

EC's 2022 Fall Festival Keynote
by Ralph Blair

***“From Creation & Insurrection to Redemption & Resurrection:
God’s Grace Overcomes All of Our Self-Destructive Self-Deceptions.”***

Through all of the ages of God’s Gracious Revelations to *humanity*, from generously Creating *us* in *His* Image to flourish as *human* beings, through all of the ages of our ungrateful responses in all of our own insurrections through all of our own self-righteous resistance and rabid self-indulgent resentment, through all of our irrational rationalizing of all of our very own sinfulness – God’s Gracious Love in Christ, through our Savior’s sacrifice, endures forever. As the Apostle Paul put it: “Even before the creation of the world, God chose us *in Christ* to be holy and perfect in His Presence.” (Ephesians 1:4)

“Pride precedes destruction and a haughty attitude foretells a fall.” What an *accurate* prediction this *was* and *always is!* What *wisdom!* What a *warning!* This quite succinct prognosis is given to us in the ancient biblical book of Proverbs, chapter 16, verse 18.

Our own *self-centered bent* has been *ours* from the beginning of humanity, when, with predicted results, *our* selfish rebellion was *acted-out in disobedience* by the pompously ungrateful Adam and Eve, billions of years after God made the solar system to make a home for humanity. Tragically, we’ve followed *their* self-centered lead, doing what *they* did in *our own* disobedient, self-centered ways until, by God’s Grace, in His love through the sacrifice of Christ, His Son, we’ll be resurrected to eternal peace, at Home with Him.

In the meantime, in this, our fallen world of lies, we’re led astray, as Paul tells Timothy – whether by *our own* self-centered selves or by *others’* self-centered selves. (I Tim 4:1; II Tim 3:13) We’re conspirators, singly or together, by all of our own *egocentric con-jobs*.

The prophet, Jeremiah, warned us that *we’re all so deceitful*. (Jer 17:9) The prophet, Isaiah, recognized that *we all* mislead *ourselves* by *our own self-delusional thinking*. (Isa 44:20) Another prophet, Obadiah, assessed that, *our arrogance* is the *root* of all of *our self-deception*: “Your *pride* deceives you!” (Obadiah 1:3) This includes all of our ancient pride and 21st-Century pride, too. But, trying to escape, we *hide* what *we still see* of *our* falling so far short of the true good for which we’re created, renewed and called to *live*.

Jesus’ disciple, James, warns against *deceiving ourselves*: “Don’t merely *hear* words, and *fool yourselves*, but *obey!*” (James 1:22) But, *our self-deception* keeps leading us astray. Yet, by God’s grace, sincere meditation on His Word is meant to alert us to all these traps. (Ps 119:11; John 17:17) Our part is *to listen and learn*, and then, *obey*.

God’s *written* Word, as Paul told Timothy, is *given*, “so that the servant of God may be *thoroughly equipped for every good work*.” (II Tim: 3:17) Committing God’s Word to *our memory*, as *His truth* in *our minds* for *renewal*, is also *necessary*. Then, we must *follow* it, sincerely *behaving* in accord with what we learn is God’s *call* for us. (James 1:23f)

James distinguishes a *self-deceiving rubbish* “religion” from a *truly pure and faultless faith*. Self-deception chirps away as if words don’t matter. Yet, “Those who say they’re ‘religious’ but don’t keep a tight rein on what they say, *deceive themselves*. Thus, *their* ‘religion’ is *worthless*.” (James 1:26) And it’s not just in *interaction with others* that we must keep a tight rein on our *tongues*. We must keep a tight rein on our *thinking*, in our *internal conversations within us*, lest we slip into fooling *ourselves*, holding *us* hostage to *self-centered* irrationalities and *short-sighted* agendas for *such stupidly selfish*, purposes.

As James explained it: “Religion that’s *pure and undefiled* before God, the Father, is, e.g., caring for the welfare of orphans and widows in their affliction, and keeping oneself unstained by *this world*.” (James 1:27) To Galatian Christians, Paul said that what really counts *most* is God’s call for us to *live our “faith through love”*. (Gal 5:6) That’s a *faith by honest acts of kindness, action* that makes all the *real* difference for others’ *real* welfare.

But our *self-deceptions* can be terribly twisted up into a sense of *self-security*, as in Jesus’ parable of a wealthy fool. The man in that story was thrilled that he’d produced so much abundance and he *mistook this* to *mean* that he’d now get to “take it easy; to eat, drink and be merry”. But his interpretation was merely a foolishly selfish wish about a fancified financial security, when, in actuality, *he’d die that very night*. (Luke 12:20)

Nominal Christians at Sardis boasted of being “woke” in *their way*, as so many, in *their way*, do today, to try to *display* a “good” *reputation*. But it’s all *worse than worthless*, for its all *self-righteous self-deception*. We need to be warned to *truly “Wake Up!”* (Rev 3:2)

The Bible reveals God as The Triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; our Creator, Savior and Guide. *God, Himself, is This Holy Trinity*. He expresses Himself through Eternal Love *within* The Trinity, and in His truest real welfare *for* His creation, culminating for the very best good of *humanity*, as *lovingly created* and *lovingly redeemed from all our sin*.

But we *pretend to be our own mini “trinity”*, all *tied up in our solitary “me, myself and I”*. Thus, we fall so far short of God’s Image, in Whom we’re created. We get ourselves all tangled up in knots, obsessively burdening ourselves in *our idiotic isolation in our idolatry*.

However, in *realistic* worship of God – our Creator, Savior and Guide for all Eternity – we get to be heading Home with Him, by His Grace. But *by worshipping* our fantasized fetish, *measly*, “me, myself, and I”, we have nothing, now or ever, to look forward to, for without our truly God-given relationship with the One-and-Only, the One True and Holy Trinity, there’s literally *nothing* but the *meaninglessness* of utter *death* in our *final demise*.

So, what’s behind all this *damned foolish boasting*? What’s most *deeply* behind it is the *God-given sense of awareness* that we, indeed, *do fall so very far short of what all we’re created to be*. And the fact that our boasting is prompted by this very awareness of all these *failures* while we try to *posture* the very opposite, should be the *grateful clue* into *real relief through repentance and rebirth*. But this *evil habit* often *refuses to repent*. Our boasting, *instead* of being a clue about what’s so very ugly beneath our cover-ups – as if, we needed any reminder – should, itself, remind us of how so far short we fall. Still, *without our repenting*, we stay stuck in our own awareness of what’s so very wrong with us, and what we try so desperately to hide from self and all others. But *we can’t hide it*. Still, all true repentance, followed by forgiveness, is followed up by our rightly relieved conscience and an undistracted mind for moving on ahead in and for a far greater life in obedience to our creation’s goal, our really truly good life that’s truly right in God’s sight.

If the subject matter of one’s boast is of no interest to those at whom the boasts are flung, the boaster gets no coveted response of *adoration*, or even of *admiration*. And, if the one at whom the boast is flung takes it as *one-upmanship* (as it *is*) he or she will take it as a *putdown* (as it *is*) and will have a *negative* reaction to this *foolish braggart* – which isn’t what such a fool intends to receive from trying to deceive by trying to impress. So, boasting gains no *desired* “payoff”. People *don’t brag* about what they *don’t worry* is

inferior about them; they *brag* about what they have *self-doubts* about themselves, and foolishly think that others agree. Their bragging *shouts their insecurity!* It's so silly, and far worse, to try to save oneself in the eyes of others by *bragging* about a *pretended* self!

If boasters stopped boasting to get affirmation that others *can't afford to give*, and instead, *confessed their shortcomings and sins to God, and asked for His help to do right, they'd, indeed, receive the relief they need regarding their past, and they'd get the true help they need for moving ahead in the peace that passes all of their stupid expectations.*

As all boasting is based in one's own sense of *inferiority* and aimed to *raise one's sense of self* – it's a *dead giveaway* to a savvy receiver that the boaster *is* an insecure *deceiver* – in *contradiction* to the boaster's boast. But so, too, is the low self-esteem of the one to whom the boast is made. So, boasting *backfires* in clueless naivete and as a "put-down". Either way, it fails to fulfill the boaster's purpose for the boaster still *remains insecure*. Even if *others buy* into the boast, the *boaster can't* buy into it. It's but one's flimsy mask, right? So, both the boaster and those to whom the boaster boasts can then get beaten up – all by their own dumb doings. As in *all* misbehavior, it's another awfully *dumb deal*.

All of this can take place on such *superficial* grounds that it's all of so little if any *true* importance *except*, of course, for all its *bad intentions* and for all its *bad consequences*.

Besides, it leaves *unaddressed, the most significant failure* of our fallen human race. Though *superficial* efforts to win praise from others can never begin to touch upon what's *truly, so fundamentally* behind a boaster's awareness of his or her *own failures at being* what he or she was *created to be*, they only postpone, and may eliminate altogether, any truly realistic resolution of their existential sense of not being what they *most truly should* be, as each one was, indeed, *created to be*, and down deep, is unhappily aware of it.

Today's self-styled woke squat in desperation to overcome their sense of "low self-esteem". So, they *pretend they're "in the know, you know", and desperately try to be so "socio-politically correct" and "a bright social justice warrior"*. They push stereotypes of people they can't stand, as, e.g., "stupidly *clinging* to religion". However, all the best data show that the *most religious* people are the *most educated* people. So, these attacks by the woke are but *frenziedly frivolous efforts* to "belong", to overcome their own sense that, in *really important ways, they really don't measure up like they really want to measure up.*

Given their own goal, *woke doesn't work. Woke won't work, for woke can't work.* It's all simply too *superficial*. Trying, all on one's own to get out from under one's *miserably misdiagnosed and misunderstood sense* of inferiority is already doomed by what's *real inferiority*, for it looks to merely *pretended* strengths to try to gain strength to overcome *its misinterpreted sense* of its very *real* shortcoming and most *basic* inferiority: *its own sin.*

Misdiagnoses may be longwinded and highfalutin, but they *can never lead to any real solution.* Settling for quick-fixes is giving-up to quackery. And no quackery, quick or prolonged, can solve what's *truly wrong*, whether for now or for forever, forevermore.

Today's problem of self-esteem is the world's *oldest problem.* Every generation has fallen for this most ancient *lie* of our most ancient ancestors, plotting to *be "God" on their own.* It's never worked, for it can't work. We're God's *creations* made in His Image, but we're not, God, Himself. *We tried that trick, and that trick, tricked ourselves into death.*

What's so damned difficult to accept in God's gracious facts of life in Him, Creator of life for us on this, His gifted planet? What's so damned difficult is our own *damned self-*

delusion. God graciously gave us ourselves in His Image on this good earth for our thriving habitat, yet we so self-centeredly rejected and reject His gifts and Him, Himself.

All of our problems have to do with *ingratitude*. We, who'd never have come alive, but for God's *gifting* us with *life*, complain about God's good gifts of *life* and all else He's given us. But, right off the bat, there in lovely Eden's Garden, those first two disgruntled humans hatched their ungrateful grab at counterfeit divinity – so very much like all of *our own* ungrateful disgruntlements. And, except for *God's continuing love* that's there in His gracious, Self-giving, sacrificial intervention, so succinctly described by John, Jesus' beloved disciple, in his Good News account, Eden would have been our *utter demise*. But God intervened for us, in John's words, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

For God's most gracious Love, we all *should* and *could* be, most eternally grateful. But we tend to be so very *self-centered*, so *absent-minded* and *ungrateful* for all that God has done and does for our *truest* welfare, that we all self-righteously settle for gazing at our navels and at nuisances of novelties, while ignoring God, our Creator, Savior, and Lord.

But all who truly turn to God find the peace they need. There's an inspiring old hymn to give much needed clarity and perspective in our world, but it's seldom sung today. It was written by the prolific Fanny Crosby who, from infancy, was blind for life. We in EC visited her grave in New England on one of our EC pilgrimage weekends. Remember?

She wrote so very many hymns that, quite humbly, she used several pseudonyms for many of her hymns, not wanting her own familiar name to clutter up so many pages of a hymnal. So, this hymn was published under her pen name of Henrietta Blair: "How oft in holy converse with Christ, my Lord, alone, I seem to hear the millions that sing around His throne. They share the victor's conquest and sing the victor's song: My soul takes up the chorus, and, pressing on my way, communing still with Jesus, I sing from day to day. Through grace I soon shall conquer and reach my home on high; And through eternal ages, I'll shout beyond the sky: 'Hallelujah! Amen!', 'Hallelujah! Amen!'"

May her hymn's wise witness be an echo to encourage *our* life's pilgrimage, mindful of Christ's victory here and now, prior to *our* shouting beyond the sky: "Hallelujah! Amen!"

Well, the so-called "good *old days*" that *really never were*, are *now* The *Right Wing's* daydreams for "going back", with nowadays' fantasies – *without any real memories of slavery's cruelty, racial segregation against blacks, women without the right to vote, embarrassing imprisonment for violating anti-sodomy laws, etc.* And, The *Left Wing's* daydreams for "rushing ahead" with nowadays' fantasies of "good *new days*" to come that *really won't* – *with CRT's racial segregation against whites, women's rights to kill their babies, pushing young kids who fantasize being the other gender, into irreversible puberty blocking gender-hormone treatments and lasting "top and bottom" transgender surgeries.*

Thus, nowadays, both Right and Left are *day-dreaming of real nightmares* that they *never knew up-close in real-time*, and *nightmares they'll never know up-close in real-time*. All such irrational imagination-with-prejudice always misreads the *actual* past and the *actual* future. No such *fantasy times* were ever *experienced* by the folks in "those good old days" and they won't ever be experienced in "those good new days", since any *utopia*, as *imagined by a fallen race*, was, is and ever will be, quite *literally*, a "no place". Sadly, it's so often so late in the game, when reality hits the fantasizer, knocking him or her for

a loop, when one then winds up *frustrated and lost, outside of a foolishly intended fantasy*, and never having owned up to an intelligently humble recognition of what is *truly real* life.

Neither the Far Right nor the Far Left “hears the millions” that Fanny Crosby so “oft in holy converse with Christ, [her] Lord, alone, “seemed to hear, singing around His throne”, sharing “the victor’s conquest and sharing the victor’s song.” How do they miss hearing what *she* heard? Both the Far Right and the Far Left are *deaf by ignorance and on purpose*, as they seek, so very stubbornly, for merely *political* solutions above all else – especially above anything that’s truly, rigorously and authentically, *biblically* based.

Here, in EC’s Keynote for Fall, 2022, in EC’s 47th year, we’re reminded again of what all generations have looked forward to, each year – *harvest time!* Whether we grew up on a farm or not, we looked forward to *harvests*. We, in cities, missed all the hard labor of plowing, planting, watering, weeding and reaping. We just went to a corner grocery store and, later, to a big supermarket, to find all the produce from all of those farmers’ flourishing fields and overflowing orchards.

As a kid back in the ‘40s and ‘50s in Youngstown, Ohio, I very fondly recall our weekly excursions through all of the rows of stalls in the, now, long gone, Pyatt Street Farmers’ Market down the hill from our house. Each spring and through every summer, and into the fall, we’d be so thankful to enjoy tasty rhubarb, fresh strawberries and corn-on-the-cob from *way out of town, on those farms somewhere out there in the countryside!*

And, each autumn, ancient Hebrews gathered, and now, so do our Jewish friends, to connect at Sukkot for soul searching repentance after Rosh Hashanah, and prayers for forgiveness on Yom Kippur and Simchat Torah. We Christians, too, gather to cultivate discipline for our discipleship in Christ, the fruition for a harvest of maturing in our faith.

In Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31st, 1517, it was All Hallows Eve – and Martin Luther bravely posted his great reforming protest, his faith-affirming *95 Theses* against Rome’s corrupted works-righteousness proffered by the worthless indulgences from the Vatican where, in revulsion, he’d personally witnessed so much vulgar depravity.

But today, rather than recalling Luther’s Reformation, All Hallows Eve gets all swallowed up and regurgitated as all “Halloween”, e.g., wicked witches, spooky ghosts and goblins and greedy self-centered “tricks or treats”. Americans spend over 10 billion dollars each Halloween on candy and crazy costumes without a thought of what all should be *hallowed*.

To most people today, there’s little or no notice of that greatest Good News that was revived some 500 years ago, by Luther’s faithfully recalling his people to this Bible-based Gospel from God. As Paul, in the 1st Century A.D., expressed this greatest of all Good News: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not holding our sins against us. And, God now entrusts to us, this message of reconciliation.” (II Cor 5:19)

There’ve been many important doctrinal debates throughout church history, but none has been as significant as Luther’s urgent call for a *return to justification by faith alone*.

Now, in reading and recalling Luther’s Reformation, we in EC are privileged to remind one another of this plain Word of God on our *justification by faith in Christ alone*, without any traps of corrupt ritualism. We go back to the *biblical* Good News that directs us into a truly fulfilling life in Christ, our Savior and Lord. We’re gifted for a harvesting of all of the very fine crops of spirituality to be found in God’s Good News of atonement in Christ Jesus, alone. So, again, this fall, let’s all join together in harvesting God’s Gospel of

Amazing Grace, flourishing for us, now, in God's holy scriptures that nourish our daily lives in all matters that matter, no matter the season of the year or the season of our lives.

Still, and very sadly, in so many churches today, so few ever really do hear that truly Good News to which Luther recalled us – the Good News that Jesus, *himself*, was and is forever. They hear nothing of the good news that Jesus brought to his first disciples, that they went on to share with others by their words and lives, two-thousand years ago, and in what they wrote for us for today. We in EC get to hear His Word and get to share it.

But now, in so many churches, there's little if anything at all, of Jesus' Good News. Yet there's loads of virtue-signaling on what's *politically correct* in woke circles. Rainbow flags, CRT, BLM, BDS banners and climate flyers clutter all these church doors in self-congratulations, identifying congregations where there's never a bit of a biblical hint of the *Gospel* of God's Saving Grace in the crucified and risen Christ. But as Luther noted, "one little word shall fell the prince of darkness" – and that word, he predicted, will be: "*liar!*"

A recent study by The Barna Group, *How Concerned Are Christian Parents About Their Children's Faith Formation*, asked: "As a parent, how concerned are you about your child's/children's spiritual development?" Among practicing Christians, 51 percent said they were *very concerned*, 33 percent *somewhat concerned*, 9 percent *not very concerned*, and 7 percent *not at all concerned*. So, only *half* of these *practicing* Christian parents are *very concerned* about their children's spiritual growth, while the scripture says that parents are especially *responsible* for their own children's spirituality. (Deut 6:4-8; Psalm 78:1-8). No doubt, these parents have little concern for *even their own* spirituality.

Andy Byrd, of Youth with a Mission, reports on Gen Z: "They're eager, willing and voluntary, but they're *biblically illiterate and not grounded in the theology* of what they're willing to do." He recognizes: "To me, this is a great opportunity", noting that, "We have not had a hard time motivating Gen Z. It's more about getting their zeal channeled in the right direction. With Gen Z we're finding so much hunger for the Bible, so much hunger for evangelism and so much hunger to make a difference." He says: "I see this zeal and vigor rising up for their generation to experience real love, real truth and real transformation." By God's continuing grace, Gen Z may now make up for what their churching parents failed to impress upon them of what all their parents never learned.

Today, sadly, even in Luther's Germany, the citizens, even in the churches, are *infected* repeatedly by *indoctrination for indifference* to the *biblical Gospel*. Thus, merely 12% of German citizens say Christian faith is very important to them. Today, this tragedy is the case throughout western Europe. Why? Helmut Thielicke, that late and great Hamburg pulpit preacher and brilliant theologian of the Gospel, declared, with his sound biblical grounding and with keen foresight: "When theology says only what the world can say to itself, it says nothing. The feet of those who will remove it are already at the door."

Still, there's a whole *other* world of *serious* Christians: *360 million*, living in countries that *cruelly persecute* and *kill* them for their *sincerely committed biblical faith in Christ*. That's *30 million more Christian victims* than the *entire population of the USA's 331.9 million citizens*. Yet, *we, here, complain* about the so proudly *woke* who, in their personal ignorance and private prejudice, merely *look down* on us and *sneer* with *disdain*, over all our *biblical faith in Christ* while trying to see themselves as *better*. *They're not killing us*.

At least, not yet. Disdainful smirks are all we get so far. Still, their disdainful smirks don't get themselves out of their own divinely blessed sense of spiritual *inferiority and need*.

Meanwhile, Christian faith is rated by the Christians in sub-Saharan Africa – Ethiopia, Nigeria and Ghana – to be *more important to them* (by percentages in the high 80s and 90s) than it is here in America, where only 68% of Christians say that Christian faith is *very important* to them. Up in Canada, only 39% of Christians say that Christian faith is *very important* to them. Yet, these faithful *African Christians*, in spite of *all of the deadly anti-Christian persecution* (especial by the Islamists) so value their Christian faith that they're *literally* willing to *die* for Christ. Does this tell us anything about the big *difference* between *our* everyday devotion to Christ and *theirs*? Think, and pray, about *this*. Then, by God's *grace*, be receptive to God's answering *this prayer*. And then, *do* what's right.

It's, indeed, *still our* turn to bring God's Good News to *our* generation, to those where we live, work and worship, and where *we* can now witness without any worry about being *savagely tortured* and *murdered* for our faith in God, our Heavenly Father, and in Christ, our Savior. Of course, we may be unfairly *criticized, mocked* and surely be misunderstood by many, as we mean to be seriously Christian here in America today, but we're not in danger of being *tortured* and *murdered* for our Christian faith – at least, *not here, not now, not yet*. *And yet*, we need to recall that, as Jesus very clearly alerted his first followers, asking them to never forget it: "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master. So, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too.'" (John 15:20) And, he promised *them*, and *us*: "You can be sure that *I will be with you always*. I will be with you to the end of time." (Matt 28:20) So, through whatever persecution we must endure, we've nothing to lose, for whatever is truly everlastingly valuable is all beyond destruction.

Since its founding in 1992, Open Doors, a martyrs' ministry, ranked North Korea as the *worst* country for the oppression of Christians. But ever since America's recklessly impulsive pull-out from Afghanistan on that last day of August, 2021, leaving the entire country in the evil hands of The Taliban, Afghan Christians have had to escape or relocate secretly. Many lost their lives. Many lost others' support after the house churches were closed by force. "Before the Taliban, it wasn't great, but it was good", said an evacuated Afghan Christian as he requested anonymity, hoping to reunite with his folks someday. But, as he says, sadly, "Christians there now live in fear, in secret, totally *underground*."

Open Doors notes that the displacement of North Korea to No. 2 in terms of persecution doesn't at all reflect any slight improvement in religious freedom under Kim Jong-un. Indeed, another anti-reactionary *thought law* has now resulted in even *increasing* the arrests of Christians and in the closing of house churches. And last year, for the very first time in three decades of tracking, all 50 nations that scored high enough to register at "very high" persecution levels were joined by still 5 more anti-Christian countries.

Around the world, 360 million Christians live in countries that *persecute* them for their faith in Christ. *This amounts to 1 out of every 7 Christians in the world*: 1 in every 5 Christian believers in Africa, 2 in every 5 in Asia, and 1 in every 15 in Latin America. As previously stated, that tragic figure for such horrible persecution of Christians, amounts to *30 million more people* than our entire American population of 331.9 million people.

Where is it *most dangerous* to follow *Jesus*? Ranking *lethal anti-Christian hate*, it's in this order, from *the worst*: Afghanistan, North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, and India. But our US Administration left Afghanistan to Taliban

and dropped Nigeria from a religious persecution watch list, while Islamic terrorists and other extremists there were slaughtering 4,650 Nigerian Christians!

At all of our EC worship services over the years, we've given all the contents of our collection plates to those that *serve*, mainly, the oppressed, e.g., Voice of the Martyrs, The Lottie Moon Fund and The Bowery Mission. But, we, ourselves, can't actually *identify* with these persecuted folks, for what we speak of as "persecution" *against us* is not at all the *real horror* that *they've* endured for years and still endure.

We, here, tend to complain of what we *overstate* as "persecution" of *us*, from the woke who merely *look down* on us, *disdaining* us for our faith in Christ – or maybe *defriending* us, *firing* us or refusing to *hire* us. So? That's *nothing* like what so many millions suffer.

Hosea declared: "In God, the fatherless find compassion." (Hosea 14:3) Isaiah calls *us* to "defend the cause of the fatherless" (Isaiah 1:17) The same calls and promises are found in Psalm 82:3 and in Deuteronomy 10:18. So, we in EC can and do befriend and affirm some who are, in effect, *fatherless* by being rejected by angrily embarrassed antigay fathers, and by antigay churches that push bogus "ex-gay" lies onto them.

Oppression of the *fatherless* isn't only about homosexuality, here or elsewhere. A tragic fact of inner-city life in America is a result of virtue-signaled, irrational, regulations about public assistance from the political era of LBJ. It means that, so many boys now have no guidance from *their biological fathers* as they grow up, or, more accurately, even *live* long enough *to grow older*. Reared by single mothers who must not have a live-in salaried husband if they want continued public assistance payments. Without the discipline that only a *loving dad* can give *his son*, such kids seldom learn any *self-discipline*. So, they seek *approval* from another more dominant fatherless boy – one who now heads his deadly inner-city crime gang of other fatherless boys. So, staying alive is very tenuous, for there are always *rival gangs*, also irresponsibly reared and now trying to get *their own* "cred" by being "big shots" in turf wars until, they, themselves, get *fatally shot* by other gangbangers. So, the many who are fatherless need befriending – and most of all, befriending by Christ, beginning with being befriended by caring Christians who may then introduce them to Him. The true Gospel churches in the inner cities aim to provide this.

EC weekly Bible studies were held until Covid-19. For now, good reading can be found in inexpensive used books at www.Abebooks.com Recommended, in no particular order, are the fine works of C. S. Lewis, Eugenia Price, Rosalind Rinker, R. Maurice Boyd, Tim Keller, J. Gresham Machen, Kay Lindskoog, Elizabeth Elliot, Bob Jones, Jr., Justin Lee, Nancy Hardesty, Henrietta Mears, Lewis B. Smedes, Roy Clements, G. K. Chesterton, Fisher Humphries, David G. Myers, N. T. Wright, Nickolas Wolterstorff, F. F. Bruce, Cornelius Van Til, Oswald Chambers, *et al.* Fellowship in writings by bright Christians, both lay persons and scholars, can be instructive for living into further Christian maturity.

Well, we've recalled, in this keynote, the wide scope of God's eternal grace from His creation of everything, and we see that *God was always with us, even before we were created*, as He mused to Himself, "Let Us make man in Our Image" (Gen 1:26) By God's lovingly creating us, and in our *Redemption!* and *Restoration!* in Him, at Calvary, and our future *Resurrection!* it's all by God's Grace alone, and then we'll be forever together with one another, together with our Triune God, our Creator, our Savior and Comforter. Amen!