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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## The Subversiveness of Christmas

By Bruce Burgess

Jesus' birth was subversive. Why would divinity taint itself with humanity? Why would the High and Lifted up stoop to become so lowly? Surely, that One would come in unparalleled glory, majesty and might, making it absolutely certain that *this* One was clearly different from all others—super-human. Further, this One would be sure to arrive to the right people; people with authority, with significant status, people high enough to be worthy of welcoming such a One; in human terms: high and mighty as would befit visiting royalty.

Jesus' birth was subversive. It occurred under the radar. It happened to an unlikely mother, for example. The one chosen to bear the Son of God was a maiden from the town of Nazareth, a small village in Galilee. Nazareth was a village of possibly 480 people, stuck in the middle of nowhere. Nazareth did not have a great reputation. In John's Gospel, after Philip met Jesus and responded positively to his call to follow, he sought out Nathaniel and said to him: "*We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*" Philip replied: "*Nazareth! Can any good thing come from there?*" With this reputation it is no wonder people were sceptical about any deliverer coming from there.

So Jesus was born to a maiden from a very small town with nothing out of the ordinary to recommend it. It was just out of

the way. The 'father' was another nondescript individual named Joseph, a carpenter of little note, whose only claim to fame was that he was a descendant of the line of David.

Then there was the method of conception, which bypassed the normal procedure, resulting in a pregnant teenage girl who had been left with the message that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit's overshadowing action. Try explaining that to your fiancée and see how well it goes over!

What in heaven's name was God thinking? Why couldn't God have waited a year or so till Joseph and Mary were happily married? Then there would have been no questions raised about infidelity. But remember, this is a subversive birth, very subversive!

Then there is the issue of the occasion and location of the birth. Who is writing this script? Joseph, knowing that he must respond to the census being taken by the Roman Empire, which will require him to return to his Davidic home of Bethlehem, decides to make this difficult journey with Mary in her ninth month of pregnancy. As with most men, this was well thought through!!! And had he called ahead for a reservation!? Oh no! At journey's end the inns were full so they had to shelter in a barn—the *ideal* place for the Son of God to draw his first breath. The elegant aromas of cow poop and sheep dung! Really, who is writing this!?

Who in their right mind would situate the birth of the world's Savior in a smelly barn? It makes me wonder if, when Jesus was growing up and he forgot to shut the door behind him, any of his family complained: "Come on Jesus, were you brought up in a barn?" The Son of God plunked in a manger of straw. I used to work on a ranch. Straw is not the cleanest material going.

Now that the momentous event has transpired it is time to let the world in on the greatest secret ever kept so far. And who are they that are chosen to be the first recipients of this divine adventure? Shepherds! Shepherds were not a romantic group of entrepreneurs, out in the fields with their happy little flocks, lounging by their fires. In the time of Jesus, shepherds were not just lowly workers; they were despised. Shepherding was considered one of the worst jobs going. They were out in the fields, watching fickle and foolish sheep, in danger from wild

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18, 19).*

*“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new?’ It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, 10).*

The Bible writers display their familiarity with the tension felt by all humans; the tension between longing for something different to what has already been experienced, and disappointment at not being able to discover it.


In Scripture, religious hope is definitely on the side of the new. God is everywhere linked with newness. New covenant, new heart, new Spirit, new birth, new heaven, new earth, and a new Jerusalem.

It would be a mistake to suppose that this bias toward things new amounts to biblical support for ‘inevitable progress’; a doctrine believed and espoused for most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Modern technologies and the enormous uprush of novelty occasioned by them are not necessarily divine because of their implicit newness. Here, Ecclesiastes sounds a note of caution. What is called ‘new’ is often recognized as ‘old’ in a new guise. This helps explain

why so many in the brave new world are fatigued, bored and exasperated.

The divide between what is genuinely new and that which turns out to be more of the same, runs along a line separating God, and things God does, from humankind, and things done by them. New things crop up every second of every day, but each eventually fails before the judgment of the ancient Preacher who said: “There is nothing new under the sun.”

There have been moments and seasons marked by God’s intervention in history. At those times, something truly new occurred. The divine mingled with the mundane, and the world was changed. With the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, that which alone is not obsolete, is never passé, became fixed in human experience. Eternity appeared as one of us. How striking that God never entered the world as a book. Ultimate personality could only be revealed in a person. Infinite love needed to take form in a loving being. But those who were firsthand witnesses knew that such love could not have been produced by anyone else they had ever known. They beheld love that would never end, never grow old.

The Christmas festival helps us celebrate the good news of God’s love; a well of water springing up into everlasting life. All, who drink from this well, know it as the sweetest drop that ever wet their lips. They ‘forget the former things.’ They do not linger over what has gone before. They have tasted something truly new. Having drunk from the water that Christ gives, they never thirst again. 

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animals, rarely bathing. They were the least likely recipients of an earth-changing, dramatic revelation from the heavens about the birth of Messiah. And really, who would take them seriously?

The shepherds told everyone what they had seen and all were amazed. What we may miss is that all were amazed that *shepherds* were privy to such a remarkable visitation. We do not hear of any other groups of people searching out this marvellous event; except for those three wise guys from the East. Three astrologers—three pagan worshipers—whose

testimony would have been ignored by Jews; with the exception of king Herod who saw the birth of any ‘king’ as a direct threat to his rule, and who took terrible action to prevent this child from growing up.

Both groups of witnesses to this grand event would be prevented from testifying in court because of their backgrounds, which makes their witness suspect. Are they really the best God could come up with? Unless, of course, God’s intent all along was that this birth be subversive. What does it say that God chose the lowly of the low all the way through this unlikely story? Did the ‘qualified’ people say, →

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# The Wise Man

By Frederick Buechner

“Go and find me the child,” the king told us, and as he spoke his fingers trembled so that the emeralds rattled together like teeth. “Because I want to come and worship him,” he said, and when he said that, his hands were still as death. Death. I ask you, does a man need the stars to tell him that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king? He took us for children, that sly, lost old fox, and so it was like children that we answered him. “Yes of course,” we said, and went our way. His hands fluttered to his throat like moths.

“Why did we travel so far to be there when it happened? Why was it not enough just to know the secret without having to be there ourselves to behold it?”

“So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us. It was night and very cold. The Innkeeper showed us the way that we did not need to be shown; a harebrained, busy man. The odor of the hay was sweet, and the cattle’s breath came out in little puffs of mist. There the man and the woman and between them the king. We did not stay long. Only a few minutes as the clock goes, ten thousand, thousand years. We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left.

“I will tell you two terrible things. What we saw on the face of the new-born child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown or a bat, this death that he would die. We saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to stay with him would be to share that death, and that is why we left—giving only our gifts, withholding the rest.

“Now brothers, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him is the only life?”

-Frederick Buechner: THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT, pp. 69-71. 



**The overwhelming splendor of the gospel of Christmas consists in precisely this—that the Lord of glory, of his own will, entered into our life of grief and suffering, and for love of men bore all—and more than all—that men may be called to bear.**

**William Temple: DAILY READINGS, pp.183.**


“No,” or was God making a statement about how the Divine would function in the context of humanity? Was there a subversive message in the midst of this subversive coming?

Maybe something was being said about the kinds of things and people who have value in the divine economy. Maybe simplicity and humility are highly valued in God’s way of seeing things. Didn’t the angel address Mary as “highly favored” one? Highly valued one?” Perhaps God values the simple and humble over the mighty and powerful. Perhaps God desires to lift up the despised and marginalized; those who are weak and powerless, to demonstrate divine favor to those rejected by others. Isaiah’s prophecy reads: “*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others, he was despised and we held him in low esteem*” (Isaiah 53:2, 3).

The message for us who name ourselves ‘Christ-followers’ is to resolve to commit to those in our world who fall into the same categories of simplicity and humility, rejection and marginalization. God expects that we do the unexpected

sometimes. If it appears to be somewhat outrageous, it might just be from God. If it involves resisting the obvious or the popular, it just might contain divine direction. Over and again, in Scripture, God does the unexpected; perhaps no more obviously than here in the story of the ‘Incarnation,’ complete with the most outrageous story lines imaginable. Its’ outrageous nature argues for its authenticity. If someone sat down to try and invent a birth story for the Son of God, there is no way on God’s green earth that they would have come up with such an absurd plot. It defies logic for God to set it up this way, unless it is intentionally subversive; designed to protect Jesus from enemy forces intent on his destruction and designed to define in advance something of his methods and ministry, and God’s priorities in the plan of salvation.

Jesus’ birth was subversive, but now the secret’s out and it is our task to tell it in words and our living and our relationships. The secret is out! Let’s tell the world.

- Bruce Burgess: Pastor, IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH. TORONTO, CANADA. 

# A Prison Christmas

By Helmut Thielicke

When Christmas comes around, almost every year a little photo stands on the bookshelf facing my desk. The photo is particularly dear to me. I have it arranged so that my eye falls on it from time to time as I work. It doesn't have a bit of value as a work of art. Even the composition of the scene shows no evidence of what one would call great theatre. One sees a large group of mostly younger men in long white robes with candles in their hands walking towards an altar. At this altar, quite obviously a product of the early Victorian period and therefore not at all edifying from an aesthetic point of view, stand, kneel, and lie four men who regard the approaching group with the utmost fright. One holds his hands in front of his eyes, as though he were blinded, another appears to be heading for cover, and a third makes a gesture of surrender. The intention is clear: the white-robed figures are the heavenly choir of angels, and the four men at the altar are the amazed and frightened shepherds.



Often one of my friends, on a visit, reaches for the picture and asks with a little surprise, "Why do you have that standing here?" When that happens I like to let my visitors guess a little, so I ask them, "Well, what do you think; who are these people in the picture?" They say, "Well, who could it really be? One is inevitably struck by the total, the downright gripping expression on the faces of the performers. They are obviously totally 'involved,' and the drama is certainly much more for them than mere play. Apparently these are people from a Christian congregation, perhaps a select group from the congregation. One could possibly go so far as to suggest that it might possibly be a Bible College or something of the kind."

When that happens I can hardly wait to end the guessing game and let the cat out of the bag. "You have completely missed the mark," I tell them. "But I can understand how you came to your conclusion. The people are indeed caught up in the Christmas miracle; they have taken it to heart. They are not at all *acting* their devotion; they are really into it. It is not a Christian men's group, and it's not a Bible college either. It is a photograph of the Christmas celebration at a prison. Some years ago I spoke there and visited the prisoners in their cells. They listened—well, I can only say like starving men. Later the prison chaplain sent me this picture. Since then I can't part with it. 'You see this young man?' the chaplain said, 'he killed his friend in a fight over a wristwatch. Year after year he is given the same part. He kneels before the manger and says, "I lay in fetters groaning, you came to set me free." I tell you, when you hear that coming from him, it really gets to you.'" Why has this picture captivated me so completely and why does it affect my visitors in the same way? It's the flicker of the Christmas candles and the gentle festival of love in contrast to murderers and criminals who are here posing as angels. A miracle has been caught by the photograph.

The miracle recorded in this picture is that persons come to the manger out of a very shady past and the Christmas light strikes their messed-up lives. By thus striking them, however, it brightens them up. Although they come from bolted cells

and will later return to lock and key, now they may stand beneath an 'unlocked' heaven. Some among them told me that they, like the prodigal son who did an about-face in the pigsty, have learned to believe in this light of blessing, and have become new men because of it. They are no longer acting; they are serious about it. They are not reciting verses by rote, they are confessing them. And when one of them says, "I lay in fetters groaning, you came to set me free"—that is a miracle.

Perhaps one or two of my readers is thinking, "He's really asking too much. Of course criminals should have pastoral care, and, as far as I'm concerned, Christmas celebrations too, but to put me, an upstanding citizen on the same level as them is pushing Christian charity too far.

It would indeed be wrong, and out of harmony with the Christmas gospel to say that all the differences between gifted and handicapped, successes and failures, righteous and rascals are evened out. The point is entirely different and I will try to state it in two different ways. One of the central thoughts is that, at Christmas, God comes to us in the depths. I do not need first to have religious feelings, out of which I then produce some internal and external results, before he comes to me. He comes in the stable, to the disconsolate, the sick, and the despairing; he trudges in the long line of refugees; and if everyone and everything should desert me in my final hour, I can say, "If I should have to depart, depart not from me." Then he comes even to the dark valley of death. Crib and cross are of the same wood.

And now the second: At some time or other in our lives, everyone of us is poor. Perhaps it is not visible from the outside for we human beings know very little about one another. Perhaps I am worried or have been burdened with guilt, or am sick or am goaded by consuming desires that are never fulfilled. The prisoners in the picture represent this side of me. In my case it is kept dark, but in theirs it has broken through. Out of this dark no light could be brought; there is nothing but shadows, labyrinths, and dead ends with no way out. Now the reflection of another light shines on their foreheads. Long before they began to ask whether meaning and hope were still possible for them, someone was already on the way. Christmas tells us that God has already come for us, no matter where we are. And when everything seems to be finished, that is when God's possibilities begin.

Therefore, Christmas will be understood first by those who have no more human hope. One need only read the advice to the lovelorn columns in the papers to know how numerous they are. Even when they feel God has deserted them, when he seems pushed aside by a gaping nothingness, they can still, with one last thought, grasp the fact that someone is here who wants to be on their side and who does not disdain being identified with them.

—Helmut Thielicke: BEING A CHRISTIAN WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN. pp. 99-102. 