

## **A Christmas Confrontation**

by

Scott William Foley

James Henderson shook the snow from his overcoat and dress shoes as he entered the mammoth church. In his opinion—with the food court, café, gift shop, and free Wi-Fi—it had more in common with a shopping mall. His left hand clung to a hot pink flier so tightly that his knuckles had turned stark white.

James pounded through the lobby, but the grey carpet devoured his stomps, rendering them ineffectual. Teenagers were milling around everywhere. Some were working on homework, but most were playing on their computers or gossiping. Nearly all of them clutched a coffee of some sort. They had obviously come straight over once school dismissed. This fact only served to enrage James all the more.

He stopped one of them, a boy whose hair hid his eyes, and demanded to know the location of the youth minister's office. After a muffled response, James headed in the appropriate direction. He hadn't bothered to wipe his feet, and so he left cold, wet tracks behind him.

The particular door he sought was wide open. James burst into the office without knocking or announcing himself in any way. He discovered an older man sitting at a desk, listening to a radio show while tapping away on his laptop. The man wore a white Chicago Bears hat, a red pullover, and a silver wedding ring. The office was adorned with posters promoting musical groups unfamiliar to James—names like Switchfoot, Third Day, and David Crowder Band.

Before the older man could even look up, James huffed, “My name’s James Henderson, and I expect a word with Marty Yapple.”

The other man didn’t seem startled by the rash intrusion whatsoever, as though unexpected outbursts were an everyday occurrence in his world. He smiled and said, “You’re looking at him.”

“No,” James said. “I want to see Marty Yapple, the youth minister.”

“Yeah, that’s still me. I’m Marty.”

James squinted at the man, prompting Marty to say, “Ministering to youth doesn’t mean the minister has to be young in body, though being young in spirit helps. I really am Marty Yapple. Now, what can I do for you?”

As James rushed across the room and slammed the pink flier down upon Marty’s desk, the youth minister pushed a button on his laptop. This brought the radio show to an end.

“You’re responsible for this,” James seethed.

Marty looked at the flier, then said, “I take it you don’t like the event.”

“No, Mr. Yapple—”

“—Call me Marty—”

“—Mr. Yapple, I do not like the event one bit. *Get Jiggy With Jesus’ Birthday*. It’s sacrilegious.”

Having had many years’ experience with people of all temperaments, Marty remembered to keep his cool. “We’re celebrating the birth of Christ on Christmas Eve. *Jiggy* denotes joy, dancing, and celebration. Where’s the blasphemy in that?”

Scooping the flier back up, James read, “Live music, dancing, pizza, video games.” With his nostrils flaring and a vein above his left brow visibly throbbing, he interrogated, “Where’s Communion? Candles? Hymns? What about a sermon? You don’t mention anything that remotely gives the impression of worship.”

Marty felt his cheeks flush ever so slightly as he said, “Well, to be fair, Mr. Henderson, we’re celebrating Jesus’ birth. We will pray as a group, of course, and I always encourage independent prayer as well, but we want it to be a party. We’ll address those things you mentioned the next day during regular service, but our youth Christmas Eve event is all about celebrating Jesus’ arrival into the world and our hearts by throwing a party.”

Skepticism shrouded James’ face. Marty had seen the look a thousand times during his years of service. Waving the flier back and forth as though it was on fire, James growled, “My thirteen-year-old daughter brought this home yesterday from school. One of her friends, a member of your youth group, gave it to her. She wants to come.”

“Wonderful!” Marty exclaimed.

“Wrong, Mr. Yapple. My wife and I have taken her to our church’s Christmas Eve service since she was a little girl. Now that tradition will come to an end over pizza and live music? Our family will spend its first Christmas Eve apart over some fad and gimmick? How can you justify the turmoil you’re bringing into my family by catering to the whims of children?”

Though a Godly man, Marty felt anger swell up inside his chest. He didn’t deny it; instead, he overcame it. He said, “My goal as youth minister is to bring children to

Christ so that they may then bring their future children to Christ. You may not like my methodology, but I firmly believe Christmas is about Jesus; we want to celebrate Him.”

Marty noticed that James’ expression slightly softened as he continued with, “Look, Mr. Henderson, we’re both Christians. We may not have the same ideologies, but we both believe in Christ and want your daughter to celebrate Him. Now, we’d love to have her join us, but as long as she’s acknowledging His birth, I’m a happy man wherever she is.”

And then Marty spotted it.

Up until that point, he believed he saw anger in James’ eyes. But he was mistaken. It was not anger James suffered, but pain. Marty, being the father of three grown women, finally realized what was at the heart of this confrontation.

Marty asked, “You said your daughter is thirteen?”

James simply nodded with averted eyes placed upon a nearby cross.

“I remember those days. That’s around the time they realize that we’re not infallible; that maybe our way isn’t always the best. And then something like this comes along, and you ask yourself, ‘Man, if she’s willing to break a Christmas tradition of all things, what’s next?’ And that thought scares the hell out of you, just like it did me.”

When James looked at Marty once more, the old youth minister saw tears speaking volumes.

“She’s going to grow up, James, and she’s going to live a life without you there by her side. Trust me, there’s not a thing you can do to stop it, nor should you. But just remember Proverbs: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’”

“That’s from the King James version of the Bible,” James said.

“It is,” Marty replied.

“I assumed you to be an NIV man.”

Marty grinned and said, “Well, I’m kind of traditional in that regard.”

James laughed a little. It was enough to convince Marty that a resolution had arrived.

“Go home and talk to your daughter, James,” Marty said. “Believe me, if you sit down and tell her your concerns, all of them, even the ones that make you look weak, emotional, and fearful, she will listen. And then you have to do the same for her. But know that whatever decision you both arrive at, it’ll be the right one. Because wherever she is that night, she’ll recognize the true meaning of Christmas.”

James took a deep breath, stood up, extended his hand, and then, after a manly shake, apologized for his behavior. He went home to follow Marty’s advice.

While he resumed his Internet radio show, Marty chuckled to himself. He had suddenly realized that at his age, he was a youth minister to just about everyone he counseled.

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