“Live your lives in holiness and godliness – looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” – 2 Peter 3:11-12

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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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The Love of Christ Compels Us

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

— 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

In this issue

The Scriptures remind us that this present world is passing away and the Lord Jesus is returning to establish his everlasting kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy. We are sojourners - passing guests and pilgrims - in search of a better homeland prepared for those who hunger for God and the abundant life he offers us through his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus comes to fulfill every promise which God has made - a kingdom of peace and reconciliation, joy and everlasting life, and total victory and freedom from sin, Satan, and death. That is why our hope is anchored in God alone and his word of truth, justice, and merciful love.

This issue is dedicated to the "good news" that the Lord Jesus has come to set us free and give us new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the Lord Jesus continues to fill us with great anticipation and hope in his promise to come again to complete his work of redemption for us.

How should we live in this present time between the Lord's first coming and his return? How will he judge the living and the dead and bring vindication to those who belong to God? What gives us joy, hope, and courage to advance the coming of his
kingdom throughout the world today? And how can we pray and cooperate with God's work of reconciliation and unity for the broken body of Christ, and for the building up of communities of disciples on mission today? Don't miss the wisdom and insights of gifted teachers and servants of God's word which this issue offers for your encouragement and strengthening in faith, hope, and love.

The love of Christ compels us - be reconciled with God and with one another through the gift and grace which Jesus Christ has won for us through his victory on the cross and his glorious resurrection.

May this Advent season and Christmas celebration be a rich feast of savoring God's word and preparing our hearts and homes to receive the Lord Jesus who comes to unite us in a bond of peace and unity through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

Sincerely in Christ,
Don Schwager
editor

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Making the Most of the Present Time

by Carlos Mantica

Any ordinary day you just wake up feeling exhausted. It must be the flu, you think, and so you stay in bed in order to get well sooner. But one whole week goes by and the sickness does not go. You call the doctor, and when he finishes examining you, you can notice he’s very worried. He examines you once again, sends samples to the lab, and finally calls a doctors’ meeting. He finally tells you the truth: you have a very strange disease that has no cure. Very little is known about it. No one even knows what the symptoms will be in the future, but one thing is certain: it is fatal. You have just a few weeks of life left.

Those of us who know the Master and trust in him have no fear of the final examination. We do not despair, but our life is not the same any more. We only have a few weeks left. How are we going to use them? Things that even yesterday seemed important to us now seem trivial—long-term investments, the book I was planning to write, the trip to Europe, the earthquake insurance, the cottage by the beach... We now ask ourselves: Whom do I need to forgive? Who are those who do not yet know how much I love them? Who do I need to ask forgiveness from?

I soon experience a new desire to pray. It’s not that I want to earn heaven with prayers, because the price of heaven has already been paid for me. I just want to talk. I have many things to ask the Lord, many things to tell him. Things I had not thought about before, such as, Lord, what color are your eyes? Where will you be at the moment of my leap into the vacuum? Do Erwin and the others already know I’m coming? Do you think they will lend me George’s air-conditioned, outboard-motor cloud for my heavenly tour? What would you like me to do today? Give my wife a lot of strength!
Living Bulwark

How different everything looks now... What a fortune to have a community and a family such as I have! How ridiculous the five-year plans of the new government, the latest Toyota model and the Christmas lottery ticket! My life is now all different... it’s the same, but at the same time it’s completely different from what it was before. It’s as if somebody had given me a new pair of eyes to see things. Nothing is new, but everything is much clearer.

Suddenly, something happens that no one was expecting. When you had already resigned to your fate, a specialist suddenly comes around who tells you that a drug now exists (although it’s still being tested) that will not cure you, but that will extend your life for some time. You can carry on a normal life, without pains, work as you did before, do things as always. But... when death comes, it will come unexpectedly.

You take the drug and, in fact, all pain disappears. You rise from your bed and begin to lead a normal life. Everything is the same, except you now know that death will come without notice and is not too far away.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is no tale. It is the diagnosis for all that will read this. We are all suffering from an innate disease on account of which we are condemned to die sooner or later. And the Lord will come like a thief in the night. It’s as that poster of the hippies used to say, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.”

The question is, how are we going to live that rest of our lives? The way we lived before the doctor told us the truth, or the way we began to live when the Lord gave us new eyes to see things from the perspective of a near death and an eternal life?

Only the symptoms have disappeared. We continue to be condemned to death. The day of graduation is near. We are not worried about the final examination; even now we are longing for that face-to-face encounter with the Master, and we are imagining the tremendous party after the graduation ceremony, with the presence of all the alumni. But... we have to make the most of the present time, for the day of the Lord is now closer.

> See related articles by Carlos Mantica

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Carlos Mantica is a founder of *The City of God* community (*La Cuidad de Dios*) in Managua, Nicaragua, and a founding leader of the *Sword of the Spirit*. He served as president of the Sword of the Spirit between 1991 and 1995.

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Saint Paul says in Romans 8:19 that the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. And in the next verse he explains why: for the creation was subjected to futility... in hope, because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

There surely exists in God’s plan some point in history when this manifestation will be evident to the whole world, but I think this should also take place to some extent here and now. Unfortunately, I also believe this cannot happen as long as his children remain unaware of their own identity and of the dignity with which they have been endowed.

It is about that dignity that I would like to talk today, but without referring to all the children of God, but rather to those whom he has called to be manifested here and now as his representatives.

The things I am going to mention fall in the category of what I call my favorite heresies. These truths are so absurd and sublime that they sound like falsehood, but once we internalize them they ought to become the quintessence of our personal faith, that is, of the faith that impels us and sustains us—of our deepest conviction.
Perhaps the simplest way to sum up our dignity is by saying that everything the heavenly Father wanted to do with his Son, the Son and the Father have wanted to do with us. They have wanted us to be as he is, to have what he has, to do what he did and to be what he is.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

**Jesus has decided to give us his own identity:**

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:12).

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)

It was Jesus who taught us to call “Dad” and to address in a familiar way the One whose name could not even be pronounced (Romans 8:15).

**And if children, then heirs. That is why we are called to have what he has:**

The Father said to the Son in his self-portrait parable: Son, …all that is mine is yours (Luke 15:31).

The Son said to the Father: All mine are thine, and thine are mine (John 17:10). I am praying for them… for they are thine (John 17:9). Thine they were, and thou gavest them to me (John 17:6).

Paul then says:

All [things] are yours; and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s (1 Corinthians 3:22).

**God gave his Son a mother**, and he in turn has decided to give her to us: Behold, your mother! (John 19:27). He made her Immaculate; us he leaves without the slightest trace of sin when he effaces all sin with his blood and his forgiveness.

**He was born by the power of the Holy Spirit.** We are born again from on high, by the work of the same Spirit.

And it is through his own Spirit that he has decided to give us his own character:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).
And he has wanted us to do the same things he does; for the one who had said: Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord (John 5:19), is the same who will later say to the Apostles and to us: Apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5), and yet, [you] will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will [you] do (John 14:12).

And Paul adds, I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

The First Letter of John says that the Lord came to revert the work of Satan: The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). And the last chapter of Mark (16:17-20) tells us:

“And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” …And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.

Jesus said: The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22).

St. Paul reminds us: Do you not know that we are to judge angels? (1 Corinthians 6:3)

Jesus said: The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).

And to those he has called he says: But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:26).

We have been called to be as he is:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

And to those he has called he says: You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world (Matthew 5:13, 14).

And in Philippians, Paul says: …that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15).

Jesus’ desire is for us to be like him in all, being lifted up to the Father:

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth (John 17:16-19).

He who has emptied himself and taken the condition of a servant to wash his disciples’ feet, says to us:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so
I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet (John 13:12-14).

These are all tremendous truths, but it is not us who have invented these things. They come from him who once said: I and the Father are one (John 10:30). If you knew me, you would know my Father also (John 8:19). And to Philip he says: He who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). And, He who sees me sees him who sent me (John 12:45).

This is the same one who prays to the Father asking that we would be one with him and with the Father:

The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me (John 17:22-23).

He who asserts that the Father loves us as much as he has loved his Son Jesus, is the same one who says to us:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love (John 15:9).

That is why he continues to say a little later:

Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in they love for me before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).

And since the Father’s desire is to do the will of the Son, just as the Son’s desire was always to do the Father’s will (John 5:30), this desire of Jesus’ has been fulfilled. The Father gave over his Son to death for our sake, but he raised him from the dead for our sake too.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you (Romans 8:11).

…When he raised [Christ] from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23).

That is why even the smallest among us, being part of his body, even if he is unworthy to untie his shoes and is now as high as his feet, is yet above all throne, dominion and power.

We are already sitting with him at the right hand of the Father. It is not that some day we will be there, but we are already with him at the right hand of the Father.

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (John 14:20).

How different things look from the perspective of the throne! God’s secret plan is to recapitulate all things in Christ:
…as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).

For this purpose, this is what he did with Jesus:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

And because God gave him a name above every name, and because he has made him Lord of all that exists, he can now say to his Apostles:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-19).

It has been granted to us to complete Christ’s mission in the world, and that is the raison d’être of our call. We have been called to the most important mission in human history: to complete the mission that only a God could begin, and which required a God to become man, so that one day we might be like him and be with him forever. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (Revelation 12:10-11).

Some may wonder how we came to know that Christ is God. And I’m not referring to the faith in his divinity, but to the evidence of his divinity. Some have wanted to see the proof in his miracles, or in his power to forgive sins, or even in his resurrection from the dead. I think that the proof of his deity lies in the way he has loved us. God is love (1 John 4:8), and only God could have loved as he loved. And if it is in this that it has been known that he is God, in the way he loved us and in the fact that he loved us first, then by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

Brothers and sisters,
[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe (Ephesians 1:17-19).

We have spoken, and
…we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have
crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,’ God has revealed to us through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

> See related articles by Carlos Mantica

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Carlos Mantica is a founder of The City of God community (*La Cuidad de Dios*) in Managua, Nicaragua, and a founding leader of the Sword of the Spirit. He served as president of the Sword of the Spirit between 1991 and 1995.

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Reply to the Skeptics Concerning the Return of the Lord

A Commentary on 2 Peter 3:1-7

by Dr. Daniel A. Keating

The following short commentary from the Second Letter of Peter, Chapter 3, verses 1-7 is lightly edited with permission of the author, Dr. Daniel Keating, from his book, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude, published by Baker Academic, 2011. While it was written from a Roman Catholic perspective, the material can be beneficial for Christians from other traditions as well. – ed.

Reply to the Skeptics (2 Peter 3:1–7)

2 Peter 3: 1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; through them by way of reminder I am trying to stir up your sincere disposition, 2 to recall the words previously spoken by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and savior through your apostles. 3 Know this first of all, that in the last days scoffers will come [to] scoff, living according to their own desires 4 and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? From the time when our ancestors fell asleep, everything has remained as it was from the beginning of creation.” 5 They deliberately ignore the fact that the heavens existed of old and earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God; 6 through these the world that then existed was destroyed, deluged with water. 7 The present heavens and earth have been reserved by the same word for fire, kept for the day of judgment and of destruction of the godless.
Peter now comes to the main point: **Know this first of all, that in the last days scoffers will come [to] scoff, living according to their own desires.** The term “scoffer” appears only here and in Jude 1:18 in the New Testament. The phrase, “scoffers will come to scoff” reflects a typically Hebrew repetition formula that is meant to emphasize the activity of scoffing. Who are the scoffers? Those who mock and show scorn for the promise that Christ will return and judge the world. Their irreverence for God’s Word is matched by their immoral way of life in which they follow their own desires. There is a touch of irony here: “The appearance of scoffers who mock the reliability of prophecy is itself a fulfillment of prophecy.”

“In the last days” is a technical expression, drawn from the Old Testament, that points to the final days, when God will act through his Messiah to bring all things to completion (for example, Isa 2:2; Dan 2:28; Hosea 3:5; Mic 4:1). According to the New Testament we are living now in the last days between the first coming of the Lord and his second, final coming (Acts 2:17; Heb 1:2).

In verse 4 Peter allows the scoffers to speak in their own voice and to raise two objections to the promise of Christ’s return. He lets us encounter the full force of their perspective before answering them, which he will do in verses 5–10. **“Where is the promise of his coming? From the time when our ancestors fell asleep, everything has remained as it was from the beginning of creation.”** If we were to paraphrase their objections, we could say: “Where is the fulfillment of this promise of Christ’s coming? Nothing like this has happened or will happen. Why should we expect anything to change?”
The term “promise” is important in 2 Peter. We are told at the start of the letter that we are the recipients of “precious and very great promises” (1:4). Peter will soon make clear that the Lord’s promise about his own second coming (v. 9) and about the new heavens and new earth (v. 13) are completely reliable. At stake in this debate with the scoffers is whether there is a God who makes promises and whether his promises are true.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Identity of the Scoffers

The leading theory among scholars today about the identity of the “scoffers” in 2 Peter is that they reflect the principles and attitudes of the Epicurean school of philosophy. The Epicureans were known in the ancient world for denying God’s providential care of the world. They believed the world came to be by chance, and they rejected any form of prophecy or divination about things to come. Further, they denied that there was any judgment after death—the body simply returns to its origin in the dust. Popular forms of this philosophy were also present in Jewish circles in the first century. The Sadducees were described by the Jewish historian Josephus as adopting a form of Epicurean philosophy. While we cannot pin down the identity of the scoffers in 2 Peter with certainty, Peter’s description of them is quite consistent with Epicurean positions as found in the Jewish world of Peter’s day.

Who are the “ancestors” (literally, “fathers”), and when did they “fall asleep”? One common interpretation concludes that they are the first generation of Christian disciples—the apostles—who have now fallen asleep in death. According to this view the scoffers are pointing out that the promise of Christ’s return did not happen while the first Christian leaders were alive, and they use this fact as evidence that there will be no return and final judgment. This is a possible interpretation, but it is more likely that the “fathers” are the Old Testament figures in Genesis, from Adam through the patriarchs (for this use of “fathers,” see John 6:31; Rom 9:5; Heb 1:1). According to this view, the point is that from the very beginning of the world as recorded in the Bible nothing has really changed—nothing is new “under the sun,” as the author of Ecclesiastes laments (Eccles 1:4–9).

vs. 5–7: Peter answers the two objections of the scoffers in reverse order. First (vv. 5–7) he addresses their claim that all things have stayed the same since the beginning, and then (vv. 8–10) he responds to the question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” The scoffers, Peter says, deliberately ignore the fact that the heavens existed of old and earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God. Peter is paraphrasing the opening verses of the book of Genesis, which speak of God creating the heavens and earth and of God forming a habitable earth from the primordial watery chaos (Gen 1:1–10). According to Genesis, the earth as we know it—the land—was formed from the waters and by means of the waters (Gen 1:2, 9–10).
Creation, the Flood, and Modern Science

The modern sciences—geology, archaeology, and the theory of biological evolution in particular—pose significant challenges for how we read the Bible, especially the stories found in Gen 1–11. Did God create the world in six twenty-four-hour days? Was there really a flood that covered the whole earth? Geological studies, for example, supply substantial evidence that life on earth developed over hundreds of millions of years and that the human species has been in existence far longer than the biblical texts would indicate. Even in the early Church Christians recognized that these founding stories had symbolic elements—they were not always interpreted as literal history. New Testament writers who refer to these early narratives are not primarily wishing to affirm the historicity of such events, but rather presuppose a common knowledge of this biblical history and wish to teach something for the present through this common understanding about the past.

Today many Christians tend to read Gen 1–11 in particular as symbolic stories grounded in history and †inspired by the Spirit to teach the truth about the relationship between God and the world. How accurately do these stories reflect actual history? It is difficult to know for sure. It may be that some have a close correlation to historical events, while others have less.

Why does Peter draw attention to this feature of the world being formed from and through the waters by the power of God’s word? Because it was through these the world that then existed was destroyed, deluged with water. “These” probably refers to the combination of water and God’s word: by the power of God’s word acting through the floodwaters the world was deluged. For Peter the flood serves as the prime biblical model for how God acts to judge, demonstrating his radical intervention in the world. The flood, then, is a type of the greater judgment to come (see Matt 24:37–39). In other words, the world has not always been as it is, as the scoffers claim. It was originally formed by God’s word through water, then deluged with water, and finally made new with the receding of the waters. Peter charges the false teachers with “deliberately” or “willfully” ignoring this—they don’t want to believe in God’s judgment, and so they overlook and ignore the clear biblical testimony.

Judgment by Fire

Where did Peter get the idea of the world finally being destroyed by fire? Many scholars point to parallels in Zoroastrianism, Platonism, or Stoicism, where a judgment by fire occurs. But these are unlikely to be direct sources for Peter’s statement here, since the details and overall context are quite different. The foundation for this idea is in fact supplied by the Old Testament. The archetype is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19, which the author has already cited as an example of the judgment to come (2 Pet 2:6). But there are many other instances where God’s judgment comes by fire (see, e.g., Isa 30:30; 66:15–16; Amos 7:4; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Mal 3:19). The idea of a general conflagration also took root in the Judaism of Peter’s day. “The author of 2 Peter, who is really interested in the conflagration as judgment on the wicked, follows this Jewish tradition. If he was aware of the pagan parallels, he is unlikely to have been very concerned with them.” In the New Testament we find the promise that the present heavens and earth will pass away and that a new heavens and earth will come to be (Mark 13:24–25; Rev 21:1). In two instances it says that the final judgment will come with fire (2 Thess 1:8; Jude 1:6–7). Still, the statement here in 2 Peter about a final judgment of the world by fire is more detailed than anything we find elsewhere in the New Testament, and should be seen as a development of a well-established tradition.
Now comes the clincher to Peter’s response: **The present heavens and earth have been reserved by the same word for fire, kept for the day of judgment and of destruction of the godless.** The earlier cataclysm came by water; the future judgment will come by fire. Just as God’s “word” brought about the great flood, so by that same word the world will be purified by fire. From beginning to end, God’s word is the agent of creation, judgment, and new creation. It is crucial to recognize, however, that Peter’s focus is not in fact on fire but on judgment—on God through his word bringing the entire cosmos to judgment, especially the lives of human beings. We do not know exactly how this judgment by fire will occur. By speaking of judgment by fire, Peter is employing figurative language common to his day. This figurative language tells us something real about the nature of what will take place at the end, but it does not give an exact description.

This, then, is Peter’s answer to the scoffers’ second objection. The world has not always remained the same! To the contrary, by the powerful word of God the world was brought into existence, and by that same word it was destroyed in the flood. The flood is a type of the greater judgment that will come by fire, when God will judge all people and bring destruction upon those who persist in ungodliness.

**Reflection and application** (3:1–7)

We too have our share of scoffers today. They are not likely to be card-carrying Epicureans, but nonetheless they deny a God who intervenes in human history and discount any claim to a final judgment or afterlife. The reigning scientific theory of the origin of the universe—the Big Bang theory—actually supports the idea that the world had a beginning in one single instant, and some scientific theories of the eventual end of our solar system have the world ending in a great conflagration. Still, many people today—scientists and nonscientists alike—believe that all this happened and will happen through blind necessity and random chance, and they choose to live as if there is no God, no judgment, and no final consequences for how we live.

We know that it is possible to discern design and purpose in the natural world, and that human beings can come to know through reason both the existence of God and certain of his attributes (see Rom 1:20). It may be that many of today’s scoffers are “deliberately” ignoring these signs that point to God in the created order. Yet what they most need is an encounter with the living Word of God; this is what can change hearts and minds and open them to the full promise of what God has in store. In the words of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn: “We gladly affirm the Christian understanding … that unaided reason can attain basic knowledge of the purposes built into nature and the intelligence behind it. But it is only through God’s self-revelation in Christ, and our response of faith, that we can begin to glimpse the ultimate purpose of the cosmos and to trust in God’s provident care of all cosmic details.”

**Notes**

1 *Phaedo* 66A..


3 The two terms in the letter for “promise,” *epangelma* (1:4; 3:13) and *epangelia* (3:4, 9), function as synonyms with no obvious difference in meaning.


4 For the flood as a pattern for God’s judgment in the world, see also Ezek 38:22; Wis 10:4.


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We Will Be Judged by Our Fidelity to Christ

by Romano Guardini

Near the end of his life, during his last visit to Jerusalem, Jesus spoke these words:

“And immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be moved. And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven; and then shall all tribes of the earth mourn; and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with much power and majesty. And he shall send his angels with a trumpet, and a great voice: and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, and from the farthest parts of the heavens to the utmost bounds of them.” (Matthew 24:29-31)

And again: “When the Son of Man shall come in his majesty, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit upon the seat of his majesty. And all nations shall be gathered together before him, and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. Then shall the King say to them that shall be on his right hand: ‘Come, blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you covered me; sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.’ Then shall the just answer him, saying: ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; thirsty, and gave you drink? And when did we see you a stranger, and take you in? Or naked, and cover you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’ And the King answering, shall say to them: ‘Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these, my least brethren, you did it to me.’

And then he shall say to them also that shall be on his left hand: ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me not to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me not to drink. I was a stranger, and you took me not in; naked, and you covered me not; sick and in prison, and you did not visit me.’ Then they also shall answer him, saying: ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he shall answer them, saying: ‘Amen, I say
to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it unto me.’ And these shall go into everlasting punishment, but the just into life everlasting.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

If we shake off the seeming familiarity which comes from having heard them often, these passages strike us suddenly as strange and disconcerting. This is not how we should expect things to be. Here premises are taken for granted to which we are not sure we can give assent. But if we have some acquaintance with revelation, and know enough of men to treat certain of their unconscious assumptions with caution – and these are the first steps in Christian knowledge – it is this very feeling that here is something disconcerting that alerts us to the fact that we are face to face with an essential and crucial element in our faith. The disconcerting element here lies in the concrete, the personal approach.

Our lives become transparent in the unveiled light of God
The habit of the modern mind is to take seriously only that kind of thinking that interprets everything in terms of natural necessity or of intellectual laws. Existence for us has become a system of matter and energy, of law and natural order. Every process takes place within that system. Children or simple folk may think of natural objects as being manipulated by superior beings, as they are in legends and fairy tales, but the educated adult does not. For him the first condition of intelligent thinking is to conceive of the universe as an interconnection of physical and spiritual laws, which govern man and his destinies as well as the historical process.

If a final judgment is posited – a procedure, that is, by which the life and deeds of man are scrutinized, judged, and given their eternal value – we would have to think of it as a judgment in which man, or more properly his spirit, comes into the unveiled light of God, and in that light, his life becomes transparent, and his worth is made evident.

Each person will be personally summoned before Christ
In Jesus’ discourse on the Last Judgment, however, this is not at all what takes place. The judge is not an abstract deity, an all-wise, all-righteous spirit, but Christ, the Son made man. Nor does man, by the mere fact of his death, or the world, simply by coming to an end, appear before God. Rather, it is Christ who “comes.” He comes to the world and wrests it from a condition in which “this-sidedness” and the subjection to natural law make possible the obscurity of history. A final investigation is carried out which brings all existing things into the presence of Christ. Men, not only their spirits, appear before him – men in their concrete, soul-and-body actuality; and not individual men only, but “the world.” In order to make this possible, the body – the deceased, corrupt body – rises up from the dead, not by any natural necessity, but in obedience to the summons of Christ. And the act of judgment is not simply illumination in the eternal light and holiness of God, but an act of Jesus Christ, who was once upon earth and now reigns in eternal glory. He reviews mankind in its whole history, as well as each particular man, passes judgment, and assigns to each man that form of being which accords with his worth in the sight of God.

Sheer fantasy or myth?
To modern man, all this appears as sheer fantasy – at best as symbol. To his mentality, this kind of thinking is on the level of children and primitives. Mythology, folklore, and fairy tales treat universal processes in this anthropomorphic manner, that is, as modeled on human conduct. Children, as soon as they grow up, and primitive people, when they become civilized, perceive that the universe is governed by inflexible laws and must be conceived of in philosophical or scientific terms. The Christian teaching of the Last Judgment is just a myth and must give way to a more serious and advanced view of reality.

A direct intervention in human history
Again we have to decide where we stand with regard to revelation. Are we to confine our faith to our emotions, and adapt our thinking to that of current views, or shall we be Christians in our minds also? For what modern man describes as childish, primitive, and anthropomorphic is the essential, distinguishing quality of our faith. For when
the worth of the world and of history are finally determined, it will not be by universal natural or spiritual laws, nor by confrontation with an absolute, divine reality, but by a divine act. Let it be well understood – by an act, and not through the workings of some force of nature or spirit, just as the economy of salvation does not rest upon some higher natural order but upon a direct intervention of God, which takes place in the sphere of human history and finds constant expression in this sphere; and just as the world did not evolve as a natural reality from natural causes, but as God’s work, summoned into being by his free and all-powerful word.

If we want to be Christians in our thinking also, then we cannot conceive of the relation of God to the world, to man, and to the whole of existence in terms derived from natural science or metaphysics, but only in concepts belonging to the personal sphere; that is, precisely in the despised anthropomorphic concepts of action, decision, destiny, and freedom. Such is the language of Scripture, and when a man has striven for truth with sufficient sincerity and above all with sufficient patience for false notions to fall away and things to show themselves in their true light, he comes to see that in the final sifting of values, what really meets the case are those so-called anthropomorphic concepts.

**A sign of contradiction**
The judgment is the last in the series of God’s acts. It proceeds from his free counsels, and is carried out by him whose intervention in history was rejected by men at his appearance upon earth, but whose destiny, since God is faithful, accomplished our redemption. Throughout history, he has remained as a “sign that will be contradicted,” (Luke 2:34) as the touchstone for men and for nations. It is he who executes the judgment. He is doing it because he is God’s Son, because he is the Word “through whom all things were made,” (John 1:3) and to whom the world belongs, whether the world acknowledges it or not.

**How does God’s judgment take place?**
The strangeness which reverses our scientific and philosophic notions reaches still deeper. How does this judgment take place? On what is it based, and according to what standards does it determine a man’s worth?

At first glance we might assume that what is judged would be a man’s actions and omissions, his deeds as well as his character, the details as much as the whole, each according to the multiplicity of rules and norms pertaining to it. Instead, we see everything fused into only one thing: love – the love that is aroused by compassion for man’s need. And what is here in question is plainly that first and greatest commandment, and the second which is like unto it, as Jesus taught in the Gospel, the commandment of love, of which the apostle speaks as of “the fulfilling of the law” (Matthew 24:37-39; Romans 13:10). Consequently, although it is only the love for one’s neighbor that is mentioned, the commandment includes the whole realm of love; only love is spoken of, but this love includes doing and becoming and being what is right.

**To love Christ**
How will this standard of love be established and applied? The judge, we might suppose, would say, “You have obeyed the law of love and are therefore accepted,” or, “You have denied the law of love, and are therefore rejected.” What he says, however, is, “You are accepted because you have shown love to me; you are rejected because you denied me love.” This, too, is comprehensible, we might answer, since love is the first commandment and should be practiced toward all men, and since Christ, who enjoins this commandment and fulfilled it himself to the uttermost, has placed himself, as it were, behind each man to lend final weight to each individual being.

**The highest standard of love**
This might well be so, but once we examine the context without bias, we find that this is not what Christ teaches. The highest standard of love is not the love Christ preaches and to which all are obligated, including Christ himself; the highest standard of love is Christ himself. It begins in him and persists through him. Outside of Christ, it is nonexistent, and philosophical disquisitions on the subject have as little to do with this kind of love as he who in the
New Testament is called the Father has to do with “the divinity of the heavenly sphere” or the concept of “cause and effect” has to do with God’s providence.

**The Christian meaning of judgment**

Now there opens before us the uniqueness, the awesomeness and, yes, the scandal of the Christian meaning of judgment: man will be judged according to his relationship to Christ. Truthfulness, justice, faithfulness, chastity, and whatever else is considered ethical are in their deepest meaning the right relationship to Christ. If we speak of truth, we imply a general attitude of the mind, namely, the fact that we recognize something in the light of eternal reality. But in the prologue to his Gospel, John gives us to understand that this interpretation of truth is but an interpolated, conditional link. Ultimately, truth is the Word, the Logos himself, and knowledge, accordingly, is knowing the Logos, Christ, and all things in him.

The same applies to judgment. If we speak of goodness, we imply the highest value; and by right conduct, we understand the realization of good. But according to the discourse on the Last Judgment, Christ is the good, and to do good means to love Christ. Truth and goodness, in the final analysis, are no mere abstract values and concepts, but someone – Jesus Christ. Reversing the approach, we might say that every intimation of truth, however fragmentary, is also the beginning of a knowledge of Christ. Similarly, any charitable action is directed toward Christ, and reaches him in the end, just as any wicked action, whatever its immediate context, is, in the end, an attack upon him. Goodness may shine out in various places, in man, things, and events; but in its essence it shines forth Jesus Christ. The doer need have no thought of Christ; he may think of other people only, but his act ultimately reaches Christ. He need not even know Christ and may never have heard of him, yet what is done is done to Christ.

**The fulfillment of redemption**

To pierce with his glance the width of the whole world and the course of thousands of years, the life of each man and of each nation and community, to judge and affix to each the meaning it bears eternally, is God’s act of doom. Christ will come and execute that judgment. It will be irrevocable because it is true, because it is the exact account without remainder of every man, every community of men. It is irrevocable also because it is an act of power as much as of truth, power that is absolute and irresistible. By this judgment the state of man and of mankind will be settled before God forever.

But Christ is not only Judge; he is also Redeemer. Even as Judge he is Redeemer. The judgment is not the revenge of the offended Son of God, not his personal triumph over his enemies. By saying that truth and goodness are a person – Christ – it is not suggested that any personal element would intrude and blur the impartial validity of truth and goodness. The judgment is justice, yet not justice in and for itself, but justice bound up with the living mind and love of Christ. The Last Judgment is the fulfillment of redemption.

**Greater than history**

The vastness of such a view of things is overwhelming. It disrupts and reverses modern thinking and its conception of existence as the expression of natural law or a philosophical system. It is not ideas and laws that matter, but reality. The most real of realities is a person, the Son of God made man. He is what he was, Jesus of Nazareth. But he will be manifest as Lord, mightier than the world, greater than history, and more comprehensive than all that is called idea, value, or moral law. These things exist and are valid, but only as rays from his light.

**Seeing Christ in everything**

The doctrine of the Last Judgment is, at bottom, a revelation of Christ. It shows us, too, the task which confronts us if we want to be Christians in the true sense of the word. It implies seeing Christ in everything, carrying his image in our hearts with such intensity that it lifts us above the world, above history and the works of men, and enables us to see those things for what they are, to weigh them and assign to them their eternal value – in a word, to be their
This article is excerpted from *Eternal Life: What You Need to Know About Death, Judgment, and Life Everlasting*, Chapter 4, by Romano Guardini, 1998 edition by Sophia Institute Press, Manchester, New Hampshire, USA. Used with permission.

Illustration above: *Light of the World*, painting by Nathan Greene

Romano Guardini (1885-1968) was an influential Catholic philosopher, author, and priest in Germany. He was chaplain for a Catholic youth movement and chair of the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Berlin until the Nazis forced him to resign in 1939. He openly opposed the Nazi ideology. His books, lectures, and homilies influenced many Christian thinkers, especially in Central Europe, including Josef Pieper and Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI).

From the very beginning of Christianity – it’s already there in some of the earliest traditions – we discover the belief that the Jesus who will appear at the end will take the role of judge. This is not an isolated belief. Indeed, within its Jewish context, it is more readily explicable than the *parousia* itself. However, it’s important that we explore its meaning within early Christianity, and its significance for today and tomorrow.

**God's coming judgment will overturn all evil**

The picture of Jesus as the coming judge is the central feature of another absolutely vital and non-negotiable Christian belief: that there will indeed *be* a judgment in which the creator God will set the world right once and for
all. The word ‘judgment’ has carried negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and post-liberal world.

We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God’s coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy, and indeed the trees of the field to clap their hands.1 In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance and oppression, the thought that there might be a coming day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.

The liberal optimism of the nineteenth century had a long run for its money, outlasting some of the more obvious counter-arguments provided by the huge systemic evil of the twentieth century. But more recent theology has returned to the theme of judgment, recognizing that the biblical analysis of evil corresponds more closely to reality.2

The Old Testament hope for the creator God to bring judgment and justice to the world, to set the world right, became focused in the later biblical period on Israel’s longing to see God overturn the oppressive regimes of the pagan world. It would be like a great, cosmic law-court scene. Israel (or at least the righteous within Israel) would play the part of the helpless defendant. The Gentiles (or at least the particularly wicked ones) would play the part of the arrogant bullies who would at last meet their match, and get the justice (the ‘judgment’) they deserved.

The Son of Man is given authority over all the nations

The most famous scenario which expresses all this is Daniel 7. There, the Gentile nations are depicted as huge, powerful monsters, while Israel, or the righteous within Israel, are depicted as an apparently defenseless human being, ‘one like a son of man’. The scene is a great law-court setting, whose climax comes when the judge, the Ancient of Days, takes his seat and finds in favor of the son of man against the monsters, of Israel against the pagan empires. The son of man is then given authority and dominion over all the nations, in a deliberate echo of Adam being given authority over the animals in Genesis 1 and 2.

What happens when this is transposed to the New Testament? Answer: we find Jesus himself taking on the role of the ‘son of man’, suffering then vindicated. Then, as in Daniel, he receives from the Supreme Judge the task of bringing this judgment to bear on the world. This accords with numerous biblical and post-biblical passages in which Israel’s Messiah, the one who represents Israel in person, is given the task of judgment.

Jesus the Messiah will restore justice and truth to the whole world

In Isaiah 11, the Messiah’s judgment creates a world where the wolf and the lamb lie down side by side. In Psalm 2, the Gentiles tremble when the Messiah is enthroned. Again and again the Messiah is stated to be God’s agent to bring the whole world, not just Israel, back into the state of justice and truth for which God longs as much as we do.

So the early Christians, who had concluded from Easter that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, naturally identified him as the one through whom God would put the world to rights. They didn’t simply deduce this from their belief in his future coming or appearing. Actually, it may have been the other way round: their belief in Jesus’ messiahship may have been a decisive factor in the emergence of the belief in his final coming as judge.

Certainly by the time of Paul this belief is well established. The summary of what Paul said on the Areopagus in Athens concludes with the statement that God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world by a man whom he has appointed, giving assurance of the fact by raising him from the dead.3 Paul can refer almost casually (in Romans 2.16) to the fact that, according to the gospel he preaches, God will judge the secrets of all hearts through Jesus the Messiah. Although people often suppose that, because Paul taught justification by faith, not works, there can be no
To quote a tradition that doesn’t fully fit with his developed theology. They are fully and tightly integrated into his thinking and preaching. For him, as much as for anyone else in the early church, the final judgment, exercised by Jesus the Messiah, was a vital element, without which all sorts of other things simply wouldn’t stand up.

In particular (though there isn’t space to develop this here) this picture of future judgment according to works is actually the basis of Paul’s theology of justification by faith. The point of justification by faith isn’t that God suddenly ceases to care about good behavior or morality. Justification by faith cannot be collapsed, as so many in the last two centuries have effectively tried to do, either into a generalized liberal view of a laissez-faire morality or into the romantic view that what we do outwardly doesn’t matter at all since the only thing that matters is what we’re like inwardly. (Those who over-anxiously defend a doctrine from which all mention of ‘works’ has been rigorously excluded should consider with whom they are colluding at this point!) No: justification by faith is what happens in the present time, anticipating the verdict of the future day when God judges the world. It is God’s advance declaration that, when someone believes the gospel, that person is already a member of his family no matter who their parents were, that their sins are forgiven because of Jesus’ death, and that on the future day, as Paul says, ‘there is now no condemnation’ (Romans 8.1).

Clearly there are further questions to be asked about how the verdict issued in the present can so confidently be supposed to anticipate correctly the verdict issued in the future on the basis of the entire life led. Paul addresses those questions in several ways at several points, particularly in his expositions of the work of the Holy Spirit. But for Paul (and this is the only point I am making in the present context) there was no clash between present justification by faith and future judgment according to works. The two need, and depend upon, one another. To go any further would demand a fairly thorough exposition of Romans and Galatians, for which there is obviously no space here.

The good news of future judgment
Once again, the Pauline picture is filled out by other references in the New Testament. This is no flash in the pan or Pauline idiosyncrasy; it is common early Christian belief. It is the central point in that long paragraph in John 5 which caused so many headaches to those earlier scholars who tried to make John’s gospel teach simply a present eternal life, rather than also the future one:

The father doesn’t judge anyone; he has handed over all judgment to the son, so that everyone should honor the son just as they honor the father. Anyone who doesn’t honor the son doesn’t honor the father who sent him. I’m telling you the solemn truth: anyone who hears my word, and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life. Such a person won’t come into judgment; they will have passed out of death into life. I’m telling you the solemn truth: the time is coming – in fact, it’s here already! – when the dead will hear the voice of God’s son, and those who hear it will live.

You see, just as the father has life in himself, in the same way he has given the son the privilege of having life in himself. He has even given him authority to pass judgment, because he is the son of man. Don’t be surprised at this. The time is coming, you see, when everyone in the tombs will hear his voice. They will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have
done evil, to the resurrection of judgment. I can’t do anything on my own authority. I judge on the basis of what I hear. And my judgment is just, because I’m not trying to carry out my own wishes, but the wishes of the one who sent me.7

The main point to notice, once more, is that all the future judgment is highlighted basically as good news, not bad. Why so? It is good news, first, because the one through whom God’s justice will finally sweep the world is not a hard-hearted, arrogant or vengeful tyrant, but the Man of Sorrows, who was acquainted with grief; the Jesus who loved sinners and died for them; the Messiah who took the world’s judgment upon himself on the cross. Of course, this also means that he is quite uniquely placed to judge the systems and rulers that have carved up the world between them, and the New Testament points this out here and there.8 In particular, as we have already seen and as some medieval theologians and artists highlighted, Jesus comes as judge much as Moses descended the mountain into the camp where idolatry and revelry was in full swing. The Sistine Chapel itself reminds us of the day when careless and casual living, as well as downright wickedness, will be brought to book.9

Within the New Testament, and within subsequent Christian theology, this judgment is anticipated under certain circumstances. I have already spoken of justification by faith. The same is true, in 1 Corinthians, for the eucharist: eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus means confronting here and now the one who is the judge as well as the savior of all.10 And the same is true, of course, of the work of the Spirit, as we see once more in John 16. When the Spirit comes, declares Jesus, he will convict the world of sin, of righteousness and judgment.11 The final judgment, in other words, will be anticipated in the present world through the Spirit-led work and witness of Jesus’ followers.

**The relevance of Jesus' second coming and judgment for us**

The so-called second coming of Jesus, then, when properly understood in the New Testament and subsequent Christian teaching, is no afterthought to the basic Christian message. It hasn’t been as it were bolted on to the outside of a gospel message which could stand complete without it. We cannot relegate it to the margins of our thinking, our living and our praying; if we do, we shall pull everything else out of shape. I now want, briefly, to draw out a few final points of relevance for us today.
First, the appearing or coming of Jesus offers the complete answer to the literalist fundamentalists on the one hand and to the proponents of that ‘cosmic Christ’ idea I outlined in Chapter 5. Jesus remains other than the church, other than the world, even while being present to both by the Spirit. He confronts the world in the present, and will do so personally and visibly in the future. He is the one to whom every knee shall bow (Philippians 2.10–11), as well as the one who took the form of a servant and was obedient to the death of the cross (Philippians 2.6–8). Indeed, as Paul stresses, he is the first because he did the second. In his appearing we find neither a dualist rejection of the present world, nor simply his arrival like a spaceman into the present world, but the transformation of the present world, and ourselves within it, so that it will at last be put to rights, and we with it. Death and decay will themselves be overcome, and God will be all in all.

**The Christian worldview has closure at the end to the story**

This means, second, that a proper shape and balance are given to the Christian worldview. Like the Jewish worldview, but radically opposed to the Stoic, the Platonic, the Hindu and the Buddhist worldviews, Christians tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Not to have closure at the end of the story – to be left with a potentially endless cycle, round and round with either the same things happening again and again, or simply perhaps the long outworking of karma – would be the very antithesis of the story told by the apostles, and by the long line of their Jewish predecessors. And, precisely because Jesus is not collapsed into the church, or indeed the world, we can renounce on the one hand the triumphalism that conveniently makes his sovereign lordship an excuse for its own, and on the other hand the despair that comes when we see such hopes dashed, as they always will be, in the follies and failings of even the best and greatest Christian organizations, structures, leaders and followers.

Because we live between ascension and appearing, joined to Jesus Christ by the Spirit but still awaiting his final coming and presence, we can be both properly humble and properly confident. ‘We proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants through Jesus.’

**Faith, hope and love will be transformed**

Third, following directly from this, the task of the church between ascension and parousia is therefore set free both from the self-driven energy that imagines it has to build God’s kingdom all by itself, and the despair that supposes it can’t do anything until Jesus comes again. We do not ‘build the kingdom’ all by ourselves, but we do build for the kingdom. All that we do in faith, hope and love in the present, in obedience to our ascended Lord and in the power of his Spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing. This too brings a note of judgment, of course, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 3.10–17. The ‘day’ will disclose what sort of work each builder has done.

In particular, the present rule of the ascended Jesus Christ and the assurance of his final appearing in judgment should give us – which goodness knows we need today – some clarity and realism in our political discourse. Far too often Christians slide into a vaguely spiritualized version of one or other major political system or party. What would happen if we were to take seriously our stated belief that Jesus Christ is already the Lord of the world, and that at his name, one day, every knee would bow?

You might suppose that this would inject merely a note of pietism, and make us then avoid the real issues – or, indeed, to attempt a theocratic take-over bid. But to think in either of those ways would only show how deeply we have been conditioned by the Enlightenment split between religion and politics. What happens if we reintegrate them? As with specifically Christian work, so with political work done in Jesus’ name: confessing Jesus as the ascended and coming Lord frees up the political task from the necessity to pretend that this or that programme or leader has the key to Utopia (if only we would elect him or her). Equally, it frees up our corporate life from the despair that comes when we realize that, once again, our political systems let us down.
Christian truth constitutes a radical challenge to enlightenment thinking
The ascension and appearing of Jesus constitute a radical challenge to the entire thought-structure of the Enlightenment (and of course several other movements). And, since our present western politics is very much the creation of the Enlightenment, we should think seriously about the ways in which, as thinking Christians, we can and should bring that challenge to bear. I know this is giving a huge hostage to fortune, raising questions to which I certainly don’t know the answer, but I do know that unless I point all this out one might easily get the impression that these ancient doctrines are of theoretical or abstract interest only. They aren’t. People who believe that Jesus is already Lord, and that he will appear again as judge of the world are called and equipped (to put it mildly) to think and act quite differently in the world from those who don’t. I shall pursue these questions a bit further in the final Part of the book.

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Nicholas Thomas Wright (born December 1, 1948) is a leading New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. His academic work has usually been published under the name N. T. Wright.

Notes
1 Ps. 98.8; the whole Psalm is relevant, as are several others in that section of the Psalter.
3 Acts 17.31; cf. 10.42.
6 Cf., e.g., 2 Tim. 4.1; 1 Pet. 4.5.
7 John 5.22–30.
8 E.g., John 16.8–11, about which there is no space to say more at this point.
10 1 Cor. 11.27–34.
12 2 Cor. 4.5.
13 This is the logic behind, e.g., 1 Cor. 15.58; see my The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and Beyond (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI:
What If This Present Were the World's Last Night?

by C.S. Lewis

The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when the world drama will end. The curtain may be rung down at any moment: say, before you have finished reading this paragraph. This seems to some people intolerably frustrating. So many things would be interrupted. Perhaps you were going to get married next month, perhaps you were going to get a raise next week: you may be on the verge of a great scientific discovery; you may be maturing great social and political reforms. Surely no good and wise God would be so very unreasonable as to cut all this short? Not now, of all moments!

But we think thus because we keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows. The audience, if there is an audience (if angels and archangels and all the company of heaven fill the pit and the stalls) may have an inkling.

But we, never seeing the play from outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who are "on" in the same scenes as ourselves, wholly ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past, cannot tell at what moment the end ought to come. That it will come when it ought, we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when that will be. That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely.

The doctrine of the Second Coming, then, is not to be rejected because it conflicts with our favorite modern
mythology. It is, for that very reason, to be the more valued and made more frequently the subject of meditation. It is the medicine our condition especially needs.... The doctrine of the Second Coming has failed, so far as we are concerned, if it does not make us realize that at every moment of every year in our lives Donne's question "What if this present were the world's last night?" is equally relevant.

Sometimes this question has been pressed upon our minds with the purpose of exciting fear. I do not think that is its right use. I am, indeed, far from agreeing with those who think all religious fear barbarous and degrading and demand that it should be banished from the spiritual life. Perfect love, we know, casteth out fear. But so do several other things – ignorance, alcohol, passion, presumption, and stupidity. It is very desirable that we should all advance to that perfection of love in which we shall fear no longer; but it is very undesirable, until we have reached that stage, that we should allow any inferior agent to cast out our fear...

What is important is not that we should always fear (or hope) about the End but that we should always remember, always take it into account. An analogy may here help. A man of seventy need not be always feeling (much less talking) about his approaching death: but a wise man of seventy should always take it into account. He would be foolish to embark on schemes which presuppose twenty more years of life: he would be criminally foolish not to make – indeed, not to have made long since – his will.

Now, what death is to each man, the Second Coming is to the whole human race. We all believe, I suppose, that a man should “sit loose” to his own individual life, should remember how short, precarious, temporary, and provisional a thing it is; should never give all his heart to anything which will end when his life ends. What modern Christians find it harder to remember is that the whole life of humanity in this world is also precarious, temporary, provisional....

We have all encountered judgments or verdicts on ourselves in this life. Every now and then we discover what our fellow creatures really think of us. I don't of course mean what they tell us to our faces: that we usually have to discount. I am thinking of what we sometimes overhear by accident or of the opinions about us which our neighbours or employees or subordinates unknowingly reveal in their actions: and of the terrible, or lovely, judgments artlessly betrayed by children or even animals.

Such discoveries can be the bitterest or sweetest experiences we have. But of course both the bitter and the sweet are limited by our doubt as to the wisdom of those who judge. We always hope that those who so clearly think us cowards or bullies are ignorant and malicious; we always fear that those who trust us or admire us are misled by partiality. I suppose the experience of the Final Judgment (which may break in upon us at any moment) will be like these little experiences, but magnified to the Nth.

For it will be infallible judgment. If it is favorable we shall have no fear, if unfavorable, no hope, that it is wrong. We shall not only believe, we shall know, know beyond doubt in every fibre of our appalled or delighted being, that as the Judge has said, so we are: neither more nor less nor other. We shall perhaps even realise that in some dim fashion we could have known it all along. We shall know and all creation will know too: our ancestors, our parents, our wives or husbands, our children. The unanswerable and (by then) self-evident truth about each will be known to all.

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Photo above of a man looking out of a skyscraper window at the night city skyline, (c) by Elnur at Bigstock.com
Reconciliation – The Love of Christ Compels Us

2 Corinthians 5:14-20

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

January 18-25, 2017
Introduction

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is actually an eight-day observance or “octave” of prayer. It has been this way from the beginnings of this international movement in 1908. Following are a set of eight daily scripture readings, a short commentary on the readings and a prayer. These materials were developed by a group of ecumenical scholars living in Germany and have been sanctioned by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. These readings and prayers are intended to be prayed in common by all those participating in the Week of Prayer around the world.

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant reformation in Germany. As a result, some of the commentaries refer to the significance of this anniversary. Our prayer is that as we reflect on this significant event that both awakened a new awareness of God’s grace and also resulted in subsequent deep divisions amongst God’s people, we can together pray for new ways to move to reconciliation.

Included with the common readings and prayers are some additional questions to help individuals and families participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We would encourage families to take some time to engage the readings and prayers for each day and talk about them together, perhaps around the dinner table or in family worship time. Please feel free to adapt or change them as helpful. In particular the ‘questions for reflection’ will benefit from adaptations or expansion to best match the ecumenical reality in each local situation.

We have also included a short Lord’s Day prayer that can be inserted in the section following the Blessing of the Wine which can be used similar to the other seasonal variations in the Lord’s Day prayers.

Please use these materials in any way you find most helpful in your personal and family worship times during this season of prayer.

Note: The Psalms listed in this booklet follow the numbering of the Hebrew tradition.

Wednesday January 18, 2017

One has died for all (2 Corinthians 5:14)

- Isaiah 53:4-12 He gave his life as an atoning sacrifice
- Psalm 118: 1.14-29 God did not abandon me to death
- 1 John 2:1-2 Christ died for all
- John 15:13-17 Giving his life for his friends

Commentary:

When Paul was converted to Christ he came to a radical new understanding: one person has died for all. Jesus did not just die for his own people, nor merely for those who sympathized with his teachings.
He died for all people, past, present and future. Faithful to the Gospel, many Christians down the centuries have laid down their lives for their friends. One such person was the Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe, who was imprisoned in the concentration camp at Auschwitz and who in 1941 willingly gave up his life so that a fellow prisoner could live.

Because Jesus died for all, all have died with him (2 Cor. 5:14). In dying with Christ our old way of life becomes a thing of the past and we enter into a new form of existence: abundant life – a life in which we can experience comfort, trust and forgiveness, even today – a life which continues to have meaning even after death. This new life is life in God.

Having come to this realization, Paul felt compelled by the love of Christ to preach the Good News of reconciliation with God. Christian churches share in this same commission of proclaiming the Gospel message. We need to ask ourselves how we can proclaim this gospel of reconciliation in view of our divisions.

**Questions for reflection:**

- What does it mean to say that Jesus died for all?
- The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him.” How does this affect how I view others?
- What are the consequences of this for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue?

**Prayer:**

God our Father, in Jesus you gave us the one who died for all. He lived our life and died our death. You accepted his sacrifice and raised him to new life with you. Grant that we, who have died with him, may be made one by the Holy Spirit and live in the abundance of your divine presence now and forever. Amen.

**Thursday January 19, 2017**

**Live no longer for themselves** (2 Corinthians 5:15)

- Micah 6:6-8 God has told you what is good
- Psalm 25:1-5 God of my salvation, show me your ways
- 1 John 4:19-21 We love because God first loved us
- Matthew 16:24-26 Those who lose their life for my sake will find it

**Commentary:**

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been freed from the need to create our own meaning and from living only out of our own strength. Rather, we live in the life-giving power of Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for us. When we ‘lose’ our life for his sake, we gain it.
The prophets were constantly faced with questions concerning the right way to live before God. The prophet Micah found a very clear answer to this question: "To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." The author of Psalm 25 knew that we cannot do this by ourselves and cried out to God for guidance and strength.

In recent years, social isolation and increasing loneliness have become important issues in many contemporary societies. Christians are called to develop new forms of community life in which we share our means of livelihood with others and nurture support between generations. The Gospel call to live not for ourselves but for Christ is also a call to reach out to others and to break down the barriers of isolation.

Questions for reflection:

- How does our culture tempt us to live only for ourselves rather than for others?
- In what ways can we live for others in our daily life?
- What are the ecumenical implications of the call to live no longer for ourselves?

Prayer:

God our Father, in Jesus Christ you have freed us for a life that goes beyond ourselves. Guide us with your Spirit and help us to orient our lives as sisters and brothers in Christ, who lived, suffered, died and rose again for us, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Friday, January 20, 2017

We regard no one from a human point of view (2 Cor. 5:16)

- 1 Samuel 16:1. 6-7 The Lord looks not at outward appearances but at the heart
- Psalm 19:7-13 The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes
- Acts 9:1-19 Saul becomes Paul
- Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes

Commentary:

Encountering Christ turns everything upside down. Paul had that experience on the road to Damascus. For the first time he could see Jesus for who he really was: the Savior of the world. His point of view was changed completely. He had to lay his human, worldly judgment aside.

Encountering Christ changes our perspective as well. Nevertheless, we often linger in the past and judge according to human standards. We make claims or do things “in the name of the Lord” that in reality may be self-serving. Throughout history, both human rulers and the churches themselves have misused their power and influence to pursue unjust political goals.

Transformed by their encounter with Christ, in 1741, the Christians of the Moravian Church (Herrnhuter) answered the call to regard no-one from a human point of view by choosing to ‘submit to Christ’s Rule’. In submitting ourselves to the rule of Christ today, we are called to see
others as God sees them, without mistrust or prejudice.

Questions for reflection:

- Where can I identify Damascus experiences in my life?
- What changes when we view other Christians or people of other faiths as God views them?

Prayer:

Triune God, you are the origin and goal of all living things. Forgive us when we only think of ourselves and are blinded by our own standards. Open our hearts and our eyes. Teach us to be loving, accepting and gracious, so that we may grow in the unity which is your gift. To you be honor and praise, now and forever. Amen

Saturday, January 21, 2017

Everything old has passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17)

- Genesis 19:15-26  Don’t look back
- Psalm 77: 5-15  God is always faithful
- Philippians 3: 7-14  Forgetting what lies behind

Commentary:

We often live out of the past. Looking back can be helpful, and is often necessary for the healing of memories. It can also paralyze us and prevent us from living in the present. Paul's message here is liberating: “everything old has passed away”.

The Bible encourages us to keep the past in mind, to draw strength from our memories, and to remember what good God has done. However, it also asks us to leave the old, even what was good, in order to follow Christ and live a new life in him.

During this year, the work of Martin Luther and other reformers is being commemorated by many Christians, both Protestant and Catholic. The Reformation changed much in the life of the Western Church. Many Christians showed heroic witness and many were renewed in their Christian lives. At the same time, as scripture shows, it is important not to be limited by what happened in the past, but rather to allow the Holy Spirit to open us to a new future in which division is overcome and God’s people is made whole.

Questions for reflection:

- What could we learn by reading together the history of our divisions and mutual mistrust?
- What must change in my church so that divisions can be overcome and that which unites can be strengthened?

Prayer:
Lord Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and forever. Heal the wounds of our past, bless our pilgrimage towards unity today and guide us into your future, when you will be all in all, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen

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**Prayer for the Lord’s Day**

*This prayer may be used after the blessing of the Wine similar to the other seasonal variations in the Lord’s Day Opening Ceremony.*

**Leader:** Let us thank Him this day especially for the unity we enjoy in the Body of Christ and for our call to Ecumenical Life in the Sword of the Spirit. May we all become perfectly one, so that the world may know and believe. Lord our God, You are bringing us into the fullness of unity through the work of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

**Group:** Now we live with Him through the Holy Spirit, and we look for the day when we will dwell with Him in Your everlasting kingdom.

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**Sunday, January 22, 2017**

**Everything has become new** *(2 Corinthians 5:17)*

- Ezekiel 36:25-27  Receiving a new heart from God
- Psalm 126  Being filled with joy
- Colossians 3:9-17  Being renewed in Christ
- John 3:1-8  Being born in the Spirit

**Commentary:**

Paul encountered Christ, the risen Lord, and became a renewed person—just as everyone does who believes in Christ. This new creation is not visible to the naked eye. Instead it is a reality of faith. God lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit and lets us share in the life of the Trinity.

By this act of new creation, the Fall is overcome and we are brought into a saving relationship with God. Truly amazing things can be said about us: as Paul said, in Christ we are a new creation; in his resurrection death is overcome; no person or thing can snatch us out of the hand of God; we are one in Christ and he lives in us; in Christ we are “a kingdom and priests” *(Rev 5:10)* as we give thanks to him for overcoming death and we proclaim the promise of the new creation.

This new life becomes visible when we allow it to take shape and live it out in “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” It must also become apparent in our ecumenical relationships. A common conviction in many churches is that the more we are in Christ, the closer we are to each other. Especially on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we are reminded of both the achievements and tragedies of our history. The love of Christ compels us
to live as renewed beings in actively seeking unity and reconciliation.

Questions for reflection:

• What helps me to recognize that I am a new creation in Christ?
• What are the steps I need to take to live out my new life in Christ?
• What are the ecumenical implications of being a new creation?

Prayer:

Triune God, you reveal yourself to us as Father and creator, as Son and Savior, and as Spirit and giver of life, and yet you are one. You break through our human boundaries and renew us. Give us a new heart to overcome all that endangers our unity in you. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Monday, January 23, 2017

God reconciled us to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Genesis 17:1-8 God makes a covenant with Abraham
Psalm 98 The world has seen the victory of God
Romans 5:6-11 God reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ
Luke 2:8-14 Proclamation of the good news

Commentary:

Reconciliation has two sides: it is fascinating and terrifying at the same time. It draws us in so that we desire it: within ourselves, with one another, and between our different confessional traditions. We see the price and it scares us. For reconciliation means renouncing our desire for power and recognition. In Christ God graciously reconciles us to himself even though we have turned away from him. God’s action goes beyond even this: God reconciles not only humanity, but the whole of creation to himself.

In the Old Testament God was faithful and merciful to the people of Israel, with whom he established a covenant. This covenant remains: “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Jesus, who inaugurated the new covenant in his blood, was a son of Israel. Too often in history our churches have failed to honor this. After the Holocaust, it is the distinctive task of the German churches to combat antisemitism. Similarly all churches are called to bring forth reconciliation in their communities and resist all forms of human discrimination, for we are all part of God’s covenant.

Questions:

• How do we as Christian communities understand being part of God’s covenant?
• What forms of discrimination do our churches need to address today in our societies?
Prayer:

Merciful God, out of love you made a covenant with your people. Empower us to resist all forms of discrimination. Let the gift of your loving covenant fill us with joy and inspire us to greater unity. Through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

Tuesday, January 24, 2017

The ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

- Genesis 50:15-21  Joseph is reconciled with his brothers
- Psalm 72  God’s kingdom brings righteousness and peace
- 1 John 3:16b-21  God’s love compels us to love one another
- John 17:20-26  Jesus prays for the unity of his church

Commentary:

Reconciliation between God and human beings is the key reality of our Christian faith. Paul was convinced that the love of Christ compels us to bring God’s reconciliation to bear in all aspects of our life. Today this leads us to examine our consciences in relation to our divisions. As the story of Joseph demonstrates, God always gives the grace needed for the healing of broken relationships.

As the middle ages came to a close, many reformers sought to bring about the renewal of the church: Protestants like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin; Catholics like Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales and Charles Borromeo; and the Orthodox, Sergius of Radonezh. However, what should have been a story of God’s grace was also marred by human sinfulness and became a story of the rending of the unity of God’s people. Compounded by sin and warfare, mutual hostility and suspicion deepened over the centuries.

The ministry of reconciliation includes the work of overcoming divisions within Christianity. Today, many Christian churches work together in mutual trust and respect. One positive example of ecumenical reconciliation is the dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference. After the dialogue results were published in the document “Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ”, the two organizations held a penitential service together in 2010 followed by further reconciliation services throughout Germany and in many other countries.

Questions for reflection:

- Where do we see the need for a ministry of reconciliation in our context?
- How are we responding to this need?

Prayer:
God of all goodness, we give you thanks for reconciling us and the whole world to yourself in Christ. Empower us, our congregations and our churches in ministries of reconciliation. Heal our hearts and help us to spread your peace. "Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy". We pray in the name of Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Wednesday January 25, 2017
Reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20)

- Micah 4:1-5  In the last days justice will reign
- Psalm 87  Glorious things are spoken of God
- Revelation 21:1-5a  God will make a new heaven and a new earth
- John 20:11-18  Meeting the risen Christ leads to personal mission

Commentary:

What if? What if the prophecies in the Bible actually came true? If the wars between people stopped and if life-giving things were to be made out of the weapons of war? What if God’s justice and peace reigned, a peace which was more than simply the absence of war? If all of humanity came together for a celebration in which not a single person was marginalized? What if there really was no more mourning, no more tears, and no more death? It would be the culmination of the reconciliation that God brought about in Jesus Christ. It would be heaven!

Psalms, canticles, and hymns sing of the day when the whole perfected creation finally arrives at its goal, the day when God will be “all in all”. They tell about the Christian hope for the fulfilment of God’s reign, when suffering will be transformed into joy. On that day, the Church will be revealed in her beauty and grace as the one body of Christ. Wherever we gather in the Spirit to sing together about the fulfilment of God’s promises, the heavens break open and we begin here and now to dance to the melody of eternity.

As we can already experience this presence of heaven, let us celebrate together. We may be inspired to share images, poems and songs from our particular traditions. These materials can open up spaces for us to experience our common faith in and hope for God’s Kingdom.

Questions for reflection:

- How do you envision heaven?
- Which songs, stories, poems, and pictures from your tradition give you the feeling of participating in the reality of God’s eternity?

Prayer:

Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you for this week of prayer, for being together as Christians and for the different ways we have experienced your presence. Let us always
praise your holy name together so that we may continue to grow in unity and reconciliation. Amen.

[photo above, (c) by thegarden at bigstock.com]
There Is No Darkness in Him at All

by Tadhg Lynch

Just to be different

Just to be different, we Irish in the Republic have our own way of counting the seasons. We have four, like other civilised countries of course, but they appear to start at different times.

Imagine my chagrin in the recent past when, on the first of February, I announced to my housemates that Spring had begun and was roundly accused of being an idiot, or at least unable to count. Things got worse when the high moral ground from which I was pontificating to a household of Americans and Lebanese was ripped from beneath my feet by my fellow Irishman from Belfast who weighed in on the side of the foreigners and told me that Spring did not begin until the 21st of March...Outgunned, betrayed and effectively silenced, I had to maintain a huffy silence for another six weeks until Spring “really” began.

For some reason, the Irish in the south of the Island continue to follow the old “Celtic” calendar counting both the vernal and autumnal equinox as the middle of the seasons, instead of their first day. The longest day of the year – the 21st of June – thus becomes midsummer, while every other season (relative to the rest of the world it seems) begins about six weeks before it should. Ireland’s weather never varies all that much (a sort of persistent dampness is probably applicable to most times of the year) but its“ northerly latitude, equivalent to Hudson Bay in Canada and Moscow in Russia, allied to our somewhat individual method of counting the seasons means that light is at a premium as autumn progresses. Winter, which starts for us on the first of November, is long and dreary and dark.
**Light and dark**

As a child in Ireland the year was effectively divided into two seasons. “Dark” was counted from the 1st of September and the return to school until the winter solstice halfway through Winter on the 21st of December. This season contained all the things dreaded by any sane child. A new teacher, piano lessons, the return of community activities following the summer (autumn) break, and the gradual erosion of the golden hours, “after homework,” when one could kick a ball in the street outside.

“Light” however, began four days before Christmas with the shortest day of the year. From this time forth, though the days were at their shortest and the weather its’ coldest, things began to look up. Christmas, presents, New Year, new starts, new hope fell in a bundle around the turn of the year while days, light and the “after homework” time lengthened imperceptibly every day until the advent of “Spring” on the 1st of February brought something to really rejoice about.

**God’s light brings hope and joy**

Though there is little historical agreement on the matter, the first letter of John to the Christians of the early church would seem to have been written at a time of at least intermittent if not systemic persecution of the community. Amid the attacks on the leaders of the early church and heterodox teaching arising to corrupt the believers and the charms, illusions, and snares of the world waiting to entrap them, John writes simply and profoundly to the believers of Jesus Christ that; “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

To the first century Mediterraneans, and perhaps even more to their less civilised Celtic brethren some centuries later, light was the symbol of hope, joy and life. The illuminating power of the sun for those who did not have dependable sources of light at all times of the day and night is perhaps less easy for those of us who live in modern times to grasp, but it is still imaginable. The main source of light for the early Christians, John writes, is God. He is the one source who illumines everything else – in fact, he is what makes everything else truly visible.

**In between**

The first letter of John is striking in its brevity and the direct way in which it addresses the believers. As the light begins to fade from the sky, the hours of dusk grow steadily shorter and the “in between” light of our long autumn evenings leaves us to the sudden curtain drop approach of winter nights. The bold realities of John’s writing have resonance.

Light and Dark – complete opposites. Sin and Life in Christ – as opposite as light and dark. John writes, “You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” Such a stark truth – in him there is no sin. In him there is no darkness at all.

The early church knew something about darkness – they knew enough to place one of their major feasts at a time when the hemisphere was shrouded in night and dark – when the people would need to remember the hope for which they called themselves Christians in the first place. John addresses the Christians from this reality. Light is fading from this world. It is growing dark. It won’t be here for very long.

**Walk in the light of Christ**

As there is no darkness in Christ – and as this world becomes darker still, let us walk not in the world; “if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” After all, there are only 24 days left till it’s “light”.
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digital Illustration of sunlit forest painted by (c) J.R. Coffronili
Seeking God More Earnestly – Advent Themes in the Letter of James

by Dr. Mark Whitters

The early weeks of Advent give the Christian people an opportunity to come back into contact with biblical themes often skimmed over during the rest of the year: we are travelers in this life, always on the lookout for a home we will receive at our destination. The biblical categories for this identity are pilgrim and prophet. At the same time Advent, like all holy seasons, gives us another chance to seek God more earnestly in our spiritual lives.

Early in the season most of the liturgical readings hark back to the Old Testament and its concerns for justice and future judgment. Then come readings more focused on the messianic promise and our relationship with a personal God. Somewhat surprisingly, the letter of James has something to say about all of these themes, for it perhaps more than any other Christian writing marshals Old Testament themes under the New Testament banner. Unfortunately, the message of James has historically been relegated by preachers and pamphleteers to the realm of polemics and partisan doctrines. Historically, James has been argued over more than meditated upon.

In this essay I hope to hear what James would have to say about Advent, especially in its early weeks’
traditional themes of pilgrimage, prophecy, and piety. Three passages especially draw our attention to the identity of God, and by implication, our own identity in relation to him: James 1:1, 4:4-6, and 5:10.

God Is Our Home

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora: Greetings” - James 1:1.

Right from the beginning the recipients of the letter are addressed as pilgrims and foreigners in this earthly life. Biblically speaking, the Diaspora tribes were the Jews scattered in areas outside their homeland. One can imagine how hard it was for the biblical Jews to maintain their identity outside Palestine where language and culture naturally reinforced their sense of being separate from the outside world. James now calls his audience the heirs of those Jews. And so we, his modern audience, are to imagine our own lives as a constant struggle to maintain our special identity, to maintain the customs of our homeland.

My mother is Czech and has tried (with limited success) to get everyone in our family to pride themselves in the literature, music, and food of her mother country. But the old world is so different from the world her children grew up in! James wants us to remember that we should never consider ourselves as citizens of this world and its identity. Rather we are outsiders, strangers, pilgrims to the values and culture of this world.

Theme of pilgrimage
It is conceivable that the author has adopted the name of “James” as a reminder of his Diaspora status. Writings were often sent off in the religious world of late Second Temple Judaism under names calculated to persuade audiences that their authority should be accepted. James in Greek and Hebrew is written “Jacob,” and who better is qualified to address the “twelve tribes” than the Old Testament father who begot them? Who better to represent the whole Diaspora audience than the one whose best years were spent away from his native land? This is the one who spoke to Pharaoh, the archetype resident of this world, “The days of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the... years of my life, and they have not attained to the... years of my fathers in ...their sojourning” (Genesis 47:9); and later he ordered his son Joseph to bring back his bones to his native soil when his family returned.

If it is conceivable that James is a subtle hint to us that we are also pilgrims, then it is no wonder that the first chapter of the letter of James is filled with teachings about trials, temptations, and struggles to maintain identity in an alien land. In Genesis 28-32 we read about Jacob, namesake of James. His life was filled with such afflictions and tests, caused by the Diaspora world around him (Laban and Pharaoh), by his own decisions and passions (his duplicity and deceit in dealing with his father Isaac and his brother Esau), and by God himself (the dream at Bethel and wrestling with the angel at the River Jabbok).

The New Testament Jacob first identifies himself and his pilgrim audience and then immediately speaks of trials and tests (1:2-4). A similar theme emerges later in the first chapter when trials are connected to temptations and desires (1:12-15).

Then later in the chapter, the letter addresses the other pilgrim theme mentioned above: how to maintain a religious identity in an alien world. Along these lines he also says that we must stay “unstained from the world” (1:27). The audience may be deluged by a foreign culture replete with its own styles and fads, but James does not want them to forget about who they are (1:24-25), or be deceived about their religious origins (1:22, 26).

The alternative to assimilation is deliberate recognition of our home and ancestry: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:16-17). James says that we are from
above, we have God as our Father, and our connection with our home and ancestry cannot be eradicated by change.

“From above” means that everything worth living for is from the place where God dwells. We should spend our time thinking and dreaming of our true home in heaven. This resident alien mentality is very much a part of any immigrant’s existence. Whenever I travel to the Middle East – and I have been there six times in the last 11 years – I am acutely aware of my own cultural identity, either through my clothes, my language, or even my height. I might as well be from above as try to blend in, and recent international events have never accentuated my distinctiveness more. The lesson of James 1: Would that my spiritual identity in this world were as evident as my cultural identity!

**God as our Father**

James next point – having God as our Father – speaks of our home and reminds us again of the role of parents: they are responsible for our upbringing in a strange world. It reminds us of Jacob who found his way back to his home through all his trials. After a sleepless night of wrestling with an angel, he looked upon his sibling rival Esau and said, “I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God” (Gen 33:10). Jacob had come to accept the years of his pilgrim existence with Laban as the dealings of God who doggedly stuck with him and disciplined him. One of the most poignant scenes in the book of Genesis is that of Jacob blessing Pharaoh instead of striving against him, confessing his resignation to a life of sojourning (47:9-10).

Finally, there is “no variation or shadow due to change” with God. The thing that makes the life of a pilgrim so hard to live is constant exposure to strange cultural patterns. Somehow, somewhere, there needs to be a source of constancy for the traveler so that stability can be attained.

What is it that a family with young kids needs when it is traveling? Routine. Some semblance of order is particularly important for children who are thrown off schedule and eating all the wrong foods and behaving in all the wrong ways. What is it that keeps older folks from finding rest when they are away from home? It is the strange bed or the stress of a new environment. This is the reason pilgrims need a strong dose of stability in their new residence.

How does this sense of home, fatherly presence, and stability relate to the rest of the letter? Throughout the rest of the letter this “new” Jacob will speak about people most vulnerable to Diaspora stress: the widow, the orphan, and the weak. Among the weak would be the poor, perhaps the prisoner, the suffering and the sick, the errant of faith (2:5, 15; 5:4, 13, 14, 19). “Pure and undefiled religion” (1:27), he concludes, is concerned with people in these conventional Old Testament categories. They epitomize the existence of a Christian among the twelve tribes of the Diaspora.

**God Is Our Friend**

The second convergence of James and Advent is the call for a deeper relationship with God as our friend and lover. That this call builds on the first theme is evident in these lines: “You adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

For James friendship is not based on mere creeds and formality. He has already said in 2:19 that even the demons have a certain correct formal faith. But there is no love lost between demons and God! Friendship rather works in the realm of tenderness and favoritism – that is why he uses such a strong word “adulteresses” to describe wayward members of the twelve tribes of the Diaspora. Passion is involved, and passion drives its victims to go way beyond formality and externals. In fact, in chapter 2, James brings up two biblical demonstrations of passionate, perhaps irrational love: Abraham and Rahab.
Friendship with God

Abraham was so caught up in friendship with God that he was willing to go way beyond the formal covenant (Genesis 12) so as to sacrifice his own son (Genesis 22), and thus (says James) “he was called a friend of God” (2:23). Protestants and Catholics fight about faith versus works, but such categories are meaningless to friends. James is simply saying that formalities and boundaries are beside the point, for passion is not so rational and doctrinal. In the Semitic mind of James, one is either passionately in love with God or one is not; one is a friend of God and the other is a friend of the world; there is no in-between state of relationship.

Rahab is so incongruous an example of friendship with God, that James must be now in the throes of passion himself. Rahab was not among the twelve tribes of Israel. And she was a prostitute, a person that most of us would consider as a prime candidate for a friend of the world. And that is the point: God certainly takes strange lovers! If passion for God is demonstrated by such practices, then God is willing to reciprocate with “favor” (or, as the common translations have it, “grace”) for the humble (4:6). He loves those who show passion for God in their lives.

If passion is not in the relationship with God, then formality is not enough. This is stated repeatedly in such lines as “faith without works is dead” (2:17). This point is well illustrated by a hockey story. Hockey coach and all-time great Wayne Gretzky was once asked to motivate one young player who had come to a training camp that Gretzky was sponsoring. After hearing how much talent the young man had, but how little he practiced, Gretzky simply said, “I can’t do anything. Great players have great passion. If they don’t spend all their free time practicing the sport, they will never become great players, no matter what techniques I teach them.”

In the commercial world of imperial Rome, nobody stood on equal ground. Laws were not set up to equalize opportunity in the various trading ventures and cultural exchanges throughout the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, friendship was the most important factor for success, more important than ability and product or service. If you had a highly positioned friend who showed you favor, you had an open door for business and profit. In a strange land where you wanted to live, you relied on your “patron” or friend to defend you and make connections for you, more than on the local laws and structures. The whole thing rested more on what modern folks would regard as unfair favoritism and partisanship. This is closer to what James means by friendship with God: he favors those who are passionate about him.

Here is another story that may help to put James’ Advent word in a more palatable form. My now-deceased brother Sam was a Down’s syndrome member of our family. As he grew up, he would require special time and attention from his family and caregivers. Outsiders who never spent time with Sam probably felt sorry for Sam and for us. However, Sam returned manifold whatever care he received, for he was irrepressibly cheerful and grateful. Here is the question that James asks: did we take care of Sam because he was a member of the family, or did we take care of Sam because we liked Sam? Certainly it is both. But James emphasizes the second part: we loved to be with Sam because he was passionate about us. We loved to be with Sam because he was our friend. At his wake service this “disadvantaged” fellow had some 400 people attend, many of whom were strangers telling us in tears that Sam was their friend, too.

God Is Judge

Finally, James and the Advent season say that God is judge and vindicator. He will look out for all those mentioned earlier: the sojourner, the widow, the orphan, those defrauded or persecuted in court, and the special “friends.” In addition to these groups, James refers to a couple other categories of people, probably because they epitomize Christ and the Diaspora life mentioned above: the prophet and the martyr. The prophet and the martyr are the ones that spiritually sum up the Old Testament groups, and Christ represents
Living Bulwark

them. This theme of judge and vindicator is summed up in this short line: “Behold, the Judge is standing at the door” (5:9).

God vindicates all who are his friends, pilgrims, and prophets
The first few verses of the last chapter are a good summary of the prophetic books of the Old Testament with its concern for justice in the face of oppression and violence (5:1-6). In a remarkable shift of persona James speaks like a “gloom and doom” prophet, as if in his mind’s eye he has already seen the end of the world. Earlier he was more tentative in his address to the rich (e.g., 2:6). Now he addresses the rich and powerful directly as if he were pronouncing a decree instead of preaching repentance.

In contrast to their idea that wealth and institutions will last forever, James says that the Judge will demand an accounting for their activities. Even martyrdom is evident in this world of have and have-nots: “You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” (5:6). Here, the eye of James’ mind is most clearly on Christ, the martyred “righteous person,” oppressed by the rich and powerful of this world.

Then the rest of the chapter deals with the likes of the solitary prophets who are like spiritual foreigners: righteous Job who held out against all those who harassed him, and long-praying Elijah who stood for heaven’s agenda over the world’s. These were all heroes in the Old Testament, and they are the hall of fame members for the theology of the letter of James. In the end, the thing that holds all these models together is the sense that God will vindicate them all, and through them will vindicate all of us who live as pilgrims, prophets, and friends of God.

What is our task therefore as James closes out his letter?
Under this theme of vindicator and judge he outlines three lessons: (1) We are to live like the prophets (5:10). Perhaps we cannot have the same canonical stature, but we can live lives that speak of prophetic values and priorities. We can resist the world’s values and goals. This lesson has been implicit throughout the whole letter of James. In fact we can cut back on our dosage of worldly wisdom (3:13-16) that is at the heart of our trust in materialism and wealth.

(2) We can pray (5:16) like Elijah. There is always hope if we keep our prayers steady. Even the forces of nature (suffering, sickness, not to mention the weather!) and our personal desires (4:1-4) are subject to us, if we do not succeed in getting the attention of powerful human and institutional authorities. Prayer will allow us to hold out in the midst of the hostile forces.

(3) We can take care of each other (5:19). Fraternal care is never a waste of time. When someone takes time to listen and counsel, it has a healing effect on everyone. The last line, though hard to unravel, merely suggests that the whole effect of one soul taking care of other souls is greater than the sum of its parts. In effect, the spiritual dangers of the Diaspora world are deadly for the readers of the letter of James, and personal relationships of encouragement and support make a difference for the life of everyone in our care.

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Illustration of man walking with Bible (top) by (c) Kevin Carden

The Only Person Ever Pre-Announced

by Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979)

History is full of men who have claimed that they came from God, or that they were gods, or that they bore messages from God – Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, Christ, Lao-tze, and thousands of others, right down to the person who founded a new religion this very day. Each of them has a right to be heard and considered. But as a yardstick external to and outside of whatever is to be measured is needed, so there must be some permanent tests available to all men, all civilizations, and all ages, by which they can decide whether any one of these claimants, or all of them, are justified in their claims. These tests are of two kinds: reason and history. Reason, because everyone has it, even those without faith; history, because everyone lives in it and should know something about it.

Reason dictates that if any one of these men actually came from God, the least thing that God could do to support His claim would be to pre-announce His coming. Automobile manufacturers tell their customers when to expect a new model. If God sent anyone from Himself, or if He came Himself with a vitally important message for all men, it would seem reasonable that He would first let men know when His messenger was coming, where He would be born, where He would live, the doctrine He would teach, the enemies He would make, the program He would adopt for the future, and the manner of His death. By the extent to which the messenger conformed with these announcements, one could judge the validity of his claims.

Reason further assures us that if God did not do this, then there would be nothing to prevent any impostor from appearing in history and saying, “I come from God,” or “An angel appeared to me in the desert and gave me this message.” In such cases there would be no objective, historical way of testing the messenger. We would have only his word for it, and of course he could be wrong.
If a visitor came from a foreign country to Washington and said he was a diplomat, the government would ask him for his passport and other documents testifying that he represented a certain government. His papers would have to antedate his coming. If such proofs of identity are asked from delegates of other countries, reason certainly ought to do so with messengers who claim to have come from God. To each claimant reason says, “What record was there before you were born that you were coming?”

With this test one can evaluate the claimants. (And at this preliminary stage, Christ is no greater than the others.) Socrates had no one to foretell his birth. Buddha had no one to pre-announce him and his message or tell the day when he would sit under the tree. Confucius did not have the name of his mother and his birthplace recorded, nor were they given to men centuries before he arrived so that when he did come, men would know he was a messenger from God.

But, with Christ it was different. Because of the Old Testament prophecies, His coming was not unexpected. There were no predictions about Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tze, Mohammed, or anyone else; but there were predictions about Christ. Others just came and said, “Here I am, believe me.” They were, therefore, only men among men and not the Divine in the human. Christ alone stepped out of that line saying, “Search the writings of the Jewish people and the related history of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans.” (For the moment, pagan writings and even the Old Testament may be regarded only as historical documents, not as inspired works.)

It is true that the prophecies of the Old Testament can be best understood in the light of their fulfillment. The language of prophecy does not have the exactness of mathematics. Yet if one searches out the various Messianic currents in the Old Testament, and compares the resulting picture with the life and work of Christ, can one doubt that the ancient predictions point to Jesus and the kingdom which he established? God’s promise to the patriarchs that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed; the prediction that the tribe of Juda would be supreme among the other Hebrew tribes until the coming of Him Whom all nations would obey; the strange yet undeniable fact that in the Bible of the Alexandrian Jews, the Septuagint, one finds clearly predicted the virgin birth of the Messiah; the prophecy of Isaiah 53 about the patient sufferer, the Servant of the Lord, who will lay down his life as a guilt-offering for his people’s offenses; the perspectives of the glorious, everlasting kingdom of the House of David – in whom but Christ have these prophecies found their fulfillment?

From an historical point of view alone, here is uniqueness which sets Christ apart from all other founders of world religions. And once the fulfillment of these prophecies did historically take place in the person of Christ, not only did all prophecies cease in Israel, but there was discontinuance of sacrifices when the true Paschal Lamb was sacrificed.

Turn to pagan testimony. Tacitus, speaking for the ancient Romans, says, “People were generally persuaded in the faith of the ancient prophecies, that the East was to prevail, and that from Judea was to come the Master and Ruler of the world.” Suetonius, in his account of the life of Vespasian, recounts the Roman tradition thus, “It was an old and constant belief throughout the East, that by indubitably certain prophecies, the Jews were to attain the highest power.”

China had the same expectation; but because it was on the other side of the world, it believed that the great Wise Man would be born in the West. The Annals of the Celestial Empire contain the statement:

In the 24th year of Tchao-Wang of the dynasty of the Tcheou, on the 8th day of the 4th moon, a light appeared in the Southwest which illumined the king’s palace. The monarch, struck by its splendor, interrogated the sages. They showed him books in which this prodigy signified the
appearance of the great Saint of the West whose religion was to be introduced into their country.

The Greeks expected Him, for Aeschylus in his *Prometheus* six centuries before His coming, wrote, “Look not for any end, moreover, to this curse until God appears, to accept upon His Head the pangs of thy own sins vicarious.”

How did the Magi of the East know of His coming? Probably from the many prophecies circulated through the world by the Jews as well as through the prophecy made to the Gentiles by Daniel centuries before His birth.

Cicero, after recounting the sayings of the ancient oracles and the Sibyls about a “King whom we must recognize to be saved,” asked in expectation, “To what man and to what period of time do these predictions point?” The Fourth Eclogue of Virgil recounted the same ancient tradition and spoke of “a chaste woman, smiling on her infant boy, with whom the iron age would pass away.”

Suetonius quoted a contemporary author to the effect that the Romans were so fearful about a king who would rule the world that they ordered all children born that year to be killed—an order that was not fulfilled, except by Herod.

Not only were the Jews expecting the birth of a Great King, a Wise Man and a Savior, but Plato and Socrates also spoke of the *Logos* and of the Universal Wise Man “yet to come.” Confucius spoke of “the Saint” the Sibyls, of a “Universal King” the Greek dramatist, of a savior and redeemer to unloose man from the “primal eldest curse.” All these were on the Gentile side of the expectation. What separates Christ from all men is that first He was expected; even the Gentiles had a longing for a deliverer, or redeemer. This fact alone distinguishes Him from all other religious leaders.

A second distinguishing fact is that once He appeared, He struck history with such impact that He split it in two, dividing it into two periods: one before His coming, the other after it. Buddha did not do this, nor any of the great Indian philosophers. Even those who deny God must date their attacks upon Him, A.D. so and so, or so many years after His coming.

A third fact separating Him from all the others is this: *every other person who ever came into this world came into it to live. He came into it to die.* Death was a stumbling block to Socrates—it interrupted his teaching. But to Christ, death was the goal and fulfillment of His life, the gold that He was seeking. Few of His words or actions are intelligible without reference to His Cross. He presented Himself as a Savior rather than merely as a Teacher. It meant nothing to teach men to be good unless He also gave them the power to be good, after rescuing them from the frustration of guilt.

The story of every human life begins with birth and ends with death. In the Person of Christ, however, *it was His death that was first and His life that was last.* The scripture describes Him as “the Lamb slain as it were, from the beginning of the world.” He was slain in intention by the first sin and rebellion against God. It was not so much that His birth cast a shadow on His life and thus led to His death; it was rather that the Cross was first, and cast its shadow back to His birth. His has been the only life in the world that was ever lived backward. As the flower in the crannied wall tells the poet of nature, and as the atom is the miniature of the solar system, so too, His birth tells the mystery of the gibbet. He went from the known to the known, from the reason of His coming manifested by His name “Jesus” or “Savior” to the fulfillment of His coming, namely, His death on the Cross.

John gives us His eternal prehistory; Matthew, His temporal prehistory, by way of His genealogy. It is significant how much His temporal ancestry was connected with sinners and foreigners! These blots on the escutcheon of His human lineage suggest a pity for the sinful and for the strangers to the Covenant. Both these
aspects of His compassion would later on be hurled against Him as accusations: “He is a friend of sinners” “He is a Samaritan.” But the shadow of a stained past foretells His future love for the stained. Born of a woman, He was a man and could be one with all humanity; born of a Virgin, who was overshadowed by the Spirit and “full of grace,” He would also be outside that current of sin which infected all men.

This article is adapted from *Life of Christ*, Chapter 1, (c) by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen 1958, published by Ignatius Press, San Francisco, with forward by Fr. Benedict Groeschel.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979) was an American theologian and bishop, first in New York City and then in Rochester, New York. He became well-known for his preaching, especially on television and radio. He hosted the night-time radio program *The Catholic Hour* for twenty years (1930–1950) before moving to television and presenting a weekly program called, *Life Is Worth Living*. The show ran from 1951 until 1957, drawing as many as 30 million people on a weekly basis. He wrote 73 books and numerous articles and columns. Mother Theresa of Calcutta always kept a copy of Sheen’s book, *Life of Christ*, with her wherever she traveled for daily reflection and meditation.

Photo (top) credit: Corcovado Mountain with Christ the Redeemer Statue in Clouds on Sunset in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, (c) by Dabldy at Bigstock.com

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An Essay on Community and the Nature of the Church

Do covenant communities have something to contribute to our models of church today?

by Bob Tedesco

An Orientation to Essays on Christian Community
I wrote Essays on Christian Community primarily for members and leaders of the Sword of the Spirit and for others who may be interested in what our collective experience might have to say to the larger body of Christ. The book assumes that people have a certain familiarity with the Sword of the Spirit. I have attempted to define terms used within the Sword of the Spirit and to describe its life and mission. There may be some that I have missed, but an imaginative reader can probably figure out what I am talking about.

In almost every case, when the word “church” is used, it is intended to mean the wider body of Christ, and not a specific parish, congregation or denomination. I believe that our community history has developed into a certain kind of prophetic modeling that can make a contribution to the wider body of Christ. Due to the potential range of readers, some further introductory comments are needed. We need to examine how our community expressions got started; how they have developed; and where we are today.

Recent Church History
The past four or five decades have seen an explosion of movements and new communities. The charismatic renewal has swept through the Christian churches touching millions. The evangelical movement which preceded it impacted denominations and approaches to reform and renewal, both locally and nationally. These two powerful engines of reform have laid a foundation for a broad set of community experiments and expressions.

The bulk of this work focuses on specific areas of importance to understanding living in Christian community. I especially hope to deepen the understanding that supports the actions and lifestyle embraced. This is not intended to be a complete or comprehensive collection of community-oriented topics of interest. Much more can be addressed in the future.


**Words of the Lord to the Broader Church**

In the past one hundred years, the Lord has spoken at least three major “words” to the church. These three words have been modeled and developed in movements that have involved millions of Christians, many of them new converts. The three words that I would highlight are:

1. Evangelical: the call to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and a personal commitment to him.
2. Pentecostal: the call to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
3. Community: the call to committed relationships in a discipling environment that builds the Kingdom of God.

This latest word to the church, “community,” has produced hundreds, perhaps thousands of communities, many of them in networks together.

All three of these words challenge the nature of the church and call it to new realities and new expressions that could further equip it to be effective in the modern world.

**Sword of the Spirit**

My own network, The Sword of the Spirit (SOS), is a “community of communities” that has regions all around the world: North America, Europe, Asia, South Pacific, and Ibero-Americana (Latin America, Mexico, Portugal and Spain).

The Sword of the Spirit has grown out of several renewal movements that preceded it. We have a growing number of some 75 plus lay Christian communities located in 23 countries that are in various stages of commitment, and many others exploring a relationship with us. We have several community initiatives in formerly communist countries and the Middle East. We are ecumenical in nature and our members are from many different denominations. This ecumenical heart is one of the key works of the Lord in our midst, and it is also one of the richest fruits of our life together.

Each community has its own name and is autonomous. It is represented on the regional council by its senior coordinator. The benefits of regional and international participation are numerous, but a few should be mentioned here.

First, we seek and develop together a common way of life. We benefit from elements developed in other regions and communities.

Second, building community in a healthy way often exceeds the resources present locally, especially in smaller groups. We can get help at the regional level when we need it.

Third, each community benefits from a “visitation” every five years. A team of experienced community leaders is assembled and they visit a local community for a 3-4 day stay. They provide the local members and leadership with an outside, objective view of how things are going. They give a report that recommends areas that could be improved with suggestions for implementation. Fourth, and finally, we benefit greatly from the regional youth program where youth from all of the communities have conferences, mission trips, and summer internships together.

With all of this said, we see ourselves as a small part of what the Lord is doing today.

**Ecumenism**

The Sword of the Spirit is an ecumenical network of communities. My background is Roman Catholic and much of my thinking and resources are informed from that perspective. I have tried to use sources from across the Christian traditions to serve a broader spectrum of readers. Sources are mainly scriptural, both Catholic and Protestant, but fall woefully short from the Orthodox perspective. Appendices at the back of this book offer additional resources: definitions, other tools, and examples.

Some of our local communities are all from a single church, but are supportive of the international ecumenical vision. My local community, the People of God in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is ecumenical by intention: we have a mixture of Catholic, Protestant and Free Church members.
**Intentions**

My intentions for writing this book are: 1) to present some key lessons learned over many years (40 plus) of local community and Sword of the Spirit leadership; 2) to share scriptural references and insights about community; and 3) to identify some additional resources that others could personally research in support of the topic. This book is not intended to be an official document, but a reflection on my own experiences and lessons learned. Most chapters are “stand alone” and can be read and used in discussion groups.

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**Part 1. Community and the Nature of the Church**

Well, I certainly feel like a lightweight defending a heavyweight title! I am not a church structure expert (ecclesiologist), nor am I an ordained pastor or priest. My professional training has been in engineering, but I do have 40 plus years of community-building experience which includes my membership in the People of God community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

Over the years, I have received a lot of training in support of this work. That experience and training notwithstanding, I believe that every layman has some credible right to comment on the state of things based on his church membership and on the full responsibility of that membership. As study after study shows a decline of the influence of the church in people’s lives and decisions, it is clear that we need more than just a small set of experts to give input into the nature and expressions of church.

I find it at least mildly encouraging that Jesus chose his apostles from among those who were least qualified to be built into the foundation of his church, which is now in its third millennium. In light of scripture, we all need to question; we all need to contribute; we all need to take a concern for the life of the church. Hopefully, this effort will be a useful contribution.

**New Testament “Growth Plates”**

A “growth plate” is a section or location in a bone from which all future growth and development takes place. If it is removed or seriously damaged when you’re young, it can freeze or inhibit further development of the size (length and thickness) of that bone. In the New Testament there are several scripture verses which are like these growth plates: sources of life for Christian life and its renewal.

One such scriptural growth plate is John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In such a short statement, we can learn a number of key things: 1) God loves the world; 2) He sent His Son Jesus; 3) we need to believe in Jesus to have life; 4) life is everlasting (not confined to this earth); and 5) He saves us from perishing, death, and hell. This verse is seen as seminal for Christianity.

Another such growth plate is John 3:3:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

These two scriptures could be said to be the wellspring of the evangelical movement. Indeed, they could be said to
be the wellspring of Christianity.

**The Great Commandments**

Another New Testament growth plate is in Matthew 22; it presupposes the two already mentioned.

“But when the Pharisees heard that he (Jesus) had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:34-40

Again, there is much to be learned from these verses: 1) the Lord is after your heart; 2) the Lord is after your mind; 3) the Lord is after your soul; 4) He can be loved by us at all three of those levels; 5) the second is “like it”, which could mean that you could love your neighbor with your heart, mind, and/or soul; 6) these are commandments and therefore demand a response; and 7) “on these two depend all the law and the prophets.” (Not to be taken lightly; much of the Old Testament is summarized here).

**Comments**

I have always been struck by number seven above: “ALL the law and the prophets.” I believe Jesus is saying that all of the Old Testament is summed up in these two commandments. At the transfiguration (Matthew 17), we know that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets. Moses and Elijah together represent the Old Testament. Jesus completes this picture as being the full manifestation of the law and the prophets. It is He who gets the Father’s attention. The Father says, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” And what does Jesus say? “Love God...love your neighbor...on these two...depend all...” So Moses represents the law, Elijah the prophets, and Jesus the commandments of love.

Finally, these two are summaries of the two tables of the Ten Commandments. The first table (Commandments 1-3 in the Catholic tradition) has to do with how we love God; the second table (Commandments 7-10) has to do with how we love our brothers and sisters.

**Relational at its Core**

Christianity, at its core, is relational: love of God and love of neighbor. These two bring light and standards to all of the Old Testament, all of the New Testament, the Christian life, and the Christian churches. Virtually every direction and teaching of the New Testament is a reflection of our love of God and love of neighbor.

Christianity is doctrinal, institutional, ceremonial, etc., but at its core it is relational: the Lord and his bride.

**The second...**

Jesus said, “the second commandment is like the first” so church can’t be just worship, it can’t be just ceremony, and it can’t be just vertical (the first commandment). It must also be horizontal (the second commandment). As modern church life becomes increasingly de-personalized or more of a “me and Jesus” experience, a progressive draining of the church’s life and heart is happening. So a community that worships God is the nature of church. Not just a worshiping community, but a community that is relational by intention: a community that worships God together. One pastor declared that much of modern church experience is fellowshipping with the back of the head of the “brother” in the pew ahead of you!

**“What ever happened to Agnes?”**

Many years ago, I read an article by a Catholic bishop, “Whatever happened to Agnes?” He wrote about a personal
experience that rattled him a bit. He was fully aware of his church’s new emphasis on community, and he assumed that the closest thing to that was the collection of folks who attended daily morning liturgy together: a small group who saw each other each morning at Mass. One day he noticed that one of the women was missing, and had been for several days. After a few more days, he began to ask the others. Some didn’t know her name. He eventually found out that she had become ill, was hospitalized and was now recuperating. He summarized his experience by questioning our understanding, our reality of community. He was clearly disappointed. He recognized that something was wrong; something was missing. He did not offer a solution. I would say that his worshipping community was not a community; it was a set of people who worshipped together but lived separate lives and separate ways of life. Any one of them might move to the other side of the state (perhaps unnoticed) and slip into a similar group (perhaps unnoticed).

Who gets to move Heather?
Another story that gets at the relational side of Christian community is that of Heather. The People of God is an ecumenical community and we have members from several denominations. Heather was a member of one of the area’s “mega-churches.” For a number of personal reasons (courtship, etc.) she decided to move out of one of the community “clusters” (neighborhoods) to another part of town, closer to her church, and to leave our community. When she moved, on her last day in the People of God, it was community brothers and sisters who carried the furniture, and helped to clean and prepare the old and new apartments.

This is not meant to be a criticism or observation about a particular local church as much as it is meant to be a call to the broader Christian church: we don’t know how to love each other within the church. We leave to families the needs which are increasingly unmet at the family level. Churches usually are not organized into small groupings that promote relationships; and in some churches that do have small group structures, they tend to be “study” groups rather than “life” groups where we care for each other, grow in social relationships, and seek a common way of life together.

How did we get here?
How did we get from the early church model of Christianity to where we are today in the third millennium of Christianity? For both individuals and groups, the ongoing need for renewal, restoration, and reform could be a never-ending list of things that could and should work better. It’s easy to criticize; it’s easy for me to see where you could improve and for you to see where I could improve. For much of Christianity though, it is a “code blue” situation. There are too many indicators of the declining influence of religion and the rising influence of secularism.

We see in this “snapshot” of the early church from Acts 2:42-47, that real community was put in place after Pentecost. They “spent time” together (v. 42) learning, praying, having fellowship, and having meals together. They spent time together “in their homes” (v. 46). They had committed fellowship (v. 44) and cared for one another’s physical needs (v. 45). “Day by day” (v. 46) they met as a group. It wasn’t just a Sunday worship community; their pattern was a life together, a life of community.

So, how did we get to where we are today, where so many Christians are looking for a minimal answer to the nature of the church? I believe the answers to that are very, very complex and have components at every level of humanity: spiritual, psychological, sociological, economic, etc. I’d like to propose a few for us to consider.

A few centuries ago, there was a certain natural community in place; many lived in villages, and towns were small. Making a living necessitated certain relational realities. People needed each other and looked out for each other. Families worked together in the family business or trade. Many villages and towns had a marketplace where people met and the church was central to community. When the Industrial Revolution took place, it set off a migration by which more and more people left rural regions to come into the bigger towns and cities. This was one beginning of a
pattern that was destructive to natural community at the local level and at the family level. It was less and less the case that families worked together, or that fathers worked with their sons. Today it is common for a father to go to his job, a mother to go to her job, and the children to go off to school. These were all done together or in close proximity in earlier times.

With the growth of large cities, and the divisions and isolation of family members, we are less relational or less tied to one another. Today, it is often considered a virtue if you need no one. In past times it was a given that you needed others; life was corporate.

There are many other factors that contribute at many different levels: the isolating effects of TV, video games and modern entertainment, etc. Suffice it to say that we are very, very isolated and very, very different from the New Testament church. (Another snapshot is seen in Acts 4:32-35.)

What to do?

Again there are many and varied answers to this question. I suppose you could just say, “Try something! Try anything! And do it quickly!” We in the Sword of the Spirit are not the first to notice the serious spiritual and natural differences between New Testament and modern expressions of Christianity. Dehumanizing modern life patterns have been noticed by Christians and non-Christians alike. You have to love and appreciate those who are at least trying to make a change.

For Christian renewal and reform, we should first understand that Christianity is relational. It is not emphasizing independent isolation, but inter-dependent relationships. I would say churches and large Christian groups should reorganize into small groups, after identifying and training a small set of leaders who are truly converted and dedicated to Christ. Again, the small groups are “life groups” not just study groups: life is shared; some accountability is in place; a contribution to the mission is made.

Additionally, I would say, “Get help.” Wading into these waters unprepared will cause unnecessary casualties. Remember this: different people have different capacities for failure. One strikeout can cause some young boys to never pick up a bat again. Others will not leave the plate until they hit the ball. Wise approaches on the part of leadership can reduce the number of casualties as we grow into a Christian family.

The rest of this book will present some elements of Christian community in an attempt to make some contributions to our understanding of the nature of church and our experience of the models of church. These elements and approaches have been developed in our life together and are, hopefully, part of the solution. But first, let’s begin to close this chapter remembering these verses...

- John 3:16 tells us that God loves the world and sent his son Jesus.
- John 3:3 tells us that we can see the kingdom of God if we are born again.

So, it is a fact that God loves us and has sent his son to redeem us. Our initial response is to be born again. The Christian life, our lived-out response, is to love God and neighbor with all that we have...and that is the quintessential nature of church.

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This article is excerpted from **Essays on Christian Community**, (c) copyright 2010 Bob Tedesco. The book can be purchased at [Tabor House](http://www.swordofthespirit.net/bulwark/december2016p10.htm).
**Essays on Christian Community:**

Do covenant communities have something to contribute to our models of church?


Bob Tedesco is past President of the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit, a founder of the People of God community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and has been one of its key leaders for the past 40 plus years.
Communities that Model the Kingdom of God's Light, Truth, and Holiness

by Charles Colson

If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought to conclude that for some time now we too have reached the turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different, St. Benedict.

— Alasdair MacIntyre

“To model the kingdom of God in the world, the church must not only be a repentant community, committed to truth, but also a holy community.”

The Judeo-Christian heritage is distinguished from all other religions by its covenant with a personal God who chose to dwell in the midst of his people. "I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God," said the Lord) In Hebrew the word dwell meant "to pitch a tent"; God said he would pitch his holy tabernacle in the midst of the tents of the Israelites. In the New Testament we read "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Here also the word dwelt in the Greek is translated "to pitch a tent." The covenant, both old and new, is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who later became flesh in Christ, actually dwells in the presence of his people. And thus it: is that the
central requirement of our faith is that we be holy, for a holy God lives in our midst.

The apostle Peter echoed this theme when he said: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9).

“The church is to be a community reflecting God's passion for righteousness, justice, and mercy.”

When we are that holy community, we make an impact on an unholy world, no matter how desperate the circumstances.

Thousands of such communities of light exist around the world in accountable fellowships where the gospel is faithfully proclaimed and where members reach out in an effort to bring God's mercy and justice to those around them.

…For as the church maintains its independence from culture, it is best able to affect culture. When the church serves as the church, in firm allegiance to the unseen kingdom of God, uses it in this world: first, as a model of the values of his kingdom, and second, as his missionary to culture.

God uses our faithfulness to preserve and restore human culture

The monks and nuns of the Dark Ages acted out of obedience to God, and God used their faithfulness – without their knowing it – to preserve culture and ultimately restore Western civilization. As Christopher Dawson has said: “The culture-forming energies of Christianity depended upon the Church’s ability to resist the temptation to become completely identified with, or absorbed into, the culture.” Only as the church maintains its distinctiveness from the culture is it able to affect culture.

Another example that clearly illustrates this comes from the Cuban Isla de Pinos, from a prison so dark and remote that most of the world never even knew it existed. The huge circular cellblocks were built during the 1930s under Batista's regime. When someone asked the dictator why he had built it so big, he replied, “Ah, don't worry. Somebody will come along who will manage to fill it up.” That somebody was Fidel Castro.

One of the prisoners there was a young anti-Communist named Armando Valladares. Early in his confinement, he often heard prisoners – fellow Christians – taken to the firing squad. Such executions always took place at night, and the dark silence would be broken by triumphant shouts: “Viva Cristo Rey! Long live Christ the King!” Then the explosion of gunfire – and silence again. Soon all prisoners were gagged before their executions. The killers could not stand their victorious defiance.

According to Valladares, the most faithful member of that tiny Christian community, made up mostly of Catholics, was a Protestant prisoner known simply as the Brother of the Faith. He constantly sang hymns to God and shouted encouragement to his brothers to have faith, to follow Christ to the end.

The Brother of the Faith

Then one night several prisoners were forced from their cells, and guards began to beat them with sticks, truncheons, bayonets, and chains. “Suddenly,” writes Valladares, “as though to protect them, there appeared a skeletal figure with white hair and flaming, bizarre eyes, who opened his arms into a cross, raised his head to the invisible sky, and said, ‘Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do.’ The Brother of the Faith hardly had time to finish his
sentence, because as soon as he appeared [the lieutenant] ordered the guards to step back…he fired his AK submachine gun. The burst of fire climbed the Brother of the Faith's chest, up to his neck. His head was almost severed, as though from the blow of an ax. He died instantly” (*Against All Hope*, Ballantine Books, 1986, p. 421).

Fortified by the faithfulness of this one man, as well as by his own faith, in a way he could not forget, Armando Valladares survived gross inhumanity, psychological abuse, and torture for twenty-two years. In 1983 he was released and made his way to the West and freedom. His memoirs of those dark years, *Against All Hope*, have exposed to the world the hidden horrors of Castro's prisons.

And therein lies the irony: Though Castro controls the Cuban press, suppresses the visible church, conquers academia, and rules a ruthless government, he cannot rule the spirits of those he has enslaved. He cannot extinguish the light of the soul set free by God. And out of a flicker of light in one dark prison came the indictment of his regime that shocked the world.

**Out of brokenness comes wholeness and might**

Is this not the way our Lord works? Out of brokenness and foolishness come wholeness and might. Out of prison comes power – real power-that defies even the most brutal repression. Out of tiny monastic outposts come education, moral endurance, and artistic excellence that can save a civilization. And out of holy obedience today, in communities of light, will come what he wills, as we are faithful.

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photo above of hands raised with crosses, (c) by Rawpixel.com at Bigstock.com
Looking Back at Dalej – Kairos 2016

Encouragement and strength to run the race
by Tadhg Lynch, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Dalej Conference Director

18 months ago, a small group came to the southern town of Bielsko-Biała in Poland. We had a vision – to gather together as many young people from Kairos outreaches around the world as possible for a time of worship, seeking the Lord, training and fellowship in Poland.

Our team included representatives from the local Sword of the Spirit Community – Miasto na Gorze, as well as Kairos leaders from Scotland, Ireland, Germany and other places. Leaders from the local student groups in Bielsko-Biała and the city of Kraków expanded the team as the months progressed and the Conference began to take shape. As we prepared and prayed, two themes came consistently to mind; the need for further perseverant missionary effort in our work in the European and Middle East region, and a strong sense of needing to recognise the spiritual state of the church in our lands, to mourn for what had been lost and to offer ourselves as part of God’s plan for rebuilding. In prayer and consultation we came upon the words from Nehemiah 2:18 – where the people respond to the writer’s exhortation, “Dalej! Budujmy”, “Let us arise and build”. DALEJ was born…

Slowly, as we worked over the months, the vision and the Conference began to take shape. Leaders came on board from as far apart as the Philippines, Lebanon and Costa Rica. Payment plans, hiring tents, creating social media campaigns and international intercession campaigns for God’s action helped us to slowly refine our vision and gather the young people. By May 2016, we had 475 young people and leaders signed up to come to the DALEJ Conference – representing 40 nationalities they truly were a reflection of the “multitude” that God promises to unify for his kingdom.
For two wonderful weeks in Poland, these disparate nations were united into a people through God’s action. First there was “Prep7” – a time of spiritual and practical preparation for the 130 young leaders who would lead the participants in the Conference itself. For 7 days, we prayed and prepared. In seemingly no time at all, the main event – The DALEJ Conference – was upon us. Another 345 people came through our registration office. Hats, bags, t-shirts, bibles, tents, beds, food, water – everything that the nearly 500 people would need was ready. As we began in prayer, we asked that God would come and meet us, and he did.

The young people receiving on the book of Nehemiah and the call of God upon his people to take their place and stand, build and fight for his kingdom in the world today. Each evening they sought the Lord in prayer – experiencing a great outpouring of his Holy Spirit each night. Indeed, staff from the Conference Centre and young people from the surrounding villages began to come to the meetings, receive prayer and experience healing at the worship times as word spread. As DALEJ wrapped up, a smaller group continued on to the Catholic World Youth Day in Krakow, finally completing their pilgrimage by experiencing the excellent hospitality of the Polish Community in both Krakow and Bielsko-Biala on their way home.

The Polish word DALEJ conjures up images of perseverance, encouragement, strength to run the race, and, in the book of Nehemiah, is a people’s corporate response to God’s call on their lives. As our brothers and sisters from all over the world returned home, this is what they shared together – a mutual assurance that God has placed them where they should be in order to run the race together, to build the walls of Christian community together and to bring his word and his life to the people around them – together.

With joy we rise and we will answer our King’s call
by Christiane Lewerentz, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Dalej Executive Supervisor

Prep7 and Dalej were a firework of prophetic senses and words from God that encouraged, challenged and steered us through these weeks. At the heart of our time together, this is what God spoke and brought to life:

**God’s sovereign presence is with us.**
In the midst of a camp full of searching hearts, fears, hopes, doubts, diverse cultures and sincere questions, God’s presence was tangible and powerful. He brought peace, healing, power to make decisions, and a profound sense of unity that surprised us all.

**God is mustering an army.**
The sense of God's clear call and invitation weaved through all activities. He called each of us to surrender, to be holy and to set aside all for the building of His kingdom. God’s anointing for this Dalej generation is one of personal surrender to Christ first before launching into activity.

We hadn’t quite planned this but it was amazing to see young men and women queue at the front every night to take the microphone, kneel and pray prayers of repentance, new-found joy, dedication and surrender to Christ. Throughout the week, over 100 people asked to hear more about Kairos mission and gap years, 25 people joined conversations about new mission.
opportunities like starting a missional community in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, over 100 people dedicated their lives to Jesus anew or for the very first time, and hundreds made decisions to surrender their careers, state in life, their own plans for the future.

“So we move forward, with our eyes fixed on Him who ransomed lowly man from sin… with joy we rise and we will answer our king’s call, as we cry holy, worthy, mighty is our God.”

These words of a song Martin Jordan wrote for Dalej prophetically captured the heart of what God did among us: Young men and women finding their master, taking their place, and strengthening their hearts, minds and hands to follow him – waiting and ready to go when God calls us to battle. Are you ready?
Reflections on Dalej 2016

by Kairos Young People

Holly Leung, Koinonia University Outreach, London, United Kingdom

What impacted me most during Dalej was the sense of community. It felt like a global village, with brothers and sisters from all around the world chatting, laughing, living and praying together. I tasted a bit of what heaven would be like, with all nations and peoples praising God and living in harmony together. It really reminded me of the scripture that says “How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1)

It was a powerful picture to me of the body of Christ. We are all so diverse and unique, with our own God-given talents, cultures and experiences. Each one of us is important in the body of Christ to do His work. It was very humbling for me to see my brothers and sisters doing things that I cannot do personally, and I delighted in seeing how I fit into the wider body when I contributed my little bit, even if it felt insignificant.

It struck me how quickly I felt at home at Dalej. Though I have never met most of these people, the Spirit of God truly united us. Yes, there were cultural and linguistic barriers, but the love of God really bridged those differences. My biggest revelation at Dalej is that His blood has bought our unity. We are family because Jesus’s blood run through our veins.

Susan Bradford, University Christian Outreach, Glasgow, Scotland

The theme of Dalej was ‘Rise up and Build’ - a call to look beyond ourselves, to see a need and be willing to respond, stepping beyond our comfort zones.

I experienced this with immediate effect through my role as a household leader. Having gained so much from small groups at Kairos events in the past and having heard God very clearly during Prep7, I knew what I wanted for those within my household and immediately put pressure on myself to deliver it. God taught me a good lesson that week: it wasn’t down to me. Yes, I had to be a good leader, but to create such an environment God needed to do it. I needed to be listening to and guided by Him. My attention had to shift from what I could try and do, to what He was asking me to do, what He could do if I were willing to respond. And of course the minute I took a step back and let God go first, listened to Him and went beyond my comfort zones, God acted.
Such an attitude shift then reflected in my own experience of the week. God taught me new ways to listen, to hear what He was saying and find His strength in saying, ‘Yes’. Coming out of Prep7 and Dalej this new perspective gives me great hope and joy in what is to come, particularly during this time of transition in my life from being newly graduated to officially unemployed. A time in which I need to be listening to God and seeking out what new place ‘in the wall’ He is calling to me to.

Mikolaj Kapusta, Gdansk, Betlehem Community, Poland

I came to Dalej because I am from a small village and I love the English language, so it was an occasion to look at the church from a broad perspective. An event like this was my dream come true, with the opportunity to talk to people from places like the Philippines and Lebanon.

During the men’s session when sharing with my discussion group, God struck me with a passage from Luke 14:30: “No one can be my disciple if...” I felt like I had never been a Christian in my life because I felt like I had never given everything, so I cannot be his disciple. Immediately after, the speaker said – if somebody feels that he has never given his life to Jesus in a true way, then raise your hand and do it, and all the people around you pray. That was like a sign. And I hesitated, but I did it. Now it’s like God is making his stamp on me.

Lourdes Chacon, Arbol de Vida Community, San Jose, Costa Rica

When the conference was announced, I thought, there is a community in Poland? I want to be there! The director told me about the conference. I really wanted to be part of a European conference to see what it is like and how it is different. I knew it would be different from Latin America, and I wanted to expand my roots.

At other conferences at home, we spoke the same language. It’s amazing that people are using a lot of languages to pray at the same time, and we are trying to sing songs in other languages other than our own.

God has been telling me to be joyful, to be together, to be building a community all around the world. He has been telling me how each community is different with different cultures and leaders, but we are fighting for the same thing. We are all sharing difficulties, and even though things are wrong in the world, we are not afraid to show that we believe in God.

At the beginning, I thought, this is in Europe! It doesn’t matter for me. But then I saw we have the same problems in Latin America, and it helps me to see my place, that this is where God wants me to be fighting for him.
Living Bulwark

**Paul Codouni**, University Christian Outreach, Belfast, Northern Ireland

At the Dalej conference, I took a workshop called Mission in Europe given by Jeff Fountain, the former leader of YWAM Europe.

What most stood out for me was a simple point he made: Although it is difficult, it is actually very strategic to do mission in Europe. Why? Because Europe exports its belief systems to the whole world. At its universities, it educates a larger number of international students than any other place in the world. These students tend to go back to their countries and become leaders there.

Jeff also spoke about periods in history when the church was in such a bad place that it seemed that the people of God would not survive. During these periods, God brought up a small number of heroic men and women who were a “faithful minority” to lead the church out of its mess and change the future.

Personally, after doing full-time mission in Europe for the past two years, I was newly inspired to be part of this faithful minority and to dedicate time and energy to finding new ways of reaching every person in Europe with the gospel. Dalej!

**Rebeca Sastre**, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Coming from the United States, Dalej was my first international experience with Kairos. Worshipping and seeking the Lord with 475 people of 40 different nationalities in beautiful Poland for over a week tasted like heaven. It was my great pleasure to serve on the service team. Though we represented different countries and spoke various languages, we were one in the Holy Spirit. It fascinated me to meet people from Poland, Belgium, Nicaragua, Lebanon and many more countries who had the same vision and call from God as I have. One member of the service team summed it up well, saying “when I made a commitment to Community, I made it to YOU, even though I have just met you a few days ago”. Dalej was a tangible experience of the bulwark God is building; we are all building the same “wall of Jerusalem”, just different sections across the world. Now, when I serve and pray back in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I know there are 475 other young people and families rising up and building with me around the globe!

**Marta Cwierz**, Poland

One hundred thirty young people, many different countries, experiences, languages, life stories, problems, hurts, senses of humour, personalities… We were all coming to Kiezyce (Poland). There was one reason of gathering us in one place at the same time – faith in one God. During the Prep7 days, I felt that we were building the wall of the unity and love with each other. We were preparing to go to battle for each participant at Dalej. We started praying for little things like weather and bigger things like equipment for the battle. Through joint actions, setting up tents, preparing directions, decoration, presentations, translations, prayers, trip to the Czech Republic and having fun, we have built the real UNITY in Jesus Christ. We have been working for one purpose and one God. I also experienced a lot of hope and joy when we were waiting for all the participants from around the world. Personally that week helped me to focus only on will of God for my life, listen His calling and looking at my future in His presence.

**Dominic Stilco**, Vienna, Austria

“My one great experience was praying with people at the prayer meeting and realising that God wants me to plant a cross on the mountain of my life, that the whole mountain would be given to him; not just in my plans or decisions, but also in transforming my everyday life – my habits, the way I deal with people, and that this will make a huge difference in my life.”

**Paul Hunter**, UCO Belfast, Northern Ireland

"One aspect of the Dalej conference that particularly struck me was the use of Nehemiah and the walls of Jerusalem as
an impetus to consider both my own place in defending the walls, and more simply what exactly I am supposed to be defending. Actively building this wall with my brothers and sisters either side of me is an active response to the call to discipleship God has for all of us.”

Michael Potter, Koinonia, London, United Kingdom

“Dalej was a powerful event where I saw an army being prepared for battle. I saw myself and other young people from around the world being envisioned for the mission and inspired to go out and do it.”

Noel Campos, Philippines

“A particular quality that struck me immensely, was the quality of worship we had all throughout the 2 weeks at Dalej. There was a very real sense of witnessing something special occurring in our midst. The occasion for unity was very much felt and the love for Christ, which makes us family despite distances, was on full display. There were constant moments that were contagious. It was palpable. It was real. It was electric.”

Karl Ghosn, Lebanon

“As a household leader, I was afraid that I didn’t deserve being a household leader and caring for my discussion group. I also thought that I didn’t have the experience to fulfill this service. All of that was true! I didn’t have the experience to do it. But the Lord reminded me that it is not me who’s going to do the work but Him. It is not by our power that we lead or fight, but God who works through us.”

Katarzyna Woszczenko, UCO Krakow, Poland

“It was the unity: I am so glad to know such a big number of people from all over the world whom I couldn’t have met from another place, especially those from the Philippines, and I am so surprised that everyone here has a similar attitude to praying and way of life.”

Joanna Whittam, Community of Nazareth, Dublin, Ireland

“Thinking about how a city consists not only of walls but of people, so we need people to populate the city. The city of God is his people. This year I’m serving with UCO in Dublin on the evangelism team. [The Dalej sessions] reminded me of the importance of our call to be fishers of men, not solely builders of walls, so they’ve confirmed that calling to serve with UCO and empowered me for that.”

Cathy Holmes, Glasgow, Scotland

“Our generation lacks an appreciation for process and experience, preferring instead instant results whether they be negative or positive. If we are to be in battle, we must be prepared to march for a long time, to battle with no end in sight and to trust the Lord with everything from the shoes on our feet to the tips of our swords. After Dalej, I feel equipped to not only trust the Lord in my big decisions but to fight for Him joyfully and with courage every day knowing that He has a much greater plan in store.”

This article first appeared in the Kairos Europe and the Middle East website and newsletter.

See related article > Looking Back at Dalej – Kairos 2016, by Tadhg Lynch and Christiane Lewerentz
Two years ago, on an October afternoon, I walked into my philosophy discussion class at university. The tutor put up one word on the board: Euthanasia. Our class discussion was going to be on whether or not it was moral for people to have an assisted death. Seen the movie "Me Before You"? We were going right to the heart of that.

I knew I had to stand up for what I felt was the right thing, but it was terrifying. There were 15 people who voted "for" the legalisation of euthanasia in the class. There was 1 person who voted against. Guess who? Yep. Me. My argument was that life was a sacred thing given to us, and that humans shouldn't have the authority to decide where and when they were going to end it. But I was completely out-argued by this class for my "religious" reasoning and mocked for my ignorant view of the world.

To be honest, I don't really remember what I said. All I knew was that taking life was wrong, so I just kept sticking to that one mantra and tried to defend it from all the opposing views. I probably didn't word my arguments well; I didn't have a ton of facts to back up my points. At the end of the class I went home and cried. It felt like a defeat.

You see, when I picture "defenders of the faith", I think of women who were bold, courageous, who didn't take no for an answer. They were warriors, or missionaries, or doctors. I am none of those things, clearly! In this class I didn't win everyone over. But maybe that wasn't the point. I think that when God calls us to defend the faith, it doesn't automatically mean that we'll convince everyone of our perspective. Maybe the important thing is just that we are able to speak out. I realised that God is still calling me to be a defender, to speak up for the faith when the moment calls for it, even if I don't win the debate.
God doesn't expect us to stand out just on our own strength. If he wants you to defend the faith, he'll give you the grace and courage in that moment to speak out. All we need to do is keep coming to him everyday and asking for that grace. It seems like a scary thing at first, but God is a patient teacher. He won't put you in a life or death situation straight away- but he might work through a conversation you have with a friend or a teacher.

In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus sent out the 12 disciples to go and preach to the surrounding towns, he instructs them saying,

"But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" Matthew 10: 19-20

God will speak through us, if we give him the opportunity. Plus, he takes the weight off our shoulders- it won't even be us speaking, but the Spirit of our Father speaking through us. Being a defender of the faith is no small thing- but I fully believe God is asking just that of each of us everyday.

Let's encourage each other in this! Let's pray for the grace we need to speak out, and let's affirm other people that we see defending the faith. It is a powerful way to glorify God in the world we live in.

Mhairi Jackson is from the Community of the Risen Christ in Glasgow, Scotland. She is studying at the University of Glasgow and is actively involved in University Christian Outreach there.

This article first appeared in The Lovely Commission, a new publishing venture and brand of Kairos North America. It is run by Molly Kilpatrick and Mary Rose Jordan and a team of contributors from various Christian communities in North America and beyond. Together they are working to build a culture of radical love, femininity, modesty of heart, mind, and body amongst young women.

Their aim is to inspire and equip young women to embrace and promote a culture of Godly femininity in which we live out our rich identity as daughters of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.
Get Up and Walk

meditation by Mary Rose Jordan

Scripture Passage - Matthew 19:1-8

"Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man."

Meditation

Sometimes circumstances in our life leave us feeling troubled, perhaps even crippled. Perhaps we are failing at
something at school, or a relationship with a friend is on the rocks. Sometimes our heart aches for something we cannot have right now, and we don't understand why. Sometimes the Lord takes something from us. Sometimes, our hearts just hurt. This scripture passage shows us a few things to remember when we find ourselves in a difficult place.

1) It is important to have the support of people of faith. In this passage, the cripple is brought to Jesus by his friends. It is their incredible faith that leads them to carry their friend to Jesus, they trust in his mercy and in his healing power. In times of distress of challenge- cling closely to those people of faith in your life. Maybe this is a close friend, maybe it's a sister or a youth group leader. Whoever it is- trust them, because they will help point you to Jesus.

2) The Lord is always ready to give us healing- of our hearts, minds, bodies and souls. Here, Matthew points out how Jesus saw the importance of healing this man spiritually and physically. He freed this man from the guilt and shame of his sin and restored him to full health. We serve a God who loves to heal and restore! Ask yourself- is there an area of your life- spiritual or physical- that the Lord may want to heal? Is there an area of your life you are reluctant to bring before the Lord, perhaps because you doubt his ability to heal and to love and to give? Here we see exactly what the Lord would say to you- GET UP AND WALK!

Sisters- we should not let anything come between us and the Lord. Let's reflect on his love and mercy today, and bring forward to him any areas that need healing. Our God is loving and compassionate- let us not forget that. Today- let us GET UP AND WALK!

Prayer

"Father, I trust in your mercy and forgiveness. Today I bring to your these areas of my life which are not as healthy as they could be. I need your healing power to touch every area of my life, please forgive me for ways in which I have sinned against you. Help me to get up and walk. I love you Lord, and I believe in your saving power."
Scripture: Matthew 9:18-19

"While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples."

Meditation

In this passage we see the synagogue leader bringing his heartbreak to Jesus. Many people would consider this a hopeless situation, but this man still sees hope. He brings that hope and trust to Jesus. He is so courageous—even though his daughter has already died, he still holds out hope that Jesus can heal her. This does not go unnoticed by Christ.

How quickly do we bring our troubles, our worries, our deepest concerns, to the Lord? I know that oftentimes I try to do things alone. Sometimes I think, "It's ok God, I've got this one. I'll call you when things get really bad." Or sometimes I let things fester and eat away at me instead of quickly bringing them before the Lord. This should be a good lesson for us- that even in the most hopeless, most frustrating, most heartbreaking situations, there is always reason to hope and trust in our heavenly Father. All of our heart-troubles should be brought to Jesus.
The other phrase that caught my eye was "she will live". How beautiful are these words?! When I heard these words, I heard them deep in my heart, as if they were written just for me, "Mary Rose, you will live". Christ wants ME, he wants US to live! He doesn't want us to just survive and barely make it by in life, he wants us to be full of life and know the freedom we have in him! He wants us to bring our cares to him!

Today, let us consider our own situations and bring before Christ all those things hidden away in our hearts that cause us to worry, to be anxious, to be sad or hopeless. These must all be given over to the Lord, who offers us a hand and says, 'Here, my beloved daughter, let me carry that burden for you.' Today- the Lord wants to say to you... "YOU WILL LIVE. Let not your heart be troubled, instead hope and trust in me, a Father who loves you and wants you to LIVE a joy-filled and hopeful life!"

Prayer

"Father, today I bring to you all my worries, concerns and anxieties (name them specifically!). I trust in your power and your love and I have hope because I know that you make all things good for those that love you. Help me today to trust and hope in you. Protect me from worry and anxiety and help me to live my life with a joy-filled and hopeful attitude. Help me to remember your words to the synagogue leader, "she will live". I believe, in my heart, that these words are for me too. I love you, Jesus."

Mary Rose Jordan was born and raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She received her Bachelor’s of Education degree from the University of Michigan with concentrations in English and history. Throughout her time at U of M she was involved in University Christian Outreach, a group that was instrumental in helping her become a more ardent and mature disciple of Christ. After graduation she quickly entered the non-profit sector where she was involved in community development for a number of organizations in the metro Detroit area. Mary Rose lives in Glasgow, Scotland with her husband, Andy.

The Lovely Commission is about a work that is near and dear to Mary Rose’s heart. She’s had the opportunity to work with many youth and youth programs and is very convicted that young girls today face issues and challenges never seen before. She also believes that we, as women, need to come together in defense of each other and look to truly embrace and love the way our Lord created us.

This article by Mary Rose first appeared in The Lovely Commission, a new publishing venture and brand of Kairos North America. It is is run by Molly Kilpatrick and Mary Rose Jordan and a team of contributors from various Christian communities in North America and beyond. Together they are working to build a culture of radical love, femininity, modesty of heart, mind, and body amongst young women.

Their aim is to inspire and equip young women to embrace and promote a culture of Godly femininity in which we live out our rich identity as daughters of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.
Twin Motivations
by Sam Williamson

I once had a client whose business-gifting out-shined the stars of the Harvard Business Review. Yet she scorched everything she touched. Relationships went rancid, projects were poisoned by punitive criticism, and her management style left associates embittered.

We met for lunch a couple times a year for much of the 90’s. Over time, my opinion of her zigzagged from initial awe, to distaste, and finally to pity. These facts emerged:

- She was an identical twin, younger by twenty minutes.
- Although an excellent musician, she played second chair violin; her twin played first.
- She failed to get into medical school so she got an MBA; her sister became a surgeon.
- When her boyfriend came home for Easter, he fell in love with her twin.

A year later that former boyfriend married her identical, twin sister.

What Lights Your Fire?

In the movie Chariots of Fire, someone asks Harold Abrams why he runs so fast. He says, “When that gun goes off, I raise my eyes and look down that corridor, 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence.” Eric Liddle says, “When I run I feel God’s pleasure.”
People who appear indistinguishable on the outside (fast, friendly, successful, or moral) are energized by competing powers.

Greatness and saint-ness are not matters of natural degree but matters of supernatural infusion. The “great” dispose themselves to endeavors, whereas great believers gravitate toward God.

It is not a matter of activism versus mysticism; the great go, whereas saints are sent.

Extraordinary heroes draw attention to the person or plan (“Wasn’t Steve Jobs brilliant and isn’t this church-growth plan wise?”) whereas spiritual heroes are ordinary people who are made extraordinary by the life of God inside them.

The worldly genius zigs. God calls us to zag.

**Human Sweat**

We believers are too easily vitalized by the sweat of human effort. When we worship worldly wisdom—the “Three Keys” to this and the “Seven Principles” of that—we make alliances with Egypt; it tells us to rest in our best.

We “go” when God calls us to “come.” Our plots hamstring God’s plans.

Recently (as if the world isn’t noisy enough), those worldly mystics of mysteriously numbered methods have begun to prefix their magic potions with awe-inspiring modifiers: “Life-changing Keys,” “Mind-blowing Lessons,” and “Staggering Secrets.”

I wonder what their older siblings do.

**Relationship as Fuel**

Relationships empower us for good or ill. Some connections thrust us into rivalry, enmity, or despair, but there is another connection that supernaturally turns water into wine:

> The most important aspect of Christianity is not the work we do, but the relationship we maintain and the surrounding influence and qualities produced by that relationship. *That is all God asks us to give our attention to.* (Oswald Chambers)

We too have an older sibling who out-performs us in every conceivable measure. But he doesn’t compete with us, he completes us. The only fruit of our lives that matters is produced by his life of God in us.

It is not our gifts that distinguish us nearly as much as the fuel that animates them.

Sam

> See book review by Don Schwager
CHALLENGES IN LIVING TOGETHER AS COMMUNITY

Anchored on the Rock

by Tom Caballes

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."

- Psalm 46:1-3 ESV

What or who is the true source of our security? Many people look at wealth, or popularity, or something else as their prime source of being secured. The truth is, everything is either unstable or ‘sinking.’ There is nothing
So How Do You Live Being Truly Secured in Life?

1. God is commonly compared to a rock in the Bible. The first step to true security in life is to be anchored to the Rock. If we truly seek His Kingdom first, God will take care of our needs. See Matthew 6:33.

2. We need to surrender all that we value and dear in life to God. “All” includes all our relationships, our talents, our time and our possessions. He has given all these things to us, and He can take away anything from us as well at His leisure. See Job 1:21. Our response should be of heartfelt gratitude to God for all His gifts to us. Everything belongs to Him. We are just ‘travellers’ in this life.

3. Seek heavenly treasures, not earthly ones. *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Matthew 6:19-21 ESV). Heavenly treasures are yours to keep forever, and you will never lose them.

4. Instead of being greedy for worldly wealth, we should be generous with our wealth...’Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:40 ESV)

5. Our hearts should not be fixated or attached to anything or anyone. *For the present form of this world is passing away.* (1 Corinthians 7:31B ESV). Yes, we should enjoy life, family and friendships, but the reality is that everything in this world, even good and great things, will fall apart rot or decay.

6. Fear and doubt can challenge our sense of security. One of the most frequent messages in the Bible is – do not be afraid! If God is for you, who can be against you? See Romans 8:31 and 38-39.

7. Be passionate about your love for God. Your passion for God should overflow in you, and you should not keep God to yourself. You have found the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price – share it!

Other Scripture passages:

1. *I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.* (Psalm 16:8 ESV)

2. *The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.* (Psalm 18:2 ESV)

3. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28 ESV)

4. Other references: Psalm 91:1-16; 1 Peter 1:3-5; and Philippians 3:20.

For personal reflection or group sharing

1. Do I have anything that I am attached to in this life? What – and why - cannot I let go?

2. Do I have an attitude of a traveller or a sojourner in this life, or do I make this life my ‘real’ life?
Tom Caballes is the National Senior Administrator and a National Coordinator of the Lamb of God, a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. Tom also leads Kairos New Zealand, an outreach program for high school, university, and post-university aged people.

Tom and his wife Mhel and their two daughters live in Wellington, New Zealand.
Kairos is launching a program for a whole new set of youth workers. They are already in position and eager to awaken faith in God among young people. Who are they? Grandparents.

**Definition:**

**GRANDLY** (adverb) “In a manner that attracts admiration and attention.”

*Cambridge English Dictionary*

Grandly – The Strategic Grandparents Club is a new initiative from Kairos that hopes to equip grandparents to think, pray, and act strategically. Grandparents can have a profound impact on their grandchildren.

**How It Began!**

The Youth Culture Newsletter interviews Mike Shaughnessy, who began, and Pili Galvan, who directs Grandly – the Strategic
KYCN: How did the idea of the strategic grandparents club come into being?

Mike: Some of my friends are grandfathers. One told me about a gift he gave to his granddaughter. It was a recording of a children’s Bible. She loves listening to it. The other grandfather mentioned in passing that his grandson’s birthday was coming up the next day. He planned on getting him a card and giving him some money, as usual. Both of them love their grandchildren but only one of them thinks strategically about what to do. “What if,” I thought, “we set up a network of grandparents who could help each other to be strategic in promoting the spiritual welfare of their grandchildren?”

KYCN: A strategic grandparents club… Strategic in what ways?

Mike: Let’s start with the most fundamental – how to pray. A grandmother I know has pictures of each of her grandchildren on her hallway wall. Under each picture is a Post-It note with two precisely stated prayer intentions. She prays her way down the hall every morning. She has a method and is motivated. We hope to equip other grandparents to find similar ways to pray more effectively.

KYCN: How else can grandparents be strategic?

Mike: Financially. Grandparents give gifts. At our www.grandly.org website they can get ideas on things like good Christmas gifts to give to a twelve-year-old girl. Or they may read a testimony about a mission trip and be inspired to send their grandson on something similar.

Madeline’s Story

I am a Kairos youth worker. I work with high school girls.

In my junior year of high school my grandmother invited me to come to church with her. I was intrigued but not enough to go on my own. (My family never went to church.) Still, every time I visited her, which happened often once I was old enough to drive, we went to
When I went to university I met new friends who went to church, but more than that, they really knew the Lord personally. I started going to church with them. They asked me to go on a retreat. I did. I met the Lord and within a year I was baptized and pretty much immediately began doing youth work.

For me, like Timothy in the bible, my faith originated with my grandmother.

KYCN: What else can grandparents expect to receive from Grandly?

Mike: Hope! Most grandparents simply need hope. They are dispirited by the postmodern world and its effects on their grandchildren. That’s no surprise. What will give them hope? Hearing inspiring stories from other grandparents about what has worked for them. We want to help grandparents to be motivated, hopeful, and full of faith. God has given them a unique role, we want to equip them to do it GRANDLY!

KYCN: Pili, you are designing the website. What will it be like?

Pili: Useful! We are designing a tool that will allow grandparents to search for good ideas, to learn about youth culture, to read inspiring testimonies, and to make use of the new ways of communicating with their grandchildren. It will have an easy way to get our latest posts and to submit ideas that will help grandparents help grandparents.

KYCN: Do you need help with the project?

Pili: Absolutely! We need people to transcribe articles. We need trained copy-editors and capable writers. People can offer to do that now by emailing me at sgc.editor1@gmail.com.

KYCN: How are you promoting Grandly?

Pili: We are starting with people we know and asking them to promote Grandly to people they think might be interested. We are using a Facebook page to get the word out as well. Soon we will have a package for those who want to be our “promoters.” It will equip people to put on a seminar for their own congregation or parish.

KYCN: Obviously, this needs some financial support. How much do you need and how are you getting that?

Pili: For this year we need $50,000 and we are hoping to raise that in donations. We have just started a crowdfunding campaign. If you go here: you can donate http://bit.ly/4Grandly

To sign up for Grandly – the Strategic Grandparents Club, go here: www.grandly.org

Kairos is an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people sponsored by the Sword of the Spirit. This interview first appeared in the Kairos Youth Culture Newsletter.
The Servants of the Word Celebrate 45th Anniversary

a report by Martin Steinbereithner

Forty-five years ago the Servants of the Word began when a few men made their first commitment to live single for the Lord. Covenant community had just begun among university students in Michigan and elsewhere, and while some community members got married, others felt strongly called to live a celibate life for God and his people. Since those beginnings the brotherhood has grown to 130 men (including affiliates) living in 13 houses around the world - in the Philippines, England and Northern Ireland, the US.A., Costa Rica and Mexico.

At the beginning of September we had a celebration at our brotherhood center in Michigan to mark our 45th anniversary. Some 300 friends joined us for an evening of prayer, reminiscing, sharing, and thanksgiving.

The following articles from the recent Servants of the Word Newsletter feature some highlights and presentations from Servants of the Word brothers and guests.

The Servants of the Word Newsletter is issued three times a year. If you would like to subscribe to the free Newsletter, signup online here.

Giving Thanks for Many Blessings Over Past 45 Years

by Ken Noecker, presiding elder of Servants of the Word
Dear Friends,

Filipinos have a saying which could roughly be translated as "He who does not know how to look to where he has come from will never arrive at where he is going." The idea is that in order to achieve our aims we must never cut ourselves off from our origins. Or, to put it another way, a tree cannot survive, let alone prosper, if it is cut from its roots.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the Servants of the Word. As we celebrate this occasion, we look back and reflect on our beginnings, our early years. We remember the people and environments that formed us into what we are today and thus gain a vision of what God is calling us to be in the years to come. We reflect on and give thanks for the Charismatic Renewal that touched the mainline churches in the 1960s; its spiritual vitality provided the impetus for our birth.

We call to mind the beginnings of covenant communities and especially of The Word of God community in Ann Arbor, Michigan into which we were born and where we grew. We give thanks for the Sword of the Spirit, the worldwide community movement which provides the current context for our life and our mission. We give thanks for Steve Clark, our founder, and for people like Bruce Yocum, Don Schwager, and Dick LaCroix who were among the first men to make a lifelong commitment to our rule of life.

As we look ahead to our future we are filled with gratitude for the young men the Lord is adding to our life–those who are taking into their hearts and onto their backs the life and mission of the Servants of the Word. This year we witnessed four men from four different nations making lifelong commitments to the brotherhood. This addition of men from new nations points to where the Lord is leading us – to the ends of the world for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel to all peoples and languages. We came to birth 45 years ago as a local brotherhood with membership coming primarily from Michigan. We find ourselves now with brothers from at least 18 nations, with houses in six countries and with mission that covers dozens more.

Many countries have a Thanksgiving Day or its equivalent. We in The Servants of the Word offer our thanks to the Lord for the many blessings he has bestowed upon us this year and over past forty-five.

Sincerely,
Kenneth Noecker

Ken Noecker is a lifelong committed brother in The Servants of the Word, currently serving as the Presiding Elder. He spent 25 years (1986 to 2011) as a member of the Asian Region of The Servants of the Word based in Manila, Philippines. Ken was born and raised in Nebraska. He completed his university studies in Minnesota and his graduate studies in the Philippines. In addition to his role in The Servants of the Word, Ken is also involved extensively in community building efforts in Asia as a missionary coordinator of The Sword of the Spirit.
What Blessed Inefficiency

by Chris Larson

Chris Larson is a former affiliate, now living in Cleveland with his wife and three children.

I am standing here as a representative of the ongoing and prolific failure of the Servants of the Word as an organization. I was at one point, like many men in this room, an “affiliate,” a novice, if you will, someone who fell into the orbit of the brothers for a time. I lived with them, considered their life, yet ultimately made a different choice in life.

Please bear with me as I highlight the inefficiency with which this brotherhood attracts and retains men. All my numbers are just estimates, but they still make my point. In North America alone around 200 men were once affiliates like myself, but are no longer. On average one in seven of them makes a lifelong commitment—that is a 15% conversion rate. Over four years of formation, they spend approximately 1800 hours of training, which costs about $23,000 per brother per year. So over the past 45 years the cost of training has exceeded $5.2 million, and with an attrition rate of 85% this means that you wasted $4.4 million of unrecoverable cost. From any meaningful human capital metric the world would use, you guys are a disaster, a spectacularly wasteful failure.

And yet, lest you think I am here to bad-mouth my brothers, the metrics of the creator of the universe are others, he measures success differently than our world does. Or to quote another famously inefficient saint, Theresa of Calcutta, “We are called not to be successful, but to be faithful.”

I had the great privilege of living, over the course of seven years, with men in Belfast, London, East Lansing and Ann Arbor: men like Dan Keating, Andy Pettman and Jamie Treadwell formed me, became lifelong friends, and through them I even met my wife (that’s a story for another time). Each house I lived in was a hub for young people: the brothers were the center of activity, rooted in prayer, in a common life and in faithfulness to their calling. Like a thousand electrons swirling around a nucleus, these young people found community, joy and solace from a crazy and confusing world, simply because of the acts of love, humility and death to self of our brothers.

It is precisely your blessed inefficiency, your wasteful generosity, your limitless selflessness, your profligate service to others with no regard for reciprocity that have impacted not just hundreds of men, but thousands of lives. The people you have touched now try to live the very faithfulness and obedience which you model, in their families, jobs, churches and communities across the world. The standard you have set in following the Lord has inspired many of us to do the same, in our own vocations.

Thank God for your wastefulness, thank you for your inefficiency. From all of our hearts, thank you for all you are and do. We love and thank God for you!
On 1st September of this year, four brothers made their lifelong commitments to the Servants of the Word. For the occasion, all the brothers from the U.S.A. gathered in Detroit, Michigan together with family and a few other guests.

The four men are Tadhg Lynch from Ireland, Rodrigo Sett from Guatemala, Malaquias Garcia from Mexico, and Miguel Vargas from Costa Rica. Each of these four men spent four years in formation before making their first full commitment. After living for at least three years as committed brothers they were invited to make a solemn, lifelong commitment.

Miguel serves in San Jose, Costa Rica as a teacher and youth worker. Rodrigo lives in the same house and works in university evangelism. Malaquias does the same thing, but is based from our house in Monterrey, Mexico; Tadhg lives in Belfast and works with university-age people both locally and for the European and Middle East.

For the last three years we have invited the fathers and brothers to join us for the commitments of their family members. This time all the dads were able to come as well as Miguel’s brother and Tadhg’s two younger brothers. We are very conscious of the fact that if a man makes a radical decision to follow the Lord, a foundation of character has been laid by their parents. The formal commitment ceremony was followed by fellowship, a festive meal and the yearly entertainment by Stu Ferguson, one of our brothers.

Please join us in praying for these men as they begin their lifelong membership in the Servants of the Word. And please pray for God’s ongoing work in calling men to our life.

See Next 45th Anniversary Article > Testimonies from David Dolsen and Don DeSmith

Dr. Martin Steinbereithner is a lifelong brother of the Servants of the Word. He is the director of Communications and Development for the Servants of the Word. Previously he worked for twenty years in campus ministry in North America, Lebanon and England and for over the last ten years with Christian communities in the Middle East, Poland, Russia, Belgium, Germany, Austria, France, the UK and Africa.
Testimonies from Servants of the Word 45th Anniversary

a report by Martin Steinbereithner

Forty-five years ago the Servants of the Word began when a few men made their first commitment to live single for the Lord. Covenant community had just begun among university students in Michigan and elsewhere, and while some community members got married, others felt strongly called to live a celibate life for God and his people. Since those beginnings the brotherhood has grown to 130 men (including affiliates) living in 13 houses around the world - in the Philippines, England and Northern Ireland, the US.A., Costa Rica and Mexico.

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Why Would a Young Protestant Consider the Servants of the Word Brotherhood?
Testimony by David Dolsen

David is a graduate from the University of Michigan, currently serving on staff with University Christian Outreach.

About a year ago I landed in Manila, halfway around the world, for a mission year: I was very much out of my depth, yet with a clear realization that my closest relationship was with the Lord Jesus: a pretty remarkable realization. How did I get there?

It all started while I still was in Saline High School, only about 20 minutes south of here. I got involved in a group called “Ten for Men” and amongst ourselves we often spoke about how wanted to live a truly great life, and it was with that ideal that we graduated. For college, I found myself at the University of Michigan where I met a lot of people who were living for many things, but not for God.

Toward the end of my freshman year I joined University Christian Outreach (UCO) and through it I got involved in a summer household program. I got to live with men like Nico Angleys, Joseph Matthias and Tadhg Lynch and very quickly I realized: “These are men who are actually doing this, really living all out for God.” As I got to know them better, I noticed that they were all living single for the Lord, which for me as a Lutheran was not something I had much of a category for.

But over time the question took hold of me: might this be what I am supposed to do with my life? Maybe I should consider this calling? So as a result I decided to spend a year in a brotherhood house in the Philippines, and now I am working with many of them on staff with UCO. I am very excited about where this journey is taking me, a journey toward true greatness.

Still Here - After 35 Years

by Don DeSmith

I have been a lifelong committed brother for 35 years, and people sometimes ask me “why are you still here?” A simple, possibly glib, answer would be that the brothers have not kicked me out yet, in spite of my many idiosyncrasies. But let me give you three, more serious reasons.

The first is the love of God, and by that I mean first and foremost God’s love for me, which I have experienced and still do every day. This mercy and steadfastness of his requires a response of love. The Bible is clear that living single is a gift and if you have it, you should take advantage of it. So this is why I chose this life, as the best way I knew to respond to God’s love.
Secondly, because it is a great life: it involves prayer, normally at least three times a day. We also live it in common with other men, in groups of 6 to 12, and I find it a great privilege to live with men like Dick LaCroix or Ted Kennedy. And we engage in mission; even I who have spent 30 of my 35 years in software development, am part of the common mission of the Servants of the Word, whether it’s the youth work Dave Quintana does or the community building of Ken Noecker, we all engage in a common call.

Thirdly, I am still here because of the encouragement of a great cloud of witnesses, the people around me who live a Christian culture of faithfulness: there are couples present here who have been married for 35, 55 or in my parents’ case, 66½ years, and they encourage me to also stay faithful to my vocation. So I am grateful to the Lord and his faithfulness to us over 45 years, and to the many inside and outside the brotherhood who have encouraged me to remain faithful in turn.

See Previous 45th Anniversary Article > Testimonies from Ken Noecker and Chris Larson

Dr. Martin Steinbereithner is a lifelong brother of the Servants of the Word. He is the director of Communications and Development for the Servants of the Word. Previously he worked for twenty years in campus ministry in North America, Lebanon and England and for over the last ten years with Christian communities in the Middle East, Poland, Russia, Belgium, Germany, Austria, France, the UK and Africa.

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The O Antiphons of Advent

by Jeanne Kun

The O Antiphons of Advent have been described as "a unique work of art and a special ornament of the pre-Christmas liturgy, filled with the Spirit of the Word of God" (see below). They "create a poetry that fills the liturgy with its splendor", and their composer shows "a magnificent command of the Bible's wealth of motifs".

The antiphons are, in fact, a collage of Old Testament types of Christ [the Anointed One and Messiah]. Their predominant theme is messianic, stressing the hope of the Savior's coming. Jesus is invoked by various titles, mainly taken from the prophet Isaiah. The sequence progresses historically, from the beginning, before creation, to the very gates of Bethlehem.

The following hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is based on seven Antiphons from the early church used in the seven days before Christmas. These prayers address Christ using many of the Messianic titles found in the Old Testament.
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

(1) O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(2) O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might,
Who to thy tribes on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the Law,
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(3) O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free,
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(4) O come, Thou Key of David, come;
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(5) O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

(6) O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go..

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.
Antiphon for December 17

O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High and, reaching from beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly. Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

This antiphon, like all the others to follow, is based on a composite of Scripture texts.

Sirach 24:3: "From the mouth of the Most High I came forth, and like mist covered the earth".

Wisdom 8:1: "She reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well".

Wisdom is here personified, present with God at the beginning of creation. This is a prefiguration of Jesus, the eternal Word of God, the "logos" John described in the opening of his gospel. Wisdom is the foundation of fear of the Lord, of holiness, or right living: it is wisdom whom we bid to come and teach us prudence. The cry "Come" will be repeated again and again, insistent and hope-filled.

Antiphon for December 18

O Adonai and Ruler of the House of Israel, you appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and on Mount Sinai gave him your law. Come, and with outstretched arm redeem us.

Exodus 3:2: "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed".

Exodus 6:6: "Therefore say to the Israelites: I am Yahweh. I will free you from the enforced labor of the Egyptians and will deliver you from their slavery. I will rescue you by my outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment".

"Adonai" is Hebrew for "my Lord", and was substituted by devout Jews for the name "Yahweh", out of reverence. With this second antiphon we progress from creation to the familiar story of God manifesting
himself by name to Moses and giving his law to Israel as their way of life. We are also reminded of the Israelites' deliverance from bondage under pharaoh - a foreshadowing of our own redemption from sin. The image of God's arm outstretched in power to save his chosen people also brings to mind the later scene of Jesus with his arms outstretched for us on the cross.

**Antiphon for December 19**

*O Root of Jesse, you stand as a sign for the peoples; before you kings shall keep silence and to you all nations shall have recourse. Come, save us, and do not delay.*

Isaiah 52:13, 15; 53:2: "See, my servant shall prosper...So shall he startle many nations, because of him kings shall stand speechless. ... He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot".

Isaiah prophesied a restoration of David's throne - a new branch budding out of the old root. Christ is the root of Jesse in a two-fold sense: he is the descendant of David, who was the youngest son of Jesse, and he inherited the royal throne. The angel foretold to Mary, "The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will be without end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Our hearts more and more urgently cry out for God's reign to extend over all humanity: "Come, save us, and do not delay".

**Antiphon for December 20**

*O Key of David and Scepter of the House of Israel; you open and no man closes; you close and no man opens. Come, and deliver from the chains of prison those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

Isaiah 22:22: "I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder. When he opens, no one shall shut; when he shuts, no one shall open.

Revelation 3:7: "To the presiding spirit of the church in Philadelphia write this: 'The holy One, the true, who wields David's key, who opens and no one can close, who closes and no one can open'".

Isaiah 42:6-7: "I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon those who live in darkness".

The key and scepter are traditional symbols of kingly power and authority. Christ, the anointed one, is the heir of David and possessor of the kingdom. Jesus himself also made use of this symbol, showing the prophetic relationship of the earthly kingdom of David to the kingdom of God. All power and authority was given to him after the resurrection, and he entrusted this power to "bind and to loose" to Peter and the ministers of his
In the closing petition we look to Jesus to unlock the fetters of sin that keeps us tightly chained. It is he who frees us from our captivity. We recall the deliverance proclaimed by the psalmist of old: "they dwelt in darkness and gloom, bondsmen in want and in chains,...and he led them forth from darkness and gloom and broke their bonds asunder" (Psalm 107: 10, 14).

Antiphon for December 21

_O Rising Dawn, Radiance of the Light eternal and Sun of Justice: come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death._

Isaiah 9:1: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone".

Malachi 3:20: "For you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays".

2 Peter 1:19: "Keep your attention closely fixed on it, as you would on a lamp shining in a dark place, until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises in your heart".

This title is variously translated "morning star", "Dayspring", "rising sun", "radiant dawn", "orient". All beautifully express the idea of light shattering the darkness of night, of sin and death, of sickness and despair, with its brightness bringing healing and warmth to cold hearts. Jesus is indeed the true light, the radiance of his Father's splendor. The church prays this petition daily in the Benedictus, joining in the words of Zechariah: "He, the Dayspring, shall visit us in his mercy to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78-79).

Antiphon for December 22

_O King of the Gentiles and the Desired of all, you are the cornerstone that binds two into one. Come, and save man whom you fashioned out of clay._

Isaiah 28:16: "Therefore, thus says the Lord God: See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested, a precious cornerstone as a sure foundation".

Ephesians 2:14: "He it is who is our peace, and who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart".

The earlier antiphons have already alluded to the Messiah coming not only to Israel but to convert the gentile nations and redeem them for his own. Now this sixth antiphon clearly addresses the savior as the king of the gentiles (Jer.10:7) and the Desired One of the nations. The Messiah is the cornerstone on whom our spiritual foundations are laid, but on whom unbelievers stumble (Matt. 21:42). This cornerstone unites and binds Jew and gentile into one, making peace between them.

The plea is that God save all humanity, all his creation that he formed from the dust of the earth (Gen.2:7).
yearn for him once again to breathe the breath of his new life into us.

Antiphon for December 23

_O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of the nations and their Savior. Come and save us, O Lord our God._

Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel".

Isaiah 33:22: "Indeed the Lord will be there with us, majestic. Yes, the Lord our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord our king, he it is who will save us".

With this last antiphon our expectation finds joy now in the certainty of fulfillment. We call Jesus by one of the most personal and intimate of his titles, Emmanuel, God-with-us. We recall that in his birth from the Virgin Mary God takes on our very flesh and human nature: God coming nearer to us than we could have ever imagined! Yet he is also to be exalted above us as our king, the lawgiver and judge, the one whom we honor and obey. And he is our savior, long-expected by all creation. The final cry rises from us urgent in our need for daily salvation and forgiveness of our sins, and confident that our God will not withhold himself from us.

illustrations and commentary text (c) 2000 Jeanne Kun

*King David in Letter O* (top image), by Fra Angelico, 1443-45

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**Praising the Names of Jesus: The Antiphons of Advent**

by Jeanne Kun

It is especially in the final week of Advent that our attention is fixed on the messianic promises proclaimed by the ancient prophets of Israel. A distinctive feature of the Liturgy of the Hours in this week preceding the Christmas vigil is the antiphon sung at Vespers (evening prayer) before and after the recitation of the Magnificat. Originally incorporated into the monastic office in the Middle Ages, these antiphons, often called the "Greater Antiphons" or the "O Antiphons", are also echoed in the daily lectionary as the verse for the gospel acclamation during this week. They add a mood of eager expectation to the liturgy that builds throughout these seven days and climaxes at Christmas.

The O Antiphons have been described as "a unique work of art and a special ornament of the pre-Christmas liturgy, filled with the Spirit of the Word of God". They "create a poetry that fills the liturgy with its splendor", and their composer shows "a magnificent command of the Bible's wealth of motifs". The antiphons are, in fact,
a collage of Old Testament types of Christ. Their predominant theme is messianic, stressing the hope of the Savior's coming. Jesus is invoked by various titles, mainly taken from the prophet Isaiah. The sequence progresses historically, from the beginning, before creation, to the very gates of Bethlehem.

In their structure, each of the seven antiphons follows the same pattern, resembling a traditional liturgical prayer. Each O Antiphon begins with an invocation of the expected Messiah, followed by praise of him under one of his particular titles. Each ends with a petition for God's people, relevant to the title by which he is addressed, and the cry for him to "Come".

The seven titles attributed to Jesus in the antiphons are Wisdom (Sapientia in Latin), Ruler of the House of Israel (Adonai), Root of Jesse (Radix), Key of David (Clavis), Rising Dawn (Oriens), King of the Gentiles (Rex), and Emmanuel. In Latin the initials of the titles make an acrostic which, when read backwards, means: "Tomorrow I will be there" ("Ero cras"). To the medieval mind this was clearly a reference to the approaching Christmas vigil.

Today the O Antiphons are most familiar to us in the hymn "O come, O come Emmanuel". Each verse of the hymn parallels one of the antiphons. In addition to their use in the Liturgy of the Hours and the gospel acclamation, they have been popularly incorporated into church devotions and family prayer. An Advent prayer service for use at home, in school, or in the events of parish life can be built around the singing or recitation of the antiphons, accompanied by the related Scripture readings and prayers. They can be prayed at family dinner times or with the lighting of the Advent wreath, with a short explanation of their biblical background. The titles can also be depicted by simple symbols - for example, on banners and posters or in bulletin illustrations - to help us to reflect on these Advent themes.

_O Antiphon_ art work and commentary text (c) 2000 by Jeanne Kun

_ King David in Letter O_ (top image), by Fra Angelico, 1443-45

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the _Word of Life Community_, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Jeanne Kun is also an active member and past president of _Bethany Association_.
Sermons on the Incarnation
from the Early Church Fathers

If Christ Had Not Been Born of Woman

by Proclus of Constantinople (died 446 AD)

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. - Galatians 4:4-7

A God who was not only God, and a man who was not simply man, was born of woman.

By being born he formed the gate of salvation from what had at one time been the way in for sin. Where in fact the serpent by exploiting human disobedience had infused his poison, there the Word entered through obedience and built a living temple. From the womb of a woman had come forth the original son of sin, Cain; and from the womb of a woman, without seed, there came into the light the Christ, the redeemer of the human
Let us not be ashamed that he was born of a woman. That birth was for us the beginning of salvation.

If Christ had not been born of woman, he would not have died either, and would not 'by death have destroyed him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.' [Letter to the Hebrews 2:14]

[from Homily on the Mother of God (PG6S, 679ff.)]

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**When Christ Comes, God Will Be Seen by Men**

*From a treatise Against Heresies by Irenaeus, 130-200 A.D.*

There is one God, who by his word and wisdom created all things and set them in order. His word is our Lord Jesus Christ, who in this last age became man among men to unite end and beginning, that is, man and God.

The prophets, receiving the gift of prophecy from this same Word, foretold his coming in the flesh, which brought about the union and communion between God and man ordained by the Father. From the beginning the word of God prophesied that God would be seen by men and would live among them on earth; he would speak with his own creation and be present to it, bringing it salvation and being visible to it. He would free us from the hands of all who hate us, that is, form the universal spirit of sin, and enable us to serve him in holiness and justice all our days. Man was to receive the Spirit of God and so to attain to the glory of the Father.

The prophets foretold that God would be seen by men. As the Lord himself says: *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.* In his greatness and inexpressible glory no one can see God and live, for the Father is beyond our comprehension. But in his love and generosity and omnipotence he allows even this to those who love him, that is, even to see God, as the prophets foretold. For what is impossible to men is possible to God.

By his own powers man cannot see God; yet God will be seen by men because he wills it. He will be seen by those he chooses, at the time he chooses, and in the way he chooses, for God can do all things. He was seen of old through the Spirit in prophecy; he is seen through the Son by our adoption as his children, and he will be seen in the kingdom of heaven in his own being as the Father. The Spirit prepares man to receive the Son of God, the Son leads him to the Father, and the Father, freeing him from change and decay, bestows the eternal life that comes to everyone from seeing God.

As those who see light are in the light sharing its brilliance, so those who see God are in God sharing his glory, and that glory gives them life. To see God is to share in life.

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**Life Itself Appeared in Human Form**

*from Augustine of Hippo's commentary on the first letter of St John, 5th century*
‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life’. Who could touch the Word with his hands, were it not that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us?

This Word, who became flesh in order that he could be touched by hands, began to be flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb. But he did not begin to be the Word; for St John says, ‘That which was from the beginning’. See how his letter corroborates his gospel, from which you heard a short time ago, ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God’.

Possibly some may understand ‘concerning the Word of life’ as a vague expression referring to Christ, not meaning that very body of Christ which was touched by hands. But you must take into account what follow, ‘And life itself was made manifest'. It is Christ, therefore, who is the Word of life.

And how was life manifested? It was from the beginning, but it had not been manifested to men; yet it had been revealed to the angels, as they saw it and were nourished by it as if it were their bread. What does scripture say? ‘Man has eaten bread of angels'.

So the life itself was made manifest in the flesh, because it depended on ‘manifestation', that a reality only perceptible to the heart might also be visible to our eyes, and thus heal our hearts. For the Word is seen only by the heart, but the flesh is seen also by bodily eyes. There was in fact flesh which we could see, in order to heal the heart, the means by which we could see the Word.

‘And we are witnesses', he says, ‘and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest among us'; to make the text clearer it is permissible to read ‘was made manifest to us'.

‘That which we have seen and heard therefore we proclaim to you'. My dear brethren in Christ, take note of this: ‘that which we have seen and heard therefore we proclaim to you'. They - namely the writers - saw the Lord himself, present in the flesh and heard the words from the Lord's own lips, and proclaimed them to us. So we also have heard, but we have not seen.

Is it to be concluded that we are less blessed than those who heard and also saw? How then does the writer add, ‘that you say have fellowship with us'? They saw, we have not seen; and yet we are in fellowship with them, for we hold a common faith.

‘And our fellowship is with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And', he adds, ‘we are writing this that you joy may be complete'. This complete joy of which he speaks is in that very fellowship itself, in that very love, in that very unity.

The Word Made Flesh Deifies Us

From the treatise of Hippolytus, 130-200 A.D.
We do not put our faith in empty phrases, we are not carried off by sudden impulses of the heart, we are not seduced by plausible and eloquent speech, but we do not refuse belief to words spoken by divine power.

These God committed to the Word. The Word spoke, and by these words he turned man away from disobedience, not enslaving him by force or necessity, but inviting him to choose freedom of his own accord.

In the last days the Father sent the Word. In his plan the Word was no longer to speak through the prophets. He was no longer to be a figure of conjecture, announced in an obscure way. He was to be manifested visibly, so that the world could see him and be saved.

We know that the Word assumed a body from a virgin and, through a new creation, put on our old nature. We know that he was a man, formed from the same substance as we are. If he were not of the same nature as ourselves, his command to imitate him as a master would be a futile one. If he was of a different substance, why does he command me, naturally weak as I am, to do as he did? How can he be good and just?

To show that he was no different from us, he undertook hard work, he went hungry and thirsty, he took rest and sleep, he did not shirk suffering, he revealed the resurrection. In all this he offered his own self, so that when you suffered you would not lose heart, but rather would recognize that you are a man, and would yourself expect to receive what he received from God.

When you have learned to know the true God, you will have a body immortal and incorruptible, like your soul; you will gain the kingdom of heaven, you who lived on earth and knew the king of heaven; freed from passion, suffering and disease, you will be a companion of God and a co-heir with Christ, for you have become a god.

All that you had to suffer as a man, God gave you, because you were a man. All that belongs to God, he has promised to give you, because you have been deified and have become immortal. This is what it means to know yourself, to recognize the God who made you; to know and to be known is the lot of the man called by God.

And so, men, do not be hostile to one another, do not hesitate to return. Christ who is God, supreme over all, has arranged to wash man clean of sin and to make our old nature new. From the beginning he called this old nature his image, and in this way gave you a sign of his love for you. If you obey his sacred commandments, if you become a good follower of him who is good, you will become like him, you will be honoured by him. God is not lacking in anything, and he made you also a god for his glory.

I was walking around my neighborhood this late autumn morning, talking with my mentor, as I do every other week, and on several occasions we both had to interrupt the other and point out a particularly lovely garden or fiery tree so that we wouldn’t pass them by unnoticed. We apologised for the interruption each time, but understood that, while our conversation was important, it would almost be a rejection of the goodness of creation not to alert the other to the wonders around us.

The trees were doing their own kind of pointing, anyway. The colors are costly: the plants expend vast amounts of energy turning the leaves red and yellow and brown, just when they ought to be saving it for the winter. Nobody knows why this happens, but as Advent approaches I wonder whether there isn’t a certain prophetic edge to the scarlet and gold at this time of year, almost as if they’re trying to join us in heralding Christ as we prepare to celebrate his first coming, and look to his second.

From poem to musical piece

The same impulse is behind William Dunbar’s poem, On the Nativity of Christ, which I set to music a few years ago. Dunbar was one of the most famous of the makar, a group of court poets in 15th- and 16th-century Scotland. Not content to announce the Incarnation to his immediate neighbors, he summons the entire mediaeval world - not only men and women, animals and plants, but the four elements and several ranks of angels - to worship Christ Jesus, born for us at Christmas. Characteristically, Dunbar includes references to Latin hymns, which would have been familiar to his audience as the texts of various chants for Catholic liturgies at Advent (Rorate caeli desuper, ‘drop down, ye heavens, from above’, on the first Sunday of Advent) and Christmas (Pro nobis puer natus est, ‘for us a son is born’, on Christmas morning [as seen in the illustration at the top of the page]).

This is all supposed to be more of a roll call than an encyclopedia, but as I wrote my piece I saw the opportunity to try something similar and show as many elements of Dunbar’s musical world as possible. I included fragments of plainchant alongside elements from modern-day Scottish folk music, to try and make the experience of hearing my piece something like a three-minute trip to medieval Scotland and back. The title of my piece comes from one of the lines of the poem: after the angels, Dunbar summons some celestial bodies for good measure: ‘all ye hevinly operations: star, planeit, firmament and spheir’ (the original spelling).
Living Bulwark

In his day-job as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, CS Lewis said of this poem that it "might almost claim to be in one sense the most lyrical of all English poems - that is, the hardest not to sing." That’s certainly been my experience, and I hope yours, too, as you listen to my piece.

> Click red button below to hear audio clip

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**On the Nativity of Christ**

*poem by William Dunbar*

*Rorate, caeli, desuper!*
Heavens, release your balmy showers,
For now is risen the bright day-star,
From the rose Mary, flower of flowers;
The clear Sun, whom no cloud devours,
Surpassing Phebus in the East,
Is coming from his heavenly towers,
*Et nobis Puer natus est.*

Archangels, angels, and dominations,
Thrones, potentates, and martyrs various,
And all ye heavenly operations,
Star, planet, firmament, and sphere,
Fire, earth, air, and water clear,
To Him give loving, most and least,
That comes in so meek [a] manner
*Et nobis Puer natus est.*

...

Sing, heaven imperial, most of hight,
Regions of air, make harmony.
All fish in flood and fowl of flight,
Be mirthful and make melody.
All “Gloria in excelsis” cry,
Heaven, earth, sea, man, bird, and beast:
He that is crowned above the sky
*Pro nobis Puer natus est.*

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Stephen Bick grew up in the Antioch community in London. After a gap year in Lansing and musical studies in Cambridge, he has now inevitably returned and lives with the Servants of the Word as an affiliate. He works for the local university outreach, Koinonia and divides the rest of his time between professional singing and composition and semi-professional gardening.

manuscript illustration (top) by Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci's Nativity in an Initial P (Morgan Library, c. 1392-1399)