

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel  
At the Death of Fred Harold Calfee  
Matthew 8:5-13  
December 1, 2012**

**O**n Tuesday past Fred Calfee did something for the second time in his life: he soloed. The first time was in a P-19 trainer after joining the then *Army Air Corps* in November 1942. The second time was this past Tuesday, when- as in John Magee's poem *High Flight*- Fred *put out his hand and touched the face of God*.

Second Lieutenant Fred H. Calfee received flight instruction from experts, but then you must do it for yourself, and do it alone with no coach in the back seat. In the first solo Fred broke with gravity and with the aid of airfoils and engine thrust flew like a bird. When he gained speed going down the runway he was still a trainee, but when he landed successfully and taxied to the hanger, he was a pilot- although a novice one. And in his second solo after over ninety years of training in the sturdy version of the Christian faith known as Methodism, Fred barreled down the runway towards death, and there he found that what carried him forward was the lift of God's grace and the drawing power of Jesus Christ who had been this way before. The first solo was a great adventure for a young man from West Virginia, and the second an even greater adventure because of what happened at the moment of rotation, when the bite of the wings provided sufficient lift to leave the earth below. Flying is the exhilaration of new freedom, old limits left behind for a wide new sight from above.

The Christian understanding of the human person is that we are binary in composition, a body and a soul, and we have never known ourselves without both in a unified composite. We do not have a body, we are a body; we do not have a soul, we are a soul. And the reality of the soul has other possible names: the spirit of a person, their heart, their distinct personality, their mind and memories, what makes them who they are, or - to use a contemporary analogy- their unique software which can be separated from the hardware of the body and kept in storage. Both are created by God at the moment of conception because together they make a human person.

There is no storehouse of preexistent souls in heaven, just as there are no bodies in heaven's warehouse awaiting assignment; both come into being at

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conception, the marvelous act of creation in which man and woman participate by God's design that we be his co-creators. So children bear the DNA image of their parents and the divine image of God at multiple levels. Life is body and soul; until we die they are a living composite.

But body and soul are separable, and that separation comes at the moment of death. Biological life stops, the body begins to decay, but the soul - the essential person- does not die. Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill *the soul...*" (Mt. 10:28a). In Revelation 6 there is the vision, "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar *the souls* of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." And to the thief on the cross who was about to die, did not Jesus say? "Today *you* will be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43). And who is the *you* after the last breath is exhaled? It is the soul.

There is a part of you that men may kill, your body, but there is part of you that only God can dispose of, and that is your soul, your spirit, who you are, your software. And on Tuesday past, at death the body of Fred was left behind to be reverently carried to the church for worship and then placed in the earth. But Fred, the Fred you knew and loved, is now with God in heaven, which is the upper, invisible layer of creation to which we do not have visible access.

In his first solo Fred left the earth, and in his second solo left human visibility. His problems and pains are now past. Fred is forgiven because of Jesus Christ. He sees his life through the Lords's own merciful eyes with a new appreciation for how the grace and guidance of God was with him all his days. And he knows more about us than we know about ourselves since he share the mind and perspective of Christ. How much there is to see at a thousand feet; how much more from the heights of glory? His pains are now past because he has been separated from a worn out mortal coil.

To know and worship Jesus Christ in this life is the first stage of the long process of salvation. Fred was a believer, and for most of his life- I think- a Methodist. He has now passed to the second stage of salvation which is life in heaven with God and the saints and the angels and the bliss thereof. But that is not the end. Fred is still not saved in the ultimate sense, but then neither are any of us.

The great creeds of church end not with souls going to an eternal heaven but

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with the upper kingdom coming down to embrace our battered and torn world with the strong arms of resurrection. The goal of the Christian life is not to *go to heaven and stay there* but to *be in heaven* awaiting the final reunion of the resurrection of the dead when the stored software of the saved is downloaded into new resurrection bodies like that of Jesus and we move back downstairs to inherit the creation made new and whole.

Fred prayed when he soloed the first time. He prayed when he left the English Channel behind and crossed into Nazi Europe. He prayed when he saw his buddies' B-17s split in pieces by ack-ack and the machine guns of FW-190s and ME-109's. He prayed when he crashed landed in Sweden. He prayed when he asked Betty to be his bride. He prayed at the birth of his children and at the death of his daughter Beverly. He prayed during the Cuban Missile Crisis when his airborne "Looking Glass" command center carried the black box of nuclear codes which if opened by Presidential command would have ended our civilization as we have known it in hundreds of atomic fireballs. He prayed when he sat down weekly to count the offerings of the church he loved and to make sure the accounts were honest. And I suspect that Fred's last prayer, if we had been privy to it, would have been for his wife Betty, daughter Deborah, sons Mark and Mike, all of whom carried something of the stamp of Fred's service to others, Deborah in health care, Mark and Mike in the military.

All of Fred that was good, all that was in alignment with Jesus Christ, has been preserved alive with his soul. All else has been buried in the sea of God's forgiveness, and so we must also forgive our dear brother whatever of his faults or failings effect us, and that is the special work of his children and wife who knew him best and loved him most. We honor our parents not by dismissing their sins and failures but by extending to them the same free forgiveness Jesus Christ offers any who come to him. Heaven at death and the full kingdom later is the future of all who follow Jesus Christ in his church. Don't miss out on God's future. Embrace this grand faith today. Be ready when your call to solo comes.

Pastor Phil Thrailkill

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