

Christmas is Getting Old

There are a lot of ways the modern mind can take the title of this piece. One could take it to mean that Christmas is ancient. One article I saw on the Internet started with the statement that Christmas celebrations go back four thousand years, which obviously pre-dates Christ's birth, so they are talking about something else. It could mean that Christmas is getting tiresome, and certain aspects of the secular celebration of the season surely are getting very tiresome. It could also simply mean that I am getting old, and Christmas is growing old with me.

It could mean that the holiday is of long standing, which is certainly true of Christmas. The holiday itself dates back to the third century (the 200's), although it was not called "Christmas" at first but a festival (or celebration) of the Nativity, or birth of Christ. It has been (and still is) celebrated on a number of different days, for a number of different reasons. Some believe that someone originally calculated the date of Christmas from the date they believe Mary was visited by the angel (in March). Some believe it was instituted to compete with the pagan Saturnalia - a celebration of the return of the sun and of summer, marking the passing of the winter solstice when the days would now begin to lengthen into summer again.

The debates about why the date is set as it is in our society and others reflects the debate between the world and the Church. The world sees a holiday for partying and cheer of one sort or another, and the Church celebrates the birth of Jesus, the very Son of God come into the flesh (the Incarnation) for our salvation.

The world sees the myth - Santa, reindeer, magical snowmen, elves. That is all they are really interested in. Almost every mention of Jesus in the public square in connection with this holiday in these days is an attempt at manipulation. Someone is trying to sell something, and hopes that bringing

the name of our Lord into their ads or appeals will find a responsive chord in the heart of Christians.

Even in the Church, such as it is on earth these days, fewer and fewer see the Incarnation of God. They see nostalgia, or the miracle birth. Many so-called Christian churches no longer believe in the Incarnation, or miracles, or the Virgin Birth, or Jesus, really. They use our shared religious language to say other things and to preach something quite different. The idea that the very Son of God took on human flesh and blood and human nature (except for the sin) and became a male human individual on Christmas is too superstitious for them. It is also too sexist and offensive on so many levels against other religions and philosophies which so many so-called Christian churches are trying to say are just as real and relevant and meaningful as our religion. This is where I want to remind you of that old axiom: "Anything you can say about everything means nothing."

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The Incarnation was awaited for so long. It is a pity people let it go today. It was awaited long before the time of Christ - nearly four thousand years. They waited so long, in fact, that even the people of God began to doubt that it would ever come. That He would ever come. We know that Adam and Eve were waiting. We know that by the name of her first-born son. His name meant, "I have gotten a man, the Lord." She mis-identified Cain, but she was expressing her faith and her sense of anticipation none-the-less.

Abraham was waiting. He knew that when He would come, that special offspring, all mankind would be blessed in Him. Isaac was waiting, and gave the blessing of Abraham to Jacob in part as his confession of his wait. Jacob and all of the children of Israel waited. The prophets who spoke the many Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament gave voice to their expectation, and to God's promise, stirring up over and over again that hope and sense of waiting. The hope and sense of expectation waxed and waned over the centuries, but it remained alive, if only just barely.

By the time that Jesus did come, that hope was very dim and the expectation was almost extinguished. But not quite. A few remained who

treasured the hope. Still, when the angel appeared to Zacharias, he could hardly believe that the time had come, and so He openly questioned the angel to his face. We know how that worked out. Zacharias had been given a sign that literally left him speechless for nine months or more.

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When the angel, Gabriel, appeared to her, Mary believed, but few of those around her did. The people of God, chosen by Him in Abraham, had just about given up hope. The religion of Israel had become a religion of denial. They clung to the ancient forms, but the faith was lost to a form of empty ritualism and works righteousness. A Messiah? It hadn't happened yet, why should we believe it is happening now?

Joseph is our exemplar here. Joseph did not believe until he was confronted by the angel in a dream. The Bible doesn't paint the picture of the social ostracism they must have faced, but why else would he have taken his seriously expectant wife along on the journey to Bethlehem? Surely her family could have cared for her back home for a few days. I am guessing that no one else was any more minded to accept Mary's account of how she got pregnant than Joseph had been originally, and they did not get the angelic visit to straighten their thinking out.

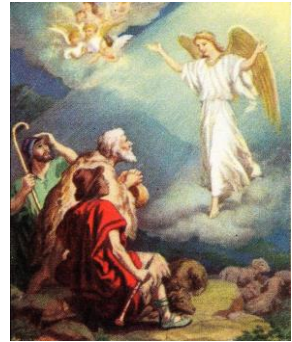
Cousin Elizabeth only believed because the Holy Spirit had been poured into her - that and she was pregnant at an advanced age when women simply did not get pregnant! Her husband had seen the angel, and heard the wonderful news, and now she was pregnant in accord with the words of the angel. How could she doubt?

For the small cast of the miracle, life was difficult and strange: Joseph's wife was pregnant, but not by him. No one believed Mary's story about the angel, except the inner circle. They had a late-pregnancy journey that they were required to take. When we are tempted to wonder how the world around us can doubt the wonderful Christmas story, we just need to consider that first Christmas.

The world around the few who were privy to the great events of earth-shaking importance took no notice, naturally, and gave no particular quarter to the wonder that was happening in their midst. There were a few signs of notice, but not exactly what we would call faith. Scholars, Magi, were following a star that portended the birth of a king, according to legends and ancient books. Even with their marvellous gifts, they may not have understood what they were seeing.

A king was freaked out by strange visitors coming in response to a prophecy, and although he did not particularly understand or believe that prophecy, he was willing to do terrible things to make sure this odd prophecy could not touch his throne. If he had believed it, he might have understood who he was doing battle with, and understood how pointless it all was for him.

Shepherds were seeing lights and hearing voices in the fields, and running into the small town of Bethlehem with a strange story, looking for something, a baby who was actually born in a barn! We hear the story with the backlighting of the Gospel all rolled out for us, and Good Friday and Easter shedding their particular light on the scene, so their actions make some sort of sense to us. It just probably isn't the sense it made to them, or the people who "wondered at the things that were told to them by the shepherds." What they were thinking is difficult for us to imagine.



The young family fled in the dark of night to avoid the raving violence of a second-rate potentate in a backwater country.

Children were slaughtered. The countryside was in an uproar. No one really knew why - well at least no one of worldly importance, and very few others either.

It was the stuff of legends and myth. It was very hard to believe any of it.....

It still is.

The world doesn't accept the history. They like the story, but not as much as they like Santa and Rudolph and Frosty. They like the season of commerce that accompanies the story. Turns out it is about half of the year's sales for many businesses. Most of the people involved in the merchandising frenzy on either the buying or selling sides probably don't understand that the power of the season flowed out of believing, and that what they often experience is just the residual pull of something they no longer really believe, and many times want to forget.

And every year the "experts" pop up on TV and in the finer newspapers to tell us that nothing really happened, and they got it all wrong all those years ago. With great confidence and tones of superior knowledge leaking from their lips, they correct the dating and explain why what happened really could not have happened back then. They carefully present their unbelief all dressed up in pseudo-scientific jargon and historical minutiae intended to persuade us that they are really in the know and we are just gullible, simple folk blinded by ancient mythology.

They don't really have a problem with the history. They genuinely don't accept it as accurate, but that is their business. They are in the business of denying what everyone else thinks and finding something new to say about whatever it is they are talking about. It is called "publish or perish." Their real problem is the theology. They don't believe in God. Some believe in something they call "god", but they don't believe in He who exists, and the thought that He might be real, and that He really did what the Bible says He did in Jesus Christ (and will do what the Bible says He will do) terrifies them!

God in human flesh? God involved directly in human history? The power of miracles? Those things are terrifying if you don't know God and have no confidence in what He thinks or what He expects. Since "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy

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Spirit,” they cannot make the leap to faith or trust the goodwill of God towards us. God is known to them as God was known to Adam and Eve immediately after eating the forbidden fruit. They were terrified. So are the modern scholars! God is the angry judge. There is no grace and kindness in the God who can whip up a hurricane or tornadoes or floods, not without Jesus. And they just can’t accept Jesus. The thought means that God is real, and God is around, and they don’t want God telling them what to do, or judging them at the end.

But we do. We who believe want to celebrate the truth that God was there, in that manger, in the flesh of that little baby. God did the impossible! He appeared in human form, bearing our nature and the burden of the Law of God on our behalf, and it began, at least as far as human observation goes, in Bethlehem, with that child. We know the whole story goes a lot farther back than that, but there we see it first. That moment was so significant that angels burst into song over fields filled with shepherds and their flocks. They came to make sure that the moment was not missed: Unto you is born, this day, in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord!

God hadn’t gone missing. Here He is! He hadn’t forgotten us. He is all wrapped up in swaddling cloths and in our lives and in our world, to save us from our sins. How cool is that?! Sure, the story is old... two thousand years old, but what a marvellous story it is, and it is absolutely true. We see it from such a distance in time that it is hard to see the manger without seeing the cross and the gloriously empty tomb of Easter, just like the prophets of old who could not describe what was coming without telling us all the details at once, describing the birth and the death and the resurrection as though they all happened at once. But that is okay. They are all different details in the same story, the story of God’s love for us, and of our salvation.

The whole thing sounds improbable, until you know God. It is almost impossible to believe, except with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is a story for

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children, God's children, of whatever age they may be. I know that no matter how often I have heard it, I never get tired of hearing it again. Merry Christmas!!

New Zealand Group Supporting Traditional Marriage Loses Charity Status

Family First, a New Zealand group that promotes and affirms traditional marriage (such as the biblical marriage of one man and one woman) and family (i.e., Christian-like) values, has just lost its status as a charitable organization. According to Family First's website, the Charities Registration Board repealed their charity status because "it does not advance exclusively charitable purposes" and "the board considers that Family First has a purpose to promote its own particular views about marriage and the traditional family that cannot be determined to be for the public benefit in a way previously accepted as charitable."

It appears that Family First is being stripped of its charity status simply because of its views on marriage and family (which seem to be based on God's Word). The board already tried to take away its status in 2013, but Family First appealed to the High Court, and the board was "scolded by Justice Collins who said '... Members of the Charities Board may personally disagree with the views of Family First, but at the same time recognise there is a legitimate analogy between its role and those organisations that have been recognised as charities.'"

Regarding the board's newest decision, the national director of Family First NZ stated,

This is a less-than-satisfactory procedure of trudging back to the same court. It seems that the Charities Board are simply hoping for a different judge and a more favourable decision. It is a highly politicised and inconsistent decision by the Board and will have a chilling effect for many not-for-profit charitable groups - both registered, deregistered and wanting to be registered - who advocate for causes, beliefs, and on behalf of their supporters, and often have to engage in advocacy at a political level, not always through choice but through necessity.

The 2005 Charities Act of New Zealand states that a group must have a “charitable purpose.” In its list of organizations that qualify, those that are chartered for the “advancement of education” are mentioned. It can include groups discussing (and advocating for) issues in the culture.

Don’t believe someone who says that Family First suddenly no longer qualifies to be a charity under the Act, for it is merely continuing to educate society about family issues. Opponents who claim that Family First is now a political group are just making an excuse to try to de-register the charity and undermine its free speech.

Is Australia next? Attacks on freedom of speech are increasing throughout the western world. Freedom of speech is being restricted for those who have differing beliefs from the currently popular (i.e., unbiblical) views on marriage, gender, and family. We need to continue praying that freedom of speech and religious freedom will be upheld, but we also need to prepare in case it is not. We must continue to be bold for Christ in a world that hates His Word and the truth contained within it.

How to Live Faithfully when Freedom has been Taken Away

Lyle Shelton¹

What can we do? This is a question I’ve been asked several times since we lost the plebiscite battle for the definition of marriage.

Last week’s rejection of freedom of speech by the Senate has sent shock waves through churches, mosques and Christian and Muslim schools.

The House of Representatives, which is this week debating Liberal Senator Dean Smith’s same-sex marriage bill, is unlikely to improve things.

Just as it did in the Senate, Labor is forcing its parliamentarians to vote against all freedom amendments. With the Greens and the votes of pro-rainbow politics Liberals, it is highly unlikely any meaningful protections for freedom of speech and conscience will make it through the Parliament.

It is lights out.

Christians and Muslims now realise that to speak and teach that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman is to risk being fined under state-based anti-discrimination laws.

¹ Australian Christian Lobby

Pleas to provide a Commonwealth override of these laws and an anti-detriment shield so freedom of speech about marriage in Australia can continue were ruthlessly rejected by Labor, the Greens and a sizeable cohort of Liberal Senators. The acting leader of the National Party, Nigel Scullion (filling in for Barnaby Joyce) joined them.

This scenario looks like repeating itself in the House of Representatives.

That conservative politicians have now joined the Left in suppressing freedom of speech is a tectonic shift in Australian politics.

I can't understate how significant this is. The unthinkable is happening but much of the church is still asleep.

It was not long ago that many Labor and all conservative parliamentarians would back free speech and freedom of religion to the hilt.

Our nation is in uncharted waters.

The gay lobby likes to call anti-discrimination laws anti "hate speech" laws. That is what they think of any speech that does not affirm and celebrate the new definition of marriage.

They now have a powerful legal weapon to silence Christian teaching about marriage.

ACL's new Human Rights Law Alliance, a legal body set up to defend Christians in court, will be in high demand in future years.

The reality of the intolerance of the rainbow political movement is starting to sink in as politicians use brutal legislative force to do the bidding of the rainbow political movement and quash the possibility of dissent.

All this is in spite of the Yes campaign's assertions that our concerns about freedoms were "red herrings" and "furphies".

It is clear that the Yes campaign was disingenuous in telling Australians that freedoms would not change.

It is now too late for freedom. The Ruddock review, announced by the Prime Minister as a consolation to the Parliament voting down freedom this week, will not result in the necessary legislative protections for freedom of speech and conscience.

Australian politicians lack the political will to preserve the most basic of human rights.

From this week, freedoms that Australians have taken for granted will be gone. This is chilling.

Pastors and imams, teachers and wedding service providers who wish to remain faithful will be on tenterhooks.

I am already getting calls from worried people in the Christian school movement and wedding service provider industries.

I've even spoken to the chairman of a large Islamic school whose school community parents are worried.

Some brave Christians will choose to break the law and keep speaking and teaching boldly about marriage without compromise.

I predict that most will choose silence and acquiescence. In some ways, I don't blame them. The cost of speaking the truth is high and will be increasingly so.

Sadly, this was avoidable. ACL has been urging the church to speak for 17 years.

Asking what we can do now is the wrong question after decades of silence when one's opponents have taken up the tools of democracy to prosecute their cause.

Those same tools of democracy – speaking in the public square, supporting advocacy groups like ACL, joining political parties and voting in pre-selections to make sure people with the right values got into Parliament – were and still are available to us if only we would use them.

I am grateful to everyone who rallied to the Coalition for Marriage – we were able to give marriage and freedom a strong defence.

But 30 years of silence could not be undone in three months.

I do believe though, that in the long term, our efforts will not be in vain.

I sincerely hope that the tens of thousands of you who donated, prayed and volunteered feel the same.

This is a wake-up call. It is not the end. It is the beginning of a freshly galvanised movement to keep speaking up for the truth.

But the question Christians need to be asking now is how do we remain faithful, even if it means being fined for our beliefs about marriage.

If we think this week's decision by Labor, the Greens and a cohort of Liberals to take away freedom of speech and conscience on marriage is where it will stop, we are naïve.

This is a new era of pressure.

The great Czech playwright, resistance leader and political prisoner Vaclav Havel's 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless" electrified Eastern European resistance movements.

Havel said that if we "live within the lie" we collaborate with the system – in his case the atheistic communist system – and we compromise our full humanity.

The answer to the question "what do we do now?" is "refuse to live within the lie".

This will be costly. But what choice do we have?

FUN FACT

Christmas as we know it wouldn't exist without Martin Luther. Five centuries ago, children received gifts on December 6th for St. Nicholas Day, a tradition that still continues in many European countries today. Luther wanted to emphasise the importance of Christ's birth on December 25th, so he started a family celebration now known as Christmas. As a gift for his son, he wrote the Christmas carol Vom Himmel hoch (From Heaven above to earth I come...).

How Martin Luther Preached about Christmas

The Protestant reformer loved the holiday, as these excerpts from his sermons show.

In the theological tumult that was Martin Luther's life, the great reformer seemed to be heartened each year by the great festivals of the church, particularly Advent and Christmas. The man who "invented" the Protestant parsonage was also sustained by a blazing sense of humour and a happy home life. It was open house all year in the large converted monastery at the east end of Wittenberg where Luther, his wife Katie, and their six children lived, along with numerous students who stayed there as well. One of them wrote that as Christmas approached, Luther grew increasingly cheerful: "All his words and songs and thoughts concerned the incarnation of our Lord. Then he sighed and said, 'Oh, we poor people that we should be so cold and indifferent to this great joy that has been given us. For this is indeed the greatest gift, which far exceeds all else that God has created. Yet we believe so sluggishly, even though the angels proclaim and preach and

sing, and their lovely song sums up the whole Christian faith, for ‘Glory to God in the highest’ is the very heart of worship.”

Luther’s writings contain a multitude of references to Advent and Christmas. The following excerpt comes from a sermon on the Nativity that he preached in 1530:

If Christ had arrived with trumpets and lain in a cradle of gold, his birth would have been a splendid affair. But it would not be a comfort to me. He was rather to lie in the lap of a poor maiden and be thought of little significance in the eyes of the world. Now I can come to him. Now he reveals himself to the miserable in order not to give any impression that he arrives with great power, splendour, wisdom, and aristocratic manners. But upon his return on that Day, when he will oppose the high and the mighty, it will be different. Now he comes to the poor, who need a Saviour, but then he will come as a Judge against those who are persecuting him now.

In 1543, as Christmas approached, Luther gave a lecture on Isaiah 9:6 in which he portrayed Christ as a ladder:

The Son of God did not want to be seen and found in heaven. Therefore he descended from heaven into this humility and came to us in our flesh, laid himself into the womb of his mother and into the manger and went on to the cross. This was the ladder that he placed on earth so that we might ascend to God on it. This is the way you must take. If you depart from this way and try to speculate about the glory of the Divine Majesty—without this ladder—you will invent marvellous matters that transcend your horizon, but you will do so at very great harm to yourself.

Again in 1543, Luther preached a Christmas sermon in which he identified Christ as our brother:

When one of several brothers becomes a great magnate, how happy the other brothers become! How gladdening they find this, as you see in Genesis when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. And this is indeed a natural joy. But why is it, then, that we also are not joyful and our hearts are not touched and we do not praise and thank God upon hearing that our God became our flesh and blood and now sits above at the right hand of God as Lord over all creatures?

Among his many roles—theologian, reformer, professor, scholar, exegete, hymnodist, and prolific author—Martin Luther probably considered his role as preacher to be most important. Biographer Roland H. Bainton writes, “Luther is at his best and most characteristic in his sermons on the Nativity,” and then excerpts one of them in which Luther unfolds the familiar story of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem:

The inn was full. No one would release a room to this pregnant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone, for even though Mary had been a beggar maid or unwed, anybody at such a time would have been glad to give her a hand. There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: "If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen! How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!" Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbour. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbour in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.

Martin Luther loved Christmas. The joy he derived from the festival each year not only overflowed in his own composition of such familiar carols as

“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come,” but also recharged his spirit for the many struggles in his continually challenged life.

All of Life

All of life is theological. Life must be lived in the presence of the truth of God. That is so because God is real, and very present. We either show by our lives – our words, our actions, and our thoughts – the knowledge of that truth or we deny God and His truth by living in a way which denies His reality or His presence, or, at the very least, His awareness of us. The first, fundamental principle of Christian life is “Live your theology.”

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That principle is particularly useful at this time of year, when so many people are thinking of making New Year’s resolutions.

For example, have you ever noticed that most, if not all, New Year’s resolutions fail? People generally make them with good motives and, hopefully, sincere hearts. But they fail anyhow. The reason behind this failure is theological.

Resolutions are a species of the Law (they tell you what to do or not to do). That is why they fail. The Law makes sense to us, but the Law rarely improves us, and never permanently. That is so because, as our theology teaches, the Law functions first and foremost to show us how sinful we are. Secondly, Scripture teaches us that the Law is a natural incitement to sin. Paul writes, “*For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking the opportunity through the commandment produced in me coveting of every kind,*” (Romans 7b-8). So, making a resolution ‘not to do something’ is relying on the Law to produce a kind of moral reformation, but sin always takes the opportunity of the Law to seduce us into greater sin (or failure).

The foregoing is an example of viewing a reality of life through your theology.

This thing about New Year’s resolutions simply illustrates the unhappy truth that even a bright and shiny new year is only a new year in the same, old, sinful age. The New Year is new in number only. It is still corrupt, even as it begins. And, theologically (which is to say, realistically), the only answer for sin and its power is the grace of God.

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We have been chosen by God, for His own wonderful but incomprehensible reasons (what we call “grace”) to be the objects of His love, His care, and of His salvation. He has forgiven us all our sins, not because of who we are, but for the sake of the suffering, death, and resurrection of His only Son. He has made us alive from the death of sin, and made us inheritors of eternal life, and freed us from the bondage to sin and corruption.

Having said that much, we also must add that we are “already/not yet” creatures in this world. We are “already/not yet” saints. That is to say, we are saints by the forgiveness of our sins and justification (God’s grace at work) and yet sinners by our own fleshly nature and our own native conduct at the same time – and so, not yet quite perfect saints. So, no matter how hard we try, even we Christians will sin and fail and succumb to temptation. And we will do it far more often than we want to admit even to ourselves.

None of that is set forth to give one permission to do such things. It is simply acknowledging the truth, We still sin, even as believers. Our theology teaches us that our sufficiency before God is not from our own holiness and “putting-away-of-sin-ness” or our own strength and efforts, but from God, by grace. He has made us worthy to stand before Him. He has declared us holy by freely pouring out on us the perfect righteousness of Christ. He can do that and still remain perfectly just and fair because Jesus willingly took on Himself our load of sin, and atoned for our sins - that is, made the payment due to the justice of God for our sins, thereby redeeming the lot of us. And what is that payment? God declares that the soul that sins, it shall die!

Having redeemed us, God has made us to be heirs with Christ – by grace. One might say that He has “gifted us” with righteousness and salvation. Along with that, He gives us His Holy Spirit to dwell within us, who brings with Him the power to make some choices and to do some of the things which will be strengthening and encouraging for this new “saint” and “heir” life within us. But He is our power and wholeness.

So, theologically, we who believe can choose to do things which are going to help us as Christians, or, sadly, we can choose to do that which will hurt us as Christians. God gives us the power to do - and to understand - the former, and our sinful flesh gives us the power to do – and radically misunderstand – the latter. The result is that we can go to church or sit in front of the TV, we can do daily devotions / Bible Readings / prayers, or we can daydream, or hurry on to something else that seems more pressing at the moment. We can volunteer to do the things that need doing in the church, or in some civic organisation. We can serve and worship God, or serve and worship self - or mammon.

Please understand: no one, not even your Pastor, is going to make the right choice every time. That is the ‘still a sinner’ part. But the choices which you make will make a difference in what your mind and soul feeds on. The choices you make frequently, and which predominate in your life, will also often give a silent witness to the health of your soul. People tend to live out what they believe.

An interesting side-light on that principle is that people tend to believe what they live out as well. If someone who believes starts to live deliberately a lifestyle that does not reflect their faith, they will find that what they believe will conform itself to how they live their life. I cannot think of why someone would want to do that, but people actually make that choice for social, professional, and/or political reasons all of the time, and, most generally the fiction of their life soon becomes the reality of their life and of their thinking. C.S. Lewis once wrote that if one wanted to become a Christian, the best way to do so would be to act as though they already were. I think there is a great deal of wisdom in that observation. People live what they believe – and when they deliberately choose to do otherwise, they

soon come to believe what they live. The Church has taught that principle for centuries: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, how you worship determines what you believe. That is another reason why we need to live our theology.

We want to live our theology. The Gospel tells us that God, in Christ, has done all that we needed done for our salvation. There is nothing left for us to do to earn or deserve it. It is pure gift and grace, poured out for us. Our theology also tells us that we are Christians because of Him. God calls us to faith, creating it in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He does that because He has chosen us - divine election. He did not choose anyone to go to hell. That is a personal choice made by human will apart from God. There is no "double predestination," one to glory and the other to reprobation. Human reason says it must work that way, but God says that it does not. He wants everyone to believe and have eternal life, but many simply will not - with the emphasis there on the will. People choose hell by refusing the gift of God, or their parents choose hell for them by depriving them of the knowledge of Christ, or sometimes even the opportunity to hear of Christ. That latter cause is at least part of what that passage in Exodus 20 means

when God says that He "*visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me.*"

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All of life is theological. Since salvation is from God, and even faith is His gift through the Word and Sacraments, we cannot live in order to achieve it or earn it, or even in some way that seems to suggest that such is our goal. To even try to deserve God's favour is to waste your time - and express a theology which denies Christ and rejects His grace. The only thing we can do is live from the grace of God and live out of the reality of our salvation.

What that means about life is that, first, we want to live a life marked by repentance and humility. Sin was our first problem, and our nature will keep us sinning. Our only comfort and hope is the grace of God and the forgiveness of our sins. So we live out our faith by being aware that we "daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but

punishment.” A life that understands the power and presence of sin in us will be marked by repenting and rejoicing in forgiveness. That awareness will also make us humble, because we know how helpless we are, and how no one around us is really any less pure or any less fit for God’s grace and love.

These things don’t mean we deliberately sin because we are helpless not to, or that we give up on trying to be God-pleasing, but it does mean that we don’t pretend that we can perfectly cleanse ourselves of sinful desires, words, or deeds. We walk humbly, doing what we can to resist sin, but aware that we may, and indeed do, fail, and that others around us have the same problem in this regard as we do. So our theology also teaches us to forgive others, as we are forgiven. Such living out of one’s theology creates a pattern in our lives of repenting and forgiving, repenting and forgiving.

So, our theology teaches us that on our own, we are helpless unless and until God helps us. We are powerless to earn or deserve salvation, but we possess it only because He gives it. We are worthless until God declares us precious. God is our sufficiency, just as Christ is our only true righteousness. God gives us even the strength and wisdom to make those choices which we might define as beneficial toward remaining in the faith – and there are such things! They would surely include regularly gathering with the saints (the holy people of God) for fellowship around Word and Sacrament, regular, faithful prayer, attending to the Word in our homes, and encouraging and being encouraged by our fellow-believers.

Spiritually, we understand that everything we desire and possess is from Him, and through Him, and for His purposes. If you believe that, and live it out, you have made a good start, but there is more. Our faith also should teach us that the same is true in daily life and the mundane things of this world. God actually does feed us and clothe us. Our fear and worry about this life and its supply is a sign of the work of the old evil foe on us. It doesn’t automatically mean that we are unbelievers, but it does reflect the on-going battle with sin and Satan and unbelief that continues as long as we live. After all, “Perfect love (faith) casts out fear.”

The difficult and sorrowful and painful things of our lives are each in their order a part of what God intends for us in this world. They are not what they seem; pain for the sake of pain, or sorrow without comfort or hope. They are tools, opportunities for faith, platforms from which we may powerfully confess Christ, and places where we may see God at work in our lives on our behalf. They teach and they train, they confess and they reveal, and they may make no sense to us, but our theology teaches us that God knows, God understands, God loves us, and God has a plan. And so, our theology teaches us to trust in the Lord with all our heart, and not lean on our own wisdom or understanding - and so acknowledge Him in all our ways, and, well..., you know the rest of that passage.

What to do with the New Year? Remember that all of life is theological, and so live out what it is that we confess and believe. In every corner of our lives. Maybe remember that it is a New Year in an old world, and that God is our Father, and Jesus is our Saviour both in church and out here in society. Perhaps, then, we can see the New Year as a reminder of the truly new world which is to come with Jesus.

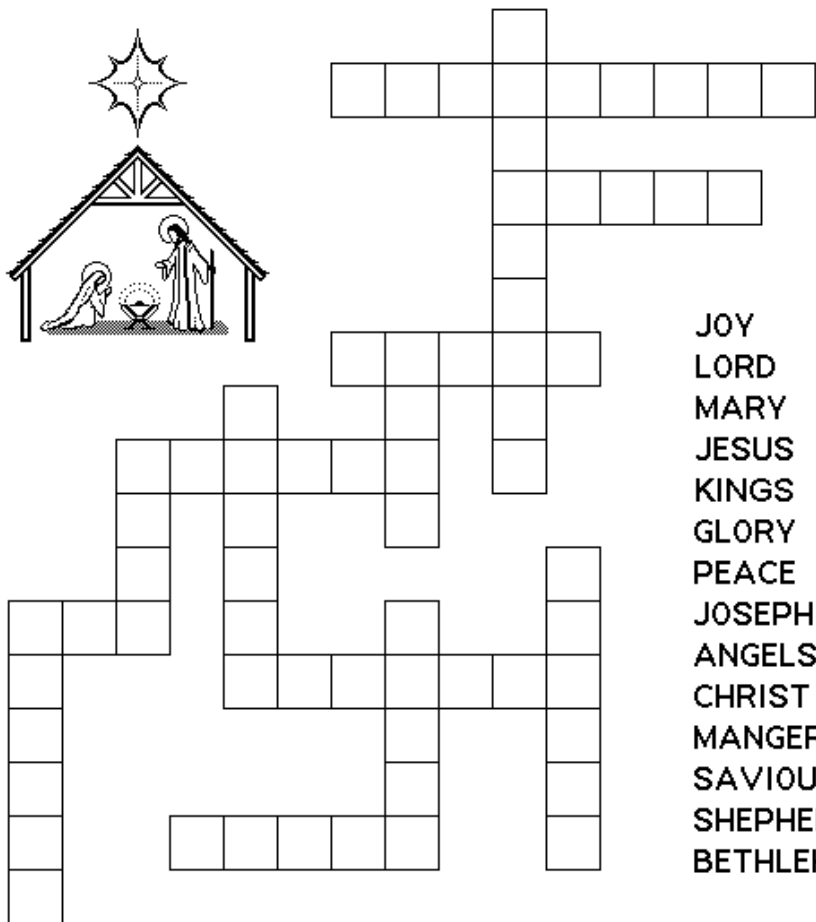
We owe our Lord worship, and praise, and constant thanks, and willing and cheerful service. When we do those things, our theology also tells us that we are doing what God wants of us. If we walk in faith, then we are living from our salvation instead of for our salvation. So let us live out our theology, because, after all, all of life is theological. Let us give up on resolutions - righteousness by the Law - and get on with living as those who depend upon God, those surely saved by His grace, and those who are filled with thanksgiving for all His bountiful goodness to us. Then 2018 will be a magnificent year!

Merry Christmas 
and
Happy New Year

Christmas Crossword

Make all the words fit into this crossword.

Each word is only used once.



JOY
LORD
MARY
JESUS
KINGS
GLORY
PEACE
JOSEPH
ANGELS
CHRIST
MANGER
SAVIOUR
SHEPHERDS
BETHLEHEM