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REASONING ABOUT FAITH: “KILLING OFF SANTA TOO WELL”

The following article is a reprint from the PLUMBLINE newsletter of the Wilmore FMC and was written by Dr. Joe Dongell. Dr. Dongell is Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Those of you who remember my mother and her passionate loyalty to Jesus will not be surprised to learn that she drew an unapologetic line in the sand about Santa Claus. I myself heard her instruct the Wesley Village staff on more than one occasion, “Under no circumstances will I allow any Santa in my room!” [She could scarcely conceal the distain in her voice whenever she uttered that name.] She would readily supply the reasoning behind her prohibition: “Santa did not die for my sins! Santa does not live in my heart! Santa will not come again to receive me unto himself!” My mother’s exclusive and thoughtful devotion to Jesus made her recoil, almost physically, at any

sighting of this seasonal character, this “Imposter” (I can hear her now!), this quasi-magical, quasi-supernatural being who supposedly evaluates the secrets of human hearts, rewards or punishes us accordingly, and draws us into a “silly worship” of him.

Wow! For a moment there, I thought my mother had reached back from beyond the grave to control this keyboard! But she taught me well, insisting that we must carefully evaluate everything, allowing nothing to slip into our lives just because it happens to be traditional, or sentimental, or part of majority culture. It was under her influence that I, as a well-intentioned 3rd grader, took it upon myself to stand up in the middle of class and begin announcing to all my friends, “Santa does not exist!” Miss Ellis, our young and athletic teacher, lunged at me, seized my arm, and instantly whisked me out of the room and into the hallway. “Never say anything like that to these kids again!” She explained that most of them “really do believe” in Santa, and would not be able to bear the shock of hearing my message. Something quite interesting dawned on me at that moment. Miss Ellis did not deny the truthfulness of my claim, but implied that I had somehow happened upon knowledge that only adults possessed, a knowledge that children did not (and perhaps should not) yet own. Certainly, without intending it, she welcomed me into the company of the mature, of those who had grown beyond childish longings and immature imagination. In my own little mind, it was natural to extend the Santa-does-not-exist conviction into a God-is-not-Santa message. It seemed to me that, just as a child needs to mature beyond a belief in Santa’s existence, so the Christian needs to mature beyond a belief that God is a Santa-like dispenser of gifts to those who approach him with their “wish lists.” The connection between “becoming mature” and sternly tamping down the rather childish tendency of submitting wish lists to God was surely forming in my mind. At that very Christmas (in my 3rd grade year), I became vividly aware that my family’s financial

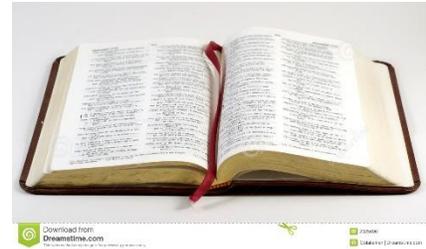
condition was precarious. I knew that my father's shoes were badly worn, that the tires on our car were nearly bald, that most of my clothes were handed down from other church families, and that frugality was a necessary way of life for us. In hindsight, I now realize that my father was a "poor holiness preacher." And so when I was asked what I wanted for Christmas that year, I intuitively knew that I needed to trim it down to something responsible, to submit a wish list reduced to the bare bone, to embrace the mentality of a mature adult who thought in terms of absolute necessities, and nothing beyond them. I was a truly "good kid," mature beyond my years. [I got the pair of woolen gloves and the two books I asked for. I was quite aware that I kept the total cost to around \$8.00.]

As the years rolled by, my understanding (and practice of) prayer apparently followed out along this trajectory even farther. I learned how important it was to expand my praying to include thanksgiving, adoration, praise, and confession. Put positively, these dimensions should probably come first of all, should probably take up most of our prayer time, and should help us center our minds simply on who God is, apart from anything God might do for us. Put negatively, the business of asking God for things ("petitions" we commonly call them) should certainly come last in our prayers, should occupy the least amount of time in our praying, and should be carefully restricted to matters of absolute necessity or to purely spiritual matters. [Only our needs; none of our wants!] Remember, we must become mature Christians, fully cleansed of any notions that God is some sort of cosmic Santa Claus!

Only in recent years has this outlook been upended in my mind. As usual, a deeper study of the Scripture has called into question what I had imagined to be rock-solid, spiritually advanced wisdom. I remember that re-soaking in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) began modifying my thought trajectory. In that sermon, Jesus repeatedly presents God,

not as a remote and unapproachable God, but as our Father, as One filled with all the instincts and longings that (good human) fathers famously have. Good fathers zealously desire to give to their children, good fathers supply truly good things in abundance, and good fathers take great delight in displaying again and again their fatherly generosity.

Aligned with seeing God as our generous Father is noticing, now in light of God's



Fatherhood, Jesus' insistence that his disciples settle into a pattern of "asking, seeking, and knocking." The tense (aspect) of the Greek imperatives used here underscores the continuous, ongoing, repetitive nature of petitionary prayer: "Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking!" Even the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples begins by naming God explicitly as "Our Father," and then moves immediately to a list of petitions, of pleas, of yearnings, of things (we might say) God really needs to do. It is remarkable to notice that this prayer entirely bypasses those elements we sometimes stress (adoration, praise, confession), and vigorously presses us into the core truth that God is a giving Father, and we are his receiving children. Though other teachings of Jesus (and the rest of Scripture) certainly round out the fuller picture of prayer as normally involving those other elements we've just mentioned, there's something about the core of Jesus' message that elevates the place of petition in the mouths of God's children who have come to know Him as Father.

Surely there is need to guard against the abuses that easily creep in at this point. There is such a thing as the "prosperity gospel" that promises the moon and ignores scores of biblical passages testifying that sickness and suffering may plague even the godliest disciple. And it is

clear, as James teaches, that some believers have twisted their petitions to serve selfish, fleshly desires (4:3). But true Christian maturity will learn, not to throttle back the business of asking, but to purify it and fan it into a blazing flame. Why should this be so, beyond the fact that Jesus himself (as we've already noted) has commanded us to be asking, seeking, and knocking?

Have you noticed that proud people have trouble asking for things? Oh, they may demand them, or pay for them, or signal in some subtle way what they desire. But simply to ask for something (without the manipulative tricks we often employ) is actually a humbling experience. We are acknowledging that we don't have something, that we cannot supply our own needs or desires, and that we will be indebted to the giver if the giver accedes to our request. Maturing believers are those who are ever more vividly coming to see themselves in precisely this way: we are dependent creatures, drawing our every breath from a generous Creator; we are unable to supply, extend, or protect our own lives; we are not God, and never will be! As finite creatures, we are forever cast in the role of being receivers when all accounts are tallied. And far from finding this to be an embarrassment or an agony, we enter right on into it and even celebrate it! And as godly humility finds a deeper and deeper lodging in our hearts, we rejoice in asking largely and boldly from God our Father, who glorifies Himself by demonstrating again and again just how generous, how wealthy, how loving, and how attentive a Father he is he is. If we must kill of all traces of a Santa Clause God, let's not inadvertently destroy of the heart of the Gospel.

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EMMANUEL—GOD WITH US!

I have found encouragement and blessing in this chorus by Bob McGee:

Emmanuel, Emmanuel,
His name is called Emmanuel—
God with us, revealed in us!
His name is called Emmanuel.

These words remind us that Jesus is not only the ultimate expression of God's love, but the willing offering that Jesus himself makes. Jesus chose to identify fully with us, and he continues to do so through the ever-present presence of his Spirit.

Paul expresses this essential truth so eloquently in what is commonly called the *kenosis* (self-emptying) passage (Philippians 2:5-12):

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Even before Jesus' birth, Scripture portrayed the reality of Emmanuel, “God with us.”

Whatever the situation the Israelites faced, God was ready, at their call, to go before them. Whatever army—spiritual or military—they faced, God eagerly awaited the opportunity to walk alongside them.

Isaiah 7:14 and Matt 1:23 both speak of this truth: *God is with us.*

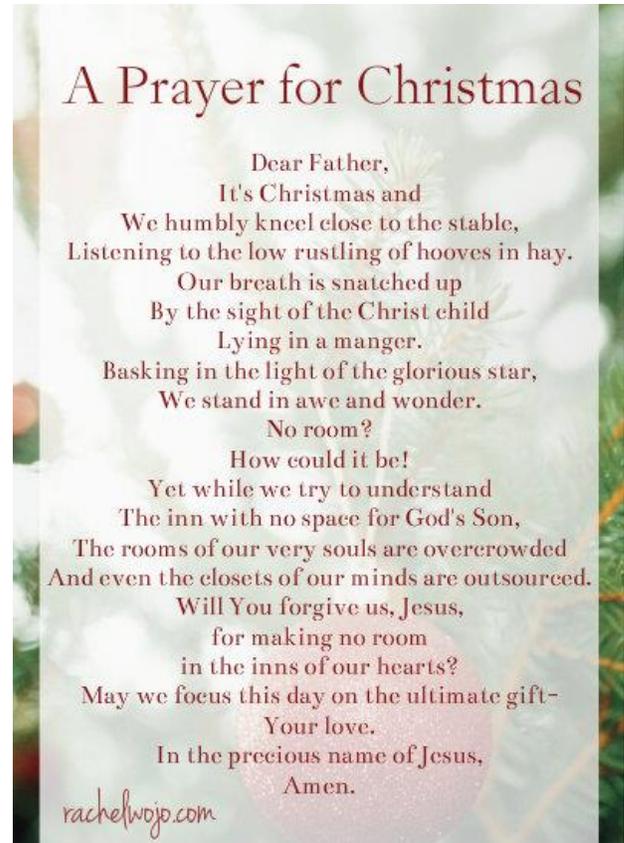
Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him *Emmanuel*.

I like Solomon 's prayer from I Kings 8:57:

May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us nor forsake us.

God is with us –above, beneath, next to, and beside us—as St Patrick said. And when we do not perceive him, maybe that is most especially when he is carrying us.

TLT



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