

# I

Welcome to this celebration of the twelfth day of Christmas. I hope you ladies are enjoying your partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, four calling birds, and particularly your five golden rings. This, of course, is Epiphany, the day we celebrate the arrival of the three magi offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the newborn king.

You may have heard about the three six-year-old boys who were playing the wise men in their church Christmas program. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold."

The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh."

The third one then gave them his treasure and said, "And Frank sent this."

"And Frank sent this." Makes sense to me. What do children know about frankincense and myrrh?

Of course, as someone has noted, if it had been the Three Wise Women who came seeking the newborn king, instead of the Three Wise Men, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts. One more interesting note: Back in 1984, a French perfume creator figured out a way to combine all three of the Magi's gifts into a new fragrance. For \$525, he would sell you a 24-karat gold-plated flask containing one-third ounce of "Amouage." The perfume was a blend of frankincense and myrrh. (1) I'm certain that there are some people with more money than sense who just had to have this expensive concoction.

I wonder what kind of men the three Magi were? In the folklore of our faith, they are given names--Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In some portrayals of the men they have distinctive racial features--Melchior, European; Balthasar, African; and Caspar, Asian. They represent people from all over the world coming to seek Jesus.

The three men have been characterized as kings. Obviously they were not lowly peasants. Herod and all of Jerusalem would not have been distressed if three peasants came seeking the newborn king. Matthew writes, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." I doubt that three nobodies would have had such impact.

They have also been called Wise Men, of course. Certainly they were students of the stars. Astrologers, perhaps. They had seen a star, a star unlike any other star, and they followed it until it came to rest over the house where the young child lay.

It is a stirring drama. Magi, kings, wise men. European, African, Asian. We really don't know much about these three men, but we do know three things. They were men of action. They saw their star and they followed it. These are the people in every generation who contribute to the

race's advancement, people who see stars and follow them. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "The secret of success in life is for a person to be ready for opportunity when it comes." H. Jackson Brown, Jr. put it like this: "Opportunity dances with those already on the dance floor." These three men saw their star, and without delay, they mounted their camels, and hit the road.

In 1982 a woman named Celeste Tate was shocked by how much good food supermarkets throw away. She persuaded a store manager to donate his expired items to help the less fortunate. She and David McKinley set up shop in a garage. Soon they had built the first Gleaners supermarket for the needy in Las Vegas. The name Gleaners comes from the Old Testament practice of leaving some grain in the fields after harvesting so that the poor may gather it.

Today the Las Vegas store serves about 20,000 people a month. There are now 194 stores based on the Gleaners model in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Holland and China. These not-for-profit shops receive food and other perishable goods from supermarkets and big businesses, repackage them and either give them away to the needy or sell them at dramatically reduced prices for those whose budgets are limited. The Department of Health and Human Services has called Gleaners the most outstanding food program in the United States. And it began because one woman was shocked at the waste in our supermarkets. (2)

Nothing happens in this world until someone sees a star and follows it. These three Magi were obviously men of action.

Of course, not every star is worthy of being followed. There are many people who are by nature impulsive. They may jump at any star--only to regret it later.

Some of you are old enough to recognize the name Carl Perkins. Perkins was a popular rockabilly singer from the 50s and the author of the classic song "Blue Suede Shoes" which was one of Elvis Presley's first big hits. As a guitarist, Perkins influenced many of the next generation of rock 'n' rollers, most prominently, George Harrison of the Beatles. Perkins never quite attained the fame of some of his more notorious colleagues. He once explained it like this: "I never envied Elvis his mansion and all that. All those boys--Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison--they all lost their wives, their families. People say, 'What happened to you, Carl? All of them went on to superstardom. Where'd you go?' I say, 'I went home.' And that's a good place to be." (3)

Carl Perkins made a choice not to follow the star of fame with the same intensity as some of his contemporaries. He felt that his star was at home. Sometimes that is a wise choice to make. Still, if we all chose to stay at home, the world would come to a grinding halt. The three Magi were men of action.

And they were men of determination. Theirs might have seemed to be a foolish adventure at times--following this star they had seen in the East. But they persevered until the star they followed came to rest over a house, and they knew their journey was complete. I love it when people follow through on a noble task and see it through until it is completed--whether the task is building a business, or a home, or a ministry, or whatever star they may be following.

Mary Kay Ash, who built Mary Kay cosmetics into a corporate giant, once said this: "If we ever decide to compare knees, you're going to find that I have more scars than anyone else in the room. That's because I've fallen down and gotten up so many times in my life." (4) Those are the people who are successful in the world. People who refuse to give up. People who follow their star regardless of the obstacles.

Motivational speaker Earl Nightingale once told the story of an American team of mountain climbers who set out to conquer Mount Everest. Before the team left the U.S. a psychiatrist interviewed them. Each was asked individually, privately, "Will you get to the top of Everest?"

There was a wide assortment of answers. "Well, Doc, I'll do my best." "I'm sure going to try." Each knew how formidable was the challenge. But one of them, a slightly built team member, gave a totally different answer. When the psychiatrist asked him the question, he thought for a moment and then quietly answered, "Yes, I will." Not surprisingly, he was the first to make it to the peak of Mt. Everest.

Nightingale comments: "Yes, I will--three of the most potent words in our language. Whether spoken quietly, loudly, or silently, those three words have propelled more people to success and have been responsible for more human achievement than all other words in the English language combined." (5)

The Magi were men of action, men of determination. They were "Yes, I will" people. But more than anything else, the three Magi were men of faith. As they told King Herod, they were following their star that they might worship the one who had been born king of the Jews. The three wise men came with pure hearts. Their purpose was worship and praise. They came not to find gold, but to find God. Their purpose was to offer up gifts to their Savior and Redeemer.

One of the oldest Christian legends is the charming story concerning the Well of the Magi near Bethlehem.

The people of Bethlehem made a practice of going to this well during Christmas week. There they would bend over the opening of the well and cover themselves and the opening with blankets or cloaks, to shut out the light of day. Then, as they peered into the dark well, the star of Bethlehem, according to this pious practice, could be seen moving slowly across the water--but only by those who were pure of heart. (6)

The three Magi would certainly have seen the star, just as they did 2,000 years ago. Why? Because they were pure of heart. Because their priority was worship and praise. Because they were men of faith. I wonder if such a star should appear in the heavens this night whether you and I might see it. Are our hearts pure enough? Is our faith real enough? Theologian John Calvin once said, "If the sight of the star had so powerful an effect on the Magi, woe to our insensibility, who, now that Christ the King has been revealed to us, are so cold in our inquiries after Him."

Follow that star. People who make a difference in the world are not content to sit on the sidelines. They set their sights on a worthy star and they follow it with all their hearts. Of course, the most magnificent star that we can follow is the same today as it was in the time of the Magi.

It is the star of Christ, himself. Bowing before him in adoration and praise and offering the gift of ourselves.

Is there a dream in your heart? The richest place in the world in the cemetery. It is filled with songs that were never written or song, stories never told, businesses never started, inventions never invented. It is never too late. Follow your dream, follow that star and you will know the joy of the wise men.

- 
1. Emphasis, Jan/Feb 2002, p. 15.
  2. Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt, *Megatrends for Women* (New York: Villard Books, 1992), p. 276.
  3. Source unknown.
  4. Deborah Ford with Edie Hand, *The Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life* (New York: Plume, 2003), p. 230.
  5. Pastor Dan Mangler's Sunday Sermon, Shepherd of the Mountains Lutheran Church, ELCA Estes Park, Colorado [http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday\\_sermons/january\\_16\\_2005\\_sermon.html](http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday_sermons/january_16_2005_sermon.html)
  6. St. Gregory of Tours (594), *Libri Miraculorum* (Book of Miracles). Cited in Francis X. Weiser, *The Christmas Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952).

King Duncan [esermons.com](http://esermons.com)

## II

"I don't know why I remember the episode so vividly," writes author King Duncan. "I remember so few instances from my childhood. But this one stands out. I couldn't have been more than five. We were members of a tiny rural church. Our hymns came from a small paperback hymnal of Gospel songs [the Upper Room hymnal].

"Worship was a bit emotional; the preacher a little loud. There was no formal liturgy. The pews were hard. There was no air conditioning. The windows were open. It was a hot summer morning. A couple of dogs lazed out on the front porch of the church. From time to time a portion of the message would be drowned out by a farm truck rattling by or a motorcycle.

"Then suddenly our worship was interrupted. A woman who lived near the church but was not a member of the church was standing at the door sobbing hysterically.

"'Somebody, please help,' she cried from just outside the door. 'There's been an accident,' she said, 'a man's hurt bad. He's layin' in a ditch.'

"Some of the men rushed out to see what they could do. One of the women of the church rushed to this woman's side and tried to console her. 'Come inside,' the woman said calmly.

“‘Oh, no,’ the distraught woman wailed, ‘I can’t come in. I can’t come in.’ And she rushed down the steps of the church and disappeared. And as far as I know, she never came in that church or any other church for the rest of her life.

“I don’t know what that woman’s story was,” says Duncan. “She was not a bad person as far as I know. But there was some reason she could not so much as place a foot inside a church.”

It’s fascinating some of the things we remember from our childhood.

One Sabbath day Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority not as the teachers of the law. That’s an interesting phrase: “as one who had authority . . .”

Where does authority come from? If you’ve ever been in the military or in a highly structured business environment, you know where it comes from. It comes from rank or position in a hierarchy.

James Fixx published a book of games which he called, *More Games for the Super-Intelligent*. In that collection he offers this wonderfully challenging puzzle from a military setting:

You are a captain in charge of one sergeant and four men. Your task is to raise a 100-foot flagpole and slide it into a hole 10-feet deep. You have two ropes one 22-feet long and one 26-feet long two shovels, and two buckets. How do you accomplish your task?

The answer is this: Since you’re a captain, you turn to the sergeant and say, “Sergeant, get the flagpole up!” That’s positional authority. You command those who are under you, and they obey.

Walter Anderson tells how as a young Marine, his fingers were crushed in an accident. They were swollen and immobile for a few days. As the swelling went down, the doctor ran some tests to measure the extent of his injuries. The doctor said, “Try to move the first finger of your right hand.” Walter tried, but couldn’t move it. The doctor suggested that they wait another day and try again. But Walter’s platoon sergeant, who was standing nearby, stepped forward. He looked at Walter and commanded loudly, “*move the first finger of your right hand now!*” And Walter moved that finger. (1)

Maybe you’ve had a sergeant or a boss like that at some time. Of course, this type of authority has its limits.

You’ve probably heard the story of a second lieutenant at Fort Bragg, N.C. who discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, “Soldier, do you have change for a dollar?”

“I think so,” the private said cheerfully. “Let me take a look.”

The second lieutenant drew himself up stiffly. “Soldier,” he said, “that’s no way to address an officer. We’ll start all over again. *Do you have change for a dollar?*”

The private saluted smartly, looked straight ahead, and said, “*No, sir!*”

In that situation, pulling rank backfired.

Some people have authority because of their rank or position. Others have authority because of their personality, or their knowledge or their extreme competence.

As a carpenter, Jesus had no positional authority in the community. His authority came from his wisdom and knowledge and his competence at interpreting God's Word. Even as a boy Jesus wowed people with his wisdom and his grasp of scripture. Of course the people in Capernaum could not know that his authority came from a more important source. All they knew is that they had never heard an individual teach like Jesus taught. They said to one another, "He teaches as one who has authority, not as the teachers of the law."

But even Jesus got interrupted from time to time. This time it wasn't a woman standing outside the door pleading for help, but rather it was a man *in the synagogue* who disrupted Jesus' teaching.

That's significant. Don't think that all the needy people in this world are on the outside of the church. There are many people on the inside of the church who have very deep needs. Indeed, sometimes needy people are attracted to the church.

Mark tells us this man was "possessed by an unclean spirit." We don't know what Mark meant by this. Most modern people dismiss the idea of demons and unclean spirits. We assume this is pre-scientific language for mental illness, but who knows? Whatever the origin of his problem, obviously the man was deeply distressed. He cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are the Holy One of God!"

It's interesting. The unclean spirits recognized who Jesus was long before the people of Capernaum.

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

And then something remarkable happened. The unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him." And Mark tells us, "News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee."

"What is this?" the people asked, "A new teaching and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him."

So, Jesus had authority because of his teachings. But he also had authority because of his power over what Mark calls "unclean spirits." In other places we see his authority over disease, and over nature, and even over death.

**This brings us to something obvious we need to affirm about Jesus: he was unique. There was no one quite like him.**

There were other fine teachers in Galilee, but they could not cast out unclean spirits, or turn water into wine or heal the leper or multiply the fishes and the loaves or forgive sins. There was something about Jesus which could not be said about his contemporaries. He had authority—physical authority, spiritual authority, moral authority. Even after his death and resurrection, he had authority. When confronted by someone who was demon-possessed or who was blind or

physically-challenged, all the disciples had to do was evoke Jesus' name and demons were cast out and the physically-challenged were made whole and the blind could see. That's authority.

Jesus was a wonderful teacher, but no mere teacher has the authority to raise the dead. Jesus was a leader, a prophet, a moral visionary but none of these explain his impact on civilization. As some unknown writer expressed it a generation ago:

"Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40 and Jesus for only 3 ½ years. Yet the influence of Christ's ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of teaching from these greatest of philosophers.

"Jesus painted no pictures, yet some of the finest artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him.

"Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him.

"Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise.

"Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble Carpenter of Nazareth."

It took a Roman centurion, stationed at the foot of the cross who watched him die, to sum it all up, "Surely this man," the centurion testified, "was the Son of God!" (Mt. 27-54)

No one else who has ever lived spoke with the authority with which Christ spoke. He was unique. There has never been another like him. This brings us to an obvious question: **If Jesus is the son of God, shouldn't we reflect his influence more in our lives?** If he is the Son of the most high God and if his teachings are the foundation upon which our lives are built, shouldn't that fact be reflected in how we live?

Donald Grey Barnhouse tells a story of something that happened to him many years ago during the Korean War. Barnhouse was aboard a flight from New York to Los Angeles. The flight attendant seated a girl in her early twenties beside him.

Obviously this girl had never flown before. Over the loudspeaker, the flight attendant said, "Fasten your seatbelts." The girl didn't even know what a seatbelt was.

Pastor Barnhouse helped her and asked, "You've never flown before?"

She said, "No, this is my first time." As he spoke to her, she opened her pocketbook, and there was a picture of a handsome young GI.

Barnhouse said, "You're going out to see him?"

"Yes," she said, "he's coming home. I'm going to see him."

She went on to explain that they had gotten married a year and a half before. They had a honeymoon of just a few days, then he had gone to the coast and left for Korea. Now he was coming back home; she was going to see him.

Barnhouse could tell that going to see her husband meant more to this young woman than anything else. He was her bridegroom; she was his bride and she was going to see him.

Then Donald Grey Barnhouse says something important. He says, “You wonder sometimes why Christians live as they do and make the choices they make. They are on their way to see their bridegroom, yet they go right out and live in the world as though it made no effect in their life at all . . .” (4)

And that’s true, isn’t it? One day we are going to see the Bridegroom, our Lord and Master, and it doesn’t seem to matter in how we live our lives. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? If so, does his influence show on your life, or does your life more accurately reflect simply the community in which you live and the people with which you associate? He spoke with authority.

And this brings us to a final question: **If Jesus is who he says he is, shouldn’t we tell the good news to others?**

A young boy from a non-Christian family named Palmer Ofuoku was placed in a mission school by his Nigerian parents because they knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet he did not convert to Christianity. He remained an adherent of a traditional African religion.

One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer. Eventually the missionary led this young Nigerian to Christ. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary’s influence like this: “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.” (5)

That is the best definition of evangelism that I have ever heard. “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.” That’s what you and I should be doing each day of our lives building bridges of friendship to the people around us so that Jesus may walk across.

Jesus spoke with authority. There has never been another like him. He is the Son of God. That ought to make a difference in how we live our lives. We ought to be telling others about him. We ought to be building bridges to others so that Christ may walk across.

1. Walter Anderson, *The Confidence Course* (New York: HarperPerennial).
2. Mike Trout, *Off the Air* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), pp. 177-178.
3. *Jesus Rediscovered* (Doubleday, 1969).
4. *Timeless Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), pp.214-215.
5. Brian Harbour, *2 Corinthians*.