

*Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song;
As the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long?
O yes, He cares; I know He cares, His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Saviour cares.*

(Frank E. Graeff)

The Dance

A GLORIOUS ASCENT

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE HAS BEEN IN EXISTENCE for almost 2,000 years. In that long span of time it has become a well-oiled, brightly polished industry, replete with marketing departments, salesmen, highly paid CEOs, accountants, and customer service representatives. Travel the roads of the US—especially in the deep South—and every other number on the radio dial will present a different flavor of Gospel message; flip through the television channels on a Sunday morning in any part of the country and the viewer will see everything from evangelicalism and Pentecostalism to perfectionism, determinism and Catholicism. Within each formal denomination there are subgroups that apply a slightly different twist on the beliefs of the larger group; outside of the denominations are

the more radical sects and cults that spring up around the beliefs and teachings of, usually, an individual.

Even within the more established, traditional divisions, such as Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, or Lutherans, one will hear leaders or teachers that press specific priorities that define their own small niche. One preacher may emphasize the love and grace of God, while another may emphasize obedience to His commandments; one may push missions and evangelism, while someone else will push fellowship within the Body; one may preach exclusively from the New Testament, while another preaches only from the red-lettered words of Jesus.

With so many different voices preaching so many different flavors of Christ,

how is a believer to know the one that is true? And without that knowledge, how are we to know what to expect from Him?

...which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.

(1 Corinthians 2:13-16)

Does Jesus Care?

We really do not live in a spiritual age. The history of man includes epochs in which God—or at least a pantheon of gods—has played a more integral role in the conduct of civilizations—but this is not one of them. We live, instead, in an age of self-determination, where human problems are solved with human solutions. God, for many people, has become an inconvenient appendage to the glories of civilized society—an ancient old man hovering impotently over the vast accomplishments of modern man. We pull out God, like a dust-covered old doll from the back of the closet, to offer Him uneasy homage on His special occasions: at Christmas we brighten our faces to celebrate Christ's birth; at Easter we look sad and remember His suffering and death.

So in an age where the unseen has become unimportant, we are called—oddly, it would seem—to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At a time when man himself has become the preeminent god, we are told to embrace as a brother and Lord the unseen Son of an invisible God. And when He fails to live up to the behavior we've been told to expect, where do we turn? To which voice do we listen for the answers to our lingering doubt?

Whenever I have a misunderstanding with my wife of thirty-three years, it doesn't occur to me to consult with her mother or father, or the next-door neighbor, or the village innkeeper. I don't ask the opinion of her best friend or the local postmaster. No, when she has somehow failed to live up to my expectations, I go directly to her. I ask, then listen to her answer, directly from the source.

And whenever I have a misunderstanding with Jesus, it doesn't occur to me to turn on the radio to seek out a voice, or turn on the television to find a preacher to watch. I don't consult the annals of the various conventions to determine a denomination's official stance on the subject. No, when Jesus has failed to live up to my expectations of His behavior, I go directly to Him. I ask, then listen to His answer, directly from the source.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

(Hebrews 4:14-16)

It is *His* Dance, you see; Jesus is leading. When there is a misstep, He is the one who will get me back in step. When I trip over my two left feet, Jesus is the one who picks me up, supports me in His strong arms, and whispers encouragement into my ear. Does He care that I have questions and doubt? Oh, yes, He does. And in the gentle touch of His embrace through prayer, and through the timeless counsel of His words in Scripture, Jesus graciously answers every one of my questions, every doubt that springs from my having to live in an alien land.

The Option

The Dance begins at the cross, and it is there that our love is periodically renewed. But beyond this, our Life-Dance with Christ is conducted in the mundane normalcy of everyday life. The Dance is played out amidst business meetings, changing diapers, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, mending children's clothing, taking out the garbage, working the third shift, and in the marriage bed. The Dance is a tapestry of Spiritual love woven intricately throughout the highs and lows, the disappointments and ecstasies of the believer's life.

The Dance is a glorious ascent from the leaden soil of earth into the gravity-defying arms of Jesus. It is not escapism, but a re-energizing of truth in a Maelstrom of lies; it is a raft of peace in a churning sea of discontent. For the Christian, eternal life with God and the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit are automatic; the Dance with Christ, however, is optional.

Salvation by grace—in the vernacular of the church, “accepting Christ”—is not the ultimate destination, but only the portal through which we may enter the Dance. Oh, salvation is secure either way, but to realize

the full and rewarding riches of a relationship with Christ, one must join the Dance.

Into the Dance!

The Body of Christ is filled with wallflowers. Every congregation or group of believers includes those who may have shown up at the school cafeteria for the event, but while others spin about with their partner, they have remained huddled on folding chairs along the outside wall. For reasons known only to them, they have decided to sit out the Dance, to remain spectators only of the One they claim to love. But those more courageous—those willing to step into the Dance and experience all the free-flowing riches of life in Christ—these are the brave souls who will realize everything He has to offer.

In my high school there was the venerable institution of the after-game dance: after every home football and basketball game the students retired to the school cafeteria to dance to the latest 45s or a home-grown band. My buddies and I spent most of those Friday nights huddled in cynical misery—making fun of those out on the floor, while privately aching to be out there ourselves. In our group there were certain “safe” girls—those with whom one could actually carry on a conversation without getting tongue-tied and stupid-mouthed. With these few we could gossip, and conjecture romances. “*Would you ask Mary if Carol likes me? I really like Carol, and maybe if you asked her, she'd dance with me.*”

We wince at the childishness of those days, but many of us are still behaving this way when it comes to our relationship with Christ. “*Pastor, would you tell Jesus I really like Him, but He has to be the one to make the first move. He can find me sitting here in this comfortable back pew.*”

Jesus Christ, the one who has already expressed toward us the entirety of human and divine love, stands waiting with arms outstretched. With tender patience He invites each of us to join Him in the Dance. His deepest desire is that we will do whatever is necessary to know Him—and ourselves—to the full. This we will know only when we summon the courage to get up from our place of safe ignorance, to throw off the leaden, earth-bound weights that deaden our feet, and with holy abandon enter into His embrace... in the Dance!