

Love Builds Bridges

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 13th, 2009 • Pastor Chris Lankford

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

~1st John 4:9-11 (NASB)

1) The Solution To The Riddle

- A) Even when we experience the greatest moments of the Christian life (phenomenal worship experiences, extraordinary teaching, intimate prayer experiences, earth shattering miracles, etc.), our experiences are limited!
- B) Our earthly experiences are like a riddle (1st Corinthians 13:12), an image in a foggy mirror. We see in part, but until we see Jesus face-to-face, we remain “in process.”
- C) As we anticipate Christ’s amazing first coming (this 3rd Sunday of Advent), we also anticipate an ultimate solution to the riddle of life, Jesus Christ (cf. Numbers 12:6-8).

D) Jesus Christ's birth was an extraordinary bridge which God provides to reach mankind (Romans 6:23). This is a bridge to experience God's amazing love (1st John 4:9).

2) Jesus' Love Is The Bridge Between God & Mankind

- A) God was motivated by love in sending Jesus Christ to mankind to be the bridge by which God saves His people, which brings God ultimate honor (Philippians 2:9-11).
- B) We know that it is not mankind who first loved God (1st John 4:10), but God who has reached mankind through Jesus Christ -- God built the bridge and then walked across the same bridge to reach us!
- C) Jesus Christ did not come to simply do nice things, loving things, beautiful things (although He did all these things). Rather, Jesus Christ came to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of people in order to love others.
- D) A great example of Jesus Christ's "bridge building" love was His interaction with the "woman at the well" (John 4:7-42). The love of God initiates & builds bridges which support the weight of truth for the salvation of many!

3) The Purpose Of Bridge Building

- A) Our purpose in loving others is not simply to be "nice people" or "good people" or "Christian people" (nothing wrong with these things). Rather, we love one another in the same way God loves us (1st John 4:11).
- B) Love with the purpose of building bridges that can support the truth of a relationship with Jesus Christ! Filled by His Spirit of love (4:12), we testify that Jesus is the Savior of the world (4:13) -- loving because He first loved us (4:19).

Engaging Advent

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means “the approach” or “the arrival.” The Latin verb is *advenio*: “I arrive. I come. I am coming.”

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. One of the ways that this season has been marked (for many years) is through Christmas cards.

I always appreciate Christ-centered messages on Christmas cards... A favorite of mine is the message of the angels... “Peace on Earth, and goodwill toward men...”

The first Christmas card is thought to have been sent by a British army officer named Dobson in the early 1840’s.

The first commercially produced Christmas cards were sold in England by Sir Henry Cole and J. C. Horsley in 1843. Those first cards outraged Christians, because they portrayed a group of people drinking. Here is a picture of that first Christmas card...



It was at least twenty-five years before Christmas cards were widely used. Since then, cards have become a major industry. This year alone Americans will spend well over one billion dollars on Christmas cards, not counting postage!

When you send your Christmas cards, or extend Christmas greetings to others, what is your message? Is your message more reflective of the remarkable birth of Jesus Christ, or is it more of a Hallmark holiday greeting? Our message to the world reflects how remarkable we feel about Jesus Christ's birth.

Perhaps it would do us well to be reminded of how remarkable a birth (and life) Jesus Christ lived as we anticipate Him through this Advent season!

One of the remarkable aspects of Jesus Christ's birth was how it fulfilled so much Old Testament prophecy. One of those prophecies is about the Messiah's "virgin birth" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25). Popular writer and pastor, Dr. John MacArthur, has some interesting observations about Christ's birth in light of the advanced technological age in which we live...

The Uniqueness of the Virgin Birth

"In July 1978, a little girl named Louise Brown was born in England. At 5 pounds 12 ounces, Louise was a tiny baby, but what made her birth truly extraordinary was that she was the first child ever born who was conceived outside the human body. Little Louise Brown was the first "test-tube baby."

Since then, many other children have been conceived by *in vitro* fertilization. It is amazing – unthinkable just a few years ago – but it is not miraculous. Conception occurs by a male seed fertilizing a female egg. Birth occurs normally. The only difference is the place of conception.

Scientists are experimenting with other amazing techniques to enable conception and birth by other than natural means. For example, sperm and eggs

may now be frozen and thawed out to conceive an *in vitro* fetus, even after years of dormancy. For years scientists have experimented with *parthenogenesis*. The name comes from two Greek words, *parthenos*, meaning “virgin,” and *genesis*, meaning “beginning” or “birth.” Literally, then, *parthenogenesis* is the science of virgin birth. Laboratory experiments have revealed that in some cases parthenogenetic life can be generated in some animals. Among honeybees, for example, the unfertilized eggs develop naturally into drones. Artificial parthenogenesis has been used to produce silkworms since 1888. Many forms of invertebrates and plants may be reproduced fairly easily through parthenogenesis. In recent years frogs and rabbits have been reproduced by *parthenogenesis* in laboratory experiments.

But *parthenogenesis* can reproduce only genetically identical species. Frog eggs, for example might be stimulated to develop by *parthenogenesis* into living frogs, but all of them will be female frogs, genetically identical to the mother who laid the eggs. Notably, *parthenogenesis*, cloning, and other experimental forms of reproduction have all proven impossible on humans.

Even in the face of modern science, Christ’s conception remains unique. Science can never explain how a virgin, a woman who had never had a sexual relationship with a man, could give birth to a child. It was a miracle of God, the greatest conception miracle in history.”

In the midst of our culture of wrapping paper, sending/receiving Christmas cards, and decorating the Christmas tree, it would seem very easy to walk through this season feeling nothing particularly remarkable. The crush of consumerism often squeezes out the miraculous.

And yet, Jesus Christ, sent by God for the redemption of the world, was completely unique. His birth, His life, His death, and His resurrection. All part of a unique story given to all and celebrated at Christmas. Are you carrying the message of Christmas to the world? Is the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation pressing into this season for you? Is He manifest in you?

Advent Reading #3 ~ Philip Britts

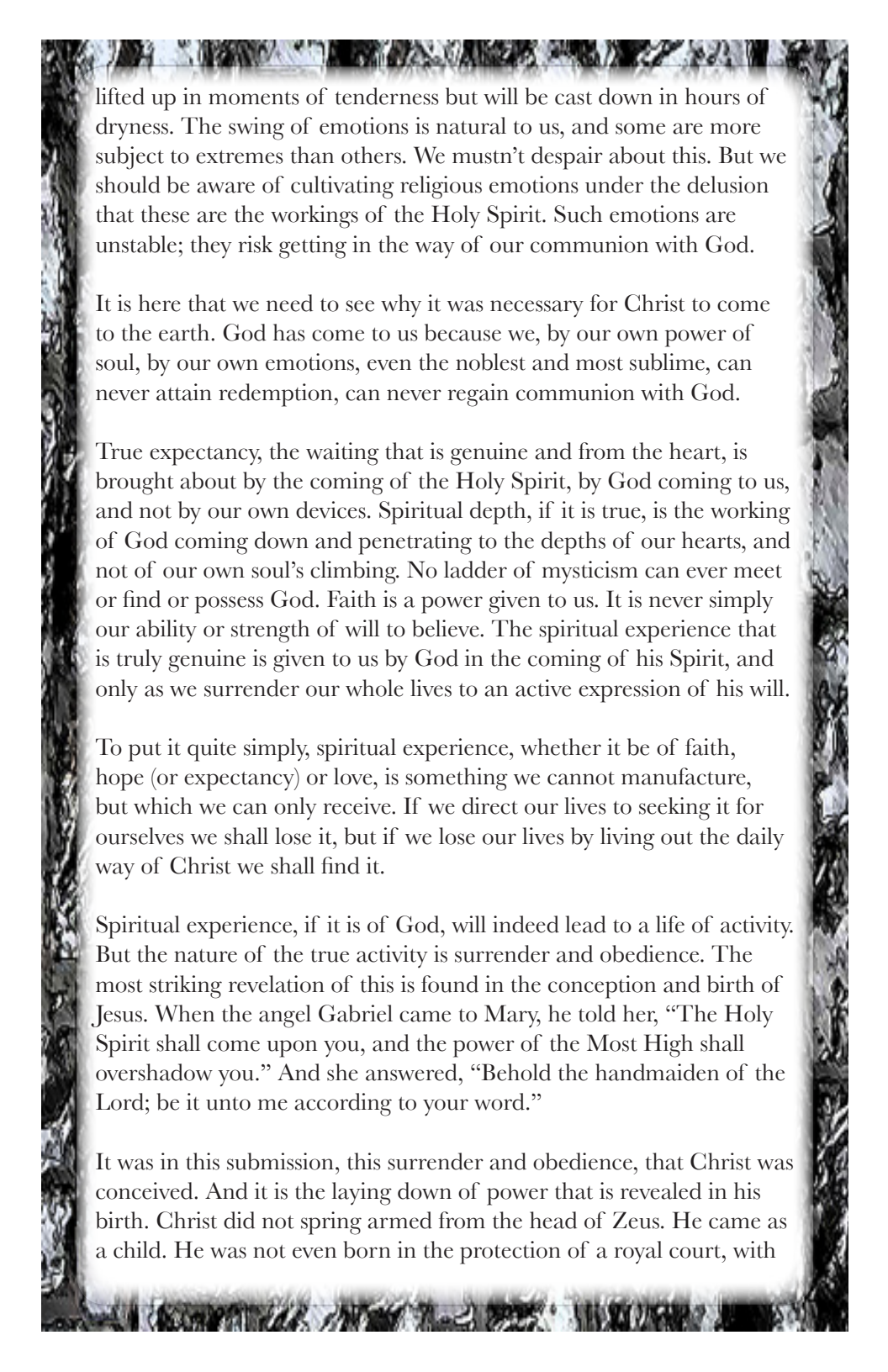
Philip Britts (1917 - 1949) joined the Cotswold Bruderhof in England shortly before the Second World War. The "Bruderhofs" were "brotherhood communities" out of the Anabaptist movement. These communities emphasized community of goods, the training of children, sharing of work, inward composure, and the testimony to the outer world carried out in complete agreement with the traditional practices of founder Jakob Hutter (Anabaptist founder of spiritual communities, martyred February 25, 1536). Philip Britts studied horticulture and loved to work in field and garden. The depth of his thought and faith, his dedication to the common life of peace and brotherhood, and his hope of the Kingdom of Justice found expression in his poetry and writing through his love for nature and hard work.

Yielding To God

When the wise men, or the kings, came from the East, they went to Jerusalem, the capital, to inquire, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?" And today those who are "wise" make the same mistake in looking to worldly power to solve the world's problems. Others go to magnificent cathedrals and follow spiritual paths that appear much more splendid and much more clever than anything which accompanied the birth of Christ.

All this is misguided; it concentrates on the question of "how" instead of the question "why." We can easily get overwhelmed. How are we to carry out all the tasks laid upon us; how are we to plan our next year; how shall we find the strength both for securing our economic needs and in reaching out to the needs of others? But as important as these questions are, it is more important to remember the ancient question "Why?" Once we realize why Christ came to earth, why he was born as a helpless baby in a manger, and why his whole life was lived as an outcast from the best society, then can we begin to answer the question "how" - "how can we find God again; how can we experience peace on earth?"

We are human and finite, and thus cannot live perpetually in a sense of expectation, or in a continuous Advent. We are distracted by many things. Our spiritual awareness waxes and wanes in intensity. If an attitude of expectancy, or an inclination to poignant spiritual experiences, is cultivated by conscious effort of our own, we will suffer severe limitations. Such effort totally misses the mark. We may get



lifted up in moments of tenderness but will be cast down in hours of dryness. The swing of emotions is natural to us, and some are more subject to extremes than others. We mustn't despair about this. But we should be aware of cultivating religious emotions under the delusion that these are the workings of the Holy Spirit. Such emotions are unstable; they risk getting in the way of our communion with God.

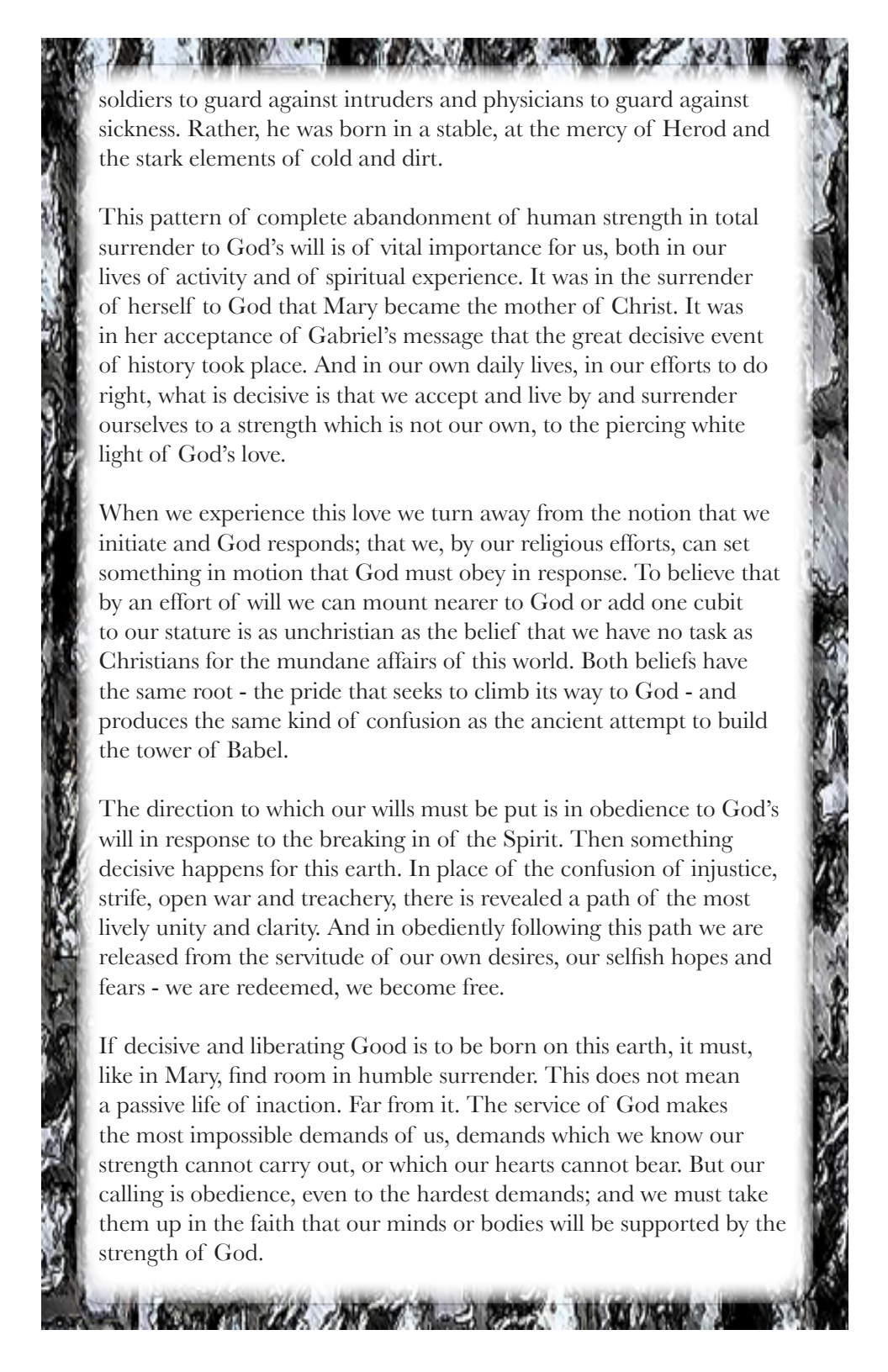
It is here that we need to see why it was necessary for Christ to come to the earth. God has come to us because we, by our own power of soul, by our own emotions, even the noblest and most sublime, can never attain redemption, can never regain communion with God.

True expectancy, the waiting that is genuine and from the heart, is brought about by the coming of the Holy Spirit, by God coming to us, and not by our own devices. Spiritual depth, if it is true, is the working of God coming down and penetrating to the depths of our hearts, and not of our own soul's climbing. No ladder of mysticism can ever meet or find or possess God. Faith is a power given to us. It is never simply our ability or strength of will to believe. The spiritual experience that is truly genuine is given to us by God in the coming of his Spirit, and only as we surrender our whole lives to an active expression of his will.

To put it quite simply, spiritual experience, whether it be of faith, hope (or expectancy) or love, is something we cannot manufacture, but which we can only receive. If we direct our lives to seeking it for ourselves we shall lose it, but if we lose our lives by living out the daily way of Christ we shall find it.

Spiritual experience, if it is of God, will indeed lead to a life of activity. But the nature of the true activity is surrender and obedience. The most striking revelation of this is found in the conception and birth of Jesus. When the angel Gabriel came to Mary, he told her, "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you." And she answered, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word."

It was in this submission, this surrender and obedience, that Christ was conceived. And it is the laying down of power that is revealed in his birth. Christ did not spring armed from the head of Zeus. He came as a child. He was not even born in the protection of a royal court, with



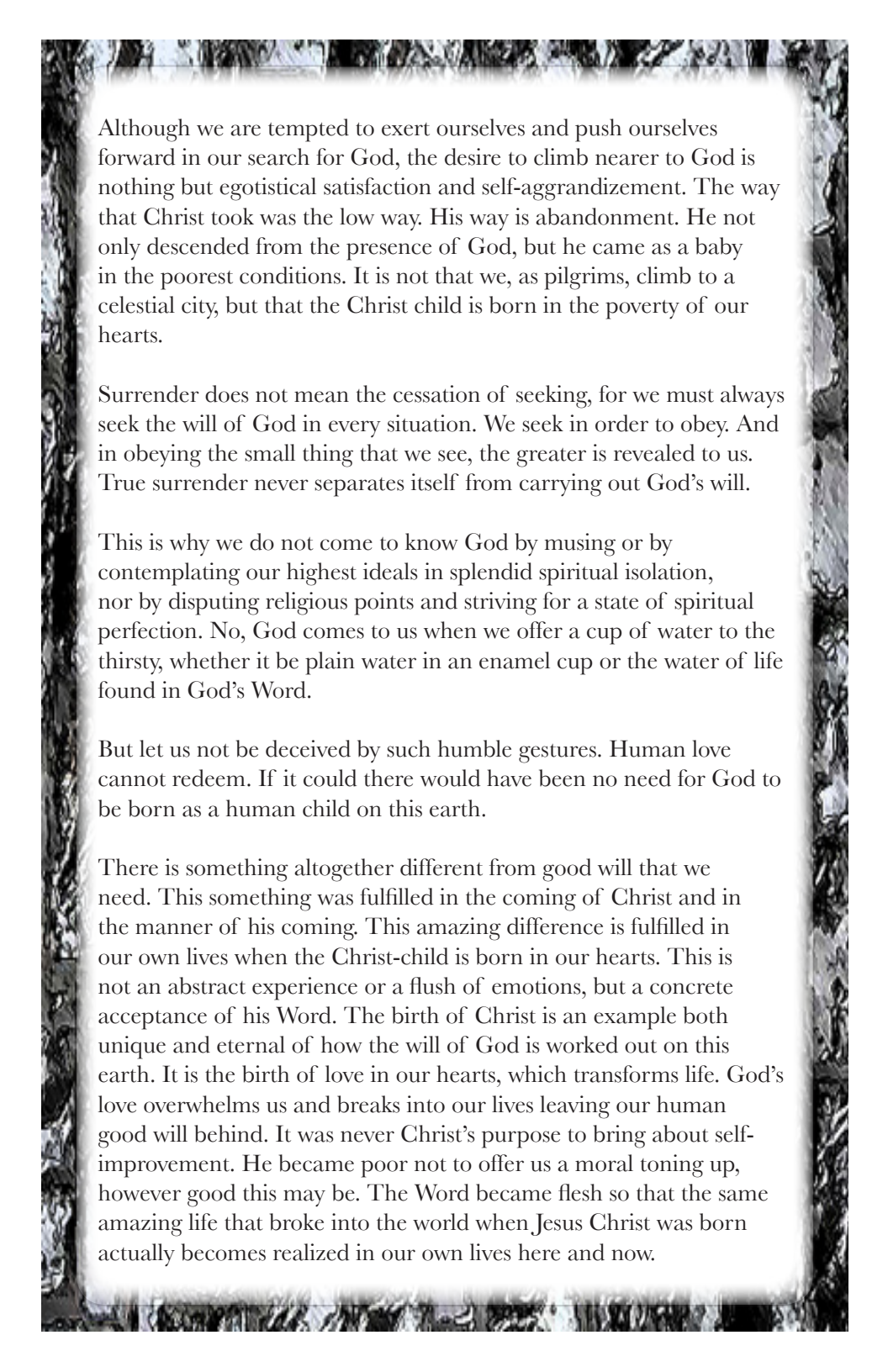
soldiers to guard against intruders and physicians to guard against sickness. Rather, he was born in a stable, at the mercy of Herod and the stark elements of cold and dirt.

This pattern of complete abandonment of human strength in total surrender to God's will is of vital importance for us, both in our lives of activity and of spiritual experience. It was in the surrender of herself to God that Mary became the mother of Christ. It was in her acceptance of Gabriel's message that the great decisive event of history took place. And in our own daily lives, in our efforts to do right, what is decisive is that we accept and live by and surrender ourselves to a strength which is not our own, to the piercing white light of God's love.

When we experience this love we turn away from the notion that we initiate and God responds; that we, by our religious efforts, can set something in motion that God must obey in response. To believe that by an effort of will we can mount nearer to God or add one cubit to our stature is as unchristian as the belief that we have no task as Christians for the mundane affairs of this world. Both beliefs have the same root - the pride that seeks to climb its way to God - and produces the same kind of confusion as the ancient attempt to build the tower of Babel.

The direction to which our wills must be put is in obedience to God's will in response to the breaking in of the Spirit. Then something decisive happens for this earth. In place of the confusion of injustice, strife, open war and treachery, there is revealed a path of the most lively unity and clarity. And in obediently following this path we are released from the servitude of our own desires, our selfish hopes and fears - we are redeemed, we become free.

If decisive and liberating Good is to be born on this earth, it must, like in Mary, find room in humble surrender. This does not mean a passive life of inaction. Far from it. The service of God makes the most impossible demands of us, demands which we know our strength cannot carry out, or which our hearts cannot bear. But our calling is obedience, even to the hardest demands; and we must take them up in the faith that our minds or bodies will be supported by the strength of God.



Although we are tempted to exert ourselves and push ourselves forward in our search for God, the desire to climb nearer to God is nothing but egotistical satisfaction and self-aggrandizement. The way that Christ took was the low way. His way is abandonment. He not only descended from the presence of God, but he came as a baby in the poorest conditions. It is not that we, as pilgrims, climb to a celestial city, but that the Christ child is born in the poverty of our hearts.

Surrender does not mean the cessation of seeking, for we must always seek the will of God in every situation. We seek in order to obey. And in obeying the small thing that we see, the greater is revealed to us. True surrender never separates itself from carrying out God's will.

This is why we do not come to know God by musing or by contemplating our highest ideals in splendid spiritual isolation, nor by disputing religious points and striving for a state of spiritual perfection. No, God comes to us when we offer a cup of water to the thirsty, whether it be plain water in an enamel cup or the water of life found in God's Word.

But let us not be deceived by such humble gestures. Human love cannot redeem. If it could there would have been no need for God to be born as a human child on this earth.

There is something altogether different from good will that we need. This something was fulfilled in the coming of Christ and in the manner of his coming. This amazing difference is fulfilled in our own lives when the Christ-child is born in our hearts. This is not an abstract experience or a flush of emotions, but a concrete acceptance of his Word. The birth of Christ is an example both unique and eternal of how the will of God is worked out on this earth. It is the birth of love in our hearts, which transforms life. God's love overwhelms us and breaks into our lives leaving our human good will behind. It was never Christ's purpose to bring about self-improvement. He became poor not to offer us a moral toning up, however good this may be. The Word became flesh so that the same amazing life that broke into the world when Jesus Christ was born actually becomes realized in our own lives here and now.

The meaning of Advent and Christmas is thus the coming down of God's love. This love alone revolutionizes our lives. Only God's love, not the elevation of human souls, can effect a transformation of the world. Those who mourn the futility of their own efforts receive the comfort of the love of God. Those who are meekly obedient to his will are filled by the love of God, not as a prize to be won after death, but as redeemed life for this earth.

Human love depends on human character and certain virtuous qualities. It propels some people to attain greater heights than others. A spiritual hierarchy is thus created in which each person climbs to a different height of godliness or saintliness according to his or her spiritual capacity. This is not the way of the manger. The love of God lays low all such hierarchy. Gifts, however spiritual, are not decisive. What is decisive is agape, the pure unconditional love of God.

Human love lifts up the Good Man. It is just this that Christ reveals as missing the point, when he himself, speaking as a man, says, "Why do you call me good? There is no one good but God." All our human goodness is relative; there is nothing in us immune from evil. Besides, Christ came not for the righteous but for sinners, for all those who can say, "Be it unto me according to your word."

The peace on earth the angels proclaimed is reconciliation with God. It is brought about by the coming of Christ into our poverty. In John's words, "*Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us.*"

Advent Notes

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