

Online Magazine of The Sword of the Spirit

LIVING BULWARK sources of strength and renewal for Christian life and mission

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A Living Bulwark of Disciples on Mission

"I am writing so that you may know how to conduct yourself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" – 1 Timothy 3:15



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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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Being a Bulwark that Serves God's Purposes

"..The household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth"

– 1 Timothy 3:15

In This Issue

The Lord Jesus came to establish a New Covenant sealed by the blood he shed for us on the cross to reconcile us to God the Father in one Body, the Body of Christ, and one Spirit who makes us a Living Temple and dwelling place of God. We are called to be "living stones.. built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). That is why the Apostle Paul in his First Letter to Timothy describes the Christian people as "...the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

This issue focuses on the image of the Christian people as a "bulwark" of "living stones" joined together in unity as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Sword of the Spirit is a network of Christian covenant communities who have been called to be part of a bulwark to defend the truth of the Gospel and to stem the tide of evil sweeping across the earth.

Steve Clark, a key founder of the Sword of the Spirit, in his article [On Mission: Being a Bulwark](#), describes what we are called to do as a bulwark and community of disciples on mission:

"We are called to live, work and strive, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that others might have true life in Christ, now and forever." Note that there is a purpose to our calling – for others to have true life in Christ, now and for all eternity. We have a treasure: we have discovered what true life is really about – life with God, life God's way. We are called to be coworkers with God, to use the Apostle Paul's phrase, to bring others to that life. This is foundational to all that we do in mission. We are not always expressly evangelistic, of course. We do not start every day by preaching the gospel or spend it calling people up on the telephone to talk about Christ. We may do that sometimes, but all that we do, the very way we live our lives, is so that others might have true life in Christ, now and forever.

May this issue inspire, encourage, and call each of us to pray earnestly and strive to "maintain

the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Sincerely in Christ,
Don Schwager
editor

top photo of the Assembly of senior leaders of the Sword of the Spirit communities meeting in Lisbon,
Portugal last May 2018

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On Mission: Part 1



Being a Bulwark

by Steve Clark

Many communities and individual members in the Sword of the Spirit have been hearing the Lord say recently that this is a time of grace for us. And many of us have also been able to point to various events that indicate the truth of that word.

As the Lord first began speaking this way to us a few years ago, I remember hearing a brother give a prophecy along these lines and then get up and share a scripture passage that seemed quite apt to our situation. It came from the first chapter of the prophet Joel, which begins with a description of a plague of locusts: “What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.” Joel was describing a time of great devastation. It must have seemed as if everything had been destroyed and the people would not be able to survive. by the end of the first chapter, little hope is left.

Then, in chapter 2, we read a description of God’s people turning to the Lord, resulting in a time of grace: “The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.” There are several noteworthy things about this prophecy. First, the Lord said that he himself sent the plague of locusts. Then he says that he has decided to restore what was taken away, and more. Implied, it seems clear, is that the plague of devastation was important for getting God’s people on the right track. But even though the years of devastation might have seemed like years of irremediable loss, the Lord promised that all would be replaced, and more added.

A Season of the Lord's Blessing

This past decade of our history has been a paradoxical time. Even as some were saying that the troubles we went through would mean our destruction, something else was going on that has since become clear. In a recent report, the Sword of the Spirit international secretary cited

statistics that show that this had been a decade of growth for us. We have more than doubled the number of fully covenanted communities, and the overall number of communities which are in various stages of commitment to us has increased by about 20. We have become more international, as well, with communities in 10 more countries than in 1990. Even though I was aware of all those developments, I was impressed at how positive the tally was.

However, I am even more impressed by something else. I am impressed by the degree of unity of purpose, and the agreement on fundamental issues that we now have, compared to ten years ago and fifteen years ago. It strikes me most at international council meetings. I have been to all of them but one since the beginning, and what I now see is a genuine and grace-filled ability to work together, a remarkable inter-cultural, international cooperation, despite the fact that in our meetings we cannot even all speak the same language. There is a sense of common purpose, that we are building something together, building an international bulwark. This is most clearly indicated by the steady progress we can see as a result of each set of council meetings. We are no longer knitting a row one year and unraveling it the next.

One fruit of that progress is this Call and Mission Conference. It was developed by the Ibero-American Region (whom most of us outsiders call “the Latinos”) and in it we are presenting what our international council has agreed on unanimously, after several years of work, the statement “Our Call”, capsulized in the phrase “We are a community of disciples on mission”. For this presentation, we will be focusing on the “mission” part of that phrase.

“Our Mission” starts out by saying, “We are called to live, work, and strive by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that others might have true life in Christ now and forever.” I would call your attention to the word “others” here. The fact that we exist for the sake of others automatically makes us a people on mission. Now, most of us would say we have become part of the Sword of the Spirit because we have experienced some kind of blessing: our life works better, our families are stronger, we are more solidly Christian. Nonetheless, we are not just called for ourselves, we are called for others.

We also often think of missionaries as people who go off to a different country to serve the Lord. If that is the sole meaning of the word, then only a few of us are missionaries. But there is another way of understanding a missionary – as someone the Lord calls and gives a mission to. If that mission is something you can accomplish in your own city, then you are a missionary there, without going anywhere else. In that sense, we in the Sword of the Spirit are missionaries. As community members, we are missionaries wherever the Lord has put us.

Notice that the “Our Mission” summary is divided into two sections: first, what we are called *to be* to fulfill our mission, and second, what we are called *to do*. Because most of us tend to think of mission in terms of doing rather than being, I would like to emphasize what we have to be.

God's Strategy

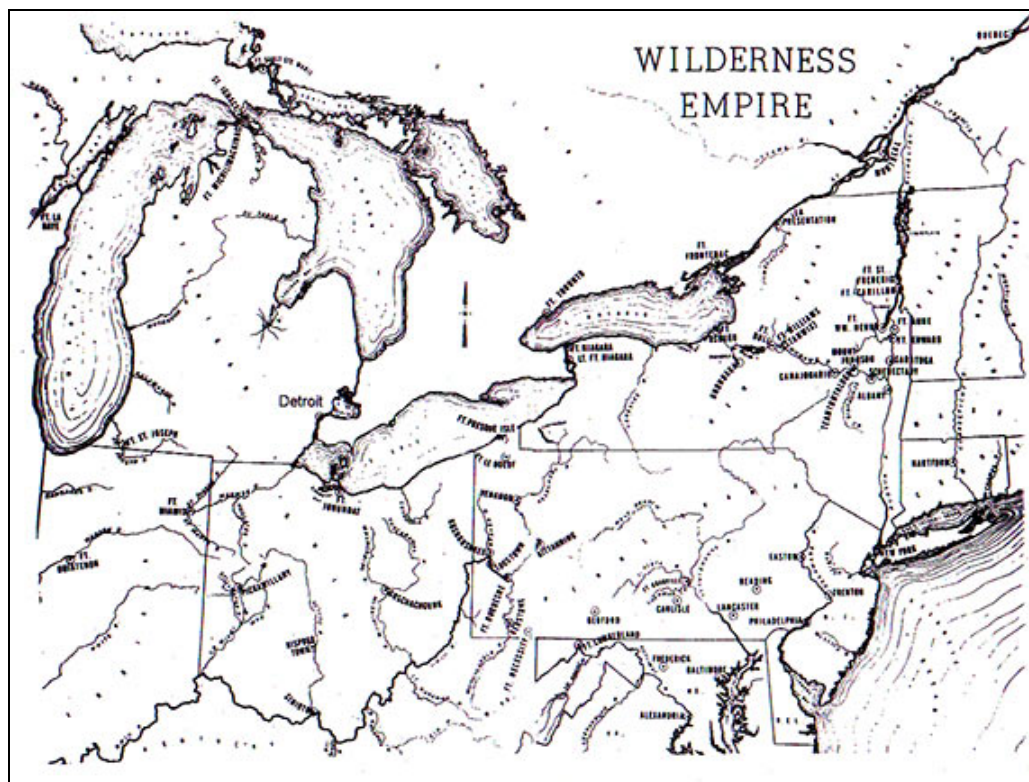
The mission the Lord has entrusted to us has a special character. We have to be something to fulfill it – communities of disciples on mission. If we can understand the Lord’s overall strategy for us (which applies to other groups as well), we can more effectively carry out the mission he has given us. That strategy has to do with establishing centers to radiate new life and to be bases for reaching out to those around us. The summary lists three different aspects of what we should be: a bulwark, a prophetic people and a servant people.

Let us focus on the first one, being a bulwark. A bulwark is not a word in common usage for most of us, but it is an old and venerable term meaning a certain kind of fortification or, on occasion, a fort. But our image of a fort can easily mislead us, so I am going to give you an historical example of a fort that will show some features that might be surprising, and draw some lessons for our own mission. The example is of Fort Detroit around 1750.

Ft. Detroit¹ was built by the French in 1701 by deliberate strategic decision to further their empire in North America. It was built on the west bank of the Detroit River near where the

Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit now stands. It was the start of everything we now know as the Detroit metropolitan area.

A map of North America in that era (see map below) shows some of the significance of Ft. Detroit. By the 1750's, a good part of the Atlantic coast had been settled by the English, but the Appalachian Mountains to their west kept the English from easy access to North America's rich central plains. The French had established a route inland by boat from the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, where they had a colony.



The French inland route headed west along the St. Lawrence River and then into Lake Ontario and on to Lake Erie. At various points along Lake Erie there were relatively easy portages to the Ohio-Mississippi basin, which occupies a large part of central North America. The water route continued north and west from Lake Erie into the other three Great Lakes – Huron, Superior and Michigan. From Lake Michigan there were again relatively easy portages to the river network of the interior. Ft. Detroit was established right on that route at the southern shore of Lake Huron. It was, in other words, part of the linkage from the French colony at the mouth of the St. Lawrence to the vast inland of North America, which the French considered part of their empire. Ft. Detroit in 1750 was probably the major French center west of Lake Ontario.

Centers of Influence

There was a big difference between the French colonial empire and the English colonies in North America. The English came in relatively large numbers and settled, so that the English area of influence was being filled by farms and towns. The French, however, with the exception of the Quebec-Montreal area, had only a few, small settlements. Most of their “empire” was territory in which they traded and in which they were a predominant presence. Detroit, then, was the center of significant French influence in a large area, covering much of what are now the states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Western part of the province of Ontario.

Despite its significance, Ft. Detroit was remarkably small (see plan of fort on page 12), with an area of about four city blocks, plus a small settlement of farms along the river. Altogether there were about 800 people who lived in the fort and on the farms – in other words, only about the number in one of our larger communities.

Now, there are forts and there are forts. The image most of us have of forts is of the kind we have seen in Hollywood Westerns – a stockade with soldiers inside, usually surrounded by Indians trying to burn it down. The soldiers are manning the walls and shooting at the attackers. Occasionally they make sorties, but in most Westerns they seem to be mainly hoping for reinforcements to arrive before supplies run out. Such forts were designed to allow an army unit to hold territory in the face of opposition.

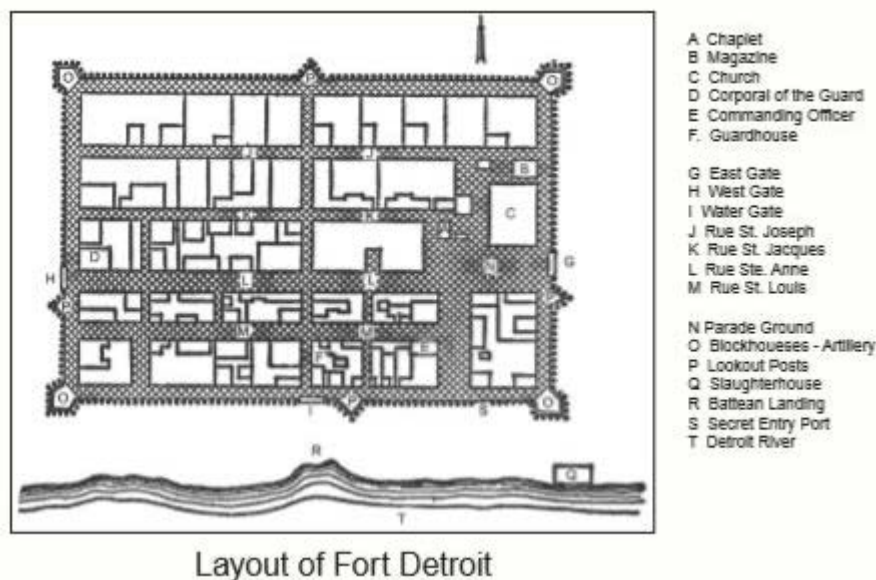
Ft. Detroit, however, was not like that. In fact, the Indians never besieged it, at least not when the French were there. The only siege against it was led by Chief Pontiac when the fort had been taken over by the English. In fact, Pontiac wanted to get rid of the English so he could get the French back. This, too, does not fit our image. Most of us are surprised that any Indians would want to have Europeans like the French around. Understanding why Pontiac wanted the French to return will tell us something more about Ft. Detroit.

A Valuable and Attractive Culture

For one thing, unlike the English, the French were not arranging for settlers to take over more and more Indian land, so the Indians knew they had little to fear on that score. But there were positive reasons as well. One was trade. The French brought a lot of goods the Indians wanted, including guns. Here again, images from the movies are misleading. Indians did at times use guns on one another or on the English, and occasionally on the French. But they mostly used them to hunt, and were much more effective in hunting – and consequently feeding themselves – as a result. But the French brought other products as well – clothing, metal cooking pots, knives for cutting rope and dressing meat. The Indians preferred the French over the English partly because the French sold them more freely the goods the Indians wanted.

There were other things the Indians liked. Especially in more settled areas like Montreal and Quebec, Christian nuns and brothers had established boarding schools for young Indians. And although the predominant French interest was commercial, there was also a significant effort to reach the Indians with Christianity. Near Ft. Detroit there were two or three villages of Christian Indians, small Christian communities resulting from French missionary endeavors. There were other villages of Christian Indians in various areas of French territory, including the Mackinaw area where Lakes Huron and Superior come together. The French saw their forts as centers of civilization, including centers of Christianity. Generally speaking the Indians appreciated that aspect of the French presence and were influenced by it. To be sure, the relationship was not problem-free, but many of the images we have of imperialism do not fit the French “empire” in North America.

If you went into Ft. Detroit what would you see? You would see a village -- shops, a church and people’s homes. Most of the fort residents were ordinary people. Ft. Detroit did have some soldiers, and a few of them were on duty as watchmen on the walls and as sentries at the gates to see if anything strange might be happening outside. But most of the people in the fort were “butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers”, living normal lives. There were also people farming the area surrounding the fort and they would come in to buy or sell or attend church. They normally lived on their farms unless they needed to take refuge in the fort during some special danger.



The gates, in fact, were normally open during the day. Farmers would go in and out, but so would the Indians. Although they usually could not go in armed (as we cannot go armed onto commercial airline flights), they had pretty free access, traded, saw how the French lived and some began to go to church.

Detroit was indeed a fort, but not on the Hollywood Western model. Its mission was not primarily to hold territory against opposition but to act as a base for various forms of influence. It was a settlement, a community, with trades people and farmers whose presence provided the base for an enduring influence in the region, allowing French soldiers, traders and missionaries to live in the wilderness, despite their distance from France or the French Canadian settlements.

Keys to Success

In its day, Ft. Detroit was quite successful. It went into English hands not because of a lack of effectiveness, but largely for two reasons. The first is that there were many more English in North America, enabling them to mount a stronger war effort on the continent. The second is that English armies and navies defeated the French in other parts of the world. In fact, Ft. Detroit did not fall, it surrendered after the peace treaty.

There were several keys to the success of Ft. Detroit in its heyday. The first is that it was fortified. Almost every historian would say that if it were not a fort, it would not have survived. If any little army or raiding party could have come in and done whatever they wanted, the settlement would not have lasted very long. The fortifications and the small army detachment were important, even though the main things that went on were not military operations or even military preparations.

The second key was that all who lived there – the farmers, the craftsmen, the priests – were united in certain ways. They all belonged to the same nation, a different one from the Indian tribes around them, with allegiance to the same king, in Paris. They spoke the same French language, and had the same French culture and way of life. They were involved in a common endeavor that made the fort a base and a source of influence. They were consequently also part of something much bigger than Ft. Detroit itself and received a great deal of support and help from France and the rest of the French colonies.

The French have a reputation for thinking their culture is superior, something that others, especially their neighbors, tend to dispute. But when we consider Ft. Detroit, most of us would be inclined to agree that in many aspects the French culture was superior to the culture of the tribes around them. They were Christians, they were relatively moral, and on the whole they had a higher civilization, both materially and in other ways as well. That is one of the things that attracted the Indians. They did not usually want to become French, but they saw many good

things the French could provide them with. Moreover, the very confidence that the French exhibited made the French more influential with the Indians than vice versa. The French did not become Indian-like: the Indians became more like the French. The French were passing on a culture, a way of life, and from our point of view, much of what was good about their culture came from the presence of Christianity and Christian values.

There is one further key to the success of Ft. Detroit. It was not just on its own, hundreds of miles from Quebec. It was part of a chain of forts – Ft. Frontenac (now Kingston, Ontario), Ft. Niagara, Ft. Presqu'île (now Erie, Pennsylvania), Ft. Duquesne (now Pittsburgh), Ft. Michilimackinac (at the straits in northern Michigan) and many others farther west. This chain was all-important for the long-term survival of any of the forts. If supplies or some sort of help were needed by the people of Detroit, they could send a boat off to Ft. Niagara. If no help was available there, they might travel on to Ft. Frontenac and so on. Moreover, Ft. Detroit itself was a major center for helping other forts when they had need or were in trouble. There was, in other words, a whole system of support, forts helping one another even though they might be some distance away.

A Time-tested Strategy

In describing Ft. Detroit, I am using what we might call a secular example. There are many others. We read in the New Testament, for instance, about Roman colonies like Philippi. They operated much like Ft. Detroit and played a similar role in their area to that of the inhabitants of Ft. Detroit. Cities like Cologne, Trier, and even Paris itself, were once Roman colonies. If we ask how the French got to speak French, which is a form of late Latin, we would have to attribute it to the success of the Roman Empire and the influence of Roman colonies planted in what at that time was called the Province of Gaul.

But there are also traditional Christian examples such as monasteries. These were founded throughout Europe in the 7th to 11th centuries when what we might now call European civilization was being established. Monasteries in this period of European history were settlements of Christians who prayed, who farmed, who were craftsmen. For much of their history, monasteries were also fortified. In pictures of old monasteries, you can see that most had walls around them. When marauding Vikings came looking for monasteries to burn and treasure to carry off, the monks would close the gates or perhaps climb into a fortified tower to wait out the attack. As a result most of the monasteries survived and became centers that radiated Christian life. But they were also often a centers of better agricultural methods, better building methods, and so on. They were little centers of Christian civilization in various locations, and they were usually linked with others like themselves.

The Moravians are another example. They were one of the first groups of Protestant missionaries to come to the North American frontier – in the mid-1700s. At the time they were formed, there were many more Catholic missionaries than Protestant ones. Originally the Moravians were mainly Lutherans and they formed communities quite similar to ours in the Sword of the Spirit, including groups of celibate brothers and celibate sisters. Many of the cities in the United States – Bethlehem and Nazareth in Pennsylvania, the Salem part of Winston-Salem in North Carolina and New Schoenbrunn and Gnadenhütten just west of Steubenville, in Ohio – were originally Moravian settlements. The Moravians would not only settle and begin to farm, they would also evangelize the Indians, with notable success.

Fortified and Inter-connected

These examples will hopefully give a better understanding of what it means to be a bulwark, a “fortified city”, in fact, a set of fortified cities. We do differ in some respects from Ft. Detroit and some of the other examples given here. We do not go off into the woods to build a city: we want to build a “city” right where we are, in the midst of existing cities. We also do not build physical walls, but we do try to build other forms of protections for our common way of life. The results are communities that can be places of refuge when needed, places of provision, but also places of influence, inhabited by pioneers of the kingdom.

Similar to the French forts, our communities are linked together into a community of communities. A single community by itself does not usually survive all that long. Communities that survive are normally linked together with others into a system of support. They also are tied to a capital. Our capital is not Rome or Jerusalem (not to mention Managua or Manila or Ann Arbor). Our capital, the place where the king lives, is in heaven. We are linked together as citizens of heaven, as we live together here on earth. We are outposts, colonies, of the kingdom of God in a fallen world, cities of Christian people who are living the heavenly life, the life lived by those whose king is the Lord.

We have to be a protected, a fortified, group. If we were not, we would not survive. We have to be linked together so we can help one another. If we were not, we would not survive. Look what happens to so many of the Christians around us. They have no walls, so to speak, around their Christian life, their life together. As a result all sorts of influences, “raiding parties”, wander in at will, to undermine and destroy. Nor do they support one another very actively when under attack. As a result, many Christians are losing their distinct identity as Christians and are gradually being assimilated into the secular society around them, being conformed to it, because they have no defenses.

We try to be sure as a group that protection is in place, but this is not our primary focus. The Lord has put us here, not so that the kingdom of God can gradually and politely retreat on earth. He has put us here to be centers of influence for the advance of the kingdom of God. A significant part of the call we have received from him is to be missionary bases wherever he has placed us. At times the attack is so heavy that all we can do is hold the line, closing the gates, so to speak, and gathering inside the fort for protection. A number of our communities could recount what it is like to be “under siege”. But most of the time the gates are open and the people around us go in and out, and we also go out and come back. Our communities are centers of the life of the kingdom of God.

Remember also what I said about how most of the people in Ft. Detroit spent their time. They farmed, they made clothes, they made candlesticks. They had families, they raised their children, they went to church. In other words, they just lived life. You might be tempted to say that they were only part-time members of the fort and that most of their time was spent living their daily life, but that would not be accurate. Their daily life was key to the fort functioning well. If the daily life of the ordinary people in the fort were removed, the whole support structure of the fort would have failed, and the fort would have disappeared. Or if it had survived, it would have lost most of its influence.

For us, living daily life as members of the kingdom, as members of the fort, is an integral part of our mission. We do not have a community and then do mission in addition to that. Being part of community life is part of our mission. Certainly we should send out evangelists, host Life in the Spirit Seminars and serve in inner city Detroit or Manila or Managua. But even those of us who are not working in such outreaches are involved in the mission with our whole lives. We are all actively involved in being a colony of the kingdom of heaven, a base for Christian life. This is what the Lord is calling us to.

> See [Part 2: A Life That Wants to Share Itself](#) by Steve Clark

This article was originally published in *The Mission of The Sword of the Spirit*, (c) 2004 Steve Clark

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<1> top photo: A collage of photos depicting some Sword of the Spirit activities worldwide, plus family bible study by bigstock.com
<2> Wilderness Empire map image: drawn by Allan W. Eckert. From *Wilderness Empire* by Allan W. Eckert, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, MA., 1969. Used by arrangement with the author.
<3> Layout of Fort Detroit image: drawn by Allan W. Eckert. From *The Conquerors* by Allan W. Eckert, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, MA., 1970. Used by arrangement with the author.

Steve Clark has been a founding leader, author, and teacher for the Catholic charismatic renewal since its inception in 1967. Steve is past president of the [Sword of the Spirit](#), an international ecumenical association of charismatic covenant communities worldwide. He is the founder of the [Servants of the Word](#), an



ecumenical international missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord.

Steve Clark has authored a number of books, including *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, *Finding New Life in the Spirit*, *Growing in Faith*, and *Knowing God's Will*, *Building Christian Communities*, *Man and Woman in Christ*, *The Old Testament in Light of the New*.

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On Mission: Part 2



A Life That Wants to Share Itself

by Steve Clark

Now let's return for a moment to that sentence that describes our call in the Sword of the Spirit:

“We are called to live, work and strive, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
so that others might have true life in Christ, now and forever.”

Note that there is a purpose to our calling – for others to have true life in Christ, now and for all eternity. We have a treasure: we have discovered what true life is really about – life with God, life God's way. We are called to be coworkers with God, to use the Apostle Paul's phrase, to bring others to that life. This is foundational to all that we do in mission. We are not always expressly evangelistic, of course. We do not start every day by preaching the gospel or spend it calling people up on the telephone to talk about Christ. We may do that sometimes, but all that we do, the very way we live our lives, is so that others might have true life in Christ, now and forever.

To be sure, community is for us as well. Most people in Ft. Detroit probably came there to gain a better life for themselves. Someone probably pointed out to them, “You know, you are not living as well in France or in Quebec as you could in the new settlement. You can get a big farm pretty much free or you can make more money trading.” And why are we in the community? Well, to most of us, people had probably said, “You can have a better life. You can know the Lord, you can have some people to support you, you can get some help with your family.” But that does not mean that community life is for our benefit alone.

When people start living this life, they soon discover that it is an expression of God's own life of generosity. God could have lived in heaven in total bliss all by himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all eternity, in perfect relationship. He could have said, “Why should we bother with all

those sinful, ungrateful people? They are only trouble!”

But that is not what God is like. He is by nature oriented to sharing his own life with others, even with insignificant creatures like us.

When we enter into God’s life, even if we enter into it just seeking something for ourselves, what we receive is a life that wants to share itself. As the life of God begins to work in us, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the same desire that God has, begins to come into our lives, the desire to say, “I have got something good and I want to share it.” We discover that there is something about this seed of new life inside us that wants to give itself away, and each of us gradually realizes, “I am becoming the kind of person who wants to share it with other people.” This is the life of the kingdom of God. As we generously live the “ordinary” life the Lord has given us in the Sword of the Spirit, we become, like Ft. Detroit, centers to radiate new life and bases for reaching out to those around us. We are foundationally, fundamentally a group of people who, as a part of our mission, live a certain life together in the Lord.

But of course we called not just to be something, but also to do things in order to fulfill our mission. These are summarized in four words in the second half of “Our Mission”: we are called *to proclaim, leaven, gather, and defend*.

An “Ordinary” Life on Mission

In order to give a feel for an “ordinary” life of mission that accomplishes these, I would like to begin with a personal testimony about serving the Lord in the workplace, given at a men’s breakfast by a man in one of our communities who is on the managerial team of a medium-sized business. He is a successful businessman, a very good community man and has a Christian community home life.

He also has a community service. Right now his community service is being on the music team. Once a week he goes to music practice and then leads a music team in community gatherings. A few years back he was a pastoral leader. Because of a development in his job at that point, he had a very hard time fulfilling any service responsibilities in the community that were not strictly limited in their time demands. His community did not need him to be a pastoral leader at the time and he was good at music. So he was assigned to the music team for a while, as community service.

In addition to that, he also does the normal service that most of us have come to recognize as part of living life in Christian community – People drop by, you invite your neighbors over to share, you bring a work colleague home for dinner, you welcome as overnight guests members of other communities or those who come to learn about community. As in the French fort we talked about, the gates are open. People come in and out and experience the life we have together.

Strategically Evangelistic

This brother described his approach at work by saying, “I’m somewhat open about Christianity.” As you probably know, there are various approaches to being a Christian in the workplace. Some are more “out there” and aggressive and some are more laid back, with various approaches in between. This brother is clearly on the laid-back side, although everybody in his workplace eventually realized that he was a convinced Christian.

He said he also did some selective evangelism at work. He did not go systematically through the whole work force, giving them the Four Spiritual Laws, the way certain evangelism courses seem to encourage. Instead, he would wait until he saw an opening and then talk to somebody, but rarely did he speak directly about the gospel. Many times he would just invite people to something that he thought they would respond positively to – a community meeting or a presentation on how to raise children. Sometimes he would invite them home and then they would see his was a Christian house. He would, for instance, make sure to say grace before the meal as a way of indicating how he and his family approached life.

A Person of Character

His coworkers also got to know certain things about him. It became clear, for instance, that he would not take part in certain conversations. He did not preach to his work colleagues about improving their language or their view of life; he simply refrained from taking part. They also knew that out of reverence for the Lord he would not work on Sunday. Occasionally he would make an exception for a weekend business trip, but on the whole he avoided working on Sunday and made clear that if it were frequently required of him, sooner or later he would have to leave the company. He also made it clear that because he was a Christian he would not take part in unethical financial practices. As he put it, “They knew that while I was doing the job, those financial practices were not going to go on.” To be sure, he was in a good position, because he knew that they wanted him. As a result he was able to take a stronger line without fear of losing his employment.

There were a couple of other things he thought were very important. First, he tried to do a good job. He said he spent more time thinking about how to do a good job than how to evangelizing people, and doing a good job put him in a position to have an evangelistic influence, because it gave him respect. He was also careful to practice Christian courtesy - to be respectful and helpful, to take an interest in people. As he put it, he tried, by the way in which he related to others in the work place, to express the kind of life that the Lord has put inside of us.

“Modest” Results

He described the results of his approach as “modest”. He felt that the topics of conversation and the language had improved considerably, as well as the general “feel” of the office environment. He also suspected that there were fewer unethical business practices because of his presence there. In addition, he thought that at least one person is definitely a Christian because of his influence, and several Christians are are now living a much better Christian life, apparently because he had been able to connect them with various Christian environments and community events. One person is now in the community because of contact with him at work.

This testimony would probably never make its way onto the Christian best-seller list. But it does show how a godly man in the middle of a secular work situation can be a channel of the life of God’s kingdom. If each business and government office in a city had one or two people like him, the cumulative effect of Christian presence and witness would be significant. The Lord is not calling all of us to preach to large crowds in stadiums but he is calling us to be a source of life in Christ right where we work and live out our daily lives.

Called to Do

I have used this story as an example because it illustrates what we are called to do, to fulfill our mission. It also illustrates how we can do it in an ordinary life situation. With this as background, let us look again at the statement “On Mission” and go through the four things we are called to do.

To Proclaim. We do need to speak the gospel. At some point people need to hear the good news. That is one of the ways in which they can come to the life of the Lord. The brother who gave the testimony did that, although he did not spend most of his time at it. He did it when he judged it would be helpful to move someone along. Proclaiming the good news should have the highest priority in what we do. We do it in various ways – sometimes by sponsoring evangelistic events, sometimes by witnessing through our life, often by taking opportunities in the course of daily life as they present themselves.

To Gather. A part of our mission is to gather people into communities and movements. Why are we concerned about “gathering”? Is it not enough for people to go to church on Sunday? Well, it may have been at one time, but we know from experience what happens to most people whose only Christian contact is their local church. If they are not involved in a community, a movement or something similar, they will usually end up being more and more influenced by the

environment around them rather than influencing their environment for the Lord. And rarely do their children turn out to be as Christian as they are.

So we seek to bring people into community, with a preference for introducing them to the one we are in, since we know it best and are in the best position to welcome them into it. If that does not seem right, we work to connect them to another environment where they can get help and support to live a more dynamic Christian life. Most frequently we “gather” simply by inviting people we know into closer contact with our “ordinary” community life and activities.

To Leaven. This is not a common term in modern speech: Leaven is an older word for yeast. It appears in a parable of the Lord Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel (13:33): “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” The parable expresses part of the Lord’s strategy for establishing his kingdom. Just as you put a little yeast into dough and gradually it permeates the dough and makes it rise, the Lord puts us into various situations in this world in order to permeate and change them so that more and more of the world can be opened to and changed by the life of the kingdom of God.

We do not have a social-actionist ideology. We do not believe that just trying to improving people and the world will bring about what God wants. We believe very firmly that Christian conversion is essential for people to come into new life and for human society to become what God created it to be. On the other hand, we are supposed to be a Christian influence, and the more we act as Christian leaven in our daily environments, seeking to promote good values, the more our presence disposes people to the kingdom of God and to Christian conversion, and the better their life will be.

To Defend. Sometimes we have a chance to defend the gospel and Christian morality. In the testimony that I spoke about, the brother found that difficult business decisions became an opportunity to quietly speak on behalf of Christian morality. I heard several of our brothers and sisters say that the recent U.S. presidential morality scandal, unfortunate as it was, had the good side effect of giving them an opportunity to speak to colleagues and friends on behalf of Christian morality. It is worth noting that we sometimes need to speak up, not just in society in general but in our churches, as well. During the recent wave of aggressive homosexual propaganda in American society, many of our members were the only ones in their churches willing to speak up in defense of traditional scriptural moral values. Once they did, however, they found they had a great deal of support from others around them, including from many non-Christians.

The Means

How do we do these four things: proclaim, gather, leaven and defend? The last paragraph of “Our Mission” gives a brief description: “We do these things individually both in our daily lives and by serving in the community or its outreaches. We do these things corporately by opening our life to others, by maintaining outreaches, and by helping to build new communities.” The example I gave illustrates how we can do these things individually in our daily lives. Now let’s look at how we do them corporately.

To begin with, we do our mission by opening our lives to others, which of course requires internal community service – taking care of the music, providing meals, setting up chairs. If we did not do such things, we would not have a community of disciples on mission. These support services allow the community to exist and to manifest God’s kingdom so others can see it. Our doing these services is missionary work, because it allows us to function as a missionary community.

One of the best examples of these essential support services is the work surrounding our mission trips. I recently visited one of our mission trips in Latin America. A group of North American adults and young people working alongside a similar group from Latin America were doing effective Christian service with genuine Christian zeal. But the trip did not just come together all by itself.

Dozens of adults on both continents, and not just parents of the young people involved, sent out

invitations to participate in the mission, helped find ways of raising funds and then provided the participants with transportation to and from the airports. Although the work of these community members would not be described as literally as “going on a mission trip”, they were essential to the mission’s success. That is life in a Christian community. The people who stay at home are an integral part of missionary endeavors.

We also do our mission by having community outreaches and, as individual members, serving in them. All of our communities have outreaches of various sorts, and the regions do as well. I believe a higher percentage of us are actively involved in them than ever before. Most of our regions send younger people off on mission teams and many of our young people are now taking a year or two off, to work in community outreaches. Our outreaches are a key way we accomplish our mission.

We also accomplish our mission by starting new communities. As you know, we have just recently been helping to start a new community in Fiji. The work began when Eroni Sotutu, a Fijian who is part of the Servants of the Word, spent three years doing theological studies in Fiji and provided inspiration and practical know-how about community. But several others also traveled there to help. A married couple from the Antioch Community in London, with their two children, went for a summer to give talks and live with the new brothers and sisters. A young couple from University Christian Outreach (UCO) in Ann Arbor lived and served there for almost two years, and another couple from London with their one-year-old son went to serve in Fiji for four months. People from the Lamb of God in New Zealand have gone there regularly to help the new community.

These people did not consider themselves great missionaries. They were for the most part ordinary members of communities who gave generously of their time and energy at a key moment in the life of the community in Fiji. Establishing communities is a part of our mission and something that many can personally contribute to. I hope that in the future many more couples, families and single people will lend a hand in this way, but whether we relocate to serve or we do support services from our home community, we can all participate in the active missionary work the Lord has called us to.

Sometimes our missionary work involves helping an existing community. Just recently the Work of Christ sent a team of people to Monterrey, Mexico, to help them establish a summer youth camp. In that case people did leave their city and country and went to a new location.

But we can all participate in our mission as we go about our normal, daily life. Whether we are raising children, managing our homes, studying, or working in our profession, we try to be men and women of God, sources of influence for the gospel in the various environments we are in. We are also “on mission” as a community when we open our life to others, inviting them to our homes and activities, hosting overnight guests, arranging community events to which we can bring neighbors and coworkers – in short whenever we share our life together with others. In large and small ways in our daily life, we seek to proclaim, gather, leaven, and defend. This is what it means to be a community of disciples on mission.

Volunteering for Mission

Joining a Sword of the Spirit community means volunteering for mission. We are not necessarily volunteering to be sent out to another country, although we might be sent out. We are not necessarily volunteering to spend all our time on a particular community outreach, although we might at some point be asked to. Rather, we are volunteering to live our whole lives as missionaries.

As communities we are asking the question, Could our life be more missionary? Could we live our life in a way which even more allows the kingdom of God to be advanced? Have we perhaps let our missionary edge become dulled? These are good questions for us to ask, as long as we keep the complete vision in mind. As we appreciate more fully how our whole life can be – and is – missionary, and as we live it in a true missionary spirit, God will be able to make us even

more fruitful and effective for him.

> See [Part 1: Being a Bulwark](#) by Steve Clark

This article was originally published in *The Mission of The Sword of the Spirit*, (c) 2004 Steve Clark

top photo: collage of Sword of the Spirit and Kairos outreach events



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Steve Clark has authored a number of books, including *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, *Finding New Life in the Spirit*, *Growing in Faith*, and *Knowing God's Will*, *Building Christian Communities*, *Man and Woman in Christ*, *The Old Testament in Light of the New*.

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“Reading the Signs of the Times”

by Bruce Yocum

Introduction to a New Series

by Bernhard Stock

Under this headline, “Reading the Signs of the Times”, we want to sporadically publish articles, book reviews and other material which have a prophetic orientation: reading the signs of the times and trying to understand what the Lord is telling us, or has already told us as the Sword of the Spirit. He has called us to be a prophetic people and to “build a bulwark against the tide of evil” – for this, we should learn to understand what the evil tides are and how we can be equipped to counter them.

The following article is from Bruce Yocum, who has just completed, but not yet published, a serious study of prophecy in Scripture and in the history and life of the church. He comments here on the phrase from the Gospel which we are using as the title for this series of occasional commentaries on what is happening in society and in the church.

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“Reading the Signs of the Times”

It is very common today among certain groups of Christians to hear it said that we, or the church, should discern the will of God by “reading the signs of the times.” There is good reason for that because it is taken directly from the words of Jesus. But it is a phrase that we must use correctly.

The phrase is from Matthew 16:3 and has a long history as a description of a type of prophecy. Its use in the gospel makes it the common property of many traditions and many currents in the church, but today is most popular among those in the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, among Catholics and among those everywhere who would like to promote certain changes in the church.. The connection of the phrase with prophecy is natural and understandable, but it can only be viewed as prophetic if it is a matter of God speaking to the church, or to members of the

church, or perhaps occasionally to the broader society. Sadly, today its use is often inverted, and becomes a means of the world speaking to the church. I will address the improper use of the phrase first, and then point to what we learn from the Gospel.

In order to illustrate how the phrase can be inverted, I will briefly describe some of the ways it has appeared in Catholic circles in the past fifty years. Similar stories could be told of other churches or groups. The use and misuse of the phrase is quite ecumenical.

Through its use in Vatican Council II, most notably in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, the phrase has become ubiquitous in the Catholic world. As Pope Paul VI commented “An expression of the Council has entered our habits: that of scrutinizing ‘the signs of the times’,” and he points out that it was used by Pope John XXIII “in the Apostolic Constitution with which he convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, when, after observing the sad spiritual conditions of the contemporary world, he wished to rekindle the hope of the Church, writing: ‘We like to place staunch confidence in the divine Saviour ... who exhorts us to recognize the signs of the times’, so that ‘we see amid obscure darkness numerous indications that seem to announce better times for the Church and for mankind’”²

Gaudium et spes itself says this:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.³

As we can see in this paragraph, *Gaudium et spes* itself does not connect the phrase with prophecy, but rather with the perennial task of the church to interpret what is happening in the world in the light of the gospel so that it can better proclaim the Gospel “to each generation.” The Gospel itself does not connect the phrase with prophecy.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed. (Matthew 16:1-4)

Here Jesus responds to a disingenuous question from the Pharisees and Sadducees by telling them that they should not need and will not be given a sign. In effect he tells them that they do not need a “prophetic” sign because they ought already to be able to understand what they see. This is very much what we see in the passage from *Gaudium et spes* just cited: the church ought to be able to “scrutinize the signs of the times” and interpret them “in the light of the gospel.” God’s revelation has been given to us to equip us to “interpret the signs of the times.”

On the other hand, later in *Gaudium et spes* we find this.

The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord’s Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God’s design for man’s total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.⁴

This is rather different, and while not using the gospel expression “signs of the times” clearly alludes to it, but this time says that the People of God ought to be able “in the light of faith” to “decipher” God’s presence and purpose in what is happening in the world.

For whatever reason, this phrase has, to paraphrase Paul VI, “has entered our habits” of speaking about prophecy. Often those who employ the phrase give no explanation of what count as “signs of the times” or how one knows what the correct “reading” of them may be. It is at times used as a way of saying, or implying, that what is now dominant in the surrounding culture is what God is saying. (And it is almost always used by those in Western culture, who apparently do not regard what happens in any other culture as important). In effect, the expression used in the Gospel is inverted, and we are asked to interpret the gospel in the light of current culture. We see this for example in the words of the late Catholic theologian Avery Dulles.

“Scrutinizing the signs of the times, Christianity must reinterpret its own doctrine and goals in relation to the world of today. To effect this transposition without loss of substance is a task calling for prophetic insight.”⁵

Whereas *Gaudium et spes* urges a scrutiny of the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, Dulles tells us it is the doctrine and goals of Christianity that need scrutiny. Very likely Dulles himself took seriously his comment about avoiding a “loss of substance,” but many others do not. Too often the phrase is used as a Trojan Horse to introduce current cultural norms under the cloak of prophecy.

Yves Congar, a contemporary of Dulles, says rather that what the prophets who read the signs of the times say is “essentially, the judgment of God on things; to [measure] things against the absolute of God.... To declare their truth in the light of the plan of God for the world, his design, his purpose. The prophets read the ‘signs of the times’, they bring out the significance of events with regard to the eschatological consummation.”⁶ That certainly is much closer to Jesus’ use of the expression in Matthew 16, and Congar ties it also to the eschatological pronouncement of Christ in Matthew 24:32-33: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

In the Pentecostal-Charismatic world the phrase also appears in connection with prophecy, often with prophecy that is supposedly about the “end times.” That makes some sense when read in connection with Matthew 16 and Matthew 24, but Christ in Matthew 16 is telling the disciples they do not need a special sign, or prophecy. They should already be able to see what is happening spiritually.

It is most fundamentally Scripture, God’s revelation in Christ, that allows us to interpret the signs of the times.

In the “charismatic” world the phrase is sometimes used in connection with 1 Chronicles 12:32: “Of Issachar men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, two hundred chiefs, and all their kinsmen under their command.” This use of the verse doesn’t make sense when cited as a manifestation of prophecy, since there is no reason from the passage to attribute the understanding of the times to prophecy. It is much more reasonably read as a matter of wisdom or prudence, perhaps as having the good judgment to align themselves with David rather than Saul.

Nevertheless there is something natural about reading Matthew 16:1-4 and 24:32-33 in connection with prophecy, and there is a proper place for reading the signs of the times prophetically. To do so is to bring to bear, as Congar says “the judgment of God on things.” It is

most fundamentally Scripture, God's revelation in Christ, that allows us to interpret the signs of the times.

Notes:

[1] *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly Edition in English, 24 April 1969, page 1.

[2] A.A.S 1962, p.6.

[3] *Gaudium et Spes*, 4. www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[4] *Ibid.*, 11.

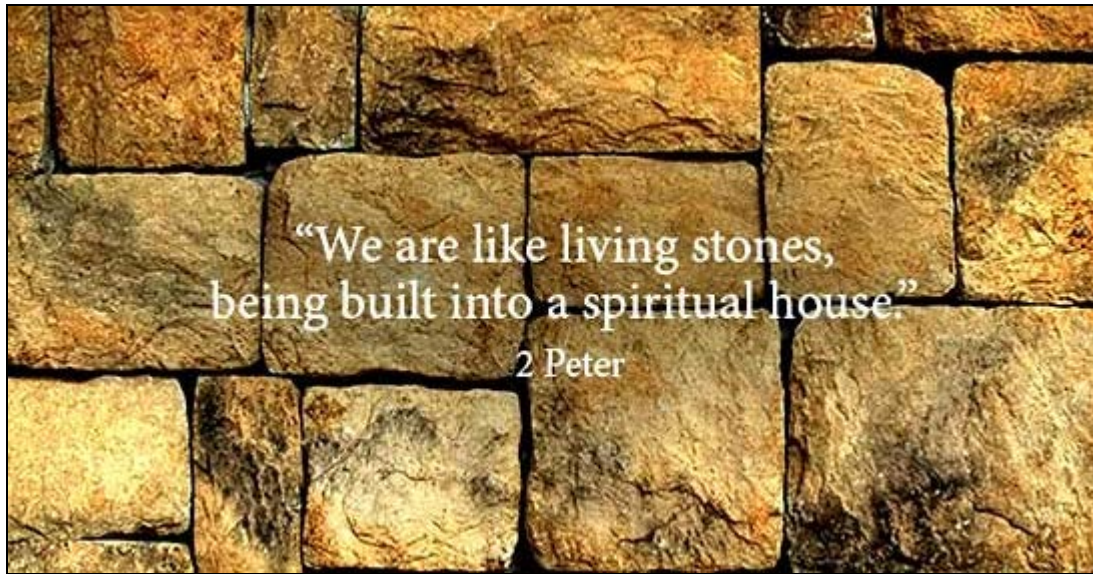
[5] Dulles, "Succession of Prophets," p. 31

[6] *Vraie et Fausse*, 183.

Bruce Yocum has been involved in leadership and teaching in charismatic renewal from its earliest years, and has served in the Sword of the Spirit for many years in North America, Europe and the Middle East, Latin America and the South Pacific. He was Presiding Elder of the Servants of the Word for thirteen years. In 1976 he wrote the book "Prophecy", which has been translated into at least nine languages.

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“Living Stones”

We are being built into a spiritual house to be a spiritual priesthood
– acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

A Commentary on 1 Peter 2:4–10

by Dan Keating

The following short commentary from the First Letter of Peter, Chapter 2, verses 4-10 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.

Dr. Keating explains the aim of his commentary in the introduction to 1 Peter: “The First Letter of Peter is a hidden gem, tucked away among the catholic epistles, just waiting to be discovered. Overshadowed by the longer and weightier letters of Paul, 1 Peter has often been neglected or undervalued. My aim in this commentary is to aid the reader in discovering the riches of this letter, in the hope that he or she may hear its proclamation of the gospel anew and follow the call to suffer joyfully with Christ.” – ed.

1 Peter 2: 4 Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, ⁵ and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it says in scripture: “Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.” ⁷ Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”⁸ and “A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall.” They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.

vs.4-5: In these two verses Paul used the image of a house, or temple, made of stones.

Echoing Psalm 34, Peter calls us to **come to him**,²³ to Jesus himself, **a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God**. This phrase is drawn from two Old Testament texts: Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16 (Peter will quote both texts below in vv. 6–8). Jesus is the “stone” that the Father has given to serve as the foundation of God’s own house.²⁴ Though rejected by the Jewish leaders of his day, he is raised up and put in place as the foundation of the Church. He is a “living” stone because, though rejected and cut off in death, he has been raised from the dead and now lives.

Strikingly, Peter now applies the imagery of “stones” directly to the Christian people. We are to be **like living stones** who let themselves **be built into a spiritual house**. The image of a “house” predominates here, both as a noun (*oikos*), but also as embedded in the verb “to be built into” (*oikodomeo*). This is no ordinary house made of lifeless stones but the true spiritual temple of God that has living members, with Christ himself the cornerstone of the temple (see Ephesians 2:19–22). In the Old Testament the temple in Jerusalem is often simply called the house of God (see sidebar below, “The Temple as God’s House”). It was the dwelling place of God among his people. We the Christian people have now become the dwelling place of God; we are living stones built together “into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

More than this, we are called to serve in this house as **a holy priesthood**. Here the imagery slides from that of the building to those who serve in that building. A priest is one ordained to serve in God’s temple. He offers sacrifices and brings the prayers and needs of the people before the Lord. What then does Peter mean by calling the Church a “holy priesthood” called **to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ**? He does not develop the practical implications here, but we should note that he is not referring specifically to the ordained priesthood. Rather, it is the entire Christian people by virtue of their baptism into Christ who have entered into the inheritance given to the people of Israel to be a “royal priesthood” (v. 9; Exodus 19:6). We are all called to stand before the Lord as priests, offering our lives as living sacrifices.

We should not overlook the repetition of “spiritual” in verse 5.²⁵ We have now become a “spiritual house” and a priesthood offering “spiritual sacrifices.” “Spiritual” does not mean immaterial or unreal. Rather, “spiritual” refers to the divine life and activity of the Holy Spirit in and through us. We are now the house where God’s Spirit dwells and we offer our lives as sacrifices in the power of the Spirit.

vv. 6–8: To support his point Peter ties together three Old Testament texts that concern a “stone” in God’s plan.²⁶ The first (v. 6) is from Isaiah 28:16, where the Lord God reprimands those who put their trust in other gods and promises that he himself will establish among his people a cornerstone, chosen and precious to him, such that **whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame**. The second (v. 7) is an exact quotation of Psalm 118:22: **The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone**. Here, the psalmist rebukes those who reject the “stone” that the Lord himself is establishing as the cornerstone of his own house. The third (v. 8) is a loose adaptation of Isaiah 8:14, in which the prophet chides both houses of Israel for failing to believe the Lord who will become for these faithless ones **a stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall**.

Peter shows that Jesus is the “stone” promised in the Scriptures, rejected by the leaders of Israel who put him to death (see Acts 4:10–11) but raised to life to become the cornerstone of God’s house. The key issue is faith. For those **who have faith**, the stone established by the Father is “precious,” but to those **without faith**, this stone becomes a cause of stumbling and falling. What does it mean to stumble in this context? **They stumble by disobeying the word**, that is, they do not believe and obey the gospel (note the contrast with “obedience to the truth”

in 1:22).

What should we make of Peter's claim that this stumbling over the stone in unbelief was **their destiny**? Were they personally fated by God to disbelieve and disobey the gospel of Christ? Some have interpreted Peter this way, but this is not the conclusion Peter is drawing here. Rather, he is showing that the Scriptures predicted ahead of time that Jesus, the stone established by the Father, would be a cause of division and that some would not obey his word. The biblical prediction does not rob anyone of free will. Instead, it gives confidence to believers that the ongoing rejection of Jesus by some was foreknown and foretold by God and so falls within his plan and purpose for the salvation of the world.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Temple as God's House

Once his kingdom was secure, David consulted the prophet Nathan about building a house for the Lord God to dwell in, and Nathan gave his blessing (2 Samuel 7:1–16). But the Lord interrupted this plan, telling David through Nathan that he had no need of a house to dwell in. Instead, the Lord turned the tables on David and promised that he would build a house for David, meaning a dynasty of kings. The Lord also promised that David's "offspring" would build the house of the Lord, and this was fulfilled by David's son, Solomon. The glorious temple that Solomon built (see 1 Kings 5–8) was the focal point for Israel's life, worship, and sacrifice. Destroyed by the Babylonian armies in 587 BC, the temple was rebuilt by the returning exiles (see Ezra 3). Enlarged by King Herod the Great (37–4 BC), the temple in Jerusalem stood as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus not only said that he was greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6), but he also claimed that he himself was the temple of the living God (John 2:19–21). He is now the dwelling place of God on earth, and, as living stones built into him, we have now become God's house where he dwells through the Spirit.

1 Peter 2: 9 But you are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises" of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were "no people" but now you are God's people; you "had not received mercy" but now you have received mercy.

OT references: Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 42:6–7; 43:20–21; Hosea 1:6–10; 2:23
NT reference: Ephesians 2:11–13

vs.9: We have now come to the climax of this passage. Peter's main concern is not, in fact, with those who disobey (v. 8) but with the glorious privilege of those who have believed in the "living stone" established by the Father. He announces that believers in Christ have become **a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own**. The four phrases build upon one another with powerful effect and together communicate the staggering dignity that is ours in Christ. The language is not Peter's own invention. He has selected and combined phrases from the Greek version of Isa 43:20–21 and Exod 19:6.27 By linking these texts, Peter brings to mind the two great moments of deliverance in Israel's history: the deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Exod 19) and the deliverance from exile in Babylon (Isa 43). Peter is saying that what Israel was and is called to be has now been fulfilled in the Church through the deliverance Christ has accomplished.

All the terms point to a corporate reality. We have become a "race," a "nation," and a "people," specially chosen by God for his own possession, to be holy as he is holy. And this race, nation, and people is also a royal priesthood. By virtue of our incorporation into Christ, we have attained a truly kingly and priestly status not as separate individuals but *as a people*,

the Church.

Moreover, our royal priesthood obliges us to evangelize: we are to **announce the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light**. The Greek word translated “praises” is literally “virtues” and comes directly from Isa 43:21.²⁸ Though the term “virtues” usually refers to good moral qualities, here it refers to the saving acts of God. As the people of God, we are called to announce God’s great deeds by giving testimony to what he has done for us. The contrast between light and darkness depicts the conversion that ought to accompany baptism: we come out of the darkness of our former way of life into the light of Christ. Here it is helpful to call to mind the mission of the servant of the Lord in Isa 42:6–7. He was called to be a “covenant to the people,” a “light to the nations” (NRSV), and to free from prison those who “live in darkness.” Jesus has done this through the New Covenant, bringing both Jew and Gentile into the full inheritance promised to Israel. This is what we are called to make known in the world—and when we do so, we are giving God praise.

Reflection and application

If all this is true—that each of us has been called to be a member of a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation”—then each of us is also called to participate in the *mission* of this priesthood and nation to the whole world. We are God’s “own possession” not simply for our own sakes. We are also called to “announce the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Each of us needs to know and experience the freshness of the gospel and to experience wonder at being called into God’s marvelous light. Not many of us are called to preach to large multitudes, but all of us are capable of giving personal testimony to the great deeds that God has worked in our own lives.

Notes

²³ This is a clear reference to Ps 34:6 (LXX 33:6), which in the Greek text says, “come to him and be radiant.”

²⁴ Jesus applies Ps 118:22 to himself in the Gospels (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17).

²⁵ The Greek word translated “spiritual” here (pneumatikos) is different than the one translated “spiritual” in verse 2 (logikos).

²⁶ The Old Testament “stone” texts singly or in combination are used in a similar way by Jesus himself (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17–18), by Paul (Rom 9:32–33; Eph 2:20), and by Peter in Acts (4:11).

²⁷ From Isa 43:20–21 (LXX) with slight alterations come “chosen race” and a “people” for God’s “possession”; from Exod 19:6 (LXX) come the exact phrases “royal priesthood” and “holy nation.”

²⁸ “Virtue” is an unusual translation of the Hebrew “praise,” found only in a few texts in the latter part of Isaiah and once in Habakkuk and Zechariah (Isa 42:8, 12; 43:21; 63:7; Hab 3:3; Zech 6:13).

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

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Taking Our Place in the Bulwark

by Bob Tedesco

It's a Wonderful Life!

According to George Bailey (actor Jimmy Stewart in the film, *It's a Wonderful Life*), having an angel and a number of good friends is a "wonderful life". I wonder how he might respond to knowing that we have an army of angels (2 Kings 6:16-17) if needed, and tons of Christian friends! Our way of life in Sword of the Spirit communities is truly a really, really wonderful thing.

This Life is a "New Thing"

From the beginning of the charismatic renewal which began in the 1960s, we have heard the prophetic word about God doing a "new thing" in our midst today. Recently, a couple of our community leaders have sensed that the Lord wants us to see that the call to build a bulwark of covenant communities is a big part of the "new thing," and that he is waiting for us, young and old, to take it more seriously. He is calling us to be "all in"... heart, mind, soul and strength. The Bulwark he wants us to be part of is not meant to have gaps and holes in it.

Have you ever watched children playing soccer? At any given time, several of the kids will be distracted and the opposing team will run right by them. Often, as adults, we are so distracted by certain details of our lives, that the enemy just runs right by us with no resistance. (James 4:7)

As we consider the "new thing," notice that even elements of our way of life seem new or unusual to those around us: a people trying to integrate baptism in the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit into daily life and not just a prayer meeting is an unusual thing.

A people trying to welcome and build the Kingdom of God...

A people trying to live a scriptural way of life...

A people trying to live according to a scriptural covenant...

A people trying to live in an ecumenical community...

A people trying to live with lay leadership...

A people trying to raise their children as disciples of Christ...

A people who builds a youth bridge covering K through post-university or trade school ages...

A people who take their place in a world-wide bulwark that presents the gospel and the culture of the kingdom of God...

There may be more, but these together make a very new thing, a very remarkable thing, a very

wonderful thing.

It's a Covenant Life

This wonderful life is a covenant life. It might be prudent to reconsider our own covenant annually. Our way of life is described in our community covenant and it becomes reality as we are faithful to it.

Our God is a Covenant Maker!

Starting early in the Old Testament the Lord shows himself to be a covenant maker and a covenant keeper. A covenant is a promise, and a community covenant is a set of promises that describes a hoped-for way of life. This full-life covenant is family-like and is meant to express the kingdom of God on earth.

The true "Super Models"

We all know what the world sees as "super models". But the title is based on what you consider to be super. We happen to have a superior savior...the best in the entire universe. And, we are called to individually and corporately reflect his life and kingdom to the world. As such, we are super-models as individuals and collectively the bride of Christ. We are called to be a city on a hill and the people of God.

Integrity and Covenants

In the early 1600's a Catholic priest named Camillus de Lellis founded a religious community dedicated to caring for the sick. He was later canonized in 1746. He is credited with the quote: "Commitment is doing what you said you would do, after the feeling you said it in has passed." What a good description for married couples, for religious orders, and for covenant community members. Time, circumstances and moods will test our commitments to Christ, to our spouses if married, and to our covenanted brothers and sisters. Our integrity is being tested as we live out our covenant relationships.

Another quote that recently emerged in an online bible study: "A new year is a time to look forward; a time to stretch; a time to grow; a time to stop babying yourself." Whether we're entering a new year, a new season or simply taking some time for spiritual reflection, reviewing our commitment to our covenant promises will be challenging.

Details...

The Lord makes use of covenants to establish and develop relationships. Marriage is a good example: we make a few simple promises only to find out that those promises cover more of our lives and decisions than we thought. Some examples: 1) I did not explicitly promise to come home every night or 2) to live in common sharing or 3) to hold down a full-time job, etc. There are many behaviors and practices needed to make a good marriage work, to make a good family work.

While not a marriage covenant, our community covenant covers many intended details of our way of life, but more will be necessary for a successful, covenanted, godly way of life. If we honor the details of our covenant, we will have a great start on what the Lord has for us.

Some of the important details in considering our commitment and faithfulness to our call are:

1. Attendance: We are committed to being present when the community gathers to pray... and we should be there.
2. Forgiveness: Have we been quick to forgive and to ask forgiveness?
3. Prayer: Have we been faithful to personal prayer and scripture study?
4. Tithing: Have we honored our financial responsibility to the community?
5. Authority: Have we been submissive to the community leadership and taken pastoral care seriously?

These are some covenant details worthy of consideration in any review of our commitments.

“Get Back”

It’s hard to choose among the pop culture’s challenges. “Get back!” is an old Beatle’s song that says, “Get back to where you once belonged!” There are several movies with the title, “Back to the Future!” We want a blessed future and we want to do the right thing in the present, and those things were written into our covenant in the past.

It’s probably not safe to use a movie or song to draw a spiritual conclusion. But I sure don’t want to hear the Lord say (as in Revelation 2: 45), “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember, then, from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.”

The Lord wants us to show our love for him by our obedience to what he has called us to. I remember the devotion and dedication that we had at the beginning...it was remarkable. As we consider and celebrate our covenant, let’s get back to where we once belonged (repent) and love the Lord and the brothers and sisters in the way that he has shown us. Let’s continue in this “new thing” that he is doing and the “wonderful life” of covenant community!

> [See other articles by Bob Tedesco](#)

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top image: A collage of photos depicting some Sword of the Spirit activities worldwide, plus a family bible study pic by bigstock.com

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A Study of Ephesians 4

Unity and Growth in the Body of Christ

by Derek Prince

In Chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul describes the completed body of Christ as having four distinctive marks: It will be united, strong, mature, and complete.

Paul very rightly begins this tremendous church-building chapter by emphasizing Christian character.

"I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

This matter of character is crucial. You may wish to build a building, and you may be aware that the best architect in the world has drawn up flawless blueprints for it. But you must also have the right materials to build with. If the architect calls for reinforced concrete and steel, you cannot use bricks and wooden beams and build successfully. In the same way, we cannot build the kind of church Paul describes unless we become people with the character of Jesus Christ. To become people of character we need the full power of the Spirit, and we ourselves must decide to change.

Seven basic unities of the church

Paul goes on in this chapter to deal with what I call the seven basic unities of the church (verses 4, 5, and 6): *one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father*. Those are basic, inescapable unities of the true church of Jesus Christ. Then Paul discusses diversity. I find that whenever

Paul tackles the issues of the church he always begins with unity, and then unfolds diversity. After establishing the unity of the church, Paul goes on to say, "But grace was given to each of

us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ...And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...."

Thus the primary diversity in the body is the ministry gifts that the ascended Christ gave. Let us look closely at the words used for "gifts" in this passage. The word translated "gifts" in verse 8 is *doma* in Greek. But when Paul says, "according to the measure of Christ's gift," he uses the word *dorea*. Now where the word *dorea* is used in the New Testament, the "gift" referred to is a person. There are two great *dorea*: Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other words, Paul is saying here that in these ministry gifts, Christ gave himself back to the church through the Holy Spirit: "According to the measure of Christ's *dorea*."

Christ is the perfect embodiment of everyone of those ministries. He's the perfect apostle, the perfect prophet, the perfect evangelist, the perfect shepherd, the perfect teacher. Seminary or Bible school training alone does not make a man a shepherd. A man is a shepherd only because Christ the shepherd lives in him. If I am a teacher, it's not because I spent seven years at Cambridge University. I am a teacher only because Christ the teacher gave himself to me.

In a certain sense, the entire purpose of Jesus Christ for his church flows forth from these ministries. I do not believe that the purpose of Christ for the church could be fulfilled without them.

I want to give you a brief definition of each of these ministries, realizing that my definition will be extremely inadequate.

By definition, an apostle is one who is sent forth. A person who has not been sent forth cannot be an apostle. The first apostles were sent forth by Jesus while he was on earth, but in Ephesians 4, Paul is primarily referring to apostles who came later: "When he ascended on high, he gave gifts to men and his gifts were that some should be apostles ..."

Apostle

An apostle is the architect of the building. It is his responsibility to know every part of the building – from foundation to roof. When his apostleship was challenged, Paul said to the Corinthian church, "If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 9:2). Paul meant that Christ had never been preached when he went to Corinth. When he left after completing his ministry, Corinth had a complete, functioning, local church with all its gifts, offices, ministries, and graces. This complete church was the seal of Paul's apostleship. An apostle does not always build the local church, but he is the one who has the final word on how it should be built.

Prophet

A prophet is very simply a man who receives a message from God, supernaturally, to be delivered at a certain time and in a certain place. Let me illustrate from Jonah. Jonah walked into Nineveh and told the people that God was going to judge them. If Jonah had been a preacher he could have said that. What made Jonah a prophet? He said, "Forty days is all you've got." He had a direct, supernatural revelation.

Evangelist

An evangelist is one who conveys the good news of Jesus Christ. You might say that the evangelist is God's paratrooper. He drops behind the enemy lines before the devil even knows he's there. Phillip is the only evangelist actually described in the New Testament and he acted as a paratrooper. He did not actually get his converts baptized in the Holy Spirit, but he did get them baptized in water.

Shepherd

The meaning of the word shepherd is lost on many of us today. But in the Lord's time and for many centuries before that, being a shepherd was a quite common occupation. When the writers of the New Testament letters, Paul and Peter especially, used this word to describe a

ministry in the church, they expected their readers to understand its meaning immediately. A shepherd in those times (and in some places even today) took a personal, caring interest in each one of his sheep. He made sure the needs of each sheep were met, that none got lost or strayed away, and that they were led to good grazing land. The shepherd personally protected the flock from harm by doing battle with wild animals himself. Each sheep knew the shepherd, knew his voice, and trusted him. He stood in the midst of them and led them.

The ministry of shepherd, then, is to take care of the people of God, making sure the needs of each person are met, spiritually and sometimes even physically. It is his responsibility to make sure that each member of the body of Christ is receiving the kind of care and encouragement he or she needs to grow strong and mature as a Christian. He is the one who leads them and makes sure things go well for them.

Teacher, interestingly enough, is related to many of the other ministries. For instance, Paul said that he was ordained an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles. There were certain prophets and teachers in Antioch. Teacher went with prophet. In Luke 20, Scripture says that Jesus was evangelizing and teaching. Teaching apparently can go with any of the other ministries. Whether it is a ministry on its own is a matter of discussion. We would probably have to classify Apollos as a teacher. We do not hear of him fulfilling any other role, yet he clearly had a valid ministry of teaching.

After Paul lists the ministries, he describes their three purposes in verses 12 and 13: (1) they exist to equip believers for their tasks. Those who receive the gifts do not do all the work, but train the believers to do what they are called to; (2) they exist to build up the body; (3) and they exist to bring all believers into unity, maturity, and completeness.

In verses 14 and 15 we are presented by Paul with a kind of parenthesis which gives us two stark alternatives: "...50 that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness and deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

God gives us this choice: come under discipline, submit to God's appointed ministries in the church for your upbuilding, and grow up; or, if you refuse, you will remain a spiritually retarded child, subject to deception, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.

Paul tells us very fairly and honestly that there are men waiting to deceive us. The only safety from deception is to come under God's appointed authority in ministry, and grow to maturity.

The completed Body of Christ

Verse 16 describes the completed body. Talking about Christ the head, it says: "From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies according to the effectual working on the measure of every part, makes increase of the body under the edifying of itself in love." This is a complex sentence and I am not going to try here to analyze it grammatically or syntactically. But I'll tell you what I think it means. I see three things in that picture of the completed body. First of all, each member is rightly related to Christ the head. This is the most important point. Secondly, each member its function. Thirdly, each member is rightly related, by joints, to the other members.

To draw practical applications from this image, I want to talk about my interpretation of the parts of human anatomy spoken of in this passage.

Interpersonal relationships

First of all, what are the joints? In my understanding, the joints are interpersonal relationships, the places where the members touch and fit one another. The passage says, "According to that which every joint supplies." The channel of supply is the joint; you can be in the body, but if you're not rightly jointed, you don't get your supply.

Covenant love

Joints are held in place by ligaments. Just as our body's joints and bones are knit together by ligaments, so do ligaments bind together the members of the body of Christ. I believe the ligaments that join the bones are covenant love.

Covenant love is not an emotion; it is a commitment. The marriage commitment is "for better or for worse, for rich or for poor, in sickness and in health." It doesn't depend on situations, circumstances, or emotions. It is a life commitment. In the same way, covenant love among Christians is a life commitment that does not depend on our feelings, or the weather, or the preacher. I believe that covenant love is the only way we can be joined and still hold up under stress. Unfortunately, most members of the body of Christ today are not firmly held together, because there is no real covenant love.

Covenants are not simply human contracts. There has to be an element of divine sovereignty in every covenant relationship; I do not believe that we can put the bones together ourselves.

Ministries of the body

To extend our metaphor further, let us consider the body's muscles – that which makes the body move. I believe the muscles are the activities or ministries of the body. Oddly enough, muscles in the body work against each other. In other words, some muscles bend my arm while others extend it. So it is in the body of Christ. The activities of the body work in tension, some bending and some extending as the body moves. For years I missed this point completely. I wanted to be with a group of people who thought, believed, preached and dressed like me. If I had succeeded, I would have constructed a paralyzed body of Christ, incapable of moving at all. The secret of the body's activity is the tensions within it. Properly balanced tensions make the body function. Unbalanced tensions paralyze it.

For instance, you've probably seen a crippled person whose arm is bent up tightly, close to his body. This happens because the muscles that normally straighten the arm have failed, and cannot counterbalance the action of the muscles that bend the arm. Some bodies of Christ walk with their arms like that: only half the muscles are working.

Counterbalancing tensions in the body

Here are six different counterbalancing tensions in the body of Christ. I think most of us in our churches or prayer groups experience these: (1) institutional versus charismatic; (2) what we call "fixed-form" worship versus spontaneous~Which is right? Both; (3) tradition versus immediate truth~Which do we need? Both; (4) evangelism versus pastoral care~the evangelist says, "Brother, all we need to do is tell people about the Lord." The pastor says, "What are you going to do with the ones that are saved already?" That's a natural and proper tension in the body; (6) plurality versus leadership - Many different kinds of people are serving the Lord, but we must have leadership over them all. We've got to make room for both.

Now let me mention some common, personal tensions in the body: the outgoing versus the reflective; the impulsive versus the cautious; the inspirational versus the analytical; the mystical-prophetic versus the practical administrative. Instead of bemoaning the presence of these differences in the body, let us thank God that he has placed them there. Without them, the body of Christ is swiftly on its way to paralysis. But with the creative tension of these differences the whole body and all its parts can work effectively.

In his word, God gives us a vision for the completed body of Christ. He tells us what it should look like and how it should function. If our work is to be fruitful and enduring, we must pay close attention to his plan and set aside our own. We need the sturdy raw material of upright, personal character. We need the seven unities of the body. We must have the diversity of the ministries and their proper functioning. Neither can we do without the ligaments of covenant love that bind the members together nor the muscle-like, counterbalancing action of the

various ministries and personalities.

If we do not submit to God's plan and his ministries, God gives us only one choice-spiritual retardation and deception. But if we diligently follow his blueprint for the body of Christ, what we will attain to is nothing less than the glory of Christ on earth.

This article was first published in *New Covenant*, January 1976, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan USA.

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Born into a Battle

Living a Christian way of life in a secular society

by Jerry Munk

A person who joined the church in the early days of its development knew that he or she was making a radical decision. In the first place, society was hostile to Christians. One who believed in Christ faced loss of status, of livelihood, of property, and, perhaps, the loss of life itself.

Beyond this, the Christian was also embracing a new way of life, a way of life very different from their neighbors. How they looked at science, history, marriage, politics, family relationships, morality, even their concept of human existence was different from, and often opposed to, the thinking of the majority. Indeed, intrinsic to following the “way of Christ” was the idea that one would be consciously different: that they would be in the world but not of it.

Secularization

Western society remains basically secular. It is not following God, and it is opposed to those who do. Most Christians today have also become secularized.

Let's look at the evidence:

Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z

"It may come as no surprise that the influence of Christianity in the United States is waning. Rates of church attendance, religious affiliation, belief in God, prayer and Bible-reading have been dropping for decades. Americans' beliefs are becoming more post-Christian and, concurrently,

religious identity is changing. Enter Generation Z: Born between 1999 and 2015, they are the first truly “post-Christian” generation.

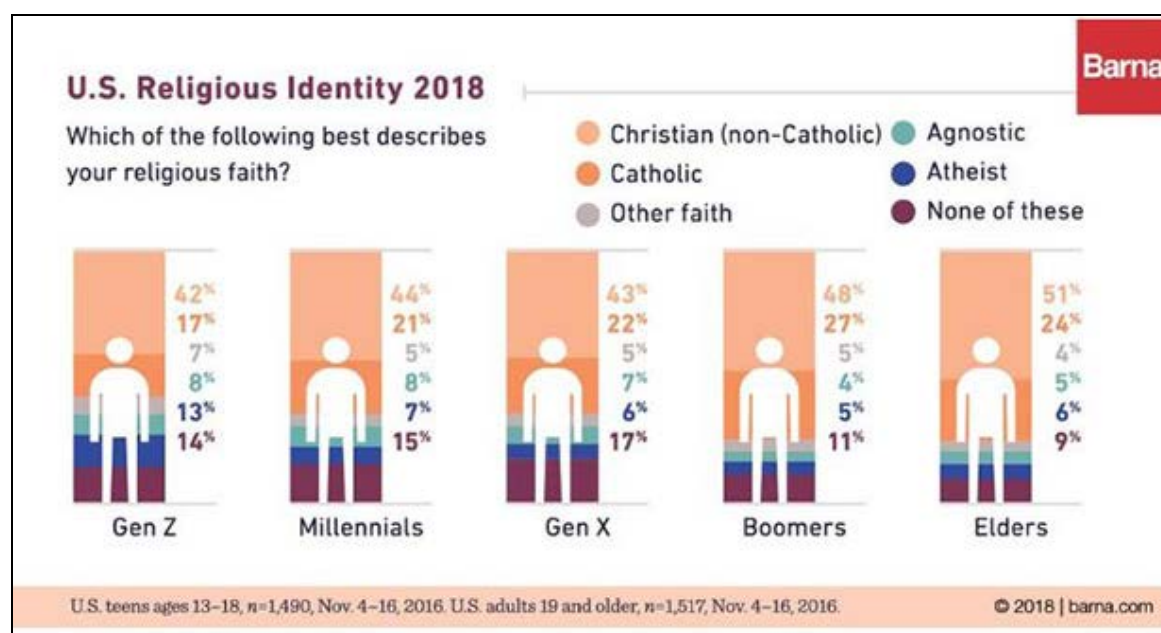
"More than any other generation before them, Gen Z does not assert a religious identity. They might be drawn to things spiritual, but with a vastly different starting point from previous generations, many of whom received a basic education on the Bible and Christianity. And it shows: The percentage of Gen Z that identifies as atheist is double that of the U.S. adult population.

Atheism on the rise

"For Gen Z, “atheist” is no longer a dirty word: The percentage of teens who identify as such is double that of the general population (13% vs. 6% of all adults). The proportion that identifies as Christian likewise drops from generation to generation. Three out of four Boomers are Protestant or Catholic Christians (75%), while just three in five 13- to 18-year-olds say they are some kind of Christian (59%)."

An Increasingly Elusive Truth

More than one-third of Gen Z (37%) believes it is not possible to know for sure if God is real, compared to 32 percent of all adults. On the other side of the coin, teens who do believe one can know God exists are less likely than adults to say they are very convinced that is true (54% vs. 64% all adults who believe in God). For many teens, truth seems relative at best and, at worst, altogether unknowable.



[See full [Barna report](https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/) at <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>]

A Biblical world-view survey

An earlier nationwide survey in the US conducted by [The Barna Group](#) among a representative sample of adults explored how many have what might be considered a “biblical worldview.” The report from Barna compared current results to the outcomes from a similar survey the company conducted in 1995, 2000 and 2005.

For the purposes of the survey, a “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

Overall, the current research revealed that **only 9% of all American adults have a biblical worldview**. The research data showed that one pattern emerged loud and clear: **young adults rarely possess a biblical worldview**. The current study found that less than one-half of one percent of adults aged 18 to 23 have a biblical worldview, compared to about one out of every

nine older adults.

Now, let's look at compliance.

God's Commands

(Note: The numbering of the commandments in this article follows the pattern of the Orthodox Church, as this article was written originally for an Orthodox audience.) The first two of God's commands teach us to worship and value God before all else, and that we shall not worship the works of our hands. Rather than valuing worship of God, our society concentrates on material accumulation and personal fulfillment. We are next commanded to revere the names of God and not abuse them, but His names have become standard swear words. The Sabbath, the Lord's Day, is now a time for pleasure and yard work, but God intended it for worship and rest. He commands us to honor father and mother, but society has devalued traditional family structure in favor of career advancement while the government is systematically stripping parents of their authority and responsibility. The Sixth Commandment says "Thou shall not kill," but millions of lives have been lost to abortion, "Right to die" legislation now threatens the elderly and infirm as well.

Sexual Morality

The Bible clearly teaches that sex has a very special and protected place – inside the covenant of marriage. Today, however, half of all marriages end in divorce while adultery touches over half of those which don't. A 2007 [study](#) in the US found that the average age at which teenagers have their first sexual experience steadily decreased during the 1990s, and now almost half of American adolescents report that they have had sex by the time they graduate from high school.

God says, "Do not steal," but cheating on our income tax has become an American art form (economists estimate that 10 to 30% of transactions are unreported). We are also commanded not to bear false witness, but slander and innuendo are standard "reporting techniques" in the media, while gossip fills work place and neighborhood. Finally, we are told not to covet what God has given another, yet popular TV shows that promote the lifestyles of the rich and famous have no problem finding viewers.

What's the Standard

What this evidence shows is that our culture has moved away from the Judeo-Christian morality and has embraced some other ethic against which it measures right and wrong.

It is interesting that many people describe their moral ethic as the Ten Commandments, but upon close examination it is obvious that the Ten Commandments are, in fact, not guiding the conduct of society. Secular society, it would seem, is involved in some kind of mass rationalization and self deception where moral values no longer line up with specific scriptural standards, but people, through ignorance and personal justification, fail to see or admit that fact.

A Radical Decision

My reason for developing this argument is quite simple – to alert us to the fact that our society is indeed not "Christian." We need to realize that if we truly follow the way of Christ, our lives will look considerably different from those of our neighbors. We live in a situation that is quite similar to that of the early believers. While most of us will not face physical persecution because of our beliefs (although some will), choosing to faithfully follow Christ means that how we look at science, history, marriage, politics, family relationships, morality, and even human existence will be different from, and often opposed to, the thinking of the majority. Indeed, following the way of Christ still means being consciously different – being in the world but not of it. We need to know that the decision to follow Christ is still a radical one.

Taking a Stand

What concerns me is how very few Christians seem to be aware of how bad the situation is.

We have lost the notion that giving our lives to God through Christ is supposed to make a difference. We accept the world's values and the world's ethics as our own with seeming little understanding that in doing so we are rejecting the Lord we claim to serve. Statisticians cannot

find a discernable difference between Christian and secular behavior. Just as many Christians engage in premarital sex; just as many Christian marriages are broken by divorce; just as many Christians end up in jail. Rather than standing against the tide of secularization, firmly anchored to the revealed word of God, many, many Christians are choosing to go with the flow.

Born Into a Battle

Whether we like it or not, whether we realize it or not, each one of us is born into a battle. On one side stands Jesus Christ and his followers. On the other side is Satan and those who follow him. There is no middle ground. Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). Subscribing to a comfortable, but meaningless, "social Christianity" is not standing with Jesus. Casual Christians become Christian casualties. He calls for a total giving over of our lives to him: "Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he hates his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, and himself as well." Nothing, absolutely nothing, can stand between us and our Lord.

An Army At War

The body of Christ has been likened to an army. Indeed, we are an army at war. There is a spiritual battle going on right now: a battle for the souls of men and women, for the spiritual destinies of our children, and for the control of society. The general disobedience to God's laws mentioned earlier is not simply an interesting social phenomenon. There are spiritual forces at work here. In the book of Ephesians (6: 12) we read: "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age."

Church Militant

In the midst of this battle, the people who constitute the church militant are strangely complacent. The average Christian seems not to know that he or she is a member of an army, let alone that there is a war going on. The quest for worldly peace and prosperity have lulled us to sleep, and while we slumber, the evil one has been at work. Territory once won for Christ has been lost. Satan is making advances. Entire nations that were once considered Christian have been snatched away by the enemy.

As Christian men and women, as members of God's army, we need to be clear about where we stand. We are in the midst of a battle. God has assured us that he and his church shall be, indeed, already are, victorious. But it is equally clear that in the course of the battle there will be casualties. I believe that in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23), the seeds that fell among the thorns especially apply to our day and time. We have received the Word of God and have begun to grow, but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke us, and many have become unfruitful.

Let each one of us examine our lives. Have we made a radical commitment for Jesus? Are we willing to be different, to stand against the tide for the sake of Christ? Will we embrace God's standards as our own, and when we fall short, will we respond with repentance, not rationalization? Are we willing to invest the time and effort necessary to lead our children to Christ and train them to serve as his soldiers also?

The Apostle Paul challenges us, "Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. Do not conform to the standards of this world, but let God transform you by a complete renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:1,2).

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> See other [articles by Jerry Munk](#) in previous issues of Living Bulwark

Top illustration of man under spiritual attack reading God's Word in Scripture (c) by Kevin Carden

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The Attack on God's Word – And the Response

by Ralph Martin

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The Christian people today are facing many serious challenges to their integrity. I would like to examine four passages in Scripture that indicate some of the spiritual forces that are at work in the present situation, passages which identify the problems that God's people face today.

The first passage, Genesis 3:1-6, is a key to understanding the satanic strategy that is undermining God's word. The second passage is Romans 1:18-32, which vividly describes the effects of this satanic strategy on mankind. The third is Luke 19:41-44, which provides us with a glimpse of God's provision for our situation today. The fourth passage is Isaiah 55:6, which guides us to one of the main ways of responding to this situation.

Satan's Strategy for Human Destruction

In John 8:44, Jesus identifies the satanic strategy for destroying the human race. Satan's strategy is clear: he uses lies to lead mankind to death. "The father you spring from is the devil," Jesus tells those who reject him, "and willingly you carry out his wishes. He brought death to man from the beginning, and has never based himself on truth; the truth is not in him. Lying speech is his native tongue; he is a liar and the father of lies." In Genesis 3:1-6, we see this father of lies in action. This passage not only reveals the reason for the fall of the human race, but also the satanic strategy which has operated throughout history and continues today.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made. The serpent asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" The woman answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of

the garden that God said, "You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die." But the serpent said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad." The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Satan's first move was to sow doubt in the woman's mind about whether she heard God correctly: Did God really say that? Are you sure you heard him right? Are you sure you properly interpreted his message to you? Are you sure that it was God who said that? By using such tactics, he made the woman experience God's word as narrow and restrictive, keeping her from something that she deserved to have. She lost confidence in God's goodness.

I believe this satanic strategy is at work today in the lives of millions of people, causing them to doubt whether they have heard God correctly, to feel that Christianity is narrow and oppressive, and to believe that the only way to fulfillment in life is to break out of the confinements of God's word and reach out for an autonomy and a fulfillment apart from God. As a result, the lives of millions of people are headed for disaster.

Unfortunately, this satanic strategy is also at work in many of the churches. The authority of God's word is being undermined in our midst.

Direct Denial of God's Word

First of all, the power and effect of God's word is being undermined through the direct denial of its authority. Several years ago, I read the text of a convocation address that a prominent professor from a major Protestant seminary in the United States delivered. His words were startling:

What does ancient Christian tradition, with its archaic language and individualistic ethos, have to do with the necessarily social and secular expression of Christianity today? What is the point any more of teaching or studying the classical disciplines when the bases for our action are given with sufficient clarity by contemporary ethics and the adjunct studies of sociology and psychology? I suspect that many of us here, if our back were against the wall, would honestly have to answer, "Very little indeed." We may have some aesthetic interest in tradition, but we are no longer in any danger of confusing aesthetic with normative judgments. There is thus probably a widespread, intuitive acceptance of two affirmations: (1) the New Testament and the creeds are no longer in any way authoritative or canonical for us; (2) the Christian today can find sufficient guidelines for his faith and action in contemporary statements and solutions.

We are thus in no secure place. We have found no single authoritative standard from the past of what to say or how to live. Neither have we a secure self-understanding erected on the basis of our immediate experience. We in fact find ourselves in the abyss of continual uncertainty, but we are kept from falling into chaos by the very tension between past and present. Our specific spot over the abyss is the result of our own individual dialogue. We have no assurance that where we happen to be is the best or final place to stand.

Many of God's people are in an abyss of uncertainty. They no longer know whether they can trust God's word, and, consequently, they do not know where to turn for direction. What a place for God's people to be – cut off from God's word and in an "abyss of continual uncertainty," able to be blown about, as scripture says, by every wind of doctrine!

The direct denial of God's word is not restricted to certain liberal seminaries; it is increasingly becoming an attitude of the ordinary person on the street. A while ago, I read a letter to the

editor of a Catholic diocesan newspaper from a housewife who wrote in regard to the regular reading in church of the passage in Ephesians that relates to husbands and wives, parents and children.

I'm sorry, dear Editor, but I don't believe that the excerpt from Paul to the Ephesians is the word of the Lord; and if believing is living what we believe, neither does anyone else, be they husband or wife! Paul's words are fossils, to be kept in libraries for scholars to read and remark to each other about how primitive people were in "Bible times," how uncivilized. Furthermore, if these readings are so difficult to understand, and their occurrence in our liturgy is the cause of people losing faith, then those people in Rome are saying, "It is better to insist that Paul's words are the word of the Lord and lose souls than it would be to strike Paul's archaic language from the liturgy and use something meaningful in its place."
...The books of the Bible were put together as one book by men; let wiser men take them apart.

It is interesting to read what some of the Fathers of the Church had to say about people who, in their day, took a similar approach to scripture. St. Hippolytus saw only two explanations for the problem: there was either a problem of faith and unbelief, or a problem of satanic activity.

They [i.e., people who are undermining the authority of God's word] have not feared to lay hands upon the sacred Scriptures, saying that they have corrected them. Nor is it likely that they themselves are ignorant about how very bold their offense is. For either they do not believe that the sacred Scriptures were spoken by the Holy Spirit, in which case they are unbelievers, or if they regard themselves as being wiser than the Holy Spirit, what else can they be but demoniacs?"

A few years ago, I happened to pick up a copy of a national Catholic magazine devoted to parish renewal and read the following from an editorial that issued a ringing call to abandon God's word and give ourselves to bisexuality.

Persons - young and old, Hollywood beauty and spiritual beauty-have all become sex "objects" for me.
So why not male and female?
The law of God, you say? Come on, let's grow up theologically too. We say we don't hold an anthropomorphic God, a kind of great puppeteer, old, male (and heterosexual may one suppose?), so let's really not hold one. No, God works the wonders of his providence, of his love, and his laws right down inside the concrete, living, *individual* natures he creates and sustains.

Basically, the editor proposed that we simply throw out God's word and replace it with our individual desires. His editorial brought these words from St. Augustine to mind:

It is necessary that we become meek through piety so that we do not contradict Divine Scripture, either when it is understood and is seen to attack some of our vices, or when it is not understood and we feel that we are wiser than it is and better able to give precepts. But we should rather think and believe that which is written to be better and more true than anything which we could think of by ourself, even when it is obscure.

How different were the attitudes of the Fathers of the Church, who held God's word in high regard, from the attitudes that we increasingly encounter today.

Ambiguity Towards God's Word

Even though the direct denial of the authority of God's word is becoming more and more common, I believe that the indirect denial of the authority of his word is having an even more damaging effect. Indirect denial occurs when people ostensibly honor God's word by saying that we do need to take scripture into account when making decisions in life, but then add that we

also need to take into account what the latest opinion polls say, what psychology and sociology tell us, the direction in which the signs of the times are leading us, and, of course, our own particular needs in the situation. Such people encourage us to decide what is right for us on the basis of all these factors. However, this approach often places God's word on the same level as majority opinion or theological speculation. Although such people do not directly repudiate God's word, they relate to it in such a way that its real authority is drained away and it becomes one opinion among many-and usually the losing opinion.

Many people today are undermining God's word by fostering a certain ambiguity towards it. Preachers, teachers, and counselors, who themselves are uncertain about the authority and the meaning of God's word, continue to use the words but not to communicate the conviction or enthusiasm that helps people know that it is a word they can trust and base their lives on.

This purposeful ambiguity and vagueness about the authority of God's word is even nibbling at the edges of evangelical gatherings. For example, at the 1982 Convention of Evangelical Youth Workers in Detroit, a workshop leader, speaking on sex education for junior high school students, recommended that teachers preface their remarks on values with a qualified "in my opinion." Do not give an "overlay" of the Bible, teachers were told; it turns students off. In effect, teachers were discouraged from teaching with authority what God's word says about this area of life. Instead, they should invite sex education experts from public schools and from the county family planning office to educate evangelical youth groups on sexual matters.

Sometimes ambiguity and vagueness are rooted in a fear of being considered naive or foolish because of what the next scientific article might reveal. People suspend their commitment to God's word since they no longer envisage it as a clear and certain word. They become addicted to the latest scientific findings in a way that saps their ability to commit themselves definitively to God's word.

Sometimes ambiguity and vagueness is rooted in an actual hostility to the very notion of certainty. In many ways our society has been so deeply affected by the notion of 'searching' that the searching becomes an obstacle to finding. The desire not to find can very easily disguise itself as a search.

Silence on God's Word

A third way in which people are undermining God's word is through silence. Preachers, teachers, counselors, and ordinary people experience tremendous pressure from today's society to talk only about those parts of God's word that are least offensive to contemporary culture. In my own church, the Catholic Church, this has meant that for the last 40 years or so we have heard a lot about God's love but little about his holiness; a lot about how important it is to fulfill ourselves but little about the need to take up the cross and deny ourselves to follow Christ; a lot about what beautiful people we are but little about the need to repent, change, and be conformed to the image of Christ; a lot about how important it is to express our thoughts but little about the need for every thought to be submitted to Jesus Christ. Over a period of years, silence on important aspects of Christian revelation produces a distortion in the life of God's people.

Many passages in scripture starkly and boldly reveal the differences between the divine perspective and the views of our culture. One of them is Matthew 5:29-30: "If your right eye is your trouble, gouge it out and throw it away. Better to lose part of your body than to have it all cast into Gehenna. Again, if your right hand is your trouble, cut it off and throw it away! Better to lose part of your body than to have it all cast into Gehenna." Yet the prevailing spirit of our culture says, "Pay any price you can to be totally whole, even if it means going to Gehenna. Whatever you do, be fulfilled. Whatever you do, protect yourself."

Another passage which flies in the face of the spirit of our age is 1 Corinthians 15:19: "If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of men." In spite of what scripture tells us, there is tremendous pressure today to present Christianity only in terms of what it can do for me here and now. But Christianity is not concerned only with what it can do

for me today; it is also concerned with the life to come. Christianity is not only about this world; it is also about the world to come.

Note, too, the passage from Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few there are who find it!" What a different picture this passage presents from the attitude, prevailing in many of our churches, which says that everyone is basically a good person and is going to make it to heaven. The spirit of this age tries to blot out the reality of sin, the truth of God's judgment, the need for redemption, and the fact that you do not simply drift into the kingdom of God; you need to make choices and changes in order to enter his kingdom. As the attitudes of the world work to fog our perception of the divine perspective, the realities of sin, Satan, heaven, hell, judgment, and eternity need to be clearly proclaimed, that the nature and reality of God might be truly revealed.

Reinterpreting Scripture

A fourth way in which people undermine God's word is by reinterpreting it so that it corresponds to causes and desires they are already committed to. Today many people approach God's word with certain preconceptions because they have already made certain ideologies, certain values, into absolutes.

This reinterpretation of God's word is expressed in many areas of life. Often it occurs in the realm of politics. A few years ago, a French Catholic priest, who was the secretary of his local section of the Communist party, reinterpreted Christian freedom in this way:

I fail to see why it would be absurd and contradictory to be both a Christian and a Communist. I will go further: I see no contradiction between being a Marxist and being a man who questions his faith and the ministry he has received from the hands of a bishop. I even dare ask myself and others this question: if Marxist analysis led me to atheism, would this evolution not in fact express the very freedom of the movement of which I am a part? and would this freedom not be the freedom of the Gospel?

Another area where reinterpretation occurs is sexual morality. For example, in one of the workshops at a meeting of the Evangelical Women's Caucus, a number of evangelical participants openly defended homosexual practices as compatible with scriptural teaching. (Once again, we see how attacks on God's word are already nibbling at the edges of evangelical groups.)

Another instance of the reinterpretation of Scripture in regard to sexual morality comes from a priest who was a moral theologian and who taught at the main seminary that the Catholic Church had maintained in the United States for preparing missionaries. In an article on homosexuality for a national Catholic magazine, he stated:

But doesn't the Church teach that *active* homosexual persons are sinning? Yes and no. The Church teaches that sex is for having children. This part of the Church's message rings as true as it ever did, and as it always will. The Church also teaches that sex is for loving. It's for loving in marriage, and nowadays, the Church is not so sure that *all* sex-for-love outside marriage is sinful. Surely it is when new life is likely to be generated. People who play around with sex, and then find themselves with unwanted pregnancy, often get abortions. This is the reason the Church opposes sex outside of marriage - family stability for the security of offspring. It's a good reason. Let's hold on to it, you and I who are the Church. But this is not a problem in sex with two people of the same gender. . . . But doesn't the Bible condemn homosexual acts? That it surely does, and roundly. Genesis condemns the men of Sodom and Gomorrah for wishing to have sex with Lot's male guests - by raping them. It is not the homosexuality of mutual respect and self-sacrifice the

Scripture condemns here.

But what about Leviticus and the Epistle to the Romans? Do they not call homosexuality an "abomination to the Lord?" Yes, but the outcry is heavily culturally conditioned. ... Well, we've multiplied and filled the earth, and Jesus the Messiah is already here. Can it be that childless sex is no longer an abomination?

In the last few decades dozens of articles like this have been published in Catholic publications, and similar articles have appeared in other Christian publications as well.

Even the area of ecumenism is not immune from reinterpretation of scripture. Unfortunately, we are often confronted with a false ecumenism and indifferentism that few of us would want to be part of. For example, the chaplain of an American college had written a series of articles in which he called for Christianity to become more relevant to modern man. In the first of these articles, he proposed that "Christianity deemphasize its claim to uniqueness in favor of a vital universalism, advocating a creative and positive relationship among the religions of the world."

In a second article, he offered the thesis that the churches should play down their historical, creedal affirmations - the Trinity, number of sacraments, apostolic succession, the deity of Christ, and so on-and work for the abolition of racism, a renewed dedication to human justice and freedom, and greater understanding among the peoples of the world."

Then 20 years later, he assessed the progress that had been made in realizing these proposals:

Almost 20 years later these predictions which raised so much protest seem mild, and most of them have been realized. We've seen a burgeoning of interest in the religions of the East, and even Harvey Cox has belatedly moved in that direction. ... Except for a phalanx of conservative rearguard figures, I know of no mainstream theologians today, Catholic or Protestant, who are brazen advocates of the uniqueness and once-for-allness of the Christian revelation...

Later in his article, he made some proposals for the future:

In the days ahead we should put less emphasis on the historical Jesus. Since Vatican II, Catholics and Protestants have increasingly stressed their agreements. A similar movement is gaining strength between Christians and Jews, as both Catholics and mainstream Protestants are renouncing efforts to evangelize Jews. We are in increasing contact with other religions of the world, and an insistence on the uniqueness of the historical Jesus can only be a hindrance. Christians should never have made a God out of Jesus. It is just too preposterous to believe that God gave his/her world embracing love uniquely through Jesus. We Christians may use such phrases as "anonymous Christian" and "the cosmic Christ" in our attempts to universalize Christianity, but then we should empathize with such terms as "the universal Buddha" or "the plurality of avatars...." I suggest that we leave him (Jesus) alone for a while. Just as Jesus said to his disciples, "It's best for you that I depart. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you," so, too, must we have the courage to say that it's best for Jesus to depart for the sake of the love of God.

God forbid that there would be an agreement on such apostasy! The same spiritual force that has tried throughout the ages to destroy our confidence in God's word and in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is at work today to destroy our confidence once again.

I do not think that we are merely dealing with human weakness, with honest mistakes, or with isolated infidelities. We are dealing with a massive attempt to undermine the authority of God's word for the purpose of destroying God's people here on earth and leading them to eternal damnation. As scripture tells us in 1 Timothy 4:1-2, "The Spirit distinctly says that in latter times, some will turn away from the faith and will heed deceitful spirits and things taught by demons through plausible liars."

The Condition of the World Today

The satanic strategy is one of lies, false teaching, confusion, and undermining the authority of God's word, and it leads to death. A passage from Romans 1:18-31 provides tremendous insight into what is happening in our society today.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the irreligious and perverse spirit of men who, in this perversity of theirs, hinder the truth. In fact, whatever can be known about God is clear to them; he himself made it so. Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made. Therefore, these men are inexcusable. They certainly had knowledge of God, yet they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks; they stultified themselves through speculating to no purpose, and their senseless hearts were darkened. They claimed to be wise, but turned into fools instead; they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images representing mortal man, birds, beasts, and snakes.

In consequence, God delivered them in their lusts to unclean practices; they engaged in the mutual degradation of their bodies, these men who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator – blessed be he forever, amen!

God therefore delivered them up to disgraceful passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and the men gave up natural intercourse with women and burned with lust for one another. Men did shameful things with men, and thus received in their own persons the penalty for their perversity.

They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly. They are filled with every kind of wickedness: maliciousness, greed, ill will, envy, murder, bickering, deceit, craftiness. They are gossips and slanderers, they hate God, are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wrongdoing and rebellious toward their parents. One sees in them men without conscience, without loyalty, without affection, without pity. They know God's just decree that all who do such things deserve death; yet they not only do them but approve them in others.

One of the characteristics of people who themselves have turned away from God's word is that they encourage other people to do so as well. Misery loves company; there is a superficial brotherhood of the damned.

Today numerous groups are dedicated to leading people away from God's word. And in many ways, the most visible signs of this movement are the sexual confusion and disorder that has become more and more prevalent in our society - just as these were the signs that characterized Roman society in St. Paul's time.

We are living in a time of rapid de-Christianization. De-Christianization leads to dehumanization because the only way to be fully human is to be in Jesus Christ. Truly, the wages of sin is death. We are seeing the wages of sin being paid out daily in the environment in which we live, whether it be the thousands of fetuses found in trash containers or the specter of weapons of mass destruction hovering over the entire earth. At a time when the human race is perhaps in the hour of greatest need, God's people are weak, confused, and disunited. This is not accidental; it is part of the satanic plan.

A Time of Visitation

A spiritual war is raging beneath the surface of our society. Yet, in this moment of need, we are also living in a time of tremendous grace and blessing. I believe that we are living in the midst of one of the greatest visitations God has made to his people.

I have seen many signs of this visitation. First of all, we have had the extraordinary ministries of people like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Kathryn Kuhlman, which have touched many thousands of people in past years. We also have some marvellous evangelism ministries, like Agape (formerly Campus Crusade), Inter-Varsity, and Navigators, which have touched thousands more. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is being proclaimed to millions through various media ministries.

I think that the Pentecostal movement and charismatic renewal is another sign of this time of visitation. For the first time since the early centuries of Christianity, millions of people are experiencing the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit in a widespread way.

God is visiting his people for a reason. He is inviting them to turn to him and be saved. He is inviting the church to turn to him and be equipped and empowered because hard times lie ahead. Many people have responded to this visitation, but many more have not. There is a consequence for missing a visitation from God. The consequence is judgment. For this reason, I believe that the destiny of our generation is hanging in the balance.

In Luke 19:41-44, we read about another visitation that God made to his people – the visitation that Jesus made to the people of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago:

Coming within sight of the city, he wept over it and said: "If only you had known the path to peace this day, but you have completely lost it from view! Days will come upon you when your enemies encircle you with a rampart, hem you in, and press you hard from every side. They will wipe you out, you and your children within your walls, and leave not a stone on a stone within you, because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation."

Jesus visited his people – walking through the streets proclaiming the kingdom of God and healing them – but they failed to recognize this moment of grace. A critical moment had arrived; God had sent his only Son. Many responded, but many more did not. Forty years later, the Roman armies destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation was dispersed to the four corners of the earth.

The moment of visitation is a moment of choice. One of the things that determines what happens in this moment of choice is the intercession of God's friends. How much God is willing to do for his friends! Remember the generation of Abraham. When wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah reached such a point that God had to destroy them, Abraham interceded for the few that were faithful to God, and God saved those few. We see what God was willing to do for his beloved and the weight that he gave to Abraham's prayer.

I believe that the destiny of our generation is hanging right now in the balance. I believe that our generation is faced with a choice: repentance or judgment. We who have been touched by this visitation have a critical role to play. In addition to our evangelistic action, our intercessory prayer is vital in resisting the tide of evil that is flooding our homes and cities.

In conclusion, I would like to offer what I believe to be a particularly important element of our response to the situation in which we find ourselves. It is found in Isaiah 55:6: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near." This, I believe, is the word that the Holy Spirit is bringing to our attention. Now is the time to turn to God. We need to do many important things and to receive a great deal of wisdom. But what we face can only be faced in and with and through the presence of God dwelling with his people. We are not simply dealing with flesh and blood; we are dealing with powers and principalities. Only the power of God, manifesting itself in the words, actions, and lives of his people, is sufficient to face what we are facing. I believe the time has come to repent and turn to God in a more profound way than ever before.

Jesus promised not to leave us orphans. He wants to be with us and guide us. There *is* a way to

deal with today's situation, but only God knows this way. We need wisdom from on high. I believe that it is time to turn to God in intercession. The prayers of the friends of God have a tremendous power to change the course of history, to change the fate of our generation.

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Top illustration of spiritual attack on God's Word in Scripture (c) by Kevin Carden

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Jesus sends out 70 disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God and to set people free, illustration by James Tissot

The Gospel of the Kingdom and Liberating the Captives

by Michael Harper

The hardest war to fight is the one without a front line. Christian conflict is always like guerrilla warfare. "The whole world," John writes, "is in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). We are fighting in enemy-held territory. Satan snipes at us from every direction. There are enemy agents everywhere. The enemy has immense power and resources, and numerous allies.

We need to be made very much more aware of the subject of "the Kingdom", for it figured prominently in the teaching and work of Jesus. The word means "authority" or "the rule of God". When the noble man, in Jesus' parable (Luke 19:11 ff), went into a far country to receive "a kingdom" (AV), it does not mean an area of land, but authority to rule. The RSV correctly translates the word "kingly power". According to Dr H. Ridderbos, the expression originated "with the late-Jewish expectation of the future in which it denoted the decisive intervention of God, ardently expected by Israel, to restore His people's fortunes and *liberate them from the power of their enemies*" [quote from *New Bible Dictionary*, IVF 1962].

God's world has been taken over by enemy troops. His concern is for its liberation. We are His troops fighting a non-stop and ruthless war, recapturing one stronghold after another from the enemy. This is what Jesus meant by the Kingdom. It is interesting that in the New Testament it seems at times to be almost synonymous with a word we are very much more familiar with: Gospel. For instance in Luke 9:2 Jesus commissioned the Twelve "to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal". They obeyed, yet in verse 6 we are told that they went through the villages "preaching *the Gospel* and healing everywhere".

It seems as if the Gospel and the Kingdom are different aspects of the same thing – the reclaiming of the world for God, and the rescuing of men and women from the hands of the

enemy. Jesus put these two words together in the expression "the Gospel of the Kingdom" (Matthew 24:14). But if we do not link the Kingdom to our thinking about the Gospel, then we are losing something that is vital. For whereas the word "Gospel" signifies that it is "good news" that we proclaim, the adjunct "Kingdom" signifies what happens when we proclaim it – people are set free from the power of Satan.

The message that Jesus preached was centered on "the Kingdom". He was concerned with delivering people from the power of Satan. He was sent to "proclaim release to the captives and...to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). As He moved from town to town it was like the passage of an army of liberation. There was the woman "bound by Satan for eighteen years" whom Jesus released (Luke 13:10 ff.). There were the poor madmen out of whom He cast demons, so that He could say "the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Disease and even death departed before the authoritative word of the Son of God.

The disciples also were given power and authority to do the same when they were sent out by Jesus. They too healed the sick and cast out evil spirits. They were told by Jesus that as they healed they were to declare, "The Kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9). They came hastening back to the Lord with enthusiasm saying, "Even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (Luke 10:17). Paul and the other apostles had similar experiences after Pentecost. Paul himself was commissioned with the words, "I send you to open the eyes of the Gentiles, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:17-18). He reminded the elders of Ephesus of his "preaching the Kingdom" in their midst (Acts 20:25). He was still preaching the same message the last time we hear of him in the Acts of the Apostles (28:31).

It is for this task that the power of the Holy Spirit is chiefly given.

Evangelism

It is fashionable to say that "the Church is Mission". We are soldiers in an army of liberation. If we are true Christians, we have ourselves experienced the joy of release and freedom which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. So, with a deep sense of our own gratitude, we join hands with others in the task of liberating the captives of Satan. Our enemy is a past master in the art of psychological warfare. He is the father of lies. He has infiltrated into the Church, and persuaded many to believe in his lies - even that he does not exist !

Paul describes Satan's work as "blinding the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:4). The activity of Satan is massive and powerful in preventing people from believing the truth. He has succeeded in closing a third of the world's population to unrestricted missionary work. He has sent confusion into large areas of the Church so that few are clear as to what they should be preaching, and fewer still have any confidence in the Word of God. He has dangled enticing "red herrings" before the Church, so that some have become so preoccupied with these that they have almost completely neglected the primary task of the Church: evangelism. Then even amongst those that are most active in evangelism, he has succeeded in blinding many to the full-orbed ministry of the Holy Spirit, without whom evangelism becomes a heart-breaking chore rather than an exciting adventure.

One of the most important purposes for the baptism in the Spirit is that we might have power to be witnesses to Christ. It makes possible our initiation into the strategy of the Spirit. Just as He was the inspiration behind the effective evangelism of the early Church, so He will be today. We are not preaching to neutral forces, waiting to hear the Word of God before believing, but to people who are Satan's captives, although unconscious of it. It is the function of the Holy Spirit, working through channels that trust Him, to break these chains and deliver the prisoners. It is He, for instance, who convicts a person of sin, righteousness and judgement, words which modern man laughs at. It is the work of the Spirit to make Jesus Christ real to people – as the Son of God and Lord of all. Only then will they acknowledge His deity and surrender to His

Lordship.

But the Spirit is not only concerned about the preparation of the listeners - He wants also to be the guide and director of the evangelists. It was He who moved Philip from a city to the desert, and called Paul and Barnabas to leave Antioch. It was He who told Peter to go to the Gentiles in Caesarea and directed Paul and Silas to Europe rather than Asia. As we wait on God the Holy Spirit will direct us in remarkable ways. Is there not too much man-centred evangelism today? May this not be the reason for the pitiable results so often? Is it not time for us to trust the Holy Spirit more?

Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would give them the words that they would need to speak in different circumstances (Mark 13:11). Expository preaching and courses on evangelism are important if the Word of God is to reach those for whom it is intended. But however faithful the exposition may be, and however good the training course is, they should never be substitutes for the Spirit. We need at all times the anointing power of the Spirit upon the words that we speak, if they are to be like "sharp two-edged swords" to our listeners.

But evangelism without compassion will never be really successful. Here again it is the Holy Spirit who helps us. He will give us that divine love which transforms evangelism into such a joyful work. He disturbs the complacency that is so often born of unbelief in the power of God into a fiery concern for the unconverted and unconvinced.

Healing

The Gospel of the Kingdom is also related to those who are sick in body and mind. Jesus did not divide people up as meticulously as some do today. His Gospel was for the whole man. He was concerned about their bodies as well as their souls. His salvation meant health to the whole personality. His Kingdom meant the overpowering of Satan in the realm of the body and mind as well as the spirit.

Even if we have had little or no interest in divine healing, the baptism in the Spirit brings us immediately into this sphere of conflict with Satan. Jesus was as indignant over sickness and disease, where it had been caused by Satan, as He was over sin and hypocrisy. He yearned to dismiss Satan from his position of authority in this realm as well as in every other. But He was careful not to form a healing cult around Himself. He forbade many of those He healed to tell others, and He related this healing power to every other part of human life. To one He forgave the sins before He healed the body, and to another He warned, "Sin no more that nothing worse befall you" (John 5:14).

The early Church continued to heal the sick and regarded it as part of the message of the Kingdom. And they did not regard it as a prerogative of an apostle. Stephen and Philip the evangelist, for instance, were much used in this ministry, and in the Epistle of James it is the elders of the church who are to be called by the sick man to pray and anoint him. It is important too to notice how often the Holy Spirit used the power of healing to arrest people and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

When the early Church was forbidden to preach and teach, it is most significant that their prayer included both a request for boldness to preach the Gospel, and also that the hand of God might be stretched out "to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:30). Or again, it was the miracle of tongues at Pentecost, and the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple shortly afterwards which drew the large crowds, thousands of whom were converted and added to the Church. Or again, in Samaria we are told that the people "gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did" (Acts 8:6).

When Peter healed Aeneas at Lydda, the people who lived there "turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35). The same results followed the raising of Tabitha - "it became known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42). How can we neglect, as some do, this

important ministry, when it has such enormous potential in communicating with the unbelieving world around us?

We surely need to have the same compassion towards the sick and indignation about illness as our Lord displayed during His earthly ministry. This is another area of spiritual warfare. Satan may sometimes trespass into God's territory here, too, and needs to be boldly and confidently evicted in the name of Jesus.

This is not to say that all illness is the work of Satan. We will need discernment to know how to act. Healing raises many problems, particularly concerning those who are not healed in spite of believing prayer. There is not space here to go into this in any detail. But it is easy to be glib about it all, either by dismissing this area from consideration and leaving it entirely in the hands of the medical profession, or by presuming too much. Nevertheless, it is important to discern the enemy in this field as well as others, so that he may be defeated and God's Kingdom ushered in.

Deliverance

Jesus specifically related the Kingdom to His ministry of exorcism, and we should do the same. He said, "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Part of Satan's power over this world and its people is through the agency of evil spirits. When Jesus sent out the Twelve and the Seventy He commissioned them to cast out demons as well as heal the sick, and this seems to have been part of the normal ministry of the early Church.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in this subject. Some of this has led to very real and successful exorcisms of people and places. However, it is a field of ministry into which we should only move with great caution. There are signs of a dangerous lack of balance by some who claim to have this ministry. This includes an exaggeration of the function of exorcism, and encouragement to some to take a morbid interest in the subject, bringing them into superstitious bondage, which can be spiritually harmful.

This is no ministry for amateur demon-chasers, as the sons of Sceva discovered to their cost (Acts 19:13 ff). It calls for much prayer and self-discipline as the disciples found to their shame when they failed so signally in their attempt to deliver a young boy from demon power (Matthew 17:14 ff). It calls for careful discernment, and much harm has been done already by irresponsible though sincere Christians, who have had very little experience in this field, claiming to discern evil spirits in people where there are none. This has been encouraged by some who teach that straight forward sins of the flesh, such as pride, anger and lust, are due to evil spirits. While this may be so in some cases, there is a need for the balance of the New Testament to be seen, where exorcism does not have the dominant place that some modern teachers would like to give it.

There is much more emphasis on holiness and the life of self-discipline in the New Testament than on exorcism. A story is told about someone who met the devil in the street one day outside a church and he was weeping copiously. When asked what was the matter, he replied, "Why, it's these Christians, they blame me for everything".

Demon-possession takes place when the personality is "invaded" by an evil spirit, which remains there, at times overpowering that person. There may be more than one spirit involved. These attacks come in different ways. In some cases there may be physical manifestations - such as epilepsy. In others there may be abnormal or immoral behaviour, when the will of the person is completely bound. The evil spirit needs to be discerned, and if the person is willing to be delivered, the spirit should be cast out in the name of Jesus. Let it be repeated, this ministry can be dangerous, and is not for everyone. If in any doubt, it is best to find someone who has had experience in this field, rather than tackle the problem ourselves, which could do more harm than good. The after-care of a victim of evil spirits is essential, for there are counter-attacks to be dealt with, or the room which is "swept and garnished" can be repossessed by other spirits.

The empty void must be filled with the Spirit, if the person is to survive further attacks, and the loving prayers of friends are all-important, as Satan is resisted, and the reclaimed ground defended.

But there is a similar ministry which is very much more common than demon-possession. This concerns dealing with what we might call "bondages". This is satanic power over some area of the life of a person. It may arise during early childhood, when an emotional crisis results in repression, with later psychological or even physical bondage. It may manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as irrational fears, shyness, indecisiveness, evil habits, depression, insomnia, etc. Satan has gained a foothold in the life, and it may well take the prayer of faith to dislodge him. It is wonderful to rest assured that any such spiritual bondage can be defeated and overthrown. Jesus said "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). He gave His disciples authority to loose people from every kind of bondage in His name.

Part of this healing may involve the memories. Some need these to be cleansed and healed, otherwise Satan can use them to bring God's children into bondage, and cripple part of their spiritual life. Agnes Sanford has some very sound advice on this aspect of the subject.

Social concern

There are many who view the theology of the Kingdom almost exclusively in terms of social concern. The roots of this can be traced to the Christian Socialism of F. D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley and others in the nineteenth century. It is fashionable to jibe at pietism as so "other worldly" that it fails to be deeply concerned with the real problems of life, such as racialism, war, hunger, etc. On the other hand modern exponents of the social gospel tend to be oblivious altogether of those aspects of the Kingdom outlined in this chapter,

True pietism, however, has in the past been deeply concerned with social matters, and their prophets have attacked social injustice and exalted social righteousness. The roots of modern British socialism stretch down to the seed-beds of Methodism, for instance.

Every one of us should be passionately concerned about justice, public morality, and the plight of the under-nourished and under-privileged, and a balanced spirituality should reflect really deep commitment to the cause of man's physical as well as spiritual well-being. The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles was constantly destroying racial barriers, and reconciling deeply entrenched prejudices. It is important to notice too that in 1 Corinthians 12:13 the baptism in the Spirit is seen in this context. We often forget those words which follow the phrase "baptised into one Body" – "whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free" (AV).

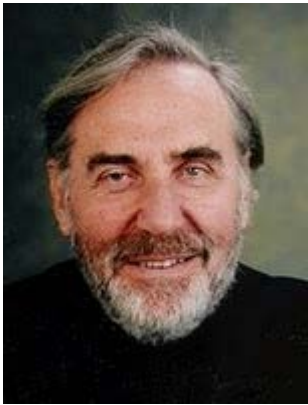
How we shall act in order to fulfill this concern is another matter and not within the scope of this book. But if we are to speak and act with authority in the sphere of social concern, then we not only need an accurate knowledge of the facts, but also prophetic insight and power which only God can supply.

If we are to be the children of the Kingdom in the fullest sense, then we should be those who know the liberating power of the Spirit ourselves, so that we can serve in the Kingdom of Christ. Then we are to proclaim to all the message of the Kingdom, and through prayer and the Word we shall see other lives delivered from the hands of Satan. We have seen the wide scope of this ministry. It is in this context that the gifts of the Spirit are so important. Without them we shall never be fully successful. We need particularly the gifts of discernment, the discerning of spirits, and the words of wisdom and knowledge, as well as the gifts of healing. But whether directly through their operation, or indirectly through the edification they bring to us, these gifts are weapons in spiritual warfare – and we need to be armed with them.

This excerpt is from *Walk in the Spirit*, Chapter 5, © 1968 by Michael Harper. The book was originally

published in 1968 by Logos International, Plainfield, New Jersey, USA, and reproduced from the Great Britain Edition by arrangement with Hodder and Stoughton, London E.C. 4.

Some of Michael Harper's books and articles are available online at:
<http://www.harperfoundation.com/books.html>.



Archpriest Father Michael Harper (1931-2010) was a world-renown leader in the charismatic renewal movement. He was a minister in the Anglican Church for 40 years. He joined the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1995, and was appointed Archpriest of the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the UK and Ireland.

He and his wife Jeanne formed the Fountain Trust in 1964, which organized charismatic conferences all over the world at which he addressed thousands of people. Jeanne co-edited the songbook, *Sound of Living Waters*, which is still used by many charismatic churches today. Harper also founded Soma (Sharing of Ministries Abroad), which was committed to sharing ministries between the developed and developing world.

He was involved for many years with the World Council of Churches. He spoke at several Catholic meetings. He met Popes Paul VI, John Paul and John Paul II.

He also edited *Renewal*, the longest-established charismatic magazine in the world. He wrote 18 books, including the bestseller *Equal and Different*, which set out his views on women's ordination and the gender debate. Colleagues remember him as a man with the ability to build friendships across the Christian traditions. A gentle and humble man, Harper was nevertheless a dynamic speaker and networker, able to draw people in, whatever their background or differences from himself. He is survived by his wife, Jeanne.

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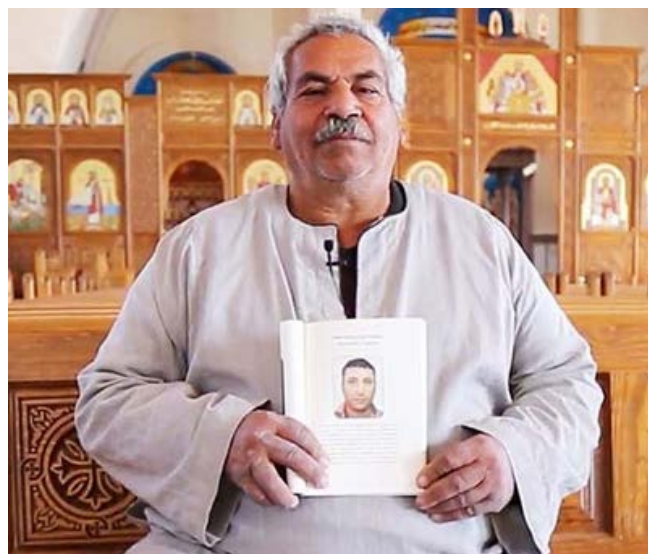
Love Stronger Than Death: 21 Coptic Martyrs

a brief report and interview with Coptic martyrs' families

“ISIS thought the killing of our relatives would destroy us. It did not. It revived us.”
- wife of 29-year-old martyr Samuel Abraham

February 15 (2019), marks the fourth anniversary of the deaths of 20 Coptic Christian men from Egypt (Copts are the native Christians of Egypt) and one Christian man from Ghana — all martyred for their faith. Last year, a church, The Church of the Libyan Martyrs, was inaugurated and dedicated to the lives of these men and their resolve to follow Jesus.

In the days and weeks leading up to their deaths, ISIS captors reportedly tortured the men who had traveled the 1,200 miles to Libya to find work and support their families. Militants attempted to persuade them to deny Jesus in return for their lives. They all refused. In fact, during the barbaric execution, the men repeated the words, “Lord Jesus Christ.”



“When I saw he died with the name of Jesus on his lips, I was very proud. I rejoiced!” – Malak, father of martyred son

“We only knew martyrdom from films, but martyrdom was reintroduced and it strengthened our faith because these people, these martyrs, lived among us.”

For Malak, the reintroduction of modern-day martyrdom on a worldwide scale is especially sobering. He is the father of one of the 21 Coptic Christians killed by Islamic State militants on the Libyan coast. Few will forget the graphic images of the mass beheadings in a video released and paraded online around the world.

Excerpt from [Open Doors report](#), February 15, 2018 by Lindy Lowry



The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs

by Martin Mosebach

Martin Mosebach, an acclaimed journalist and novelist from Frankfurt, Germany, traveled to Egypt and went to the homes of the Coptic martyrs families. He was started by the faith and serenity Coptic Christians he met with. His interviews and research culminated in the writing of a book, *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs*, published by Plough 2019. The following excerpt is from Chapter 9 of the book.

It had been dangerous to go to Libya seeking work. The Arab Spring had plunged the country into chaos, and public safety was effectively a thing of the past. There had been violence against

Christians well before 2015, including several murders. The priests of one Egyptian diocese – the Holy Metropolis of Damanhur, in the Nile Delta, who also looked after the Copts in Libya – ceased their usual trips, as there was no reliable police force left to protect them. But the families of the Twenty-One needed the money, and going to Libya was a shorter journey and posed fewer bureaucratic difficulties than going to the Gulf States. They were poor – just an inconspicuous little group heading out to look for jobs together. Who would care about such people?

And yet their departure was accompanied by a few premonitions. Twenty-three-year-old Abanub, a young man whose unusual features made it look as if he might be from India, said to a friend returning home to El-Aour from Libya in 2014 to get married: “You came back here for your wedding this year, but in 2015 we will all celebrate our wedding.” Might his listeners have been reminded of the “marriage supper of the Lamb” from the Book of Revelation, which all of them would have been familiar with, in which the blood of the sacrifice cleanses the robes of the righteous until they are pure white? After the fact, that is precisely how his enigmatic words were interpreted.

Girgis (the elder) was also twenty-three and, according to his father, always carried a photograph of two Christians killed in a bombing, saying: “I wish I were with them, and like them.” Sameh phoned his family shortly before being abducted – he had been in Libya for six months already – and asked not only that everyone back home pray for him, but above all that they look after his little daughter.

Issam’s widow showed me a photograph people considered prophetic. During a visit to the Monastery of Saint Samuel, Issam had asked a monk what the future might hold. Issam knelt silently before him, and the monk put his hands around the young man’s neck – that was the exact moment the snapshot recorded. On the night the Twenty-One were abducted, the monk had a dream: he saw Issam and other men tormented by a large hound dog in uniform, and then a dagger suddenly pierced his chest.

Luka’s widow said that once, after hearing a sermon on martyrdom, her husband had said: “I’m ready.” He mentioned having an intuition that martyrdom awaited him. He had often taken walks on the very beach where he was later beheaded. He also had a macabre sense of humor: she showed me a photograph of him lying in a coffin he himself had built. As I left, she gave me a T-shirt with a print of her husband and Issam, both wearing sparkling crowns.

Malak’s father, a fat, merry farmer in a gray jellabiya, described a phenomenon that occurred the night after the murder: a bright white light appeared in the dark sky, “like a laser cannon.” He and the neighbors spotted it even before news of their sons’ deaths had reached them. He recalled that, throughout the forty-three days their sons had been held captive, the government had kept all the men’s families in the dark, without any news. “We didn’t know how they were doing, but as soon as we saw the light, it was clear: either they’ve been freed, or they’re dead.” He had begun to join our visits to other families, and let others confirm this miracle as well; and indeed, they, too, had seen it. Phenomena involving bright lights are a recurring theme in Coptic narratives, and accompany almost all major events the church has experienced over the centuries.



The miracles didn’t stop, even after the massacre. The little son of Samuel (the elder) fell to the street from the third floor, and his arm was broken in several places. When he regained consciousness, he claimed his father had caught him, and a few days later his x-rays showed not a single fracture. Samuel’s sister, who entered the door barefoot in a stained jellabiya, confessed that for three days following the death of her brother she had fought with God: “I blamed God!” But then a bright light had appeared in the heavens, Samuel’s face shining brightly from within. “After that, twenty-one crowns appeared around the light. From then on, I didn’t complain anymore.”

Sameh's son, who fell ill and began vomiting after his father's death, also saw him again: Sameh had laid his hand on the child's head and said, "It's going to be all right," and the boy had immediately felt well again.

Ezzat's mother, a stout woman who had borne seven other children and had a noticeably spirited eloquence compared to most of the people I met here, suffered a severe stroke a while after her son's death. Ezzat and Saint George had come to her in a dream; her son had laid his hands upon her, and she had been healed.

A childless Muslim woman came to Issam's mother for help – local Muslims often ask their Coptic neighbors to pray for them: "Your God listens to prayers and works wonders." She gave the woman one of Issam's shirts. Maybe the woman wore it when she lay with her husband – who knows? In any case, after fifteen infertile years, she became pregnant twice while in possession of the shirt.

The martyrs had often saved children falling out of windows: after his death, Luka, too, had caught his two-year-old nephew, saving him after he fell from the fifth floor. This served as confirmation – not just for the families, but also for their neighbors and many others in the surrounding countryside – that the martyrs were indeed now with Christ. Their steadfastness had

led to their sanctification (this is why they were portrayed wearing crowns) and they now served as mediators of divine grace for their fellow human beings on earth.

All of which is why their families didn't care to remember the grief, pain, and fear they felt during the men's captivity, nor the tears unleashed by the news of their deaths. In fact, they all went out of their way to avoid leaving me with the impression that the decapitation of their sons, brothers, and husbands had caused them any misfortune. Naturally, they were depressed while awaiting news, as they had been kept in the dark and could only prepare for the worst. But when they saw the video and knew with certainty what had happened, their confidence had returned: "We now have a holy martyr in heaven and must rejoice. Nothing can harm us anymore."

This also explains why the families handled the execution video with such apparent ease. There was an iPad in every household where the full-length, uncut, unedited version could be watched.

Malak's mother was the only one who refused to look at the screen, while all the young men, cousins, and brothers in the household, as they had often done, stared at it, apparently undisturbed, pointing out the men they recognized. There could have been no better place to watch the video – surrounded by the men's families and runny-nosed children, in rooms adorned with images of the crowned Twenty-One, while a goat poked its devilish-looking head through the doorway and a calf next door wailed for its mother.

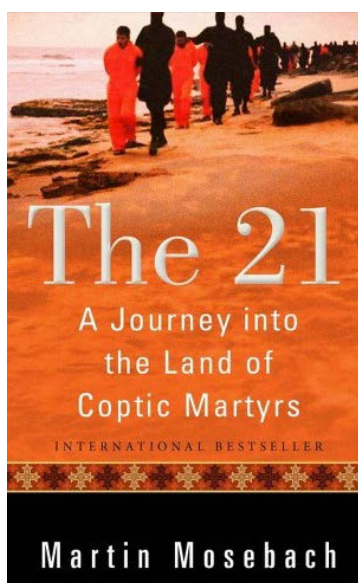
What would the murderers say about their video being shown like this? Would it surprise them to see how unflappable these simple-minded, poor folk were; that these people had managed to turn an attempt at triggering boundless terror into something entirely different? Would they be able to see that their cruelty had failed to achieve its intended goal, that their attempt to intimidate and disturb hadn't succeeded?

Gaber's hunched-over, barefoot mother – whose house had resounded with unidentifiable voices singing a hallelujah at the hour of his death, as her Muslim neighbors also confirmed – was quick to express her gratitude that her son had become a martyr. Youssef's family members – his young widow with their little boy, his turban-clad father, his mother holding an icon of her crowned son to her chest – told me, as well as each other, how happy they were when they realized that he was in heaven. Gaber's family had a similar response.

Hany's mother also readily admitted her joy, especially with regard to her four little grandchildren: once they're a bit older, they'll be so proud that their father is a martyr. Milad's parents also thanked God for their son's martyrdom, and the parents of Girgis (the elder) recalled how their son had always wanted to become a martyr. During his captivity they had not prayed for his deliverance, but only that he remain strong. He had remained strong indeed, and was now the family's pride and joy.

All these words were spoken not with fanaticism or zeal, but rather with serenity and calm. These were no Spartan mothers celebrating some rigid ideal, but believers whose faith had been forged and strengthened by adversity. Whereas Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* features Thomas Payne asserting that pain is the touchstone of atheism, in this case it turns out to be quite the opposite: pain is the touchstone of faith and the revelation of Christ.

Excerpt from *The 21*, Chapter 9, by Martin Mosebach, © Copyright 2019, Plough Publishing House, Robertsbridge, East Sussex, UK, Walden, New York, USA, and Elsmore, NSW, Australia.



Available from Plough Publishing House and Amazon

Behind a gruesome ISIS beheading video lies the untold story of the men in orange and the faith community that formed these unlikely modern-day saints and heroes.

Acclaimed literary writer Martin Mosebach traveled to the Egyptian village of El-Aour to meet the families of the Coptic martyrs and better understand the faith and culture that shaped such conviction.

In twenty-one symbolic chapters, each preceded by a picture, Mosebach offers a travelogue of his encounter with a foreign culture and a church that has preserved the faith and liturgy of early Christianity – the “Church of the Martyrs.” As a religious minority in Muslim Egypt, the Copts find themselves caught in a clash of civilizations. This book, then, is also an account of the spiritual life of an Arab country stretched between extremism and pluralism, between a rich biblical past and the shopping centers of New Cairo.



A Mighty Fortress is Our God, A Bulwark Never Failing

hymn by Martin Luther

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he.
Lord Sabaoth, his name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,

Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers
Not thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also.
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.

Martin Luther wrote the words and composed the melody to the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, sometime between 1527 and 1529. Based on Psalm 46, the hymn is a celebration of the sovereign power of God over all earthly and spiritual forces, and of the sure hope we have in him because of Jesus Christ. After its publication, it gained immense popularity throughout Reformed Europe.

The English translation of the hymn is by Frederick H. Hedge, written in 1853.

photo credit: Mount St. Michel in Normandy, France (c) by Boris Stroujko at bigstock.com

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Young Professionals On Mission

by Michael Shaughnessy,

Navigating Your Twenties

January 18-20 (2019) saw 120 people from Canada, the United States, and Mexico converge in Minnesota for the 2019 young professionals' *Legacy Conference on Navigating Your Twenties*.

It is a span of life that is challenging because so many things change so many times: friends, family, career, housemates, and debt levels.

It is also the case that many of the most important decisions one will ever make are made in these years and they can affect the rest of one's life.

Some of the key points made were:

- the value of getting rooted with people who will call you on in discipleship,
- facing the natural fears that come with this stage of life,
- how to know God's will and trust him in all circumstances,
- how to witness to those around you,
- how to make new friends and have a great time in Minnesota in the winter

Young Pro Podcast Launch

We are about to launch a podcast – a weekly, twenty-minute show – on the subject of doing outreach to those in their twenties, young professionals as they are often called.

Travis Wesenberg, the producer, interviewed Mike Shaughnessy about what they would be doing

Travis: These are not the easiest years in life. Everything important seems to be in a state of flux. It is when students transition to “adulting” and eventually reach adulthood. Mike, you have covered that a lot in this newsletter. What can we expect to hear in the podcasts?

Mike: What we will discuss - and by ‘we’ I mean a variety of people who are working in this

space - we will discuss this newly emerging stage of life, the opportunities it provides for presenting the gospel, and how we can do that.

Presenting the Gospel

Travis: Is this stage of life just trend, or is this here to stay? Many young professionals feel the older generation sees this extended transition as a problem that needs to be fixed.

Mike: This is the new reality. There is no going back. The necessity of being better educated is real. So are more debt, higher prices, greater mobility, unemployment, and relational instability. The higher stress level is real but it also creates a great opening for the gospel.

Travis: The people who will be listening to these podcasts are people who want to do mission. They are people who want to pass on their faith to their peers. They are eager to get started.

Mike: Yes. And anywhere you have two or three who want to start a Young Professionals Outreach you have it half-started already. You have a team!

The next obstacle is: Where to start! Doing nothing is never a way to start. It's like the old Irish joke: "How do you get to Dublin from here?" The reply is, "Oh, I wouldn't start from here." My point is that you start where you are! And you start by doing something.

But that ties into the other big obstacle to starting a YPO: fear of failure. It is funny how powerful the fear of failure is. The mere potential of experiencing that bad feeling keeps people from acting and that guarantees failure! Whoops!

Travis: Why do you think this is an opportunity, or as we often say, an open door for mission?

Mike: Many people at this age lack a stable foundation for what they believe. They grew up with a post-modern worldview. They accept the utter inconsistency in their thinking, but they don't like it. Most still want a worldview that works rather than accepting confusion.

In addition, most young adults do not have stable, reliable friends. They had some in high school or at university but now they spend their day at work, mainly with strangers, few of whom are peers. A good YPO is built around this amazing opportunity. We can be the best friends, loyal, gracious, servant hearted, inclusive. Friendship works like gravity. It draws people in. So, this is a great opportunity for the gospel of love and truth.

Travis: Can you give us a preview of what things will be covered in the upcoming podcasts?

Mike: We'll have two main kinds of podcasts. One will be "the news". There is a lot going on in different places. We will cover what's working in Kansas City, what's new in Lansing, what's challenging in Columbus and what's starting in Seattle.

Second we will do training on things like developing 'a genius for friendship', creating a winning environment or helping people take the next step further up and further in.

Travis: The first podcast is already up on the Spotify and Apple Music apps. (Download those apps free. Then search for YoungPro Podcast on either.)

Life is busy, as we all know, but these great podcasts can be listened to on the way to work or when doing you laundry.

Youth struggle with the desire to fit into the culture of the world around them, especially when that culture speaks strongly but wrongly.

Helping youth to see the truth amid a flood of lies is not easy. Sometimes the "naked" Scripture

says it best. When we fail to obey God, the consequences lead from bad to worse.

[This article originally appeared in the Kairos Youth Culture Newsletter, Issue 130 - February 2019.]



Michael Shaughnessy is the [Kairos](#) director for the Sword of the Spirit both in North America and Internationally. He is the editor of the [Kairos Youth Culture Newsletter](#). Kairos is an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people.

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The Eternal Weight of Glory Awaits

by Tom Caballes

"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." 2 Corinthians 4:17 ESV

We all experience hardships, failures, relationship difficulties, illnesses, and suffering at different points in our lives - even when we have Jesus as our Lord. Some trials are light and easy, but some are long and very difficult. They go away for a time, but then another ordeal comes our way. It seems as if life is a series of challenges with some respite in between, and at times they feel like they are all happening at the same time – they can feel overwhelming! But the good thing about it is that as Christians, there is a reason why we persevere with such a tumultuous challenging life – one day, all of them will go away. One day, we will say, it's worth it. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4) That is great news! Paul says that our current afflictions now is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that awaits us. And that weight of glory would be incomparable to the worst things in life now. What is some temporary suffering for 70 years or so compared to billions of years of true joy and fulfilment for eternity? Can you start feeling the weight of glory?

So How Do We Await the Weight of Glory Due to Us As We Persevere in Life?

1. Even in your most challenging situations, keep in mind that all trials are temporary. Prolonged disease or relational difficulties can at times feel forever, but they will end. Winners do not quit when life is hard.
2. Have a balanced view of life. Have an eternal perspective with what is happening to you

all the time. Know and be confident that God is with you at all times, and He will never leave you, even if at moments it may feel like that. *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) Never give up trusting and hoping in God – let Him be your true anchor!

3. Know that God is forming you into His image and likeness, and He uses trials as a way for you to smoothen up your rough edges in your character. Anticipate that challenges will come your way. Rejoice in the midst of trials. James 1 [see text below] encourages us to count trials as something you can have joy even as you encounter it. No one likes tests, but after the ordeal, you are better off as long as you learn from it.
4. Store riches on heaven, not on earth. *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.* (Matthew 6:19-20) Do not tire doing good to all, for in due time, your work will bear fruit – either here on earth or in heaven. See Galatians 6:9-10.
5. Everyone you meet and encounter in this life – your neighbours, friends, officemates, and schoolmates - can potentially have that weight of glory, too. Each person has an eternal destiny; do your best to influence them so that they would one day share God's presence with you. Share the Gospel in season and out.
6. Anticipate heaven. Dream of it; think of it; meditate on it. Know that everything you do and accomplish in life is passing. Your life in God will be the only thing left in the end. Put your ultimate hope and trust in God, who will welcome you with open arms when we finish our race; then we will experience the weight of glory!

Other Scripture passages:

1. *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* (Romans 8:18)
2. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* (James 1:2-4)
3. *Other Bible verses: Romans 5:3-5; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Philippians 3:20; and 1 Peter 5:10.*

For personal reflection or group sharing

- How focused are you on the hope you have in Christ?
- How often do you think of your eternal life in God?
- How does that put into perspective your daily trials and sufferings?



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.

Top image credit: man in a maze while distant glory awaits, illustration (c) by Kevin Carden

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Rewiring My Fears

by Sam Williamson

After four years of trying to sell our old house, we finally moving into our *new* house last August. To prepare it for retreats, I've been immersed in chores: creating a new kitchen, installing new cabinets, making a desk, and rewiring about twenty light switches to link them to Alexa. All things I've done before: plumbing, carpentry, and wiring.

Now that the house-updates are done, I sense God calling me to write a book on *Cultural Creep* (how we adopt the world's solutions while rejecting God's answers), to talk with a friend about a difficult subject, and to coach a spiritual organization about how to communicate God's word.

And I feel wholly and completely inadequate. How can I communicate the world's influence without sounding like a crabby old man? How can I speak to my friend without sounding like a harsh jerk? How do I move from behavior-ism to gospel-ism when tips and techniques seems their default message?

I'm sleeping poorly because I think God is assigning me tasks that I'm ill-equipped to execute.

God *A*lways Demands the Unreasonable

Everybody's inner default is to fasten onto the familiar, to perform tasks we already know how to do. But the greatest triumphs of past spiritual leaders were always when they tackled the impossible:

- God asked Abraham and Sarah to have a child when they were in their nineties;
- God told Moses to find water for Israel in a rock in the desert with no oasis in sight;
- God wouldn't let Gideon battle Midian till he reduced his army from 32,000 to 300;
- When God called St. Francis to rebuild the church, God meant an entire culture not a tiny chapel.

Why does God always draw us beyond the end of our resources? Not just to the edge of our strength, not merely a toe over the line of our aptitudes; he persistently pushes us past our natural abilities until we cry "Uncle!" (Or, "God help me!").

It's Always About His Life in Us

Scripture repeatedly teaches a simple message with multiple metaphors, the most common is:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, its laborers work in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

When I was preparing our new house for retreats, I didn’t pray much about my activities. I’ve performed them so many times before I could do them in my sleep. Well, as I sleep-walked my way through carpentry, I was training myself to build my house without the Lord. Literally.

So why should I be surprised when difficult assignments make me feel totally helpless? I’ve orientated myself through regular practice to work as an independent contractor.

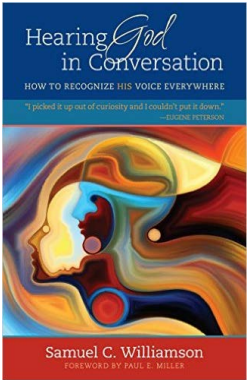
When God told Moses to confront Pharaoh (the greatest leader of the greatest empire), he said, “Tell Pharaoh to give away his single greatest resource for constructing cities; and tell him make it snappy!” Moses asks God “How can I do this?” because it seemed impossible. God answered, “*But I will be with you*” (Exodus 3:12).

I think God orchestrates unreasonable and impossible tasks to re-orient us to accomplish even the tiniest tasks through him; not on our own, and not completely on *his* own. He likes to work his greatest miracles through us, his life in ours.

Whether we’re tackling a toilet or walking on water.

Sam

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Sam Williamson has published numerous articles and has written two books. He has a blog site, www.beliefsoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsoftheHeart.com.

[Hearing God in Conversation: How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere](#), by Samuel C. Williamson, published by Kregel Publications, 2016, available from [Amazon](#)

top photo of a man rewiring a light fixture at bigstock.com Stock Photo ID: 66062554

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Meeting Jesus in Mystery

by Sam Williamson

I recently read an article in which the author rejects any kind of fear of God. He especially hates the beavers' descriptions of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis:

"I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion" [says Susan].

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

When the author read those words, he pitied Christians who believe them. He said, "Aslan made my feelings of insecurity and insignificance worse." Elsewhere he adds: "the idea of God being dangerous and terrifying to believers is bitter beyond words."

He rejects any kind of fear of God as evil, incompatible with the gospel.

Embracing the Mystery

If God is infinite, his nature must exceed our limited-wisdom. The spiritual path of a believer will always push past one seeming paradox to the next. That was the first divine principle I learned as a child, the first time I heard him speak: **that God is real, and I didn't understand.**

The greatest obstacle to our intimacy with God is when we cling to our own ideas and reject what he reveals about himself. And God himself says we should both love and fear him.

Every heresy since the time of Jesus has emphasized one truth at the expense of another.

Heresies are our refusal to accept the whole counsel of God's self-revelation; they flourish when we say, "I like to think of God as _____, but I hate to think of him as _____ [fill in the blanks]. What matters is not what we think of God as much as what he thinks of us.

Theologians have a word to describe how to hold two seeming contradictory truths, but G. K. Chesterton just called it mystery. And he said it is only in mystery that we meet the real God:

As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity.

The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them.

His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that.

It is Good to Fear God

Whenever we encounter something bigger than us, we experience a type of fear. When I see the Milky Way on a clear night, or I get a glimpse of a 14,000-foot Colorado mountain, or I see a storm on the ocean, I'm in awe. Awe doesn't detract from the experience, it enhances it.

To reject fear of God is to make him like Caspar the Friendly Ghost, a nice but pathetic, toothless power. If that god loves me, I'm not particularly stirred. I don't know if I even care.

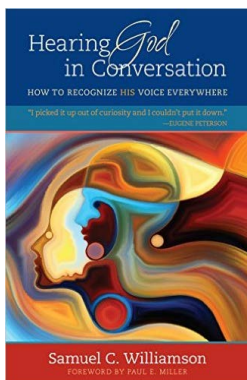
But if the fearful God who judged Egypt loves me—the one who controls hurricanes, whose holiness shrivels my pride, and whose love for his people scares my judgmental self—if that God also loves me, I am moved beyond words.

God never says the beginning of wisdom is love of God; he says the beginning of wisdom is fear of God; but when that fear of God meets and kisses his love for us, then (and only then) we meet the real God, the great Lion and Lover.

We need two eyes to know the love of God; one eye fixed on his astonishing, utter holiness, and with our other eye, we see his astonishing love for us.

Sam

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Sam Williamson has published numerous articles and has written two books. He has a blog site, www.beliefsoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsoftheHeart.com.

[Hearing God in Conversation: How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere](#), by Samuel C. Williamson, published by Kregel Publications, 2016, available from [Amazon](#)

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Can Beauty Change the World?

Beauty incarnate draws us into the presence of God

I was sitting with a good friend of mine recently, updating each other on our lives and discussing our dreams for the future and our latest hobbies and passions. I shared about my recently rediscovered love of writing and she described her passion for painting. In the midst of our laughter, fun and heartfelt sharing, she looked at me and said what is probably one of the more profound things I have heard in a while. She said, “You know Maria, beauty will change the world!” It got me thinking, and you know what? I think she’s right!

Noticing true goodness and beauty

We live in a crazy world! A fast-paced, busy and incredibly loud world. It is so easy to go through each day and never really pause to appreciate the world around us. But what if we did? What if we stopped to notice the beautiful sunsets that are painted across the sky or to hear just how wonderful the sound of laughter can be? What if we took the time to appreciate the beauty of relationships, to recognize truly what a gift it is to have friends and family? What if we stopped to notice beauty?

I believe it would change us. It would change the way we look at our lives and approach our relationships. Just as you cannot sit in the sun for a prolonged period of time without being burned, you cannot sit and acknowledge the presence of something truly beautiful and not be moved!

Beauty incarnate draws us into the presence of God

There's a reason that words like "breathtaking" are used to describe beautiful things, because beauty is meant to stir something within us. And perhaps, if we pause to acknowledge the beautiful sunset or be moved by another's heartfelt and joyous laugh, we will begin to see and know the Hand that painted those smooth colors across the sky. Each beautiful scene or breathtaking moment is not simply an expression of His love (though it is indeed that) it is a glimpse of Him who is beauty incarnate, beauty Himself. Each expression of beauty is a moment of encounter, an opportunity to be drawn into the presence of God. There is nothing more worthy of pausing our busy, loud lives, if only second. It is worth taking time to notice.

Yes, I think my friend is right. If we allow it, true beauty incarnate will inevitably and undeniably change our hearts and changed hearts will change the whole world.



Maria is a sixth grade teacher in Columbus, Ohio. She grew up in a wonderful, faith-filled family and spent her college years living, growing and serving in a campus ministry organization called St. Paul's Outreach. It was in these years that she developed a passion for building community and bringing women freedom through powerful sisterhood. Maria enjoys being outdoors, is a frequent visitor to all of her city's metro parks and coffee shops, and loves anything that involves spending quality time with good friends, new friends and family.

This article first appeared in [The Lovely Commission](#), a publishing venture and brand of [Kairos North America](#). Used with permission.

The Lovely Commission 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.

Top illustration: woman walking towards a shining white cross, (c) by Kevin Carden

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Awakened to Eternity

*A spiritual journey of poems reflecting on the passion,
death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ*

by Jeanne Kun

- [Gethsemane](#)
- [I Have Graven You upon My Palms](#)
- [Pietà](#)
- [Laid to Rest](#)
- [Awakened to Eternity](#)

Poems (c) 2002 by Jeanne Kun.

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. See other articles by the [author](#) in [Living Bulwark](#).

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[A Spiritual Journey of Poems for Passiontide and Easter](#)

by Jeanne Kun



Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, by El Greco 1541-1614

Gethsemane

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

—Matthew 26:41

What battles you fought (and won!)
that night beneath the shadows of Gethsemane
as the trio of your close companions
slept on in ignorance and sorrow.
(Job, too, knew scant comfort
from those three friends who came
to sit beside him in his trials.)

There your soul was tormented and twisted
like the gnarled trunks of the olive trees standing watch
(what sacred secrets they witnessed
and still keep in silver-leafed silence)
as Satan seized that opportune time
(long awaited since his failures in the wilderness)
to test and try you once again.

Your sweat fell
(wrung and pressed from you in anguish
like the oil running down the olive press nearby),
mingled with those first drops of your blood
that was before long to run so freely from your veins.

Terror and distress
must have taunted and mocked your resolve
and made a tight knot in your stomach
as you anticipated and recoiled
from the pain and agony soon to come to you.

As you knelt in earnest prayer
(so full of dread, yet in determined obedience)
did you first feel
that your Father's heart

was as merciless and unyielding
as the cold rock you leaned against?

And yet you won through those fearful hours
and the temptations that laid siege to you,
strengthened by an angel
(who surely trembled at the horror—and the privilege—
of being sent on such mission)
till all that remained was to drink to the dregs
the cup you willingly took up,
now sure it was not to be removed from you,
holding fast to your Father's will
that all (I, too) might be restored to him.

Readied now, go to receive Judas' traitorous kiss
and greet your captors.

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> next poem: [I Have Graven You Upon My Palms](#)

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[A Spiritual Journey of Poems for Passiontide and Easter](#)

by Jeanne Kun



The Crucifixion, by El Greco 1541-1614

I Have Graven You upon My Palms

I have graven you upon my palms.

—Isaiah 49:16

Long ago your hands clung 'round Mary's neck,
tiny fingers twining her hair about them
while she hugged you to her breast.
Later Joseph held your boy-hand secure within his firm grasp
as you walked the road together on your first pilgrimage to Jerusalem
and taught those hands to handle lathe
and plane rough wood beams to smooth usefulness.

Your hands blessed and healed,
tousled the curly heads of the children who flocked around you,
and wrote in the dust as the elders looked on,
hoping to ensnare you, too, in the trap laid for the adulteress.

Raised in thanksgiving,
your hands
multiplied the loaves and fishes
and broke bread
to feed your disciples' hunger with much more than crushed wheat.

Then those same hands
that washed soiled feet
(and stained, sin-encrusted souls)
were wrenched and held fast,
forced to the crossbeam as the executioner plied open your fingers
and drove iron through your palms,

inscribing my name upon them.

Tendons mangled and severed,
nerves vibrating in agony,
muscles contorted in tight spasms—
those hands were made useless
except to hold you pinioned to the cross
as your body sagged,
its weight straining and pressing raw against the nails.

Your hands, once so wounded and so bloodied,
still bear the hard-won battle scars—
now a sign of victory and glory
and record of the price you paid for me.

These wounds indelibly written upon your flesh
plead on my behalf before the throne of God
where you stand and never cease to intercede as the Lamb slain for me.

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> next poem: [Pietà](#)

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[A Spiritual Journey of Poems for Passiontide and Easter](#)

by Jeanne Kun



Pietà, by El Greco 1541-1614

Pietà

How sore your grief, Mary,
as you hold the cold and lifeless body of your son
(once warm with beating heart in your own womb)
all bloodied now by death,
and cradle in your arms for one last time
him whom you so often held upon your breast.

Sharing in his pain and passion,
you looked on in agony
as the hands that clung as infant's around your neck
and those feet that pattered long ago about the cozy home in Nazareth
were cruelly wrenched and nailed fast.

I wonder:

Had you spoken in quiet hours together
of the prophecies and their mysteries?
Had you—with motherly intuition—
read your son's heart and the shadow that hung over him?
In your nights of pondering,
did you gather strength for this inevitable day?

And now, with a mother's knowing heart,
can you perceive that this stiffening form upon your lap
(a piece of torn humanity that tabernacles divinity within)
will soon breathe again
and brim and pulse with life,
all gloriously transfigured?

Looking through the darkness there at Golgotha,
do you already see in your mind's eye

the new dawn promised in three days' time
and tremble to feel again your child's glad embrace?

O wait no longer, Mary,
to entrust him to the grave!
Surrender your son now to Joseph's tomb,
that he might rest awhile from the battle bravely fought
and then descend to death's domain
to claim from Satan there
the victory so hard won for us.

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> next poem: [Laid to Rest](#)

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[A Spiritual Journey of Poems for Passiontide and Easter](#)

by Jeanne Kun



The Entombment, by Raphael 1504-1505

Laid to Rest

The women keep silent vigil,
watching over the sagging, twisted body
hanging limply now upon the cross.
Light and life and breath are gone from his frame.
Stillness reigns, bringing with it
relief from the heavy horror of the day's events.

Joseph of Arimathea bravely declares himself,
claiming in death what he had feared in life.
He unfastens the broken body from the crossbeam,
careful not to further wound
the flesh so bruised and torn by nails.
What reverence for the tabernacle
that gave human form to God!

Mary cradles her son in her arms as she so often had
when he laid his soft infant cheek upon her breast.
Her hand gently caresses the bloodied, cold brow
and tenderly closes the sightless eyes
before she gives him over to the grave.

(Mary, what were your thoughts then?
Did your son's words of life and resurrection
echo in your ears?
Beneath your grief and sorrow,
did hope that he might rise and live again
stir deeply in your mother's heart
and sustain you in quiet expectation?)

Now he rests from salvation's work and pain,

the sleep of death upon him as he's enshrouded in linen.
Sweet spices surround and perfume his wounded corpse.

Darkness falls as the stone is rolled in place.
Yet a deeper darkness invades and fills the rock-hewn sepulchre,
reaching into its narrow confines
and encircling the body it now holds as in a womb.

Soon morning light will dawn upon the stone-cold tomb,
warming its icy hardness.
But greater light shines from within,
glowing and pulsing with new life and waiting to find release.
No guard set there to vigilantly keep watch
(and hold death within its chamber)
will stay his power to burst forth.

*For he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him. . . .
His going forth is as sure as the dawn.
—Hosea 6:1-3*

O Sun of Righteousness,
night's shadows must fade before the glory of your rising
Triumph now over death's dark domain,
and spread the radiance of your newly-won dominion over us!

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> next poem: [Awakened to Eternity](#)

[A Spiritual Journey of Poems for Passiontide and Easter](#)

by Jeanne Kun



"Noli Me Tangere" (*Do Not Touch Me*) by Titian, 1511-12

Awakened to Eternity

I

The day of rest past—
rest prescribed by law,
rest that refreshed her body
and eased the fatigue of the harrowing day spent at Golgotha,
yet brought no relief to her grief—
Mary [Magdalene] made her way early
to the garden where the priceless treasure of her master's body lay,
that tabernacle so cruelly ransacked and emptied of the glow of life.

Night's veil was not yet lifted from the earth,
but already a faint glimmer spilled over the horizon's edge,
pushing back the shadows
and spreading its soft light through the garden as Mary entered there.
Yet even as the dawn began to break,
desolate darkness and black fear blinded her eyes,
for she'd come in one last act of kindness
to anoint her Beloved with sweet spices—
and found the tomb and grave cloths empty
and his body gone!

"O Gardener, tell me where you've laid my Lord,
that I might see him once again!"

Then Mary heard her name
as only he could speak it
and knew him in the sound of it.
Joy rushed in upon her,
and in the morning sun,
her heart was filled
(like the garden 'round about her)
with new life and vitality.

II

I too seek my Lord with love's longing.

Now go to him, my soul.
You'll find him (as Mary did so long ago)
waiting for you in the garden as in a lovers' trysting place.

In that fair place
where seed has fallen to its death
(buried in its own earthen grave beside his tomb)
and now springs forth in fruitfulness and fragrance,
he wipes away all tears
and speaks my name in voice my ears have ever strained to hear,
restorer of my life
and herald of my wakening into eternity.

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The Son of God Goes Forth to War

Hymn by Reginald Herber

Sung by Will Cannon (see [audio recording](#) below)

1 The Son of God goes forth to war,
a kingly crown to gain;
his blood-red banner streams afar:
who follows in his train?
Who best can drink his cup of woe,
triumphant over pain,
who patient bears his cross below,
he follows in his train.

2 The martyr first, whose eagle eye
could pierce beyond the grave,
who saw his Master in the sky
and called on him to save:
like him, with pardon on his tongue
in midst of mortal pain,
he prayed for them that did the wrong:
who follows in his train?

3 A glorious band, the chosen few
on whom the Spirit came,
twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,
and mocked the cross and flame:
they met the tyrant's brandished steel,
the lion's gory mane;
they bowed their necks the death to feel:
who follows in their train?

4 A noble army, men and boys,
the matron and the maid,
around the Savior's throne rejoice,
in robes of light arrayed:
they climbed the steep ascent of heav'n
through peril, toil, and pain:
O God, to us may grace be giv'n
to follow in their train.

Reginald Heber was born in 1783 into a wealthy, educated family. He was a bright youth, translating a Latin classic into English verse by the time he was seven, entering Oxford at 17, and winning two awards for his poetry during his time there. After his graduation he became rector of his father's church in the village of Hodnet near Shrewsbury in the west of England where he remained for 16 years. He was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823 and worked tirelessly for three years until the weather and travel took its toll on his health and he died of a stroke. Most of his 57 hymns, which include "Holy, Holy, Holy," are still in use today. [bio by [Greg Scheer](#)]

Click  to listen to an MP3 audio clip of the [song](#)

sung by Will Cannon



Will Cannon is a member of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. Originally from Norcross, Georgia, he moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2008 to attend the University of Michigan where he graduated with a degree in Audio Engineering and Electrical Engineering. He now serves with University Christian Outreach Ann Arbor as the chapter's Mission Director.

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The Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Christ

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- [The Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Christ](#), by Dieterich Bonhoeffer
- [The Resurrection of Christ Is God's Yes to Us](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- [The Cross - the One True Glorification of God](#), by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI
- [What Is the Resurrection of Jesus?](#) by Josef Ratzinger/Benedict XVI
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“Let there be Light”

Part 3: Orange, Yellow, Green

by Ros Yates

In the [previous article](#) I wrote (or rambled) about [red](#) – so powerful for positive and negative reasons – the lifeblood of our bodies, but the danger of death when it is spilled, and the amazing life-giving-death of Christ’s own crimson offering for us. But I’m moving on through the spectrum and just as Good Friday passes into the day of resurrection so we move on to orange, yellow and green.



"Silver Birches", Immenreuth, Bavaria

I mentioned orange last time because of its association with red as a fiery colour, along with yellow too. On Easter morning churches throughout the world will be lighting bonfires at dawn to dramatically call to mind the resurrection of the light of the world. Most of the bonfires we light here are evening fires; especially with the young people of our families and community

who are irresistibly drawn to the natural fireworks of wood being consumed by flame; Maybe it's the slight excitement of the element of danger that draws them, as well as toasted marshmallows and the companionship of sharing the source of warmth on a cold night as well as songs and laughter. It's more of a challenge to get up in the dark of Easter morning, but greeting the fire and the rising sun/Son with exultant praise is well worth it (especially followed by a good breakfast). Ps 19.5 Like a bridegroom the sun emerges from its chamber... perhaps prefiguring the coming of the risen Son and his appearing in glory one day.



Easter bonfire

Naming Colours

Orange as a colour is not mentioned in the Bible – neither are the fruit! The sweet orange comes from China. The Portugese probably were responsible for introducing the fruit to Europe. The colour is named after the fruit, and the first recorded use of orange as a colour name in English was in 1512, so it's not surprising that it doesn't get a mention in the Bible. Similarly with yellow, scriptures tend to describe things as the colour of sulphur or other yellow things such as gemstones, natural gum, bronze or gold, rather than naming the colour. The word for yellow/blond hair means 'gleaming'.

Of course the history of colour names is all wrapped up with the history of the objects which bear those colours – and that is all part of the richness of language. I love the fact that there are hundreds (or more) names for colours in art shops and interior paint stores. It certainly helps to write more interesting poetry! I was delighted to discover an old book called 'Werner's nomenclature of colours' (with additions by the flower painter Patrick Syme 1814) which compares colours to where you find them – The different yellows are named and referenced by where you'd find it in nature – animal, vegetable or mineral - primroses, saffron, lemons, canaries, the larva of the large Water Beetle, the wings of goldfinches, and various gemstones and gallstones! It all encourages me to do that mindful practice – to 'stop and stare' at every little thing, and construct my own living rainbow like I might have done as a child cutting out pictures from magazines for a collage or mosaic. To take in the vast array of colours we are blessed with in the natural world should move us to worship – although the modern tendency is to move us to grab our camera or phone to 'capture' what is there rather than relishing it in the moment and praising the God who shows a little more of himself in every new hue we discover.

*Take a while to look into this picture of a vine below.
Just look, don't analyse. What do you see?
See the light not just the structures.
See the different shades of green, yellow, orange, brown, or any others.
And spend a little time just 'abiding' in the vine and being part of the picture.
Perhaps you also see the form of a crucified man, holding out his life to you...*



Leaves – Ros Yates 2019

Colour and context

It is refreshing to ask people what a particular colour (orange, or yellow, or green), means to them. How does it make you feel? What does it remind you of? The answers may vary hugely depending on the context and history and culture of those asked the question. While I am feeling 'yellow' because I am happy, someone else may be feeling 'jaundiced'. Yellow has been used as a symbol of cowardice, and in art the character of Judas the betrayer was depicted wearing yellow. More recently the horror of Nazi Germany where Jews were forced to wear yellow stars has given the colour a painful association. And as for orange and green, if you are in Ireland they are loaded with politics and history. The same is true of flags of many nations, rebels, uprisings, and movements for better or for worse – whose colours have become embedded in the stories inherited from parents and ancestors.

Colours are God's gift to us but we all see them differently. For a start, those who are colour-

blind perceive certain wavelengths of light in another way. Forest peoples are sensitive to a vast number of shades of green which I might not be able to tell apart. Our personal and cultural histories affect how we react to colour and we can't ignore that (or risk causing massive offense or misunderstanding) but let's reclaim it from politics and rejoice in the 'colour of worship'! I'd like to encourage a pure, and perhaps child-like appreciation of colour as one of the channels of grace to those of us who are not physically blind.

How do you see it?

You may have a favourite colour, for whatever reason – perhaps it's the way your brain is wired. Some suggest that Vincent van Gogh's medication affected the way he saw the world so that he saw it more yellow than it was. But Vincent embraced and loved the colour yellow. He prepared a room full of yellows and sunlight for the visit of his friend Paul Gaughin, and Vincent's coffin was covered in the yellow flowers he loved, "symbol of the light that he dreamed of finding in hearts as in artworks" (Emile Bernard, 1890).



Mangoes – Ros Yates 2019

I'm staring at a lovely ripening mango – and can smell it too – and musing on the colours of the skin. It displays a little part of the rainbow as the reds shift through orange and yellow to green. In places it seems all those colours are present at once, recalling a Pointillist work of art with spots of different hue on the skin playing tricks on my eyes whilst my brain puts them together to create the glowing image of the fruit in my mind – which in turn triggers the saliva glands in my mouth!!

The orange-yellow flesh inside glows with sweet sunshine as if the warmth of the tropics has been concentrated, packed into a living parcel and flown across the world to bless my senses with its delectable sight, smell, and taste. How would you describe the taste of a mango? Edible sunshine? In a sense it actually is just that.

The energy of the sun's rays has been captured by the mango leaves; the chlorophyll – that amazing green catalyst molecule – has married water and carbon dioxide and bonded them with sunlight-power to create sugar (sent to the developing fruit to make mango juice) and at the same time producing that other life-giving molecule: oxygen. It's schoolgirl biochemistry but I still find it an absolutely mind-blowing process, brimming with the wisdom of God in action. For me green is so very much the colour of the life-giving Spirit of God – and yet in a complimentary way to red, which I explored in my previous Part 2 article.

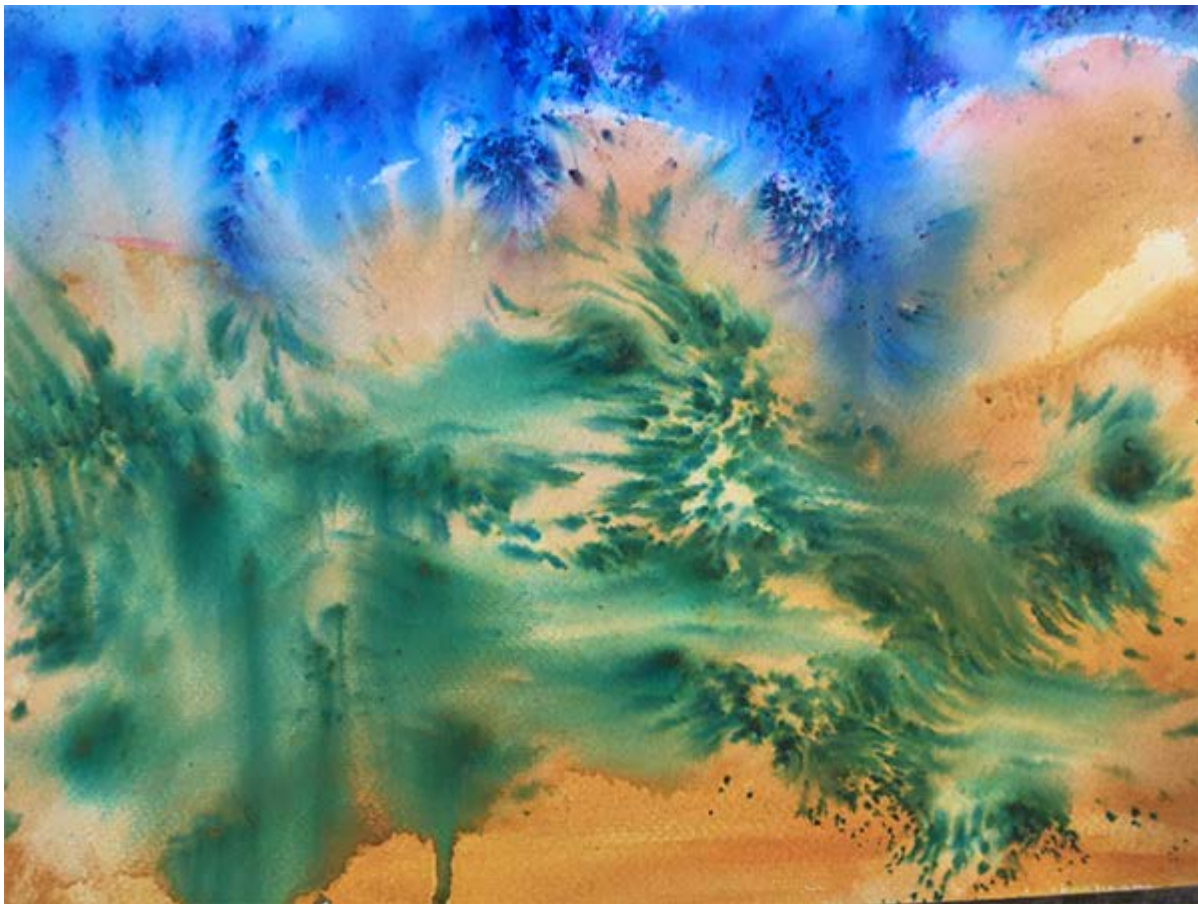
The greening of the Spirit

And so green and red, complimentary colours in the paint box, both speak of life in different ways. How fitting that in different traditions of the church these colours are both used liturgically for the feast of Pentecost. See what we can learn from each other!

Red – the colour of tongues of fire, sacrifice and martyrdom – drapes our Anglican church communion table on Pentecost Sunday. But when I lived in Russia we visited a Cathedral on the eve of Orthodox Pentecost to find the whole place decked in green, and living green at that, with fresh birch branches about all the doors and windows, and mown grass strewn all over the floor – it smelled like a newly cut lawn.

In the Bible the greening of the desert is one of the most powerful images of the life of God returning to a dried-up land and a parched people. Isaiah 35.1 'Let the wilderness and desert be glad. Let the arid rift valley rejoice and bloom like a lily.'

Have you ever seen one of those time lapse films of what happens when the rains come to arid places? Within a few days dormant seeds come to life and rapidly shoot, spread and bloom while the water is available in order to set seed for the next generation of plants.



Greening Desert 2017 – Creative Worship Workshop at Twyford School, Acton

It's been recently confirmed that our family will be moving with my husband's job to live in Oman so I'm hoping to see something of that spectacle first hand. At least the experience will make me utterly more appreciative of "England's green and pleasant land" (where everyone complains about the weather) even knowing that the Irish have a thousand more shades of green than we do – that come with even more wet days. I will also miss the northern passing of seasons – another of God's blessings – where each winter is just long enough to really make me appreciate the fresh green growth of Spring;

Apologies to antipodians who celebrate Easter in the Autumn, and those of you in the tropics who never get a winter, but I do pray that as the days lengthen and the sun's heat gathers

strength the fiery sunrise will remind you of the risen Jesus, his golden light will power you up, and that green shoots of renewal will sprout as you put your roots into Him.

The Lord is my sun and my shield. (Psalm 84.11)

Be like 'a tree planted by flowing streams;
it yields its fruit at the proper time,
and its leaves never fall off. Psalm 1. 3



Cleft oak tree still sprouting green in old age. Near Church Knowle, Dorset, UK.

Luke 11.11-13

What father among you, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, although you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Ask for an egg!!

Enjoy looking forward to a colourful Easter and a powerful Pentecost.



Easter egg collage card
Happy Easter!
from Ros Yates

See Part 1

[“Let there be Light” – Reflections on Light, Color & Our Relationship with God](#)
by Ros Yates

See Part 2

[“Let there be Light” – Part 2: Color Red](#)
by Ros Yates

Ros Yates is a member of the Antioch ecumenical Christian community in London. She has been painting and drawing from an early age. Having studied Biology and Theology she is now an ordained Deacon in

the Church of England, a self-taught artist, and mother of four children. Not surprising then that themes of creativity, spirituality and the natural world are constantly interwoven in her life and art.

She uses art and crafts in prayer and Bible study workshops with adults and children. The natural world is a constant course of inspiration. She loves gardening and spending time at The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, the London Wetland Centre, and holidays in Purbeck on the English South Coast. All these find their way into her art, as do the word-images and parables of the Bible.

> See other articles by [Ros Yates](#) in [Living Bulwark](#)

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