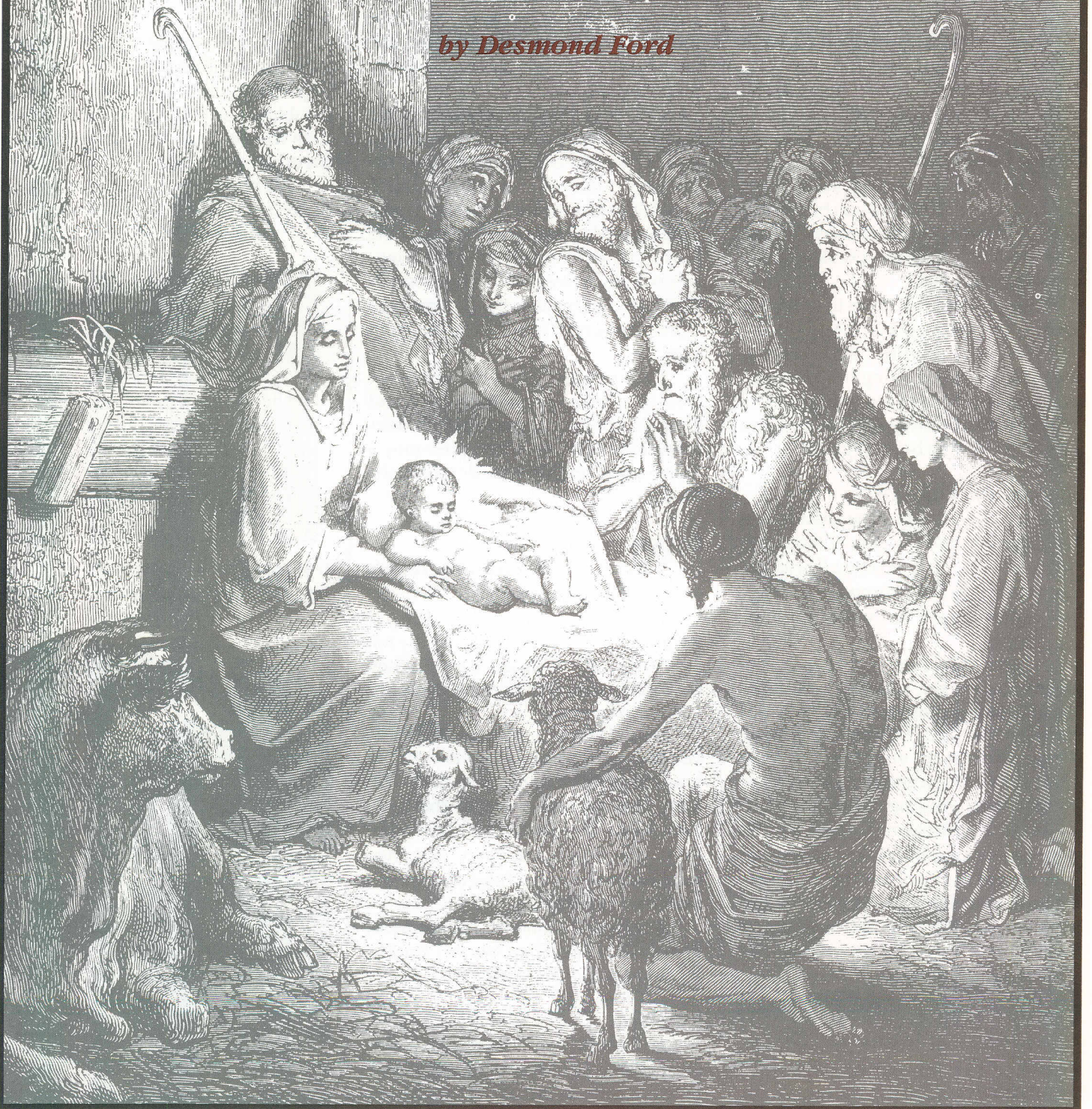


Christmas has something to say about

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

by Desmond Ford





Paul Johnson's recent book, *The Intellectuals*, has a significant thesis. Persons immoral in heart and life have no right to advise humanity on how to conduct its affairs.

Johnson discusses, chapter by chapter, the careers of Bertolt Brecht, Hemingway, Ibsen, Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, Shelley, Tolstoy, Edmund Wilson, and others. He says:

I think I detect today a certain public skepticism when intellectuals stand up to preach to us.... The belief seems to be spreading that intellectuals are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old.... One of the principal lessons of our tragic century, which has seen so many millions of innocents sacrificed in schemes to improve the lot of humanity, is—beware intellectuals (p. 342).

Karl Marx as Example

Let us take Karl Marx [1818-83] as an example of this thesis and counsel.

He was the son of converted Jews, a poet, a journalist, and a social reformer. As a young man he wrote several volumes of poetry revolving around his love for the woman he married and his anticipations of coming world destruction.

His best-known work, *Das Kapital*, is actually a series of journalistic essays, rather than a well-planned unity. It often reflects the author's vivid imagination more than the facts of world economic systems.

Verbal Violence

Despite being strangely blessed with a magnificent wife, Jenny, Marx lived in an atmosphere of continual verbal violence. He quarreled with practically every close friend. Even Engels, who saved him from the indignity of a regular job, was ultimately horrified by the callousness of his leader.

When Engels lost his mistress in death, Marx wrote to him with a single sentence of acknowledgment about the tragedy.

The rest of the long letter begged for more money.

Physical Habits

Marx influenced the world. But what influenced Marx?

Not primarily his sweet wife Jenny. Nor his daughters. The answer is: his physical habits.

Marx rarely took baths and usually looked dirty. He rarely exercised, being "totally and incorrigibly deskbound. Nothing on earth would get him out of the library and the study," says Johnson.

Worst of all, he ate in suicidal fashion, indulging prodigiously in alcohol and tobacco. For a quarter of a century he suffered from a plague of boils, the result—not of an avenging Providence—but of his own vices. Often he could not sit in comfort, and huge outbursts of rage effervesced continually.

Family Economics

Because of his inability to handle money and refusal to work as others did, the living conditions of the Marx family were squalid. Because of deprivation, his daughter Franziska died. She was soon followed by son Edgar, who died of gastroenteritis.

Though a professed champion of low-paid workers, Marx unrelentingly abused the household nursery maid. She received only her keep and no wages. When Jenny was pregnant, Marx took the maid as his mistress. He refused to ever acknowledge the illegitimate boy from the union.

After the death of worn-out Jenny, Marx rapidly went to pieces. A daughter died just a few weeks before he did. Another daughter died years later from an opium overdose, and a third from her own hand.

Moral Source of Life

Why discuss this retinue of tragedy? Because our work and influence are determined by what we are in character and personality. "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life" (Prov 4:23).

It would be wise to refuse to listen to the advice of those whose lives and characters are morally skewed. There is no such thing as moral perfection for any of us in this life. Still, ultimately, there are only two types of people:

those who fight their own natural pride and selfishness, and those who don't. Our Lord often divided humanity into two classes: wheat and tares, sheep and goats, saved and lost.

Sadly, it must be admitted that even the best of persons are only human at heart. Scripture warns us against making "flesh" our arm, even "good" flesh (Jer 17:5-9).

We Trust in Christ

But despite the moral darkness of the world, and the twilight of the church, for those who desire spiritual light that they might walk in it there is good news. Every Christmas season tells of the heavenly illumination which hovered over the hills of Bethlehem as the Light of the world was born.

We trust in Christ because he fulfilled the specifications of Old Testament prophecy. We trust in him because we find his words self-authenticating. We find our faith strengthened as we study the Gospels and find them true that "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (Jn 7:46) because no man lived as he lived.

He WAS the truth; therefore, he could teach the truth. No one else could ever say, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Every act of his life as recorded in Scripture acts out the glorious light of the gospel.

Bowing to the Christmas Light

Here we are at this special season, erring, faulty believers, often failing to reflect the glory of Christ. We recognize the truth of the admonition: "Thou must be true thyself if thou the truth wouldst teach." We cannot live like Marx, Rousseau, or Hemingway, with their selfishness, pride, violence, and impurity.

What then is to be done? There is no other way than just looking unto Jesus, so that by beholding we may be transformed.

Christmas has no calendrical validity, but its essential message is accurate. Either we degenerate into the pride, paranoia, and violence of Herod, who slew the babes of Bethlehem; or we bow with the shepherds and magi before the Light of the world that can never be extinguished. ❖