



“Who Are You Looking at,

Wise Man?”

by Steve Phifer

“Who are you lookin’ at, Wise Man?” the carved, wooden shepherd seemed to be saying, clutching his lamb beneath his left arm. He seemed to be trying to initiate a staring match with the wooden King from the East. All told, eleven characters plus the Baby Jesus populated the nativity scene in the Narthex of our church. Each character was sculpted to be about half the size, or less, of the originals. I loved to watch little children, about three-feet high themselves, walk through this beautiful, colorful celebration of the season. I can only imagine what visions might have danced in those little post-modern heads as they met the ancient truths in this hands-on, eye-to-eye manner.

Several years ago in a church in which I served as worship leader/music pastor, the senior pastor brought an impressive, carved wood nativity set back from the Holy Land. The display took up a strategic corner of the narthex of the church adjacent to the doorway which led to the “old sanctuary” which had become a youth and children’s auditorium when the “new sanctuary” was built some twenty years before. Since my

office was found through those doors, I passed this unruly group of Christmas characters several times a day. Routinely, I interrupted whatever vital music minister mission I was pursuing (upon which the Kingdom of God rested, to be sure) to stop and rearrange the wooden figures so they all were looking at Jesus. It didn't take me long to see the metaphor inherent in this activity.

Trying to keep all the characters around me focused on the Jesus was my year-round mission, right? However, after a few years, I ran out of steam. The escaping energy of my passing middle years would no longer serve such a hopeless task. I just let those 3-foot high statues look wherever they pleased. One morning, I decided to record their disorderly, wooden "worship."

Mary was staring intently at a blank spot on the carpet. Joseph was looking past Mary's left shoulder gazing wistfully out into space. The shepherd was watching a wise man, holding his little lamb as if it were worthless compared to the wondrous gift in the king's hands. Another king was looking at the same spot on the carpet Mary found so interesting. The donkey was staring at the shepherd's left foot. The cow lying in the corner was watching a wise man while a nearby sheep was staring holes into Joseph's back. The king who was the object of the shepherd's envy, declined the staring match and joined his other wise man friend in a thorough examination of the carpet. Only the angel, one wise man and one little lamb had their eyes on the Christ-child. Of eleven figures only three had their eyes on Jesus.

What a picture of a post-modern Christmas! We find too many points of view to count, too many conflicting interests to manage, and too many distractions to ignore. In a supreme irony, we lose Jesus in our celebration of Christmas.

Thus the question of this brief out-of-season Christmas deliberation—"What are you looking at, wise man?" Are we looking at our choirs, our music selections, our productions, our careers, our personal or ministry goals, or some buried burden borne of the disappointments of Christmases past? Let me join the annual chorus of voices crying

out in the commercial wilderness of the American Christmas.

Our message does not twinkle in the pale imitation of some ancient star—it beams in the face of a Present Redeemer, the Bright and Morning Star! Our music is not a sentimental sonata of snowy tunes and frosty lyrics—it is the evergreen music of the hope of the world, the song of the angels to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth and goodwill to all!” Our story is not one of nostalgia or mid-winter wishes—it is the Gospel of Christ, the mystery of the Incarnation, the divine summoning of the angels and the poor and the rich to forecast the reunion of a fallen creation with a loving Creator.

When we keep our eyes on Jesus and we carefully design, build and present our Christmas music to bring all the attention to Jesus, we give Him a place to do His work.

Jesus told worshipers in his hometown synagogue what that work was:

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me

To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind,

To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."

Luke 4:18-19 NKJV

Commercialism is not good news to the poor. Sentiment will not heal the broken hearted. Nostalgia will never open prison doors or restore sight to those blinded by a fear-filled today. Vague good wishes will never break the chains of oppression that bind

our friends and neighbors or our brothers and sisters. In a marvel of *anamnesis* (the spiritual mystery of a past event brought in full force into the present), the Christ-centered Christmas presentation proclaims this year to be the year of the Lord's favor.

Through our music, people will join the shepherds as they attend the outdoor angelic concert. They will journey with the wise men on their question for a true king. They will dream with Joseph of the one who will save His people from their sins. And they, like Mary, will hold Jesus in their arms—the hope of Glory.

If we are really wise, we will keep our focus on Jesus.

Dr. Steve Phifer

www.TheWorshipRenewalCenter.com

[Visit Dr. Phifer's Biographical Information](#)