequences (within reason, of course) of that action, or you may have to think up a consequence for him. Mark admits that once or twice he found himself quite angry with his children, and he suggests that it is wise to wait until the anger has passed before setting the consequence.

### Flexibility is vital

Within those set boundaries, however, flexibility is vital. Often a

parent must re-evaluate and try another approach when one approach is not working. This takes creativity—and a lot of prayer. Cheryl also suggests that young parents look around them at church and find more mature couples who are doing or have done a good job of parenting. Talk to them frequently and get ideas of various ways to handle situations.

Be flexible enough to meet the different challenges which come at different stages. Yes, those teenagers can sometimes be obnoxious. The Frosts were especially challenged when dealing with their teenage son, Alan, who had a mind of his own. One of the difficulties was the difference in parenting styles: Cheryl was more strict, whereas Mark was inclined to compromise. Then Mark realized that Alan was using the situation to his own advantage, and Mark knew he had to start backing up Cheryl's decisions when she had already communicated them to their son.

### Choose your battles

Another hint: be flexible enough to choose only the more important issues to enforce; don't fight every battle. Evaluate what is most important. Mark remembers how he kept trying to push Alan to do well in his schoolwork. He was getting nowhere. Finally, Mark decided that he was pushing the wrong issue—that what was more important was to develop good character. Mark went so far as to tell Alan that when he next went to a teacher's conference, he would refuse to talk about academic work, but

would instead ask if Alan was honest, kind, and responsible. And guess what? Alan began taking his schoolwork more seriously.

### Relax, enjoy, and learn

Be flexible enough to learn. Cheryl suggests that a parent try to learn about child development, and recognize that children develop in different areas at different rates. Study the motivational structure of each child; for instance, with their daughter, Caren, the reward system worked well. Cheryl especially recommends Karyn Henley's *Child-Sensitive Teaching* (paperback, \$10.99), which, among other things, outlines individual differences and the needs of childhood. Cheryl believes that children often misbehave at those junctures when they are trying to integrate new developments in their lives. They are trying to figure out who they are and what they can do. She also encourages parents to relax and enjoy a child at each stage. Even difficult stages don't last, and at each stage there are unique joys.

**AFTER HEARING HIMSELF SAYING, "YOU'VE ABUSED MY TRUST, SO NOW I CAN'T TRUST YOU ANYMORE," HE REMEMBERED THAT GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE WOULD NOT SAY THAT.**

### Family identity

Early in their children's lives, the Frosts tried to give them a sense of family identity; one of their ways of doing that was to have frequent family

time together. And those times didn't have to be elaborate; one of their fond memories was when the children would jump into their parents' bed for a loud "family fun time" (which sounded rather like a pillow fight!). But within that sense of family, the Frosts were flexible enough to encourage individuality. They recognized that a child might not always dress as they might prefer, and they had no certain career expectations for their children.

Caren appreciates that her parents encouraged and supported her at whatever stage she was in, and especially that they trusted her. The Frosts think it is important to develop trustworthiness. They believe that parents should extend trust, though not huge amounts of freedom (there is a difference!). Allow children a little more trust than they've already proven themselves worthy of. Mark says he had to learn what to do with abuse of that trust. After hearing himself saying, "You've abused my trust, so now I can't trust you anymore," he remembered that God's mercy and grace would not say that. Mark learned not to remove trust completely, but to take the child back to an earlier stage of trust so that the child could prove himself again and go forward.

### Current issues

What about some of the current issues that face today's children? The Frosts advise that parents talk about definite issues, such as drugs and materialism. If there is a television program that a child particularly wants to watch, but you have doubts about it,

don't just automatically refuse, but sit down and watch it with them. Use that as an opportunity to talk about the good and bad points in a program—and whether Jesus would want us to watch it.

Cheryl notes that children today are often pushed to grow up too soon, and she suggests that children not be permitted to be involved in too many things. Her children were allowed to have no more than one extra activity beyond their church activities. In this connection, Cheryl recommends a book by David Elkins, *The Hurried Child*.

Cheryl also notes that some parents today give their children too much freedom, with no boundaries whatsoever. For example, some are allowed to choose what they want to eat, so that Mom ends up preparing special food for each child. On the other hand, some other parents have a fortress mentality and are so strict that the children are not allowed to solve problems and to learn from their mistakes. A balance is needed.

"PKs"

How did the Frost children deal with being the "preacher's kids"? In the first place, no decision about permitted behavior was made on the basis of any special expectations that they had to act like a preacher's child. The family tried

to keep a balance between the concerns of the family and church work, and they made the children a part of the ministry as much as possible. Mark appreciated the fact that his being a minister gave him a more flexible schedule so that he could attend ball games and tennis matches in which the children were playing. When his son was a teenager, Mark committed to going to work earlier every day so that he could be home when his son got home from school. The Frosts noted how often the church was the extended family needed to help raise their children; many times the church provided the right relationships and input into the children's lives at just the right time.

Were they able to have regular devotionals? No, but they used every opportunity to teach informally, such as in the car and at the dinner table. The children were encouraged to ask questions, and any question was permitted. Perhaps more importantly, Mark and Cheryl lived for God in front of their children. Their prayer during those child-rearing years: "Lord, these are your children. Help us to do what we need to." May that be our prayer.

Send your suggestions or comments to us at 9 Adams Lane, Dearborn, MI 48120, or at <Ehiggs@umich.edu>. we can make it a major focus."

*Laquita Higgs, a graduate of Abilene Christian University, has generously offered time, talent, and spiritual direction to the Integrity ministry for more than 20 years. She is occupied as a professor at the University of Michigan, and as parent to six-year-old Rachel.*

*Says Laquita, "Alexander Pope, the 18th century English poet, said, 'Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.' Accordingly, we call this regular feature of parenting advice 'Bending the Twig.' All of us as Christian parents should be committed to a great deal of unashamed 'twig bending' for the Lord, and we need each other's help to do it."*



## The Virginal Conception of Jesus

Jeremy Hoover

**Editor's note:** This article was originally written as course work for Harding University's graduate school. It is academic in form and content and thus differs from our usual offerings, but we perhaps that is precisely why we chose to include it. Let us know what you think!

In this paper, Hoover refers to many authors. While we have eliminated footnotes from this article for your convenience, a list of sources cited can be found at the end of this paper. You may find these useful for further study. More of the author's notes and footnoting can be obtained by emailing us at <noreen@integrityjournal.org>.)

From the time of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 AD) until the nineteenth century, the virginal conception\* of Jesus was accepted without a doubt. Not until after the so-called Enlightenment period did the historicity of this event come into question. The basis for this questioning was the high view of science and what could be determined in a scientific laboratory by scientific methods. This way of thinking, called modernism, led many scholars into discounting entirely any of the Bible's miraculous claims because they were not scientifically "testable," preferring to refer to them instead as myths.

Despite the intense efforts of scholars to discredit the miraculous in the gospels, something can be gathered from the work of the gospel writers. Upon a close reading the narratives themselves appear not to be interested in history *per se*, but in the theological importance of what is

being narrated. In spite of this appearance, however, the birth narratives do have common traits. Although much has been made of where they differ, Ulrich Luz has noticed nine points of agreement between the two stories, which he attributes to "community tradition."

Most scholars are not willing to admit as many points of agreement as Luz; many will admit only to the minimum of agreements between the two texts. At the core of the virginal conception stories is this: The names of Jesus' legal parents (Mary and Joseph), the place of birth (Bethlehem), and the proposition that Mary conceived while still a virgin. It is from this that we must begin the search for historicity. This article will analyze the New Testament evidence and determine whether, based on the New Testament evidence alone, it is possible to posit an historical basis for the virginal conception.

\* "Virginal conception" is to be preferred to "virgin birth" since the precise question at stake for this paper (and this issue) is the manner of the conception itself (i.e., by God or by a human) rather than the nature of the birth. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, new updated ed., The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 517.

### Differences in the gospel narratives

It has long been asserted that the differences between the two narratives are just too difficult to come to terms with. For example, Marcus Borg lists as one of three reasons he cannot accept the virginal conception narratives as historical "the striking differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts." Therefore, a brief look at the stories as they are found in Matthew and Luke will be helpful in sorting out the differing theological purposes.

### Matthew

It becomes obvious upon reading Mt 1:18-25 that the point is not to prove that Jesus was born of a virgin, but rather to solve the problem presented by the genealogy—how is Jesus the legal son of Joseph if Joseph did not aid in his conception? Verse 16 breaks the pattern that has emerged through the genealogy, and Jesus is presented as born of Mary and not (by implication) begotten by Joseph. Therefore, the virginal conception narrative becomes an explanation and extension of the genealogy.

Furthermore, the events in 1:18-25 (the annunciation scene) are reminiscent of the Old Testament accounts of the births of Ishmael, Isaac, and Samson. Davies and Allison have outlined the annunciation pattern. They see four elements present in each of the Old Testament parallels and also in Matthew's account. This suggests that Matthew was using an accepted pattern when he wrote; it does not

suggest whether he has historical facts at his disposal and fit them into this pattern.

Two aspects contained within the annunciation pattern are significant: The citation of Isaiah 7:14 and the instructions to Joseph to not be afraid. Many scholars have pointed to the fact that Isaiah 7:14 was understood both within the LXX and in its interpretation to refer to a young woman who was currently a virgin but later would conceive and bear a child. Therefore, Matthew's use of this citation gave it a distinctly Christian usage. The question then becomes why Matthew would do this, and there are really only two options: He was trying to narrate an actual event or he was trying to cover-up an event. Jane Schaberg has presented an elaborately contrived argument in an attempt to show that Jesus was illegitimate. She argues that Mary was raped, and when Matthew uses Isaiah 7:14 he makes no mention of the man who impregnated Mary. She suggests that Matthew's point in using Isaiah 7:14 was to demonstrate that Jesus' coming into the world was divinely willed, and even predicted. Geza Vermes argues along a similar vein. He picks up on the term "virgin" and suggests that the term was used elastically. He proceeds further by stating that marriage could occur before some girls had even reached puberty. Therefore, a girl could conceive "while still a virgin in respect of menstruation, i.e., at the moment of her first ovulation."

These are attempts to deal with the text as Matthew narrates it. Much more

appropriate is the comment by I. Howard Marshall: "It remains possible that this language, while mythological in colouring, bears witness to some real event which cannot be described in literal terms and which remains veiled in mystery." This is a much more balanced approach to dealign with what the text suggests.

Pertaining to the angelic instructions to Joseph, Cantwell has proposed a very engaging theory that would also allow for the supernatural conception of Jesus. He observes that most commentators suggest that Joseph was told not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife because Joseph was waffling since he thought Mary was an adulteress. However, Cantwell argues that this does not harmonize with how people act. He argues that if Mary knew she had conceived via the Holy Spirit, that she would have communicated this to Joseph. He thinks that Joseph was aware that the child in Mary's womb was divinely conceived, and that he was going to send her away because he was literally afraid of the divine! Therefore, the angel literally means that he ought not to be afraid to do such a thing.

In view of this study, it is easy to see how Matthew may have taken an already existing tradition focusing on the virgin conception and adapted it to fit various Old Testament themes.

## Luke

The key concern in Luke is whether or not Luke even portrays a virginal conception. For example, Strauss claims that he cannot find an act of

divine supernatural intervention in the expression of Lk 1:35. Presumably he accepts that a man other than Joseph impregnated Mary. Fitzmyer sees a two-step progression in Luke regarding the conceptions of John the Baptist and Jesus: If the conception of John required a miracle, then the conception of Jesus would require a greater miracle. Hence the conception by a virgin. Schliermacher suggested that "an historical element may be present, but hardly can it be as narrated." He prefers to see the narratives mythically representing some sort of historical truth. Much more helpful here is Nolland's suggestion that the best explanation of the text (not history, but the text) is the one based on a natural reading—that Jesus was conceived without the intervention of a human father. This last approach is superior simply because it lets the text speak without seeking to undermine it in some way.

## Other New Testament Allusions

An effort to discover any historicity that might be inherent in the virginal conception narratives can be bolstered if it can be demonstrated that other New Testament books were aware of it. Some scholars have isolated texts in Mark, John, Romans, Galatians, and Philippians that might shed some light on this issue.

**Mark 6:3.** At issue here is the meaning of the comment by Jesus' adversaries, "Is not this one . . . the Son of Mary?" (Mk 6:3). The question asked by scholars is whether this means that Jesus was known this way

because he was illegitimate or for some other reason (e.g., Joseph was dead and Jesus was referred to by the name of the living parent). McArthur has done extensive research in response to this question. After reviewing all the possibilities and their parallels in the Jewish literature of the time he concludes that "son of Mary" carries no special connotations beyond what it explicitly states, namely that Jesus was known as Mary's son. In all probability this text neither refers to an illegitimate birth nor to a knowledge that Jesus was conceived while Mary was a virgin.

**John 1:13 and 8:41.** In John 1:13, there is a minor text variant that allows the plural form to be read as singular, which can change the meaning: With the singular form, the verse reads, "the one who was begotten not from blood nor from the will of the flesh nor from the will of man but from God." In this reading, it would appear that there is a variant of John that sounds like it supports the virginal conception. This reading, however, should be rejected. First, it is a very minor reading. Second, it is easy to see why church fathers would latch onto it in connection with the divinity of Jesus. Third, read singularly, the phrase does not make literary sense with vv. 12-13. Therefore, a plural reading should be accepted as the most authentic reading.

The second case is 8:41. This verse is seemingly the most likely candidate for proponents of Jesus' illegitimacy, for here Jesus seems to be accused of illegitimacy. This accusation takes the

form of a denial by the Jews: "We have not been born from fornication" (i.e., "we are not illegitimate"). The argument is that they are accusing Jesus of being such and arguing that they are not of the same stock. John Spong takes this further, combining the accusation in 8:41 with 8:48 (where Jesus is called a Samaritan, a half-breed). He asks, "Could that also mean that he was born of violence, of rape, of adultery; that as a child of sin he bore the curse of illegitimacy?" Fortunately, other scholars have sorted this problem out in more satisfactory ways. John Meier argues that the context is to be understood spiritually, that the Jews are engaging Jesus in a spiritual argument. What they are really saying is that they are not guilty of spiritual infidelity to (or apostasy from) God, sins which are described in the Old Testament in terms of fornication. Further, he adds, Jesus is the one on attack here; he raises the question of their births, not vice versa. This line of reasoning makes much more sense of the evidence. It does, of course, eliminate this passage from having anything to do with the virginal conception.

Analysis of these passages has not shed light on the issue of whether other New Testament passages are aware of the virginal conception.

**Romans 1:3-4.** Some questions have been raised concerning Paul's use of "the one who was descended from the seed of David according to the flesh" in relation to Jesus. Read plainly, and with Paul's attribution of sonship only in connection with the

resurrection, it seems to discount the virginal conception and require a natural conception and birth. John Spong finds this significant. In connection with this verse, and also with Gal 4:4-5, Spong argues that there is no hint of anything unusual about the birth of Jesus. Further, he says, "Paul's clear assumption was that the birth of Jesus was completely normal and completely human." Despite Spong's use of charged language many scholars agree with him in essence. It is obvious that this passage does not refer to the virginal conception; however, neither is it obvious that this is Paul's clear assumption. James Dunn sees *kata sarka* juxtaposed with *kata pneuma* in verse 4. Therefore, so far as Jesus' role in God's saving purpose through the gospel was concerned, Jesus' physical descent, however integral to that role, was not so decisive as his status *kata pneuma*. It is best to read this passage as part of a creedal formula, as suggested by Dunn, and not as an affirmation by Paul concerning the circumstances of the birth of Christ.

**Galatians 4:4.** This verse concerns the understanding of "born of a woman." Does Paul say this because he is unaware of a male father, or because he is only aware of a normal birth process for Jesus? Spong is correct when he writes that Paul himself was unconcerned with this matter in this letter. It is obvious that Paul in Galatians is simply concerned with elements of salvation history, in which the arrival of Christ signaled a new epoch. It goes too far, however, to

draw the conclusion that Paul was entirely unaware of the virginal conception. Much more down to earth is the statement by F. F. Bruce that this phrase "throws no light on the question whether [Paul] knew of Jesus' virginal conception or not."

Further, Betz suggests that this phrase may also be part of a creedal formula, similar in nature to that found in Romans 1:3-4 and discussed by Dunn. Betz also argues that Paul has implemented this formula without regard to its "usability" in his argument. That is, not every element in the formula may be useful for Paul. Betz contends that Paul merely wants to show Christ's existence as a human being "under the law" — "it is a definition of human life." Consequently, this phrase also ends up being unhelpful for the examination of Paul's knowledge of the virginal conception.

**Philippians 2:5-11.** It has been suggested that this incredibly powerful, pre-Pauline hymn about Christ contains material pertaining to the question of the virginal conception. The question that arises pertains to whether this pre-existing hymn is aware of the virginal conception. In other words, how does it portray the incarnation of Christ? Verses 6 and 7 apply to this matter, but they become somewhat problematic, because v. 6 describes Christ in his pre-existent form, but v. 7 suggests that in some way he was born/became made in human likeness. Ash thinks that "being made" (in human likeness; v. 7) "implies the conception and birth process." To the degree that this hymn

might do so, it is unclear what sort of conception is imagined. This line of reasoning becomes problematic because nowhere in the NT are pre-existence and virginal conception brought together; such an idea is later theological speculation. It is very likely that this hymn is imagining the incarnation of Christ in servant form without speculating on the nature of that incarnation.

### Conclusion

The analysis of these Pauline passages has not been conclusive for determining awareness of the virginal conception. The apparent dependence by Paul on pre-existing creeds and hymns has obscured matters further. It is very likely, as Betz has suggested, that Paul has latched on to these elements without regard for their "usability" or theological "correctness" in his own thought. It cannot be known either way whether Paul accepted, or was even aware of, the virginal conception. The examination of these passages is inconclusive.

After analyzing the virginal conception narratives in Matthew and Luke, and surveying possible allusions in the other two gospels and the Pauline literature, it is clear that the virginal conception as presented by Matthew and Luke is a unique attestation. It is neither affirmed nor denied by the rest of the New Testament. However, the absence of corroborating evidence should not dismiss the narratives, for if nothing else the virgin conception has at least two attestations—Matthew and

Luke. Further, if one considers Jewish thought from the first centuries BC and AD, it becomes clear that there is no pre-Christian Jewish tradition that suggested anything of this sort, namely that the Messiah would be conceived miraculously by a virgin. Therefore, why would a Christian interpreter couch the story of the virginal conception in Jewish terminology and take such a risk if there is no historical basis at its core? This is not to argue that the virgin conception narratives are historically accurate in every detail; this approach clearly falters since Matthew and Luke differ themselves on key points according to their themes.

However, it is to suggest that at the core of the virgin conception narratives is a seed of historicity that the authors of Matthew and Luke took, reshaped for their purposes, and presented as truth. In order for them to have taken such a risk by writing about the birth of Jesus by means of an unprecedented virginal conception there must have been an historical catalyst. This is a valid conclusion when the evidence is examined, and it is the conclusion of this writer. ❀

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## Just Like Jesus

Max Lucado. Word Publishing, Nashville, TN, 1998. 173 pp ISBN 0-8499-1296-2.

Reviewed by Henrietta C. Palmer

God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to have a heart like his. He wants you to be . . . *Just Like Jesus*.

God has such high aspirations for us that he will continue to change and shape us “along the . . . lines . . . of his Son (Rom. 8:24, *Message*).

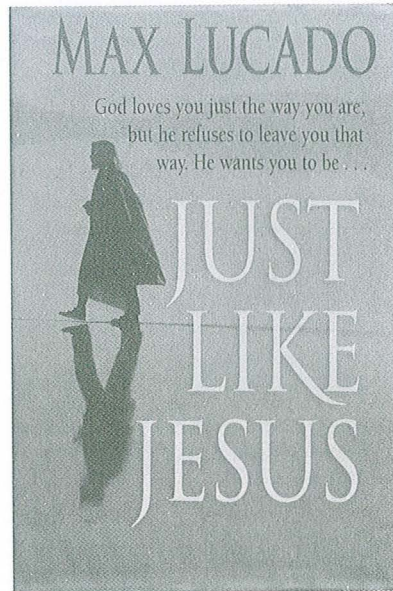
Max Lucado’s prayer for all who read his words is a simple one: “May God open your eyes so that you can see Jesus. And in seeing Jesus, may you see what you are called to be.”

In his “folksy,” story-telling way, Lucado helps us to understand the changes God will make in us if we allow Him to change our hearts and become just like Jesus.

Each chapter includes Bible verses which describe the kind of heart that God wants us to have:

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- A Forgiving Heart
- A Compassionate Heart
- A Listening Heart
- A God-Intoxicated Heart
- A Worship-Hungry Heart
- A Focused Heart
- An Honest Heart
- A Pure Heart

Henrietta Palmer is a Bible Study leader and a frequent contributor to Integrity.



A Hope-Filled Heart  
A Rejoicing Heart  
An Enduring Heart

Lucado asks these questions: “Do we know what it’s like to see Jesus? Do we know what it’s like to ‘fix our eyes on Jesus’ (Heb. 12:2, NIV)? Do we earnestly search to know Jesus? Are we hungry in our quest?”

What awaits those who seek Jesus? *Nothing short of the heart of Jesus.* “And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him” (2 Cor. 1:18, *Living Bible*). ❁



## The Desire of the Everlasting Hills

Thomas Cahill. New York: Doubleday, 1999, 353 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 0-385-48251-5

Reviewed by Noreen Bryant

And what is the ‘desire of the everlasting hills?’ What could be the meaning of this phrase, taken from the blessing of Jacob on his son Joseph, the last of the patriarchs? Is not the desire of the everlasting hills that they be saved from their everlastingness, that something new happen, that the everlasting cycle of human cruelty, of man’s inhumanity to man, be brought to an end?”

Cahill writes this book about the world before and after Jesus as a third in his “Hinges of History” series, the first two being *The Gifts of the Jews* and *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

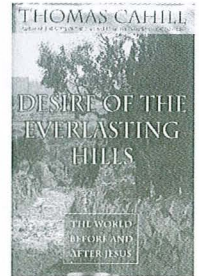
I haven’t been able to find out about Cahill’s academic credentials, and sometimes his theology is a little iffy (but then, so is mine), but what makes this book sparkle is Cahill’s easy style. He paints a sweeping picture of history to help us see the historical context in which Jesus lived (“He was a small-town Jew, born in a bad time for Jews. . .”)

Cahill is a great storyteller, and *Desire* is mostly lovely reading. Here’s an excerpt:

. . . they lead us to the ultimate question about Jesus: does his story make sense? For though we may admire his

compassionate and uncompromising moral teaching, his healing care and prayerful life, his human story (like all others’) ends in suffering and death, a death as overwhelming and incomprehensible as any of us shall ever undergo. What is there here to nourish us?

“The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world,” said the Johannine Jesus. We do not have to adopt a theology of substitution—the theory that God required a spotless human victim to make up for human sin—to make sense of the crucifixion. Such a theory, it seems to me, is a remnant of prehistoric paganism and its beliefs in cruel divinities who demanded blood sacrifice. But Jesus’s suffering body is surely his ultimate gift, for it is his final act of sympathy with us. From all ages, human suffering has been the stumbling block that no life can avoid and that no philosophy has been able to comprehend. In the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Job, God refuses to explain why good people must suffer. In the New Testament, he still does not explain, but he gives us a new story that contains the first glimmer of encouragement, the only hint of an explanation, that heaven has ever deigned to offer earth: “I will suffer with you.” ❁



Noreen Bryant is Integrity’s Managing Editor.



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