

I was a wide-eyed twelve-year-old in the fall of 1956, a season to be marked forever in automobile history as the Year of the Fin. The new models of previous autumns had come and gone with little notice, but that September, as Detroit's astounding '57s were unveiled, I discovered that Solomon must have been wrong: there was indeed a new thing under the sun.

Each afternoon as I scuffed along my paper route through the commercial area of a Missouri county seat, I could not help stopping in at a showroom or two to gaze in wonder. The

Chevy's fins were straight and vertical, as if borrowed from a rocket; it was definitely a car meant to fly. The wondrous new sheet metal even made it more aerodynamically stable, said the fliers; it had been tested in wind tunnels. Ford's fins were not quite so bold, but they were placed on an outward tilt. Neither of them, however, could match the curvaceous Plymouth as it swooped up to a climax of aesthetic tingle. To a junior high boy entering puberty, it gave a rush of awe mixed with fascination.

By the next year our family had

moved to Hutchinson, Kansas, and I didn't have a paper route, but I made a special pilgrimage downtown all alone the night the dealers announced an Open House for the even more spectacular '58s. I scurried from display floor to display floor, gasping and gawking. The Pontiac had a dazzling cluster of taillights that, if you sat a man's hat on top of them, became a kind of robot's face. The turn signals would then make his eyes blink while the rest of him glowed cherry red.

I was hooked. I had discovered the supreme joy of living, the key to power and enchantment, the guarantee of status and respect. A car was far, far more than a piece of transportation; it was a marvel of technical brilliance that rose above the sum of its many parts to approach personality. It was also an essential part of manhood.

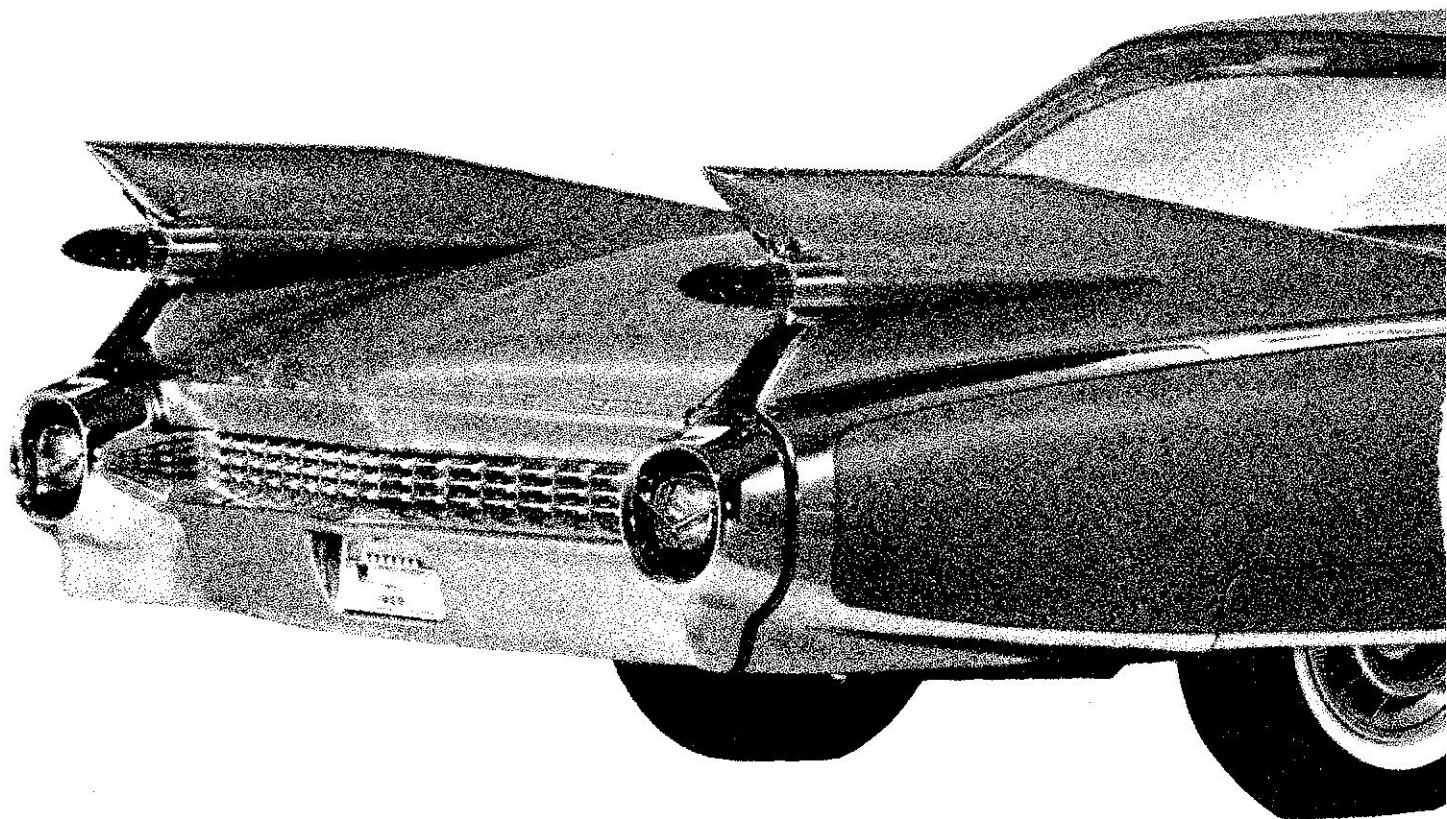
I turned fourteen that winter, which qualified me in those years for a true rite of passage: a driver's license. By the next summer my foster brother and I

Car Fever!

An automobile is far, far more than a piece of transportation; it is a marvel of technical brilliance.

DEAN MERRILL

Dean Merrill drives a '74 Honda Civic to and from David C. Cook Publishing Co. in Elgin, Illinois, where he is executive editor. He is the author of several books including The Husband Book (Zondervan).



had earned enough money to buy an aging Mercury coupe without a first gear. We eagerly tore into the transmission, bought the parts, and soon had it running. We now had a movable zone of privacy, a habitation that was ours alone, a me-place. The low rumble of its glass-packed muffler turned heads in the high school parking lot, and after we painted the car black, our self-esteem was invincible.

Such an ally was not, of course, without its requirements. I began noticing a chattering sound in the engine while accelerating, and when it didn't seem to go away, I asked my father about it.

"Hey, listen to this," I said as I came to a stop sign one day. "It makes a funny noise when I take off."

He listened. A frown crossed his face.

"How long since you checked the oil in this thing?"

"I don't know."

We pulled to the side of the country road and raised the hood. The dipstick showed not a trace of black. The noise, I learned, was coming from rod bearings clattering against a flattened crankshaft, thanks to the absence of lubrication. My beloved alter ego was

suddenly very sick, and it was all my fault.

We pulled the black beauty into a barn on the farm where we lived, set the front end up on blocks, and proceeded with surgery. It was an operation that took us amateurs more than a month to complete, but if you think such a trauma led me to question the passion I had embraced, you are quite mistaken. This was no passing teen-age fad. This was part of becoming an American adult. It was, in fact, a challenge, a game to master—making that engine start on subzero mornings, ramming my way through snowdrifts, skimming the asphalt stretches in the summer like a bird of prey. Fools who didn't know how to employ socket wrenches and timing lights were helpless victims in such a sport. We were its young lions.

As I left for college in Chicago, an obvious maxim of the game was that one ought to drive the newest and biggest car he (or his parents) could afford. In my sophomore year I dallied with a novelty, a long, black '48 Dodge limousine. That was soon followed by a more chic Olds hardtop, and then a pink and white Cadillac Coupe de Ville. By the time I was married, I had

scrambled up to an almost-new Mercury Monterey with four-barrel carb and that classy reverse-slant window in the back.

A highlight of each year was a trip to the Chicago Auto Show, a mammoth banquet of chrome and glass and hand-polished lacquer, garnished with bright lights and full-color brochures and alluring blondes. Revolving platforms turned Detroit's finest for every possible view, and even the exotic European manufacturers made their pitch. It was, for me, a stroll through paradise.

What made automobiles so delectable, among other things, was that they were a perfectly acceptable way to parade one's financial status. You couldn't go flashing your savings account passbook, your CDs, or your stock portfolio; you couldn't announce your recent raise—but you could convey the same message through what you parked out front. It was a clear indication of how you were coming up in the world.

And then came the Awakening.

It was not a flash of understanding on one day, but rather a gradual dawning of financial reality. This pursuit of automotive status, this constant push to upgrade was costing real money,



wasn't it? I did some calculating and found that cars represented sixteen percent of our monthly expenditure; only housing consumed more than that. Meanwhile, my wife was feeding us on thirteen percent.

And while I knew that transportation was a basic necessity of life in modern America, did we have to do it in such elegance? I took a hard look at the "investments" I had made in my various cars. Actually, I'd never made a dime "investing" in a car; they'd all sold for less than I paid for them. Some had depreciated more slowly than others, but every one of them had gone down over the period of use, not up. Hmmm.

During those months, my theology began talking to me. What was stewardship all about, anyway? Stewardship was far more than a euphemism for giving in offerings; it was the whole concept of taking good care of another person's (i.e., God's) assets. If it was true that I had been granted a certain number of dollars to feed, clothe, house, transport, and otherwise care for my household as well as to support God's Kingdom, how many of those dollars could be spared for a personal ego trip?

I eventually had to admit that cars were for using, not for loving. My kicks would have to be gotten in some other way. The Monterey, which by then was showing its planned obsolescence, was replaced with a used Volvo—the first small car I'd ever owned—and driven for the next 109,000 miles. The greatest change, however, was attitudinal. The coveting stopped. Automobiles came to be viewed as perishable pieces of equipment rather than as mirrors for my psyche.

In the years since then, of course, we have all become painfully aware that transportation has a price tag. Oil in the 1970s went from less than \$2 a barrel to more than \$24. By the time you add up gasoline, maintenance, insurance, licenses, and depreciation for one car for a year, you've spent in the neighborhood of \$2500.

What's \$2500? The price of a new piano, or a three-week family vacation. Or a semester of education at a Christian college. Or two month's salary for a missionary or youth worker. Or a

couple thousand New Testaments in a needy land. Or a year's food for a dozen Cambodian refugees.

Not that Christianity calls for a renunciation of cars. Automobiles are here to stay, as evidenced by the fact that one of every seven jobs in America is car-related. And in many cases, cars are the most efficient way to go. Someone has figured out that for the cost of a rapid-transit system in Los Angeles, you could buy every Los Angeles family a small car.

The point is rather to draw a line between "What do I need?" and "What do I want?" If I am intent on being a good steward of God's resources, do I *need* more than one car? Perhaps I do, but maybe, with a little adjusting and flexing, I could manage with one.

Do I need a *new* car? Do I need a *large* car? Do I need one that's "loaded"? Kenneth Taylor, creator of *The Living Bible*, succumbed temporarily last year to the pressure of the times and bought a Mercedes. After two weeks of living with a miserable conscience, he bravely took it back for a refund.

Furthermore, we might all ask ourselves continuously: Do I need to make this trip? Does my church's calendar need to be arranged in such a way that I drive there four and five times a week? Or might I ask the leadership to do some consolidation? Early this year the Mormons put out the word from Salt Lake City for their congregations to pull all major meetings into a single three-hour block on Sundays. The world's largest congregation, Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, Korea, gathers only once on Sundays and ministers to its 100,000 members mostly through 6700 walking-distance cell groups all over the city. Even tithes are collected in the cells.

I stopped by a showroom the other day to pick up another one of those glossy, full-color brochures. Amid exquisite photography of crushed-velour interiors and sleek body lines, the words said, "All in all, the 1980 _____ is a most attractive choice for people who feel that a full-size car is something they need—and deserve."

What *do* I need? A very good question indeed. □