First Place
Cassels

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Christmas hasn't been the same for Dacell and Lynell Shamburger since an early morning phone call four years ago that changed their lives forever.

At 7:10 a.m. on Sept. 30, 1994, the Longview couple learned that their eldest son, Ron, a senior at Texas A&M University who had been active in Christian youth ministries his whole life, had been arrested for the slaying of a fellow student.

Following a yearlong investigation and capital murder trial in Brazos County, Ron was given the death penalty. Now 27, Ron has spent the past three years in Huntsville on death row.

Although the usual anticipation of having their whole family gathered at Christmas is no longer a reality for them, the Shamburgers said the celebration of God becoming man will never lose its meaning for them. The spiritual hope and peace that the birth of Jesus Christ brought into the reality of a sin-filled world — even circumstances like theirs — is what they say provides them with true "tidings of comfort and joy."

Throughout their ordeal, the Shamburgers have dug into their Christian faith and have learned to mine deeper nuggets of spiritual truth, purpose and even joy, despite their sense of grief and loss. In sharing their story, they have even been able to encourage others who have family members in prison, or who have experienced the murder of a loved one.

"The comfort that God's given me about this, that's there for everyone," Lynell Shamburger said. "The peace that the Lord's given me, people sense that, I think. And the strength that I pull from the Lord. There's nothing I could do to have that kind of strength on my own. I'm too sensitive a person."

"If God can carry me through this set of circumstances, there's no doubt he can carry me through anything," Dacell Shamburger said. "I can't think of anything worse, except maybe being on the Bakers' end," he added, referring to the family of the slain girl, Lori Baker.

By his own admission, Ron Shamburger grew up in a good home, a Christian family. In a written testimony his parents recently had printed to distribute as a gospel tract, Ron said he "lived a good clean life and never got myself into trouble."

Attending a Christian school from seventh through 11th grade, Ron said he had been to it all: summer camp, winter camp, missions trips, retreats and youth choir.

"If the church had it, I did it," he wrote from prison. "I never wanted to go against God and his ways, but once I started to look at all the things that the world had to offer, I found myself slowly following after them."

Because of Ron's growing desire for more in life, he began taking what he couldn't afford. He began to enter and burglarize homes, stealing cash and credit cards to finance the better things in life: designer clothes and a new set of golf clubs, for starters.

His parents said that according to court testimony, it was sometime after midnight on Sept. 30, 1994, when Ron entered the duplex of Lori Baker, a fellow student who came from an affluent family and whom Ron had briefly dated. He had been in the home at least once before, and when he flipped on the bedroom light, he was startled to find Baker at home and in bed.

Hearing Baker's roommate, Victoria Kohler, opening the garage door, Ron panicked. Knowing
After would be able to identify him, he shot her in the head.

He then abducted Kohler, whom he didn't know, and put her in the trunk of her car. After driving around, Ron decided he didn't want to hurt Kohler also. He unlocked the trunk, put her keys in the car and told her to stay inside the trunk until she heard police car sirens. Returning to Baker's duplex, Ron tried to cover his tracks by saturating the place with gasoline and lighting it. The home ignited, blowing the garage door off its tracks.

Stunned and singed by the explosion, Ron fled to some nearby woods, where he twice lifted his gun to his own head, but found he just couldn't pull the trigger. Finding his way to a convenience store, Ron called his youth minister and asked to be picked up. Within a few hours, Ron had turned himself in to the police and confessed.

Lynell Shamburger told their youngest son, then a 10th-grader, that they needed to pray after a nearly hysterical phone call came a few hours later from their 20-year-old daughter, who also was an A&M student.

"Our lives changed totally at that point — for all of us. I told my son we needed to pray and to give it to the Lord. I prayed that the Lord would be glorified in this, and He immediately gave me a peace. I knew He was in control."

Dacell, who had made a dozen phone calls from work after Lynell called him with the news, said their daughter had told him "Daddy, this is for real. Ron has been arrested for murder."

Though the police wouldn't give out very much information over the phone, the Shamburgers expected the worst. "I felt just a great loss — really indescribable. The fear, the dread of the unknown, not knowing what was going on. There was very little communication between us. It was long and quiet," Dacell said of the four-hour ride to College Station.

At the county jail, Ron kept his eyes down, not wanting to look at his parents. His hair and eyebrows had been singed in the explosion, and he still was in shock. "I guess we all were," Dacell said.

"We didn't know what steps to take. We had never been through anything like this," Lynell recalled. When the court-appointed lawyer requested assistance because he had never defended a capital murder case, a friend of the Shamburgers recommended a Houston attorney, Steven Losch, who specialized in capital murder appeals.

Lynell remembered Losch introducing himself to the Christian couple by saying, "I'm from New York, I'm Jewish, and I don't believe in a personal God." Right then, she said the Lord impressed on her, "This is one reason why you're going through this."

Dacell added, "Lynell and I agreed we had to pray for Steve as well as for others involved in the trial."

By the time of the jury selection, Losch had become the lead attorney in the case.

Following the nearly year-long investigation, jury selection for the capital murder trial took six weeks, and the Shamburgers were surrounded by friends from Macedonia Baptist each time they drove to Brazos County to be in the courtroom.

During the trial, Lynell said Losch asked her, "Are you going to lose your faith if he gets the death penalty?" She said she assured Losch that her hopes didn't lie in the judicial system and
minded him that he needed to depend on the Lord, not his own abilities as a trial lawyer.

The night before the sentencing, Losch gathered everyone together to try to prepare them for the worst. But the Shamburgers and church friends were way ahead of him and started to pray and encourage the attorney, regardless of the trial outcome.

When Ron received the death penalty, it was the Shamburgers who held steady, while Losch experienced an emotional reaction. "He broke down and cried," Lynell said. "I just put my hand on his shoulder to comfort him. And he said, 'This is not the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be comforting you.'"

Ron's case is in the process of a second appeal, which is automatic for death row inmates, and no execution date has been set. Because appeals now can be processed simultaneously, the average stay on death row has dropped from nine years to about five.

Still, Lynell said she doesn't put a lot of faith in the judicial system. "Whatever the outcome, it's what the Lord wants to happen, not us," she said.

"We haven't really ever figured out why he got to the point he did," Dacell said. "He participated in all the youth groups, camps, summer missions. I think he had slipped into a depression. He was a fifth-year senior, a bunch of his friends had graduated, and the rest were involved with girlfriends, which he hadn't had much luck with.

"He started to figure out ways to make himself feel better, to dress better and look nice. But he hasn't the financial means to do so. When we went through his closet, we found lots of expensive shirts, Ralph Lauren, Polo, some new golf putters."

Lynell added, "It's funny, because growing up, he never cared what clothes he wore. That changed when he got to college."

Dacell said Ron seemed especially annoyed with a temporary car they provided for him to use after he wrecked his Pontiac Grand Am. "It was a plain vanilla car, and wasn't very sporty looking. Ron called it a grandma car. He was quite upset at having to drive that car."

From Ron Shamburger's testimony:

"When you take your focus off the Lord and begin to seek after things, you find yourself empty," Ron wrote in his testimony. "So it was that I began to look for things to do that would satisfy that void I had created by removing God. Now, I'm not saying you can lose your salvation or make void the promises of God. What you can do is lose the joy of your salvation and the peace you had. I was not poor, but I always wanted more ... crime and doing wrong things became a drug in itself.

"After you have thought about something enough, and begin to take pleasure in those thoughts, you begin to act it out. What was a sin of the heart and mind is now a sin of action ... your thoughts will become actions, which will have consequences in this life and before God."

Despite having provided Ron with a solid, two-parent home and a Christian upbringing, the Shamburgers said they still struggled, wondering if they could have done something to prevent what happened.

"We wondered what we had done to fail him," Dacell recalled. "During the trial, I felt people
ring at me. Lori's father would turn his eyes away when we passed in the hallway. Wherever we went in Bryan, even in a convenience store, I worried that someone would recognize me as Ron Shamburger's father."
Lynell said she even wondered if she should still sing in the church choir. "For a fleeting moment, you think that." But instead their church, Macedonia Baptist Church in Longview, was "very supportive," Lynell said. "They even had a special time of prayer for us the Sunday after it happened. I don't know what I'd do without them, the love, the response, the cards. The way they treated it was sort of equal to if you'd lost a child."
Dacell added, "A death is somewhat natural, but there's very few people that go through having someone murdered, or being on the giving end."

Since the trial and Ron's sentencing, Dacell and Lynell said they have been "very surprised" at the ministry of encouragement God has developed in them. The couple have shared their story with church youth and women's groups and said audiences are attentive wherever they go.
And the range of individuals who seek their help goes beyond those facing death row situations—they have counseled people who have had siblings murdered, who have been convicted of assault, and who suffer from alcohol or drug abuse.
"I definitely never knew the strength I could have in the Lord that I do," Lynell said. "He's given me an added strength and boldness to speak about it. I'm also more compassionate. There's not the person who's not going through something.
I've prayed and counseled with all kinds of people. It helps them to know someone cares who's been in a similar situation. Someone who's had a loved one out of arm's reach. I always encourage them to lean on the Lord. I don't just read my Bible, I read it to get something out of it.
"It sounds strange, but it's a joy to tell what the Lord has done. We all go through storms in life, and the Lord can give the strength to go through them. We're not promised smooth sailing in life. And the storms will either strengthen us or break us. If we rely on the Lord, they can strengthen us. And He uses one person's storm to touch another."

The Shamburgers visit Ron twice a month, always separated by a heavy wire mesh screen with a 12-inch wide glass viewing panel. Ron is allowed one visit a week by someone on his approved visitation list of 10 names.
His daily prison routine was restricted, his parents said, after condemned killer Martin Gurule's escape from death row in November touched off a weeklong manhunt. Prison officials ordered a full lockdown and restricted visitation, commissary and shower privileges. It's since eased a bit. Before that, Ron had participated in the work program, working in the sewing factory four hours a day making pants for prison guards throughout the state.
Ron reads everything his parents can send him from Christian bookstores and has enrolled in an extension program from a Baptist seminary. He serves as the song leader for the weekly prison worship service, and his mother said he seems to be at peace.
"You can definitely tell a difference in his letters from at first and now. He's dealt with everything with the Lord," Lynell said. "He's always admitted his guilt, unlike others on death
v. In fact, he often says he's the only guilty one back there.

And he accepts that he needs to pay the consequences. He wants to pay the consequences. He believes he deserves to die. And when the Lord is through with him, he will. We all deserve to die."

Lynell said the turning point in Ron's attitude toward life on death row came when he read Philippians 1:21, and realized that to live is to serve Christ.

"The Lord has given us great riches through the fire," she said. "Knowing that Ron's at peace, and that he desires what the Lord wants him to do, helps give me peace."

From Ron Shamburger's testimony:

"I grew up in a Christian home and had a family that knew the Lord. I loved the church, and I still love the church and being around God's people. I knew the Lord, loved the Lord and wanted to serve Him. Yet I sit on death row. Was I saved? 100 percent. Am I saved now? 100 percent. Did I commit great sin? Yes, and the Lord forgives great sin, but I still have to pay the consequences for my actions.

"For a short time I sought after this world, and God allowed me to fall into great sin. I hope that you will not do as I did, but seek God all of your days. Give Him your heart and mind. Seek Him with all that you are.

"The best testimony you could ever have is that you came to the Lord as a young person and always lived a life devoted to God."

The Shamburgers said they always will grieve over the tragedy.

"It's hard to look around and see how many lives have been affected," Dacell added. "The Baker family has been devastated, the Kohlers were extremely shook. I still pray for the Baker family. The father was very hurt and very bitter. I'd feel the same way if my daughter had been murdered. But unless he somehow finds a way to get past the bitterness, his life also will be ruined."

"It hurts to see your kid hurt," Lynell said. "They're a part of you. It hurts you a lot more to see your kids go through something than to go through it yourself. I don't like the wrongdoing, but I love him. And that love has grown."

With no physical contact allowed during visits on death row, Lynell has not been able to touch her son since the trial. Still, she says God has dried her tears.

"That's one of the testimonies the Lord has given me. The added strength others see and wonder where it comes from, it's from the Lord totally. But Dacell is really the stronger one."

"Because of Ron's ordeal, I've gone through the valley," Dacell said, wiping a tear. "There's not a day that goes by I don't cry — such a waste of two lives. Yet it's because of this we have an open door to communicating with others."

And so, the Shamburgers have decorated a Christmas tree this year. While Lynell admits birthdays and holidays can be tough, she said their concept of Christmas now goes beyond a single day.

"There's a void," she said. "It's not the same. The world has such a picture of family getting
together, and that doesn't happen for us. But Christmas is still here.

I may get in trouble for saying this, but it's a man-made holiday. It's lost some of the reason why it started. You really should be giving of yourself all year round, showing love and compassion. It's just easier for most of us to do it this time of year."

Dacell said the couple will rejoice in celebrating the eternal meaning of the holiday. "If it wasn't for Christmas, there wouldn't be salvation," Dacell pointed out. "And no matter what, Ron still has life, and that's for eternity. If he dies, he'll be in a better place. No matter the outcome, it'll be what the Lord wants."
DALLAS — The reason the Southern Baptists caused an uproar with their statement on submission is that they focused only on married women, says the author of the book "Liberated Through Submission."

Actually, says P.D. "Bunny" Wilson, submission is a universal principle that applies to all human relationships. The author talked about her book, first published in 1989 but selling better than ever, in an interview at the Christian Booksellers Association national convention in Dallas.

"The question is not whether we are to submit, the question is to whom and what do we submit to," Wilson said. In her appearances on national radio stations and television programs like Oprah Winfrey, Wilson said audiences agree that submission makes sense.

Defining submission as voluntarily yielding, Wilson said, "It's a principle that sets us free. We're in tremendous bondage when we are rebellious and stubborn and contentious against an established order."

Though the principle is often distorted so that the entire spotlight is on married women, Wilson said everyone submits to someone or something.

"When we get a job, the first thing we want to see is the flow chart," she said. "We want our job description, and we want to know who can put stuff on our desk that we have to do when we don't want to do it. We are very definite with people who ask us to do things. We understand the principle."

Wilson said individuals can submit to a principle, a precept or a person, and cited Mahatma Gandhi's submission to the principle of nonviolence which helped to deliver India out of English rule.

Still, the former atheist said she was resistant when she first came across the concept in the Bible as relating to marriage.

"As a new convert, I wondered why God would mess up a good book with an idea like that," she recalled. "I said, 'Lord, I don't understand how I can be called to be subservient and inferior to my husband when I have the answer two weeks before he gets the question.'"

"But I'm kind of like a pit bull," she said. "I had this desire to really serve God and understand His principles. And I said, 'OK, God, I'll do this, but I won't stop nagging you until you explain to me how on the one hand Jesus came that I might have life and have it abundantly, and now you call me to submit.'"

Wilson said over the years she's learned that nothing is further from the truth than to believe that being submissive is being subservient, inferior and someone's doormat. Submission, she said, is "a very positive, powerful and aggressive principle" designed by God for men and women, single and married.

"Jesus Christ lived a totally submitted life and He's our role model. In His humanity, He did not want to die on the cross, but he said nevertheless not my will but thy will will be done. If Jesus had not submitted to death on the cross, none of us would have eternal life.

"If I appreciate salvation as God's No. 1 greatest gift, I have to believe that submission is the second greatest because it ushered in my salvation."
Submission begins before marriage, she said. And the reason there's so many problems among Christians, is it never started in their single life.

Single people, for instance, are told to submit themselves to God in James 4:7, to the government in 1 Peter 2:13, to employers in 1 Peter 2:18, and to pastors in Hebrews 13:17. Wilson uses these guidelines when counseling single people. "When a single person asks me, 'How will I know that I'm ready to get married?' I say let me talk to your boss, let me talk to your pastor and let me see how fast you drive.

"If you're a hell raiser on your job, you're not yielded to your pastor, and you're murmuring and complaining, you're not ready to be married, because you have not adopted the spirit of submission."

In a marriage, she said, God's order calls for a designated head, primarily because we're all made as independent, opinionated creatures. "It's very important that we understand the power that's contained in the principle when God is put in the mix."

Submission is not an ominous, oppressive force that hangs over her own marriage, she said. Though she and her husband, Frank, are both strongly opinionated, they will go for days, sometimes weeks, exchanging ideas. It's only every now and then, she said, that something comes up where they just can't come to agreement.

It's then that Wilson takes some very specific steps: "I can tell him how I feel. I can even get angry and tell him how I feel, because the Bible says 'Be angry and sin not.' Then I run into Philippians 2:14-15, which says, 'Do all things without murmuring or complaining.' It doesn't mean that I just let him walk all over me. It means that I take a very aggressive stand where I speak the truth in love."

After she tells her husband why she disagrees with the decision, Wilson chooses to give him the right to make the final decision. And if he doesn't go along with the way she feels about it, she then gives it up to God.

"Submission is such a powerful principle biblically because it operates on pure faith," she said. "I believe that God hears all, sees all, knows all and will intervene on our behalf. I don't doubt for a minute that God can communicate into my husband's heart and mind without any further help from me. That takes faith.

"Often Christians have the faith to believe God can cure someone of cancer. But do we have the faith to believe that God can speak to a person who has the right to make the final decision?"

Wilson admits that neither her husband nor her pastor are perfect.

"But the beauty of submission," she said, "is that the faith is so great that even if they make a mistake I have the faith to believe that you can fix it. That takes faith, because we are the kind of people that want to be in control."

Because of the submission principle in marriage, Wilson said she spends a "tremendous" amount of time working with single women, helping them to select the kind of person they'd want to submit to.

"One of the main things to look for in a husband is a man who doesn't want to break God's heart. If it makes him uncomfortable to line up with God's word, he'd rather be uncomfortable than to violate what God's word says."

Warning flags should include making decisions on impulse, or not praying for direction. "You
ed somebody who's in touch with God. You don't want to follow a person who's listening only to himself."

Perhaps the biggest disservice to the principle of submission, she said, is the attempt to use it to justify abusive situations.

"Submission and abuse have absolutely nothing to do with one another," Wilson insisted. "The very fact that they're used in the same sentence is a great disservice to the principle. Submission means to voluntarily yield. I know very few people who voluntarily yield their bodies to be beaten. Gandhi did. But that's a very unique situation.

"If you're subjecting yourself to physical abuse in a marriage relationship, that's dysfunctional. In other words, you are not helping that person. You need to go to a safe house and call your spouse and say, 'I didn't leave you, I left your behavior, and when you've gotten enough counseling that it's changed, I'll return.' That's a tough love."

"No one can force anyone else to submit. It's a voluntary thing."
A misuse of church authority can turn what should be the safest place in the world into a place where people are afraid to be themselves, says an expert in spiritual abuse issues. "Church is not the place we go to bleed, it's the place we go to dress up and pretend everything is OK," Jeff VanVonderen said during LeTourneau University chapel services this week.
VanVonderen, a Minnesota pastor of counseling and the author of "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse," said church leaders who dole out acceptance based on performance are perverting their God-given authority.
"Abuse occurs when we measure God's 'yes' by a performance standard," he said. "It's abusive when we use positions of authority to hold people's 'yes' hostage. We demand people act a certain way so that we can feel OK as leaders."
VanVonderen said his own experience with spiritual abuse grew out of being raised in "an independent, fundamental, sin-hating, soul-winning, separatist" church. Legalistic leaders in churches like that, he said, demand conformity to human standards rather than God's, and try to motivate others through guilt. They even use God's name to get people to do what they want.
"The problem with mean, legalistic and abusive people is not that they don't love Jesus, it's that they want to tell you how to love Jesus, too," VanVonderen said.
"It gets confusing, he said, because the issue with legalism is not whether someone follows God's laws, which is something all Christians are called to do. The issue, he explained, is whether someone measures their self-acceptance based on whether they do or don't.
"God's 'yes' is based on Christ's performance, not your own," he said. "God gave us the law so we would know we needed grace. It's the cross that we should base our self-acceptance on. The agony is that God's asking us to measure our self-acceptance by an intangible thing, something that happened 2,000 years ago. It's easier to just have a list."
Because they are so performance-based, VanVonderen said abusive churches typically strive for perfectionism and tend to reject human emotions as unspiritual. Members aren't allowed to struggle with issues like pornography or doubting one's faith. The result, VanVonderen said, is a whole lot of pretending going on.
"The only thing that's OK in a church like that is to be OK, and if you're not OK, to act like you are OK," he said. "Where does someone with a problem go in a church like this? What's the rule here? Is it how things look is more important than what is real? If so, what's real never gets dealt with."

On the other hand, a healthy church, he said, allows individuals to express the kind of fears and doubts that say: "I don't know if there's a God anymore. I'm not even sure He's a nice guy. And if He is, I'm not sure He's winning.
"If you could say that out loud, everyone could watch and see what God can do. He can handle his own PR," VanVonderen said. "We're so afraid others will think God is a schmuck is we don't do it right. We think we have to look good so that God looks good. Where does it say that?"
VanVonderen cautioned that like church leaders, parents can also fall into spiritually abusive
patterns with their children. By redefining their job, parents can remind themselves that they're not supposed to control how someone else acts.

Abusive parents, for instance, will pick a verse like Ephesians 6:1 — "Children, obey your parents" — and interpret it to mean "Parents, get your children to obey you."

"That verse is for children, not parents," VanVonderen said. "When we use it against our children, it's like opening mail that's not your own. Parents have enough verses about themselves to worry about."

Healthy parents and leaders, on the other hand, will recognize Jesus as their role model, and try to serve, rather than control others.

"Along with everything else He was, Jesus was an incredible human being," VanVonderen said. "He not only sympathizes with our weaknesses, but provides grace and mercy — not advice or more things to do — in our time of need. He doesn't say 'Come to me all you who are weary and I'll give you a list of things to do.' He says He'll give us rest."

Following that example, VanVonderen said a leader's job is to build up and strengthen others so they can do whatever God wants them to do.

"We don't know God's agenda for others, but He does. We want people to serve God, but not to earn points. Do it because you love Him and have something to give."
Among Unitarians, there's an old joke about coming to a fork in the road. On one sign are the words, "To Heaven." On the other, "To a Discussion about Heaven." To a Unitarian Universalist, the choice is easy — they wouldn't think of missing a discussion. These people can talk.

Because it seems their one unifying principle is the right to make up one's own mind about what one believes, a typical Unitarian church service will include a variety of denominational and religious persuasions. A traditional Christian hymn might be followed by a reading from "Song of the Kagaba Indians" and a benediction based on a saying of Confucius.

Though seminary students from Dallas are often recruited to lead the Sunday programs, the service will sometimes consist of an open forum, where the only ground rules are to respect others' time and speak one's mind.

Each service ends with a "talk-back" session where anyone can question the speaker and share opinions on what was presented.

Knowing their penchant for dialogue, it's not surprising that the Unitarian Universalist church has been receptive to presenting one of the more controversial movements among religious thinkers, known as the Jesus Seminar. The church will host a two-part program on the seminar at 11 a.m. June 14 and 28 at the Unitarian Fellowship of Longview, 3201 Gilmer Road.

Founded by Robert W. Funk of Vanderbilt University, the Jesus Seminar's stated goal is to uncover the historical Jesus of Nazareth whom it believes has been held captive by church creed and the trappings of traditional Christianity. By studying noncanonical works, as well as the Bible, some 75 Jesus Seminar scholars have concluded that the Jesus of the Gospels is a fictional distortion by the early church of the actual person of Jesus.

Since 1985, the scholarly think tank has met twice a year to vote on the historical accuracy of sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Seminar scholars have decided that 82 percent of the words traditionally attributed to Jesus were not actually spoken by him.

To reflect the seminar's findings, Funk has developed a new "red-letter" translation of the Gospels called the Scholars Version (SV). The translation is included in the book, "The Five Gospels," which includes the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas as the fifth gospel.

Seminar participants also assert that ministers have kept their congregations in the dark about what modern scholars have learned about Jesus, namely that he had no divine self-concept, did not perform supernatural miracles and was not resurrected.

Needless to say, the movement has its critics.

Conservative scholars say the seminar's attempts to separate Jesus from the divine Christ is nothing new, and has its roots in a century-long revisionist effort to secularize Jesus and make him more palatable for modern audiences.

By reducing Jesus from God incarnate to a secular sage, critics say the Jesus Seminar removes saving significance to Jesus' death. The "new" Jesus, they say, is merely a Jewish poet who spoke in parables, but rarely initiated dialogue, did not offer to cure people and made no claim to be the Messiah.

Critics also question the scholars' credentials, as none of the current seminar members teaches
any of the major centers of New Testament scholarship in the United States. And
Conservative scholars point out that historical methodology has its limitations, and argue that
the seminar operates out of a bias against church, faith and creed.
Jessica Noble of the Unitarian Fellowship of Longview, however, described the seminar's chief
critics as "those who accept the Bible as the inspired work of God, and who want a religion
that's fixed, unchangeable."
Noble will present the first Jesus Seminar program, a review and discussion of Funk's book,"Honest to Jesus." Her husband, Jay, will lead the second session on Marcus J. Borg's book,"Jesus, A New Vision."
Noble said she appreciates the Jesus Seminar material because it brings new insight from young
seminarians. "I want churches to offer more freedom in examining the latest research from
seminarians to the public," she said. "I like the freedom I sense in that movement."
Jay Noble, who holds membership in the Episcopal Church and also attends the Unitarian
programs, has become an associate member in the Jesus Seminar movement.
"If I'm going to be a disciple of Jesus and I discover the possibility that the real Jesus is at
variance with Christian orthodoxy, then I have to abandon orthodoxy," he said. "How can we
worship a tentative figure? I've got to determine whether the Jesus of history is consistent with
the Jesus of faith."
Jessica Noble said she first learned about the Unitarian church from an ethics and logic
professor when she was a student at North Texas State University. Reared a Catholic in East
Texas, "in a time when there was more institutional control than there is now," Noble began
looking at other denominations when her daughter asked why she couldn't be an altar boy.
She began attending a Presbyterian church that she said better reflected her beliefs, yet was
still reciting creedal statements she didn't fully agree with. When Noble learned in 1983 that a
Unitarian church was about to be organized in Longview, she became a charter member.
"As an institution, we don't attempt to control the thinking of our members," she said. "Each of
us has our own belief system. It's the freest form of religious life. The closest thing to absolutes
is our principles — how you treat your fellow man, whether you love your neighbor and treat
others fairly."
Though Unitarians believe parents are the "resident theologians" in their children's lives, they
maintain that children also need to develop their own theology.
"What we do not do is to threaten with hellfire and damnation if they do not agree," Noble said.
"We provide a background in comparative religion and an understanding of the Christian religion.
We help them learn how to go about being loving and fair to everybody.
"In more fundamental denominations, the primary focus is to control the thinking and tell
members what's right and wrong. If you have trouble thinking something is true, you're not
supposed to question it but accept it on faith. We believe you should be comfortable with your
faith."
In a small town, Bible belt community, what type of folks are drawn to the Unitarian church?
"Most are people who feel some dissatisfaction with their current religious affiliation and are
looking to see what else is available," Noble said. "About half of our members are Unitarians who
have moved here from larger cities."
The admits the Longview fellowship is a bit homogenous — made up of mostly white professionals. "We're a very small group," she said. "If we have 20 people on Sunday, it's considered a smashing success."

The public is invited to attend the Jesus Seminar programs. As always, the group welcomes discussion.
Surviving your kids' adolescent years is nothing new. The overwhelming surge in hormones trapped in a body that's grown six inches over the summer. A shutdown in communication with parents. Way too many opportunities to experiment with what that older teen in the next grade already knows. But these days if you're the parent of a junior or senior high school student, your parental anxiety buttons are more likely to be pushed by the threat of teen-age pregnancy, drugs, alcohol, gang violence and news reports of 14-year-olds opening fire on their classmates. With area schools back in session, it's enough to drive well-meaning parents to their knees — and that's exactly where they should be, say members of Moms In Touch International, who meet for one hour each week to pray for their children and the schools they attend. These moms say that turning to prayer is not a last resort, but the front line of battle in influencing and even protecting their school children.

"You have no control over them — that's a tough realization. But one thing they can't escape is our prayers," said Linda Harrelson, Longview area coordinator for Moms In Touch. "Prayer keeps us in hope rather than despair."

Though lots of parents already pray for their kids on their own, Harrelson said something special happens when two or three come together and agree in prayer. "It's so much more encouraging to get together with another mom or two," she said. "It's a more focused and concentrated time of prayer. Others may have gone through the same thing your child is experiencing."

Describing the bond that comes when women pray together, Harrelson said, "Their children become your children."

Harrelson looked for other moms to join her after she heard about Moms In Touch through a 1993 radio broadcast and then visited a local group in Hallsville. The ministry in Longview has grown from three moms praying for Spring Hill Junior High School to eight groups of moms praying for Longview High School, Pine Tree Intermediate and High School, White Oak Middle School and two groups praying for college students. Surrounding area groups include four in Daingerfield and Hallsville and three in Marshall.

Parents of private school students and home-schoolers can also form Moms In Touch groups, and individuals without children can "adopt" a student and join the prayer group for that child's school. Groups meet at a time that's convenient for the members. Working moms, for instance, often meet at lunchtime. The groups usually meet in a home and never on the school campus. Forming prayer groups for school campuses was the brainstorm of Moms In Touch founder Fern Nichols back in 1984, when her two sons were entering junior high in British Columbia. Sensing the negative peer pressure her sons faced, Nichols looked for other moms who shared her concerns and who would be willing to pray about it.

The following summer, Nichols and her family moved to Poway, Calif., where she established a group to pray for the local high school. In spring of 1988, Moms In Touch received national exposure when Nichols was interviewed by Dr. James Dobson on his Focus on the Family radio program. That first broadcast brought more than 20,000 responses.

Moms In Touch has set a goal to have every school in the United States prayed for by 2003.
This year, more than 32,000 prayer groups meet in 66 countries, and the instructional prayer
booklet has been translated into 14 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German,
Hungarian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian and Swahili.
In a telephone call from Irving, Texas coordinator Sharon Arrington said more than 1,200
groups are meeting across the state, with another 350 moms waiting for prayer partners to
form a group. "It's really been a busy fall," she said, crediting the release of Cheri Fuller's
testimonial book, "When Mothers Pray," with spurring interest among mothers of
schoolchildren.
Arrington's own testimony is included in that book. She became involved with Moms In Touch
nine years ago when she dropped her kids off at their junior high and senior high schools. She
began to pray that her son would find a spiritual mentor. "I thought it would be a youth pastor
or teacher, but God sent a godly girlfriend whom he still dates today."
Through Moms in Touch, Arrington said she learned how to pray scripturally. She began to ask
that Psalm 119:36 would become a reality in her son's life, and that he'd turn his heart toward
God's word.
"I prayed that for a solid year without telling him, and one day he came in and said, 'Mom, I think
I'm going to read the Bible all the way through.' I figured when he got through Leviticus, he was
serious about it. My husband and I would look at each other and just couldn't believe the
changes in his life."
He's now at Baylor University, she said, preparing for the mission field.

As Texas coordinator, Arrington sometimes travels overseas to help distribute Moms In Touch
material and hold citywide informational meetings. Seeing the problems of alcoholism among
youth in Romania and struggles with pornography and AIDS in Brazil, she's found that "mothers
are mothers," and that kids the world over are fighting the same battles. Her supply of several
hundred Moms In Touch booklets in Portuguese were distributed the first day.
"Prayer works," she said. "That's what moms want to hear, they want hope. As soon as
mothers hear that, it sparks a fire in their hearts."
Moms In Touch members keep their meetings to one hour by following a well-organized format
that includes four steps of praising God for his attributes, silent confession, thanksgiving for
answered prayer and intercession for current needs of their children's school. Longview
coordinator Harrelson said members pray after the example of Lamentations 2:19, which says,
"Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord; lift up your hands toward Him for
the lives of your children."
Though specific requests remain confidential, Harrelson said common needs include
relationships with teachers, good attitudes, safety, preparing for tests, and holding onto values.
Many mothers pray that their kids "will get caught" when they are in the wrong.
"We pray the Scripture that says what's done in the darkness will be brought into the light,"
Harrelson said. "I tell my kids, I may not know everything they do, but I will know what God will
tell me."
Participants pray in a conversational style and try to cover every aspect of a need before moving
on to another request. Even members who have never prayed out loud can attend and share
silently in prayer with the group.
Each group also prays for the school's administration, staff and teachers. Some members get permission from school administrators to express appreciation for teachers by leaving a goodie jar in the teacher's break room or hosting luncheons.

"It changes my heart to know that God hears and answers prayers," Harrelson said. "Not a week has gone by where we don't see answers."

An informational meeting for Moms In Touch will be held at 1:15 p.m. Sept. 15 at 102 Cheryl, off Gilmer Road in Spring Hill. For information, call Harrelson at 759-5682 or Moms In Touch headquarters at 1-800-949-MOMS.