Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

I buckled myself into the aisle seat on the flight from Pittsburgh to Atlanta and opened my briefcase. I've found airplanes to be one of the best places to read and work on reports. No phone calls, no interruptions, and, usually, no conversation.

This flight was different, for, as I opened my briefcase, the fellow in the seat next to me spotted my Bible, half buried under a stack of papers.

"Are you a Christian?" he asked.

I was startled, for seldom, if ever, does anyone seem to care one way or the other. When I confessed that I was, the man — who turned out to be a nuclear engineer working with Westinghouse — asked, "Do you believe in the devil?"

I've got some pet answers I usually give people who ask that question. One of them is, "I sure do. She spoke to me in the lobby of the hotel last night."

This time, however, I didn't feel like wisecracking and gave him a straight answer. "Not only do I believe in the devil, but I believe in the angels who are more powerful than he is."

The man, in his late 40s, with a serious face and dark eyes almost hidden behind his thick glasses, sat silently for a few moments. "It's refreshing to hear someone say something like that." He paused, stroked his chin, and added, "You really believe that, don't you."

I nodded, closed my briefcase and put my papers away. I could see there was something more important to do on that flight than work on an unfinished manuscript. The man went ahead to say he was a graduate of a famous divinity school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (whose name I shall not reveal). "When I went to divinity school I didn't believe in the devil," he said. "When I left I didn't believe in God."

"Do you believe in him now?" I quizzed.

He wet his lips nervously. "Yes. No man can be a nuclear scientist and deny God. But I am ashamed to admit it. In fact, just telling you that I believe in him makes me extremely nervous. You're the first person I've admitted this to in 20 years — and you're a total stranger."

He went ahead to confess that his reluctance to talk about God to his family and friends lay in his fear that someone would ridicule him. "Sometimes," he said softly, "I wish I didn't have all this education. I wish I could believe as I did when I was a child."

We exchanged addresses and shall correspond. Maybe he can put on paper what his lips refuse to say. For, as he confessed when we shook hands to part, "If the God who created this world loves me, then I guess I should acknowledge that love — publicly."