

“But, what about you? Who do you say I am?”

Ralph Blair’s 2022 EC ConnEction Keynote

Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon, was more than an eight-hours walk from Galilee. Its stone cliffs were pockmarked with *pagan shrines* in honor of Zeus, Nemesis, Pan and The Dancing Goats in risqué fertility rites of bestiality, along with “The Gates of Hades”, a big cave into “the underworld”, the darkest realm of the dead. Ritually pious Jews avoided this unclean territory with all its ramparts of pagan idolatry!

Yet, and therefore, *this* is where Jesus led his disciples – far from all of the intrusive eavesdropping and prying eyes of his Jewish opponents. It was *here*, in this remote region of pagan rituals, that Jesus chose to ask his disciples this one question of most revelatory significance: “*Who do people say ‘The Son of Man’ is?*” (Matt 16:13-20).

Responding with common notions on this most awesome figure, they replied, “Some say, John the Baptist, some say, Elijah, and others say, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.” Jesus, having repeatedly referred to *himself* as, “The Son of Man”, asked *them, most pointedly and relevantly*: “But, what about you? Who do you say I am?”

Immediately, Simon Peter spoke up: “*You are The Christ, The Messiah, The Son of the Living God!*” This referenced the greatest of all Hebrew prophetic expectations.

Instantly, so that they all would comprehend what had been declared there, by God’s revelation, Jesus *affirmed*, “You are fortunate, Simon, [a true] son of Jonah, for, it was *not* flesh and blood that *revealed this to you*. *My Father in Heaven revealed this to you!*” (Matt 16:13ff)

Then, they were in even more awe of Jesus, yet they still didn’t *fully comprehend* all of the many implications of this *unambiguous confirmation, not just of what Peter had said, but of Peter’s having received* what he’d said, *not on his own say so, but by the Highest of all Authority*. It was the truest of all testimonies to Jesus, for it came straight from *YHWH, Himself!* And, Jesus, yet again, called *YHWH, “My Father, in Heaven!”*

Jesus then announced: “*On this rock [of my Father’s revelation] I will build my Assembly of all of the called out (ekklesia)*. He assured his disciples that the Gates of Hades would never overcome his sanctified Assembly. (Matt 16:18)

Yet, for the time being, Jesus *strictly ordered* his disciples to tell *nobody* of his Identity as *The Messiah*. He explained that, *it was first necessary for him to go to Jerusalem where he must suffer* many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law, and that *he must be killed* and, on the third day, *be raised to life*.

But, Peter, rejecting the thought that Jesus must be killed, rebuked him: “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” Jesus firmly rebuked *him*: “Get away from me, *Satan!* You’re a stumbling block to me; you don’t have God’s concerns in mind, but merely human concerns. *All who want to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. All who want to save their life will lose it, but all who lose their life for my sake, will find it. What good will it do for one to gain this whole world, and forfeit one’s soul? What can one give in exchange for one’s soul? The Son of Man will come in His Father’s Glory, with His angels, and He will repay each one, according to what each one has done.*” (Matt 16:20ff)

Well, in the *meantime*, here in AD 2022, with whatever time remains before the Son of Man *returns* in His Father’s Glory, NYC Pride – with *not a thought* about *Christ’s Return* – announced its official theme for 2022: “*Unapologetically Us*”. What a *sad self-boasted defensiveness*, without any awareness of the *true freedom that’s to be found in Christ!* Yet, deeper still, that narcissistic *posturing of pride* belies God’s *gifted awareness* of the *truly deep emptiness* that lies beneath all such self-centered elaborations of egotism.

Egocentrically, thus, *hopelessly*, this *prideful* campaign claims that *it is* “focused on exploring their *true selves, coming out* to the world with vibrant, loving hearts and souls open to the public, no matter how scary, unsure, or vulnerable it might have been.” The NYC Pride promises that, *now*, “Others continue their journeys of finding a true sense of self and inner peace.” Pride cheers: “The entire community should celebrate each and every person’s story and provide support so everyone can feel happy, healthy, and safe, being, *Unapologetically Us*.” Everyone? Nope! NYC Pride *bans* all *LGBTQ cops in uniform*, thus virtue signaling *wokeness*, lest it offend the mobs of anti-cop mania.

To Christians – including us in EC – who also aim to serve those that NYC Pride aims to serve, an outcry like, *Unapologetically Us*, can never deliver the *Good News* that's so very much more than NYC Pride's promises, "true sense of self and inner peace". How far short all such *pride* falls from Paul's summation of *truest peace*: "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people's sins against them.*" (2 Cor 5:19) *It's True Peace that we all truly need as fallen humanity*, whatever might be our sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, nationality, political preferences, etc., etc.

Also, in this meantime before Christ's return, yet another campaign was launched with well over a hundred million dollars in funding. *Christianity Today* calls this, "the biggest Jesus campaign ever." Its publicity is loaded with assumedly surefire questions and attention-grabbing exclamations: "Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever felt betrayed? Have you ever felt unfairly judged? So was Jesus. He gets us." But, do the Christians behind the "He Gets Us" campaign, *get Jesus*? The project's director vows that, this campaign is "not for recruiting or converting". Instead, it's meant "to raise the respect and personal relevancy of Jesus" – whatever in this *fallen* world, *that* means.

The "He Gets Us" campaign might *better refute religiously promoted homophobia* than can the defensive *narcissism* pushed by *Unapologetically Us*. It might even show Jesus as having been *religiously* targeted, like LGBTQ victims have been and are still *targeted by our day's self-righteous religionists*. But that could not be, given that ongoing *antigay* attacks are pushed by many of these pushers of the "He Gets Us" campaign.

The "He Gets Us" campaign falls far short of presenting Jesus for *who he was – and is*. He was *not – and is not – distracted with self-doubts and a low self-esteem*. He very *well knew* that, in coming to earth, in flesh, *he'd be "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hid their faces, he'd be despised, and not esteemed."* (Isa 53:3) Yet Jesus, *voluntarily, so well accepted* all that he *well knew* he'd have to face of our *opposition and hate*, for *that was*, indeed, *his calling in his coming*. Lovingly and deliberately, Jesus truly *chose* to come and he *knew* he'd be *bullied and oppressed, for our eternal welfare*. Instead of "personalizing" that hatred and betrayal, etc., Jesus *accepted* it *willingly, knowing* what he was doing, *knowing* what all of that opposition was *all about*. He was *doing what he, in flesh, came to do to save our fallen humanity* through his substitutionary death, in our place, on that cross at Golgotha. This is what *we all* must "get" about Jesus, who *gets us* so far more deeply than we "get" *us*, and apparently, more deeply than the "He Gets Us" folks get Jesus.

Jesus so clearly knew and said so: "Nobody takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own free will." (John 10:18) He did not do this *to find* or *to model self-esteem*. He did this *to save us* from all of the terrible consequences of *our own sinful searches for self-esteem*. He *paid our debts with his life*. He did it all from his merciful love, without any complaining and without any revenge, when from the cross, he prayed: "Father, forgive *them*, for *they don't know what they're doing*." (Luke 23:34)

It was about the ninth hour, as Jesus was hanging on that torturous cross to pay the debt for all our sin, that he cried out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*", the Hebrew for, "*My God! My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" It's instructive for us to realize that *this was the only time* Jesus ever addressed God without calling him, "*Father*". On the cross, at the very end, *loaded down with all the sins of humanity*, Jesus experienced what he'd never before experienced: Hellish *separation* from His Father. For us!

Charles Spurgeon noted that Jesus had not *personalized* Peter's denials or Judas' betrayal, but that *this separation from His Father*, "cut him to the quick", in Spurgeon's phrase. It was the *only* experience in all of Eternity that The Son and The Father were *separated*, for as Paul would tell Corinthians: "*God made Him, who had no sin of his own, to be sin, for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God, in Him.*" (II Cor 5:21) Yet, as Paul also explained, "God, Himself, was there, *in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.*" (II Cor 5:19)

Jesus, on the cross, *accomplished* his work of redemption for us, proclaiming in a loud voice, and with his last breath, "*It's finished!*" The earth trembled! The Temple veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies, was suddenly torn in two, from top to bottom! *Jesus' substitutionary atonement was concluded on that cross that day. Done!*

This is what *we all need to know* when it comes to *knowing who Jesus is*. Thus, this is who we're to say, *Jesus is!* But his amazing grace far exceeds what's pitched by the *He Gets Us* ads. Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior-in-flesh, *truly understands us*. He *does know us!* Of this, *we can be sure*. And we, thus, *should be eternally grateful* for Jesus' sacrificial love that's really so very far beyond *our own* meager comprehension.

Luke tells us that, when Jesus was just 12-years-old, he'd traveled in a caravan, with Mary, his mother, and with Joseph and their neighbors from Nazareth, up to the Temple at Jerusalem, for Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After the Feast, and on their way home, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus wasn't among the others in their caravan.

Alarmed, Mary and Joseph rushed back into Jerusalem to search for him. *Finally*, after three days of looking throughout the city, they found him. *There, he was, sitting in the Temple*, in deep conversations with the teachers of the Law.

Mary scolded him, saying that, she and Joseph were so worried after discovering that he wasn't in their returning caravan where he *should* have been. Jesus respectfully reasoned with her: "Didn't *you* realize that I'd be *here, in my Father's house?*" (Lk 2:46f)

His so readily calling God, "*my Father*", could mean that this wasn't the *first* time he'd *spoken this way* to his mother, who, very well knew that *she was a virgin* when Jesus was born, and that she was told by the Angel, Gabriel, that *this child would be, the Son of God*. (Lk 1:26ff) This encounter in The Temple after Passover *confirms* Jesus' early and deep awareness of *his identity with God, "my Father"*.

The four gospels record, in 88 passages, that Jesus *identified himself as "The Son of Man"*, and he always included *that definite* article to distinguish it from, "a son of man", which would simply mean, *any human being*. This *biblical title* that Jesus used to refer to *himself*, even in asking his disciples about the *identity* of The Son of Man, had long been known to point to *One Truly Outstanding Man of the Future – This One Who would be given the very highest exaltation of glory by YHWH, Himself*.

The original biblical reference to *The Son of Man* is found in the Book of Daniel, in chapter 7, where the faithful Daniel's God-given gift for dream interpretation, describes one great dream that *he* had with an unforgettably awe-filled vision from *the distant future*. Daniel dreamed of *One Who* is identified as, "*The Son of Man*", *this supremely exalted figure in God's Presence*. "The Son of Man" is given, by God, Himself, *universal authority and the very highest of all glory*.

Here's that text: "Behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came *this Son of Man*, who came to the Ancient of Days [*i.e.*, God], and He was presented before God. To *this Son of Man*, there was given, by God, *all authority, all glory and all sovereign power*, so that people of all nations, of all tongues, *worship Him and serve Him*. *His dominion is forever; it will never pass away. His kingdom will never be destroyed.*" (Daniel 7:13f)

As the Old Princeton Seminary's warm-hearted and relentlessly biblical, B. B. Warfield put it: "The glory of the Incarnation is that it presents to our adoring gaze, not a humanized god or a deified man, but a true God-man."

Besides *Jesus'* repeatedly applying *this* specific title, "The Son of Man", to *himself*, the only other New Testament reference to *this* "Son of Man", is in Luke's reporting of the hostile Sanhedrin's self-righteous fury at the young Stephen's faith in Christ and their wicked *self-serving* agenda, using their *false witnesses'* accusations *against* Stephen, as "credible", even as they saw in Stephen's face, a face like an *innocent angel's*. As Stephen traced God's revelation across Israel's history of resistance to God, leading up to Jesus, as the Christ, the Messiah, the Sanhedrin continuing such resistance, got wildly enraged. They dragged Stephen out into the street and stoned him to death.

As he was dying, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed upward and shouted, "Look, I see heaven open, and *the Son of Man* standing at God's right hand!" So, he cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive me!", as he asked the Lord for mercy and that the Lord not hold his killers guilty. And there, on that same street that day, stood Saul [Paul] before his conversion to Christ. He was in support of those who were stoning Stephen to death. (Acts 7:56ff; 22:20)

Six centuries after Daniel's day, Jesus' beloved disciple, John, from his closest personal experience with Jesus, and in his very first sentence of his own Gospel account, put his eye-witness report about Jesus into the most ancient of *contexts*, alluding to the very first words in Genesis: " '*In the beginning* ', John added: "*was The Word, and The Word was with God, and The Word was God. ... The Word came in human flesh and He lived among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and full of truth.*" (John 1:1ff) *What awesome, eyewitness testimony this was, and still is, for us, today!*

Throughout his ministry, Jesus alluded to *this ultimate climax* envisioned in Daniel 7, and he repeatedly *identified himself as this Son of Man*. Yet, Jesus *added* a radically significant *countervailing clarification* by revealing that, "*The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as*

a ransom for many". (Mark 10:45) *This is why* He'd come to earth *in human flesh*. *This is what* he did for us in being crucified, in *our* place, on *that* cross, at *that* place called, "The Skull". *His Death was God's Own Substitutionary Atonement for sin*. This was precisely what Jesus alluded to in more fully revealing Himself to Peter and the other disciples on their sojourn among pagans.

While *seemingly* contrary to the prophecy of *glory* in Daniel 7, *Jesus' substitutionary atonement* was actually the *very deeply necessary groundwork, here on earth*, for that prophecy's *fullest fulfillment*. Jesus' love for us, in *giving up his sinless human life*, and *taking onto himself all of our sin and all of its consequences of death that we deserved*, was our Triune God's Sovereignly Grace-filled Solution, to *our own* having *chosen to revolt against God in our own self-centered willfulness and our trashing of our gifted innocence, down to our own self-destruction*.

This *Son of God* was God's Own Lamb, God's Own Sacrifice of Himself, to atone for all of our self-centered, suicidal rebellion against God and His great gifts of life for us. As Paul put it after *his own* conversion to Christ: "God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to Himself, *not* charging *our* sins to *our* account." (II Cor 5:19) God was *there*, suffering at that cross, that day at Golgotha!

What *depraved rebellion* was ours *against Him!* What *divine redemption* was given to us *by Him!* He met our massive disgrace with His amazing grace. It was, and is, and ever shall be, *God's great Love, beyond all of our abilities to even begin to more truly or more fully comprehend it all*.

Jesus fulfilled the *fullest meaning* of his Identity as this One, singularly sinless "Son of Man", enduring the *extremities of humiliation and suffering in body and spirit by his voluntary, substitutionary death* on that cross before his truly *victorious resurrection and everlasting authority as The Son of Man*, so long beforehand, envisioned in Daniel 7, and yet, he was, indeed, as it's revealed in scripture, *slain for us from before the foundation of the world*. (Rev 13:8)

Christ foretold this sweeping narrative of God's Good News for *fallen* humanity as *he lived it through his obedient earthly life, in our stead, through his substitutionary suffering and his substitutionary death, in our stead, and in his resurrection's victory over death, and his glorious ascension* back to Heaven, from thence, as Titus reminds us, we "await our Blessed *Hope*, the appearing of the glory of our great *God and Savior, Jesus Christ*". (Titus 2:13).

Were *we, ourselves*, to be asked, by Jesus – and, *indeed, we are asked* – "Who do you say I am?", what's *our* reply? Does it come, as Peter's did, from God Himself, Who, Jesus revealed is, "My Father in Heaven"? *We, with Peter, have, indeed, been given this Truth about who Jesus is – right there in that text, along with Jesus' first disciples*. *We, too*, have received, as Peter did, God's word on *who* Jesus is, and then, with *Jesus' own verification* of what Peter *received from God*. What do *we* make of it all? What's *our* response to *Jesus' question*, "Who do you say I am?" His question can't be *avoided* – and it's far too important for each of us, to *ignore*.

God's word in all of these scriptures has been thoroughly searched and carefully studied and it all proves to be so *highly trustworthy* through all of these many centuries of history, including its solid survival under so many vicious attempts by the so-called "higher critics", *bent on discrediting* God's word. But *these critics discredit themselves by trying and repeatedly failing* in all their *twisted attempts*, to find *fault* with the biblical evidence.

From the beginning, Jesus was dismissed as a blasphemer by the resentfully self-righteous *religionists*, as he's dismissed now by the self-righteous religionist woke. It's always done to *fit what's "in" with "the establishment"* of the day. But others saw then, as others see now, that Jesus, has always been and always will be, The Very Word of God, Incarnate, before and after His resurrection.

Neutrality was never, is not now, and never will be, a viable option on Jesus. God's Witness to Jesus, in so many ways, is *ignored by self-preferring indifference, deliberately intentional ignorance, self-centered preoccupation, and by defensively contemptuous self-righteousness*. Yet, any excuse "*works*" for a *deeply entrenched denial – even when it contradicts itself, to itself*. *Such is the nature of humanity's sin*.

For *our* reply to Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?", it's helpful to know what reliable biblical scholars and historians have to say on matters of who Jesus *was* and *is*, from all of their careful studies of the texts of God's Word and history's findings on this crucial question for all of us, here, today, to truly, seriously comprehend.

Yale's historian of Christianity, Kenneth Scott Latourette, assured us that, "Although our accounts of Jesus are brief, they enable us to know him and his teachings as well as we can know any figure of like antiquity." Countering the cynicism about Jesus, the historian and philosopher, Will Durant, wrote: "That a few simple men, should in one generation, have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospel." Another historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, affirmed that: "The human founder of the Christian Church is God Himself incarnate." Although this is a statement of *faith*, it very well stems from Toynbee's wide expertise in his study of this world's history. In another lecture, Toynbee estimated: "Christianity will continue to be a living spiritual force in the world for thousands of years after our Western civilization has passed away." His view of the future is based in *faith as well as in facts of world history*.

According to Scripture, our Christian *faith* will be our Christian *sight* for eternity! *Now*, by the gift of *faith* in Christ, we can well hold on to that well-grounded testimony and its gracious expectations.

All of the *earliest historical sources* on Jesus are *eye-witness* accounts in the Bible. We also have *pagan* sources from that time. Naturally, what pagan sources say about Jesus is *hostile*, but they do speak to his *historicity*. Such reliable sources include the ancient historians, Thallus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, the Younger. Among *non-Christian Jewish* sources there are accounts by the historian, Josephus, as well as at least eight *hostile* references in rabbinic Judaism's major text, the *Talmud*.

F. F. Bruce, University of Manchester's outstanding New Testament scholar, noted that: "Josephus bears witness to Jesus' date, to his being the brother of James the Just, to his reputation as a miracle-worker, to his crucifixion under Pilate as a consequence of charges brought against him by the Jewish rulers, to his claim to being the Messiah, and to his being the founder of the 'tribe of Christians' ". And, Bruce concludes, with his scholarly care: "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."

Unsurprisingly, the *biblically illiterate* are *ignorant* of all of this historical evidence and *feverishly* anti-Christian skeptics mock it all as "nonsense". But *indifference, ignorance and self-serving cynicism fail to qualify as adequately informed or credible testimonies*.

Summarizing the *actual studies* in search of the *historical* Jesus, Princeton scholar, James Charlesworth, clearly notes that, *history is, itself*, "of the essence of Christian theology". And Toynbee referred to Christianity as, "the historical religion *par excellence*". To the very "theologian of history", Wolfhart Pannenberg, and specifically, concerning *Christ's resurrection*, "history is the very mode of God's revelation".

Historians' conclusions affirm Paul's realizing, from *his own miraculously personal experience with the risen and ascended Christ* after he, himself, had so very zealously persecuted the Christians, and later, was targeted, himself, by *other anti-Christian* persecutors, that, if *our faith* in Christ is not based in His *historic resurrection, our faith is futile*. (1 Cor 15:17)

Nothing but Jesus' resurrection explains why and how Jesus' disciples – so deeply *disillusioned* and *depressed* over his arrest and crucifixion, *hiding* in fear of *their* being arrested, themselves – *suddenly*, from *totally life-changing encounters with the risen Christ*, went on, boldly, even physically separated from each other's support, to endure *severe persecution and execution* for *refusing to recant* their eye-witness testimonies of the *risen Christ, The Son of Man*. No *other* explanation for this is *credible*. Motivations to denounce this historic testimony stem from sinister, self-serving agendas of hostility.

For about a generation, most of the Gospel accounts circulated *orally*. It was usual for disciples of a rabbi to *memorize* their teacher's words. Bruce explains, "The evidence indicates that the written sources of our Synoptic Gospels [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] are no later than c. AD 60, some of them may even be traced back to notes taken of our Lord's teaching while his words were actually being uttered. ... We are, in fact, practically all the way through, in touch of the evidence of eye-witnesses. All of the earliest preachers of the gospel knew the value of this first-hand testimony, and appealed to it time and time again. 'We are witnesses to these things', was their constant and confident assertion", even, as noted, down through martyrdom, for their refusal to deny their witness for Christ.

Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield asserts that, the essential form of the Gospel materials was settled within 20 years after the crucifixion. And, as Bruce pointed out, "There were probably several selections of sayings of Jesus in circulation before the Gospels proper began to be produced."

There are *various ways* to “say” *anything*, and the *matter* and the *manner* of what we “say”, so to say, can, of course, also be “said” in all of these many ways. And this, too, applies to what we “say” about *Jesus*. We all *speak*, as it were, *from within our thinking, beliefs, assumptions, priorities, values, agendas*, into what we *utter, write* and what we *do or don’t do* and how we then *behave* or don’t. All of communicating is *multilayered, multifaceted, and multifunctional*. We also “speak”, as it were, by what we leave *unsaid* and *unexpressed* in whatever ways we do that. Yet, all of these many different ways to “say” *anything* are always deeply *rooted* in *our cognitions, our heart-felt beliefs and our intended personal purposes*.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there’s “a time to be silent”. But this wisdom is so often *bent*, so *selfishly*, into a *rationalization*. (Eccles 3:7) Still, all who *truly* know Jesus as Savior and Lord, *cannot but “speak” in whatever way is, at the time, appropriate*, to “say”, who Jesus is.

And, as we’re so well reminded by one of the very best Gospel communicators of the 20th-Century, Henrietta Mears, at Hollywood’s First Presbyterian Church’s Sunday School: “You teach a *little* by what you say. You teach *most* by what you *are*.” Indeed, her rather *unique persona* was part of her fine ability to *communicate*. She taught this insight to Billy Graham, during a tough time in his early days of ministry and he stuck with her good sense, as sacred pragmatism, for life. Another idiom puts the same, like this: “Actions speak louder than words.” This bears repeating, so, “Put your money where your mouth is”, because, “talk is cheap”. On and on such wisdom is confirmed.

Such ways were *lived* in Jesus’ parables and in his way of life, and should be *lived* by all of Jesus’ *true followers* who mean to be, in each and every *thought, word, attitude, deed* and *way of life* in *all of life, Jesus’ honest, faithful and communicable witnesses!*

In communicating our witness today, it’s so very encouraging to recall that, just before the Sanhedrin guards from The Temple arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was in deeply intimate prayer with His Father in Heaven – with all of *us* in mind. In Jesus’ words: “I pray not only for these disciples, but also for *those who believe in Me through their word*. *May they all be one*, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. *May they also be in Us*, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.” (John 17:20f)

Let’s *all contemplate* Jesus’ prayer with *abundantly grateful expectation*, for *all of us were there* in that grueling time in Gethsemane, *within the focus of Jesus’ intimate prayer with His Father in Heaven*. *He was facing history’s most horrible ordeal in taking into himself the deadly sins and punishment of our fallen humanity*. *By his suffering and cruel death by crucifixion, in our place, we are freed by God’s love in amazing grace*.

Have you ever realized how *unimaginably complex, your being born* into this world was? And as complicated as it was, it was *all by God’s sovereign grace and His will*.

Contemplating, *even physically*, the steps along one’s historic lineage into this world, the probability of an exact sperm cell’s meeting an exact egg so that, an exact *ancestor* would be created and would then, eventually, lead to *one’s* being created as *oneself*, is calculated to be one in 400 quadrillion. Accounting for those 150,000 generations by raising 400 quadrillion to the 150,000th power: $[4 \times 10] \approx 10$, that’s a ten followed by 2,640,000 zeroes. Contemplating this, we should all be grateful that we arrived through this compassionate and purposeful Love of our Sovereign God, Creator and Redeemer.

In my own case, my DNA data reveal my *ethnicity* as 37% Europe West, 26% Great Britain, 22% Ireland/Scotland/Wales, 5% Europe South, 4% Scandinavia, 2% Ashkenazi Jewish, 1% Europe East, 1% Iberian Peninsula, under 1% Finland/Northwest Russia and under 1% Middle East. Ancestors all, and yet, to me, they’re all *total strangers* – at least, *for now*. You have your own ancestors and maybe we even share some of them.

Then, in the case of each person’s own *conception*, *only one* of 20 million to 1.2 billion sperm cells in that single ejaculation outpaced all the other sperm cells to penetrate and fertilize that one month’s one ovulated egg from among the many eggs that started to develop but died before ovulation. And before that, every woman has around 300,000-400,000 eggs during her own reproductive years, but ovulates only some 300-400 eggs from among the 7 million eggs she had while she was still in her own mother’s womb. And, at long last -- *there you are; here I am!* Each of us, *privileged into life*.

When *I* was born, both of my parents were 37, about a decade older than the average pregnancy at that time. Just before I was born, the obstetrician told my father: “I might be able to save *one* of them”, to

which my father replied, "Save my wife!" It was on my 16th birthday that my father told me *this*, just as we were getting out of the car to cross a major street through heavy traffic. He never again mentioned it after crossing the street.

I mention these statistics and my own difficult birth to remind me, and all of us, of *the odds of one's arriving, as one's self*, except by God's Sovereign and Loving Purpose. This insight calls for taking ourselves and each other *far more seriously and thankfully*, than we usually tend to do. It calls for a far more *grateful discipleship* while *here* on this, our privileged pilgrimage on this planet, so precisely prepared for our own habitation.

So, I'm including, here in my 2022 keynote, some *relevant* autobiographical data on *how I, myself have experienced Jesus* over the years, and *how I've aimed, and do aim, to say*, in whatever way, who *Jesus* is. I urge you to think about and share some of the same about your own life. What one "says" of *Jesus*, of *others*, or of *anything*, entails both *personal experiences* and a lot of a *lack of experience*. These factors can help or hinder identification and communication with one another. Sensitivity to our own and to others' backgrounds helps us to be sensitive to realities and not be messed up in prejudice. And, the *sequential steps* in our *thoughts, beliefs, feelings, words and deeds – in that order* – are so crucially important in *understanding and expressing our experiences*, along with some sensitivity to *awareness of our own lack of experience*.

Since childhood, I've been *privileged* to learn, from one step to the next, and from one misstep to a step-correction, what it means to *rely* on Jesus, and what it is to *rightly reply* to His question, "Who do you say I am?" *When I've failed in my awareness or in my discipleship, I've learned to receive a given, clearer perspective, of who Jesus is, for a more consistently true Christian witness within myself and with others*. Such personal experiences are the routes into yet more maturity and consequently, a more faithful witness for Christ.

At the *heart* of my own response to Jesus, in my childhood, is what I learned of Jesus' words in His Invitation, cited in my very earliest Sunday School class, in the basement of a church building, long since demolished under Youngstown, Ohio's urban blight. His Invitation was this: "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in, and I will sup with him, and he with me." (Rev 3:20)

I'd never heard that word, "sup". But I figured it'd be *like* having "supper" with Jesus in my heart. *That*, I thought, would be *very good!* I'd later learn that, to "sup" is to take one's time in eating, sip by sip. So, let's not *rush* our time with Jesus, let's *listen* and let's *learn* from our *close* Companionship with Him.

In the words of a Sunday School song by Harry D. Clarke, orphaned as a child in Wales, I sang: "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, come in *today*, come in to *stay*, come into my heart, Lord Jesus". I *so very clearly recall my emphasizing*, in my *mind*, those two words, "*today*" and "*stay*". So, I opened the door of my heart and He came in. And He's never left me all on my own, all alone. And in God's Holy Spirit, He never will, for, as Jesus told his first disciples, that even after He'd no longer be *with them* in the *flesh*, He'd be *with them*, still, for He'd asked His Father to send Help to them in the Person of God's Holy Spirit, Who, as promised, is now with *us* in *our lives* here on earth, now, and on into the future, Forever with our Triune God. (John 14:16ff)

The lines that so *logically* follow Clarke's *first* verse, inviting Jesus to, "*come in today, come in to stay*" are these lines: "*Shine out of my heart, Lord Jesus, shine out today, shine out always, shine out of my heart, Lord Jesus.*" These lines, too, have been my prayerful desire, from *those very earliest days*, and *on into these very latest days*.

And, of course, as John R. W. Stott, put *all* of this into a soundly biblical focus: "Our Christian life began, *not* with *our decision* to follow Christ, but with *God's call* to us to do so." Indeed, it all began, "*before the foundation of the world!*", as Paul put it. (Eph 1:4)

In all of my eight decades and counting, I've been aware of God's Presence. All I've come to learn of Him, *in* Him, and *with* Him, *increases my confidence, my faith, in His being with me as the One He has always revealed He is and will be*. Through all of life's cycles, challenges and changes, God's Holy Spirit is Ever-Present.

This is Who I've aimed to say He is, in and through all aspects of my life! Still, there remains so much more to learn in my being *more faithfully yoked* with The Son of Man, The Savior of the world. As Paul

put it, twenty centuries ago, and as we can be certain in knowing *now*. “*Now, I know only in part, but then, I shall know, even as I am known.*” (I Cor 13:12)

It was by trusting in God all along, that I really never had a problem with having some *involuntary attraction* to a few other boys. I never had such *involuntary attraction* to any girls. My attraction gradually clarified into what I’d understand to be, somehow, *sexual*, however slightly I understood *this at first*, way back when. It was the ‘40s and ‘50s, so we’d not yet been bombarded with all the later non-stop antigay propaganda of the ‘60s.

As I grew older, I noticed that this *fascination wasn’t a mere phase*, but was one of my “*givens*”, for it was so *naturally involuntary*. It *wasn’t deliberately chosen*. It was simply what I discovered *within me*. It was just a *part of me*, as I grew into *being* still more of *me* – *my increasingly taken-for-granted, me*. To my way of thinking, what was a *given wasn’t wrong*; but what was *chosen could be wrong* or right.

This *personal experience* has been very useful in understanding and in counseling others who’ve experienced *this same involuntary lifelong given*. I can relate to those that I serve in *my life’s work*, helping same-sex attracted folks to better understand it and to better deal with it in *their day to day lives*, with all else that they must learn about themselves.

To my way of thinking, all the way back to childhood, there always were *various “givens”*. My sister was a *girl*; my brother and I were *boys*. These were *givens*. They were *facts, not faults*. My sister and I had *brown hair*; my brother was a *redhead*. These, too, were *facts, not faults*. These were *physical givens*. There were always, also, *other kinds of givens*.

From the start, each of us three kids, with the *same parents*, growing up in the *same household*, and each of us kids, *just a year apart* – was always so *very different* in *personality*, with each one’s *typical moods*, with *different personal preferences*, *different interests*, *different talents*, *different ways of being*, etc. None of us deliberately *chose* any of these “givens” so far as I can see. They *all were just there, so consistently there, to enjoy* or to *contend with, all along*. They were what we *found* in ourselves and in each other.

I was always rather *reflective, thinking ideas through*. I tried to be a *counselor* to my younger siblings, in our very earliest childhood. For instance, in 1945, we three had our first up-close experience with *death* when our mother’s 84-year-old aunt died, in her bedroom, upstairs. With the hushed tones in the house, and the obvious sadness there that morning, it seemed especially “scary” to my two younger siblings. So, as the oldest, at 6, I huddled with my younger siblings under our big dining room table with its heavy wooden legs, to *comfort* them, protectively assuring them that “Aunt Em” was now safe with God, and that she was no longer suffering in sickness.

While my brother was always rather quiet, a guy of *few words*, our sister was strong-willed, and could be a bit stubborn, like our father. I wasn’t *into “sports”*, neither was my sister. My brother was *into sports*, more as a *fan* than a *player*, although he loved golf. *Familial differences* were what we all *found in ourselves and in each other* and these “givens” remained our *personalities* into and throughout adulthood.

It was the same with our parents. Each parent’s personality was different in *many ways*. Of course, that’s the *fascinating otherness* that brings two people romantically together. And we all knew that we all *loved each other and usually we all got along well*, though my father and my sister could be a bit tactless in tending to be at odds with each other. I recall just one spanking incident. Our father was spanking our sister and I yelled out loud, “*Stop hitting her!*” Maybe a bit embarrassed, he immediately stopped.

Early on, I did begin to suspect, it wouldn’t be *smart* to be the only boy at school to say that he found *some other boys*, but *no girls*, “attractive”. I’d not heard anyone share about such experience in our neighborhood or at school. But, as boys started to talk about girls in 4th grade, and then hoot over an elderly substitute teacher whose name was Elizabeth Taylor, I concluded that it was *like* my attraction to a couple of the boys.

One day, *even earlier* than this, a substitute teacher had a big fit over a boy who had his hands in his pockets. She yelled at him and at all of us boys, telling us that boys should *not* have their *hands* in their *pockets!* When I got home, I mentioned this to my mother, since it seemed to me, to be so stupid. She said my father would explain it when he got home. Well, he tried, *fumbling something* on

boys “touching themselves.” I figured from that, that scratching one’s “private parts” should not be done in public.

As for the “birds and bees”, it was left to my mother’s handing me an article from a women’s magazine, one afternoon while I was at home, sick in bed with the measles, mumps or chicken pox – I don’t remember which it was *that time*, since, all three of us kids got all three of these infections in those years before the vaccines.

Besides these instances, I don’t recall *any reference* to “sex”, as such, throughout all of my childhood – or even in later years – *within our family’s household* conversations.

On Christian matters, my father resisted all *evangelical* talk through most of his life. But our mother prayed with all three of us little kids, each night at bedtime. Each kid, in turn, prayed: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord, my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus’ sake. Amen.” Observers, over the years, have mocked this prayer as “far too frightening” for young children, but I don’t recall ever thinking of it *that way*. Instead, given my *trust* in Jesus, I found it to be of great comfort each and every night as I drifted off to sleep. These *critics’ warnings* against this prayer *display their own ignorance and prejudice*.

Both my sister and my brother passed away in 2021. In eulogies, I noted that day when we’d huddled under the dining room table and our bedtime prayers in childhood, thinking that these parts of *our* lives might never have been shared with *their own* kids. I learned that their own kids appreciated hearing of this about their parents’ childhoods, especially at a time of grieving.

During Junior High, I found two books by 19th-Century preachers, Charles Spurgeon and D. L. Moody, at a small store, The Best Book Shop, in downtown Youngstown. These gave me what I *never* heard in worship services at the two consecutive Mainline churches that our family attended. I’d later realize that, these two congregations were typical of the 1940s/1950s *civic religion*, i.e., “get-up, dress-up, show-up” for Sunday mornings’ “public-respectability” routines in which the *biblical Gospel was never ever preached*, given the Mainline denominational drift into theological “modernism”.

But I’ve always been grateful for a good Christian grounding from *one* of my first Sunday School teachers, Johnny Myers, and from Spurgeon’s and Moody’s books – and a little later, from radio programs by Billy Graham and Charles E. Fuller. In these *evangelical* resources, I began to see what it meant to truly respond to Jesus’ question about who *He* is to *me*.

Harry R. Boer, a founder of *The Reformed Journal*, a Calvin Seminary professor, and a missionary to Africa, was later an early supporter of EC. Under his heading, “The *Ad Hoc* God”, he speculated, from his own life’s many challenges, that: “Competence for *adaptation* is a reflection of the *Imago Dei*.” I, too, have found this to be so. I tell my therapy clients, “Adaptability is a hallmark of mental health.” *Adapting to circumstances one can’t change, as such, by one’s self*, can be so much better handled by recognizing and rationally challenging *whatever we’re telling ourselves about these circumstances*. It helps to overcome our *frustration* and our “*otherwise fantasies*” so as to enable our move into a far more *realistic adaptability*. And *that*, we do get to do.

Well, I’d always had some good sense that I’d adapt to my *atypical sexual attractions* and that the matter would be more fully *resolved in some way, someday, not* by my being attracted to *girls* – that, I never assumed, nor wanted – but, in a way that I could trust God to work it out in *His Own time and in His Own way*. I *intuited* that, with *faith* and *trust* in Him, this God of all goodness and wisdom, I need *never worry about it*. So, I never did *worry* about it. I learned to see it, not only as a “given” of mine, but as *my “given” from God, to be used to help others with the same “given”, and thus, another way to “say” Who Jesus is, to all who’ve been told that they’re so very guilty of “the most embarrassing sin” and they deserve “eternal damnation” for it. Givens don’t need to be forgiven, as such; they need to be received to understand and to help others who’ve been given either the same “givens” or different “givens”*.

At the start, I didn’t realize *how* my *given same-sex orientation* would be extrapolated into *my life’s work* in over half-a-century’s psychotherapy practice with a gay clientele from *various* backgrounds. I’ve dedicated myself to helping *these clients* deal *rationally* with *their given* homosexuality and with whatever else, so that they can build a *healthy same-sex relationship* and cope well with all of the rest that *all* must deal with in a *meaningfully useful and contributing* life all through life. And, for almost fifty years in EC,

we've all helped Christians integrate *their same-sex attraction* and *Christian faith* with all of the rest of their daily life.

I'd begun to realize, even back in Junior High, that, what's important to Jesus is *not* falling into line with *whatever* may be *pushed by the passing notions* of what's "right" or "wrong", but, what's *truly right*, such as "The Golden Rule" that Jesus endorsed, and that seems to be, in similar ways, *truly intuitive* within *humanity as we're created*, since versions of it are found all across the world's various cultures and all through history. In spite of humanity's Fall, but *given* humanity's *original creation in God's Image*, there's still this God-given and *gracious awareness* of what's *truly right* and what's *truly wrong*, even if it's also readily *suppressed* and *rationalized away*, by our *fallen* humanity's *persistently selfish self-centeredness*.

What's long registered in my mind and in my heart, is Jesus' response to the "self-righteous know-it-alls" in his days on earth, "*religious*" leaders who were so *persistently* getting so *much* about Jesus and all else so *wrong*. I've recognized them in all of the zealous morality meddlers in my youth and in all the years ever since in, for instance, those who *defensively, self-styled themselves* as "The Moral Majority", while angrily disdaining all who are as *involuntarily* attracted to some people of the *same sex*, as those in "The Moral Majority" are *involuntarily* attracted to some of the *other sex*. And, *for goodness' sake*, recognizing *pretenses* of "moral superiority" *in others* can keep us *vigilant* to honestly recognize the *same pretense* to "moral superiority" *in ourselves!* Maybe without seeing it *in others*, we'd never *allow* ourselves to *admit* it's *in us*, too.

Well, back in the 11th grade, in 1955, while anticipating college, I was in my South High School's library and I found a bright yellow college catalog with a very odd name: Bob Jones University. Paging through it, I was intrigued to find such an apparently *biblical university*, unlike what I knew was the situation at our Mainline church colleges. I showed it to my father, but he didn't share my view of it. So, I showed it to my Uncle Dave, and *he liked* what *I liked* about it. He, too, had never heard of BJU, but, as *evangelical* Christians, he and I were both impressed by what we read in that catalog.

So, he told my father that, given the *three* kids that my father needed to finance through college, medical school and seminary, *he'd* pay for *my* education in *seminary* if my father allowed me to go to Bob Jones University for my first two years of college and then transfer, in order to graduate from a state university, as my father wanted me to do in the first place. My father always highly respected my uncle for his business success, after serving in the Navy in the South Pacific in World War II and, even without a college education, building, with his wife, my father's sister, a very successful and eventually, even *internationally* successful, construction company. So, my uncle's financial offer was a *done deal* that very day, right then and there in our living room!

In the fall of 1956, just after arriving at BJU in Greenville, South Carolina, I very soon experienced disgust over all the *racism* that was so obvious, for example, in segregated seating on Greenville's buses. In *real time, up close*, it showed me how the *segregated* South was so *very wrong* and how so *very wrong*, too, was BJU's regionally-adopted *racial segregation policy*. Growing up in Youngstown, and, in *our* neighborhood, and all through my public-school education, I'd always had good friends of *different races*.

Also, my already having had so much *respect* for Billy Graham and having urged our church youth group's members to listen to his radio programs, I *strongly disagreed* with what I discovered to be the Bob Jones *criticism* of Graham's allegedly "compromising" with *modernist* clergy in his citywide Crusades. *Why not* let liberal clergy sit up front on Billy Graham's platform if *that* might bring these modernist preachers' parishioners to hear from Graham, the Gospel they *weren't hearing* from their modernist preachers? It seemed to me, to be such a no-brainer.

When Billy Graham was just *my* age in *my* first semester at BJU, he was in *his* first semester at the *earlier* Bob Jones College in Tennessee. But he soon found its many rules and demerit system far too restrictive, so he decided to *transfer* to a Bible Institute in Florida. Such "rejection" was *personalized* by Dr. Bob, Sr. who then *raged* at Billy for "wanting to throw your life away at a little country Bible school!" He tried to *shame* Billy: "Chances are you'll never be heard of, somewhere out there in the sticks!" Yet it was *there*, at *that little* Bible Institute in Florida, where Billy transferred, that *he'd receive* *God's call* to preach the Gospel that led him around the world for *many millions* to hear and respond to God's Good News, for nearly eight decades.

Two decades after Dr. Bob yelled at a teen-age Billy Graham, Dr. Bob was now on his beautifully spacious *university campus* in South Carolina, and he was now ready to yell at another teenager – *me*. And, again, the *topic* of Dr. Bob's rage was Billy Graham!

It was *very early* in *my very first* semester at BJU. Right after lunch, I got an urgent note at BJU's P.O., swiftly summoning me to the Administration Building. On my arrival, the director of religious activities told me that I had a "heart problem". At first, I was confused, since I didn't "get" this figurative Fundamentalist lingo. He led me upstairs and into an office where there were several deans, all standing at stiff attention in somber silence. Two armchairs, facing each other, were in the middle of the room. Dr. Bob, Sr. was plunked in one of these two chairs; I was pointed to the other chair.

This was less than an hour after someone had tattled on overhearing my "griping" about the morning's Chapel speaker, a Fundamentalist lawyer, James E. Bennet, who'd *quit* the Billy Graham New York City Crusade Committee that was planning the 1957 Madison Square Garden Crusade. Bennet, that morning, had raged on and on against Graham's allowing "modernist" ministers to sit on the Crusade's platform. As I'd walked from Chapel to lunch at the Dining Common, I was overheard saying that this morning's Chapel hour was "a waste of time" since it was all about *nothing but a very long attack against Billy Graham*.

When I sat down in front of Dr. Bob, Sr., he *shouted at me*, with obviously *no interest in hearing from me*. He repeatedly boasted that *he knew how to do evangelism* and that, *I didn't*. He raged on and on: "Attendance at Bob Jones University is a *privilege, not a right!*" Then, since one of *my* home church's colleges was Muskingum College in Ohio, even on such short notice, *this fact* was at hand for Dr. Bob's loud sneer: "Why didn't you go to Muskingum if you don't like it here!" (He'd even been given an honorary doctorate from Muskingum College, but that honor didn't seem to be much *prized* at this moment.) He ranted on and on, as his flushed corpulence and bulging jugular actually alarmed me. It crossed my mind that, *I'd* be the death of him, right then and there, in that office, that day. But he kept on *raging* at me with absolutely no interest in hearing even a word *from me!* On and on and on we went, yelling at me.

Finally, at long last, he ended his tirade. I was then released to go to my afternoon Greek class. Whatever Greek I was *taught* that day, *competed* with what I'd earlier been "taught" in Dr. Bob's raging and ranting at me. I learned that, at BJU, "the walls have ears". So, *now savvy*, I never got into *that* sort of trouble there again. I never got even one "demerit", and "demerits" at BJU were easy to get for each and every minor *misstep* and *misstatement* – as Billy had learned years before, at Bob Jones College in Tennessee – and, as students and faculty members today *have to learn* in all of the "cancel culture" on secularism's woke campuses – *or else*.

Dr. Bob never realized that it was *through this "clueless" kid* that he raged at, *that day*, that D. D. Davis, my Uncle Dave, *first heard of BJU*, and would later serve on BJU's Board of Trustees for over three decades, giving millions to BJU. Among all of his many gifts is the beautifully-equipped 90,000 square foot Davis Field House with its basketball and volleyball courts, Olympic size swimming pool, running track, fitness center, a room for aerobics and a lovely café.

And Uncle Dave never knew about that episode of Dr. Bob's raging at me in my first month at BJU. My lifelong gratitude and respect for Uncle Dave and Aunt Velma were far greater than that day's *awkward*, yet, eye-opening, *lesson* in the many ups and downs of daily life.

There was no need for me to "tattle" on Dr. Bob, for, all on his own, "D. D.", as he was affectionately known to friends and business contacts, saw into BJU's *mixed-bag*, with all else in this *fallen* world. *His deep respect* for Billy Graham never got *him* into trouble at BJU, and it's very obvious *why* it didn't. As a long-time BJU Board Member, this Navy vet often steered that school's ship *aright*. He also sided with Bob Jones IV, who wished to do his graduate study at Notre Dame, but the Jones hierarchy didn't like that idea. "D. D." agreed with this youngest Bob Jones, as he had agreed with me, years before. So, Bob Jones IV did get to go to Notre Dame and I'm sure, as *I learned*, in my turn, *he found there* at Notre Dame, in his turn: *reality's mixed-bag, not his fantasy*. And such is surely one of life's *most useful* lessons.

Four months into my two years at BJU – on Sunday night, December 23, 1956, I preached *my first church service sermon*, a *Christmas* sermon, "Unto You, a Savior", in the sanctuary of South United Presbyterian Church in Youngstown. This service was led by the congregation's youth group. The whole

Blair-Davis clan was there that night. It was the 1,620th year since the *first* “Christ’s Mass” in AD 336. And I’d prepared my sermon in BJU’s Mack Library, just across Library Drive from the Jones families’ house.

My 1956 Christmas gift to my mother was a book by Eugenia Price, *The Burden is Light: A Transformed Pagan who took God at His Word* (1955). I bought it at BJU’s bookstore. Back in 1949, at Sam Shoemaker’s Calvary Episcopal Church in Manhattan, Genie Price was yoked with Christ and learned, indeed, that His “burden is light”. (Matt 11:30) She came to Christ while visiting Ellen Riley, her best friend from schooldays, who now was at Calvary Church. I suspect that Ellen may have been an early, though unrequited, “crush” of Genie’s. It was also in 1956 that Billy Graham’s *Christianity Today* magazine was *launched* and Genie’s “Good Will is No Mean Virtue” (cf. Luke 2:14 KJV) was published in *CT*’s very first December issue.

Twenty years later, on June 18, 1976, by my *gaydar*, I sent a copy of my booklet, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality* (1971) to Eugenia Price. Five days later, she wrote to me to say that what I’d written, had “special meaning” for her. She added: “YOUR MATERIAL IS, IN MY OPINION, ON DEAD CENTER. True, true, true. I receive so many booklets and literature on projects of one kind or another, I confess I can’t read it all. But I did read yours and am more enthusiastic than these few hastily written (and poorly typed!) lines will convey. Right on, man! Jesus Christ backs you up every step of the way. From my heart (and my mind) I thank you again for sharing with me. The big need in the past has been (in my ‘humble-dogmatic’ opinion) God’s blind people even more than homosexuals. Why set us apart in little villages anyway? Any of us?”

Replying to my thanking her for her response, she wrote: “Dear Ralph, I feel your approach is the sanest and most Scriptural I’ve found yet! ... My best to you – and I mean that!”

Ever since her conversion to Christ, Genie regularly noted that, “If Christ lives in us, controlling our personalities, we will leave glorious marks on the lives we touch. Not because of our lovely characters, but because of His.” So, as recently as this spring, 26 years after Genie passed away, I received an email from one who identified herself simply as, “a gay Christian woman”, saying, she’d “stumbled across” a reference to Price on EC’s website. She said Price, “has been a woman who has impacted my faith.” So, she wanted to know more about Genie.

Genie and her longtime companion, Joyce Blackburn, a writer of children’s books, are now at Home with the Lord, as their remains lie under the oaks, draped with Spanish moss, near their St. Simon’s Island home where they’d shared their life here on earth. And Genie’s witness to The Son of Man continues to minister to those who are still dismissed as “outcasts” by so many “*pious*” Christians.

Three months before I sent my *Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*, to Genie, Dean Gengle, the associate editor of *The Advocate*, the nation’s biggest gay paper, wrote in its April 7, 1976 issue: “*An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality* by Dr. Ralph Blair ‘does the job’ on Bible-beating fundamentalists. ... Dr. Blair makes a short but powerful case to call every Biblical bluff. ... For people who grew up as I did (with Assembly of God relatives and a Bible-thumping set of uncles), this pamphlet can bridge the gap between Evangelical theory and practice. It is yet another link in the contemporary chain of change.”

In the spring of 1957, an older BJU student quietly “came out” to me as *gay*. I said, “It’s okay, so am I.” I cautioned him to be careful, and that God would guide him in his dealing with it. Our conversation was a sort of pre-EC ConnECtion, 18 years ahead of EC’s founding in 1975. On January 31, 1976, while I was lecturing on homosexuality at the University of North Carolina, I was surprised to see *him* there. He was doing fine.

At Christmastime, 1957, I won BJU’s top prize. “*Whatever for?*”, you might well ask in amazement. Well, it was BJU’s Blue Ribbon for BJU’s campus’ *best dorm window Christmas decoration of 1957!* I’d painted *my caricatures* of Dr. Bob Jr., two of BJU’s administrators, and BJU’s dean of music, with their scarfs flying in the wind as snow fell around an old-style lamppost, while this quartet sang Christmas carols. My window was on the ground floor of my dorm, so it was very easy for folks to get up close to inspect the scene. As word of *what was depicted* spread across campus, crowds came to see it. And the *caricatured* four came to see what *they* looked like in that window in Bibb Graves Hall.

Years later, and surprisingly, BJU would be *the first* of all the institutions in the South to *rename* a “Bibb Graves” building to separate itself from that link to Alabama’s *segregationist* governor of the late 1920s and early 1930s. That dorm then became the Harry Ironside Hall in honor of a mid-20th Century Bible teacher from Canada.

In 1958, as I arrived at Bowling Green State University in Ohio to complete my four years of undergraduate study, I got involved with BGSU's chapter of the evangelical campus ministry, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. For one meeting, I rented BJU's 1951 *Macbeth* film with Bob Jones, Jr., a talented Shakespearean actor, in the title role. After the film, we discussed *Macbeth's* theme on the woes of immoral ambition.

It wasn't long before anti-Christian prejudice met me at BGSU. As an English major, it came, at first, from a bitter English professor who'd given me an A+ on a creative writing assignment, but then, he'd crossed out the A+ and gave me an F. I asked him why he changed my grade. He snapped that, I'd probably *plagiarized* it, for a "Fundamentalist" would be too *illiterate* to have written what I'd handed in. Rather than debate him, which I really enjoyed on my BJU debate team, I saved my breath, since that professor's mind was made up and he couldn't afford to change his mind. I found it easier to "turn the other cheek", without regrets. I never took another class of his.

His prejudice and penalty was a cakewalk in contrast to what Christians around the world, all through history, under the Romans, the Nazis, and, still today, under Marxists, Islamists and Hinduism with its caste system of lifelong torment for the "untouchables", and by the yet to come hippies of hoax-"Hinduism" in the '60s. Today, there's an anti-Christian hegemony in the *cancel culture* of woke institutions of *allegedly* "higher" learning, but that's all as propagandistic as the most fanatical of all false religious cults. Self-righteousness is, after all, as old as Eden, and it's still just as much of a defense mechanism as ever it was back then.

Well, each time we put a date on anything, inadvertently, though unquestionably, we note *the most significant individual in the history of the world* – *Jesus, of Nazareth*. And this is true in so many more ways than one, for, millions of people *pray in Jesus' name*, while millions of other people *curse Jesus' name*. People *show lovingkindness* in Jesus' name, and get *snubbed*, even *slaughtered*, for *identification* with Jesus' name.

So, in discussions of "Jesus" today, we can't assume that we're all thinking or talking about the *same individual*. As two devout 20th-Century Christian authors noted then, there's an *utter ignorance* among so many in all matters of Jesus. Dorothy L. Sayers said this, about her fellow Brits: "The brutal fact is that, not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about the person of Jesus Christ." Said Flannery O'Connor, even down there in the middle of Georgia's Bible Belt: "One of the awful things about writing when you're a Christian is that, for you, the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation." Their comments aren't "holier-than-thou" insults; they're expressions of *grief* over the *indifference* to Truth, even throughout *institutionalized* Christianity. And, how they *put* their points, to *make* their *real* point, was, *only, ever so very slightly*, exaggerated.

Yet, these 20th-Century laments of *theirs*, can't so easily be *deciphered* by most folks in 21st-Century culture, since *now*, people are even *less informed* than were the *clueless* in that 20th-Century. And so many churches must bear so much of the *blame* for all of this, for so many of the churches are so *disengaged* from *truly biblical* preaching while they're utterly *consumed* with distractions over their pet peeves, their projects in political correctness and their *virtue signaling* by which they're so desperate to prove that *they're all such saints of wokeness*, for, if they *weren't* woke, they fear *they'd* be *socially* and *politically cancelled*. And, they're *right* – they'd be *socially* and *politically* cancelled.

For example, for Lent, in 2022, an upscale Oak Park, Illinois, congregation of the "progressivist" United Church of Christ (residue of one of my childhood's mainline denominations) had this "Lenten" theme: "*Fasting from Whiteness*". Boasting that they'd not be *singing any hymns written by Whites*, they displayed gross ignorance about *white* hymnwriters such as Wesley, Cowper and Newton and others who led in the forefront of the earliest *anti-slavery* movements. Instead, the UCC woke boast: "Our music will be drawn from the African American spiritual traditions, from South African freedom songs, from [typically slave-holding!] Native American traditions, and many, many more." As self-righteous virtue-signaling, this focus *essentially eliminates* the Lenten Gospel's themes of substitutionary atonement, Christ's bodily Resurrection and new birth in *His* righteousness alone.

No wonder Pew Research finds that only 63% of Americans still *identify, even at all*, as "Christians". That's *down* already, from 78% of Americans, *just 14 years ago!* A Deseret/Marist Poll now finds that only 31% of *young adults* say they believe in God as described in the Bible. Most young adults

have *no clue* as to how God is described in the Bible. *Their version* is a caricature. But they're so sensitive to needing to be woke that they couldn't care less about knowing any better and couldn't risk the social cost of even trying to know any better. They know no better way to deal with their low sense of self for they have no awareness of how truly they're loved by God.

Our era's foolish focus on wokeness and on *fears* of *not being* woke enough to all of the *alleged* "insensitivities", *purported* "prejudices", rabid "rights" revolutions over all the "inequities", allegedly "unconscious" *bias* in spurious "racism", "sexism" "misogyny", "homophobia", "transphobia", "xenophobia", "Islamophobia", "allodoxaphobia", etc., etc., along with all of the other accusations of sociopolitical *faux pas* aimed *against truly faithful Christians* who are, *allegedly*, the "enemies" of all the "oppressed" while there's *nary a peep* from academia, major media or Big Tech against *everyday politically correct*, and decidedly, *deceitfully deliberate* "Christianophobia" or "Christophobia". Big Tech is *so disdainful* and in *such deep pathologically defensive denial* of all of its deeply rooted *anti-Christian prejudices*, that, even *these two terms* for their own *anti-Christian contempt*, are put down, all across the virtue-signaling Internet as "*unreal words*" or as "*misspellings*". So, all across the Web, they get *underlined in red*. Is this meant as a *warning of danger to viewers* or, is it an *unintended admission of embarrassment*?

Carelessly, yet consciously, faulting an ignorantly-defined "Christianity" *virtue-signals* one's *wokeness* through the blinders of *allegedly* "unbiased" Postmodern "secularism". Yet that's the *very religion* of "secularism", to virtue-signal *disdain* for Christianity. It's nothing new, of course. It's all the same old defensive denial that seeks to deny Christ's truth, but, in effect, involuntarily registers Christ's truth nonetheless, loudly and clearly.

"Woke" is, tragically, the *current alibi* for "*proudly*", but *foolishly, refusing* to be *in yoke with Christ*. Yet, it's *only* in yoke with Him, that one can gain *true rest* for a weary psyche and a heavily sin-burdened soul – *rest* that's never to be found by *staggering alone, all on one's own*, through this sin-drunk world, without *Him* at one's side, each step of *His truly forward way*, on a *joint pathway* together, forever, at peace, with God. (Matt 11:29)

Behind all of these efforts at being "woke", of "fitting in", of being "approved", is the *God-given gift of our awareness* that, all on our own, *we're all in the wrong* and so very *deeply* and *fatally flawed*. This has been the experience of each generation since Eden. All have tried to "save" themselves by their own fabrications – from fig leaves through fantasies of fame and financial fortunes. But none of this faking ever frees one from *real failings and real guilt*. None of it is open to *God's gift of a truly guilty conscience* that should *seek salvation in the gift of Christ's righteousness by God's amazing grace*.

A *current counterfeit* for Christ's Good News, is what's called, "critical theory", a Postmodernist con job infected with failed Marxist lies to try to construct a *self-righteous* "monotheism" around *race*, rationalized for *political power*. Critical Race Theory is *racism in reverse*. It smears "Whiteness", as if all *slavery* that's found throughout world history was *invented* by "Whites". *African slaves* were slaves of *other Africans* long before Africans sold other Africans as slaves to whites in America. But, Black African slaves in America were *freed through the blood that was shed by the white abolitionist soldiers in battles* against *slaveholding whites* during the Civil War – even in battles *between Northern white soldiers who fought against members of their very own white families* who were living in the South.

And this *deep motivation* and sacrificial endeavor for ending uncounted centuries of *worldwide slavery*, was genuinely prompted by *white Christian abolitionists, e.g., William Wilberforce, the Wesley brothers, Hannah More, John Newton, William Cowper, Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Benjamin Lay, et al, guided by the teachings of Jesus*.

And the 20th Century's Civil Rights Movement was led by a devout black Christian minister whose father, on a trip to Germany, was so impressed by what he learned of Martin Luther that he changed his own name and thus, his son became, Martin Luther King, Jr. who so famously and repeatedly proclaimed:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." But now, so sadly, under CRT enthusiasts, Dr. King's quote is, in itself, erroneously dubbed as "racist".

CRT "oppression matrixes" not only *blame*, as "*the oppressors*": all "white people" and "Whiteness", *per se*, but the "oppression matrixes" blame *all* of the "gender-conforming CIS men and CIS women". Doubling-down to *clarify*, lest "CIS", a rather new term of *derision*, not be grasped by all of those CIS "hicks" in the sticks, it's explained that, the "CIS" are all who're "assigned" at birth as "female or male" – as if nobody in any delivery room ever noticed any anatomically tell-tale clue on each newborn baby's body. A child's *sex* is a *given*, it's not *assigned*. But, now, one's sex is called, not a *given*, but a "guess" by an un-woke obstetrician at the delivery, and we all must wait for that child's *own choice* of "*gender-identity*" at a bit later time in childhood – like, sometime in elementary school, perhaps.

Today, most people are totally ignorant of the miserable history of the origins of what was, at first, called transsexual, now, transgender. That concept was jerked into the 20th-Century after a tragically botched circumcision of one of two twin boys. This tragic accident aroused an ego-driven sexologist's tragically botched notion to solve the problem by *reassigning* this one boy's sex as *female*. He urged genital surgery on that boy, and then he staged and photographed "sex" between these two brothers. This chaos of his abuse led to both brothers' suicides! But this didn't deter the "*transsexual*", now, "*transgender*", *movement*, from going full speed ahead into more tragedies, as when, e.g., transwomen as "sex-workers" *predictably* get murdered by enraged tricks on being *tricked*, and when big, strong XY "transwomen" *predictably* beat real XX *women* in *women's* sports, thus spoiling women's sports for all real women. But later regrets can't really reverse all that was done to "transition" by puberty blockers and surgery, not to mention years of confusion and regret.

Amid all the *politically correct disdain* against "Whiteness", CIS folks, and Christians, there's no *PC disdain* against agnostics, atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, Socialists, Marxists, "*people of color*", the "Black and Brown", or all of the allegedly innocent "*indigenous peoples*" (no matter the *genetic* evidence that many came from afar and conquered the natives they found when they invaded). Then there were all of the intertribal wars between indigenous peoples and their enslavement of rival natives. There's no PC prejudice against transgenders, "*gender fluid*", "*genderqueers*", "*agender*", "*two-spirit*", "*bi-gender*", "*pan-gender*", "*womxn*", *et al, ad nauseam*. *There's not a discouraging word against whatever's politically correct!* Why not? Well, one would be *fired and cancelled for committing such a totally out-of-favor flub, even if unintentional*. Where's even a *fragment* of the worldwide intuition of *The Golden Rule* in all of this *very fashionable favoritism and politically correct prejudice* for coping with one's intuited sense of *sin*? So, the woke seek to save themselves and other woke by castigating all others. It's all so tirelessly habituated and solves absolutely nothing.

These racially, religiously and culturally propagandistic *insults* are merely the latest contemporary *expressions* of ancient humanity's bitter *defensiveness and denial* of the *guilt that we all experience in ourselves*. The victims used to be reversed in terms of, e.g., race and gender, but it's all the same *self-righteous denial of one's own sin* and the *foisting of blame* at the latest bunch of "them", the latest despised "others", the newly defined "sinners". All protestations of *innocence* require that *others be blamed*, as Eve blamed a snake and Adam blamed Eve (and, by extension, Adam blamed God, too).

Projections of guilt *illustrate that we sense something very wrong with us – our fallen humanity's deep depravity and self-righteous rebellion and rationalizations* against God and those we try to cast as "the others". But they're all, actually, *our fellow humans that we invariably resemble – all of whom, God, likewise, created in His Image, but after our Fall, we pretend not to notice our family's resemblance* for it's all too close for comfort.

All defensiveness is utter *uselessness* as a *coping* mechanism, for it is, itself, twisted *denial* of one's *already recognized guilt*. So, it blocks the only escape route into a *true repentance* and *real resolution*. Our defensiveness *actually bears witness against us*. But *self-righteousness* has no desire for *honest self-examination*, for *real repentance* and *real renewal into a regenerated life*. A *deliberate, defensive refusal to repent* is a *stubborn self-righteousness that cannot but be, disturbingly aware of one's guilt*, that is, truly, in itself, *God's gracious gift for awakening us to an accurately honest diagnosis of our rebellious unreality and God's remedy for our illness in redemption through Christ*.

But we repeatedly *resist*, at hardest cost to *ourselves* and to *others*, each and every *sensed need for*, and each and every *call to, repentance, redemption, restoration, relief and reformation* in the freedom that's God's love in Christ. We so foolishly *posture self-reliance* while hopelessly squatting in our own *attempted self-deception* that's doomed to fail, for none can fool *oneself*, and none can fool the *others* who are also, so used to blaming others, and so, recognize themselves in all such fools, while struggling to achieve their own doomed agenda. Attempting to hide *whatever it is*, we can't avert our own attention to it, so our troubled awareness remains inescapable.

The exit through repentance, regeneration and reform by God's grace is the only option for *each convicted conscience*. Yet *it's repeatedly refused by self-righteousness*.

Am I griping? I'm *illustrating*. I'm *reminding us all of our everyday, self-righteous, blame games, here in our one fallen race*. I'm reminding us of Jesus' generous forewarning of *this world's self-righteous opposition against all of God's faithfulness and against all of God's faithful followers of Jesus*.

Those who've *repented* for resisting the Good News and now count on Christ for salvation, *know*, from *their own* experience with their own *self-righteousness*, what all gets in the way by *resisting honestly admitted guilt* instead of turning, in honest repentance, to God in Christ, for His abundantly grace-filled forgiveness and rebirth and relief in new life, in His gift of *Christ's righteousness*.

So, is God, like some *bully*, twisting our arms until we cry, "uncle"? *No!* God is showing us how deep is our need to *stop* making our *measly excuses* for ourselves, and *accept* His freely given and generous grace, in the sacrificial Love of *His Son, Jesus, the Savior and Lord, and thereby receiving God's truly empowering Holy Spirit for repentance and further reform for real Life in and through Him, Forever*. Nothing less than Christ's love and His righteousness can cancel our deadly sin and give us new life.

If we Christians *weren't* being *persecuted by systemic prejudice* or *weren't* objects of *sneers from snobs of secularism*, if we *weren't* being *censored and silenced* for our Christian witness, even if shared in the most respectful of ways, it would be *evidence* that we're *not really living* as Christ's truly *faithful followers should be living* and as many other Christians surely *do live their testimony* all around the world and, thus, *suffer* for it, as so many have *suffered for living their testimony*, through all of Christian history. And, such *martyrs* weren't, and aren't, simply *snubbed* as we might be, here, today – *such were, and such are, still being slaughtered*. Such is the pain of pagan consciences that connive against Christians and resist and refuse God's free grace.

Regardless of consequences, whether social status costs or the cost of one's own life, as C. S. Lewis, that self-confessedly "most reluctant of all converts" in the midst of the apostacy at Oxford University, went on to advise, from his own personal experience: "We must show our Christian colors if we are to be true to Jesus Christ." So, *we, today, must truly say, in whatever way we should, who Jesus truly is to us*. To fail to do so, is to miss another opportunity that's given to us by God, Himself, to share the Good News as we should.

Russell Moore, a disaffected Southern Baptist, now chairs a “Public Theology Project” for a rather unmoored *Christianity Today*, after the disreputable Mark Galli’s overdue resignation. Moore invited the popular evangelical Presbyterian pastor, Tim Keller, to give a lecture to a university class in which most of the students were from *secular* backgrounds. Most of them had *no* contact with Christianity, other than what they’d perhaps seen in the major news media – which, with all of that media’s repetitious misrepresentations of Christianity, would have been of little to no help at all.

As Moore frames it: “After [Keller’s] rehearsing some of the reputational damage evangelicalism had sustained, especially in the post-2016 cultural environment, one student asked Keller, ‘Why not just get rid of the word *evangelical* and call yourselves something else?’”

As Moore puts it: “Keller deadpanned: ‘Because most of us are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and like the word *evangelical* just fine. North Americans aren’t entitled to choose what we’re called’.”

Maybe Keller missed an opportunity to *clarify* the true, *biblical derivation* of the word, “evangelical”, although Moore doesn’t say whether or not he did. But Moore *distracts himself*, as he shares that, *he* “wondered if being called out for a kind of ‘America first’ colonialism would disorient these students, but instead,” as he puts it, “I saw nodding heads and expressions that seemed to say, ‘Fair enough’.” What I saw as most important in that exchange was not the pros and cons of the word *evangelical* but the subtle and searching use of the word *us*.” *Really? Really!*

Did Moore miss a *deeper* meaning and probable source of the students’ nodding after distracting himself by what he projected as “America first colonialism”, then, concluding, they meant, *merely*, “Fair enough”? Their nodding heads may well have had so much more to do with *their* generation’s *ignorantly prejudiced* and *outspokenly* “anti-America” *bigotry*, and *their* generation’s *equally ignorant favoritism in outspokenly* “pro-Third World” *bias*, than with any *mere affirmation of fairness*. Fair enough?

At any rate, *rightly defining* the word, “evangelical”, *can be, at least, an introduction to evangelism*, for, it *literally* means “*Good News in Christ*.” *His good news* is surely *not*, as such, an endorsement for *any* Presidential candidate – as it was *recklessly revised* to be by all the Big Media’s *ignorance and prejudice* in that “post-2016 culture”.

Here’s the *true evangel*, *i.e.*, *Good News*: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us. And God has given to us [*i.e.*, Christians] the *ministry of sharing this evangel*.” (II Cor 5:19) Sadly, too many people, including most of the Gen Z folks, have never ever heard or understood, *this truly liberating good news*.

In that 2016 *cultural* environment, too many Christians, *claiming* to be “evangelicals”, identified *more* as *Hillary haters* or *Trump followers* than as *faithful followers of Jesus*.

By a mere political election, nobody’s *real thirst* can be quenched, as Jesus, at that old well in ancient Samaria, indeed, quenched the *real thirst* of a woman who was so very much disdained by piously self-righteous religionists. Jesus gave her *living water* to *quench* her thirst *forever*. To *her*, Jesus *shared his compassion*. He *revealed* to *her* – to this “outsider”, as she was self-righteously judged to be by those who also opposed Him – *His true identity as The Messiah*. (John 4) He told *her quite plainly*, who *He truly* was, and He told *her*, who *she truly* was, for she was ready to *receive* these refreshingly lifesaving words of *the living truth* of God’s grace that cuts right through all of our own humanly-devised divisions of distraction.

Jesus reached out to *other such* “religiously” *disposable women*. When hypocritical religionists at the Temple dragged an accused adulteress to Jesus, trying to trap *him* by citing scripture to justify *their aim to kill her*, Jesus challenged any one of them, *who had no sin of his own*, to cast that *first* stone. Jesus kept writing on the ground in front of these accusers, for them all to see what he was writing. One by one, each man crept away, so guilt-ridden and so justly ashamed. Then, Jesus told that woman, “Neither do I

condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” (John 8) Again, we see, and we should say, who Jesus is: for, truly, He came, *not to condemn, but to save!* (John 3:17)

In the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman begged Jesus to heal her sick daughter. His disciples, disdaining this “outsider”, urged him to send her away. Jesus asked *her*, “As I was sent to *the lost sheep of Israel*, is it right to take the children’s bread and give it to ‘dogs’?” She promptly replied: “Oh, yes, Lord, it *is right*, for even the dogs eat the *crumbs* that fall from their master’s table.” Jesus affirmed and assured her: “*You have great faith!*” We read that, at that very moment, her daughter was healed. (Matt 15:21ff) This *faith-filled* “outsider” is surely, an appropriate patron saint for all of the faith-filled folks that the *self-labeled* “*pious*” repeatedly refuse to recognize, but whose *genuine faith*, Jesus so very readily recognizes.

Today, as always with *mere religionists* and their own “groupies”, there’s a following of a *favorite* “teacher”, more than a following of *Jesus*. At least in *some* cases, folks follow a *Christian* rather than a merely *political* “savior” or a “self-help” *guru*. But Paul warned against such immaturity, telling the Corinthians: “Brothers and sisters, I couldn’t address you as those who *live by the Spirit*, but as those who are *still worldly* – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, but not solid food, for you weren’t ready to digest any solid food. And you’re *still* not ready for solid food. You’re *still so very worldly*. There’s *jealousy and quarreling* among you. Aren’t you still acting as *mere mortals*? When *one* claims, ‘I follow Paul’, and *another* claims, ‘I follow Apollos’, aren’t you *both still so worldly*? Who, after all, *is* Paul? And, who *is* Apollos? *Only servants*, through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each his task. (I Cor 3:1-5) Sadly, today’s nit-picking rivalries remain, as some boast, “*We’re PCA!*”, others boast, “*We’re OPC!*”, yet others boast, “*We’re RPC!*”, and still others boast against all of their more biblical rivals, “*We’re PC/USA!*” I’ve seen people turn right around and walk out of church when they check that morning’s order of worship and find that their *favorite preacher isn’t preaching*.

Instead of pointing to *Jesus*, it’s PR for *me!* Preachers compete for *popularity while preaching themselves*. Parishioners praise pastors more than the One they’ve been called to worship. Many divisions are over mere trifles, but they *all* get in the way of sharing the *true Good News* and *true fellowship that’s in Christ*. There’s one ego-driven split after another ego-driven split. And given all of the *celebrity-centered* “worship”, no wonder there’s one sex-scandal split after another sex-scandal split.

After all of these fracturing failures, many still don’t seem to catch on to how we’re *all* failing the Lord and failing those to whom He’s called us to share *His Good News*. None of this reflects any *decent response* to Jesus’ asking: “Who do you say *I am?*” Instead, it’s all a series of *self-serving* descents into *the netherworld of narcissism*.

After my year at Dallas Seminary, I transferred to Westminster Seminary for a year’s study in apologetics with Cornelius Van Til. I’d found his *presuppositional* approach to theoretical thought to be the most insightful for examining and assessing all ideas and I wanted to learn more about this role that *assumptions* play in all ideologies.

I continued to use this *presuppositional* approach in my studies for my master’s thesis on ethical arguments for voluntary euthanasia in the Graduate School of Religion at the University of Southern California. While there, I was, again, involved in IVCF. Some of the students in IVCF and our faculty advisor, Bob Mannes, agreed with my positive view on homosexuality. And although he was a mechanical engineering professor at USC, Bob Mannes would later be on the staff at Fuller Seminary.

After graduating from USC in 1964, my four years of graduate study in theology that Uncle Dave agreed to fund were finished. I was hired for IVCF staff at The University of Pennsylvania. There, too, I supported students who were dealing with their same-sex attraction *vis a vis* their faith in Christ. Things

went smoothly until I gave a gay-affirming reply to a question I was asked about homosexuality during my talk to a Christian group at Yale. Although it wasn't an IVCF event, someone tattled to IVCF's national office and its new leadership. As a result, I was told I'd not be reappointed to IVCF's staff for the upcoming school year at Penn.

When Penn's American Baptist chaplain heard I'd not be back, he suggested I apply for an opening at Penn State. The American Baptist chaplain at PSU would be away on a year's sabbatical. So, I applied, and I was hired. This allowed me to stay in campus ministry and placed me in position to enroll for my doctoral studies on homosexuality *after* that year's chaplaincy ended.

Employed by *liberal* Baptists at Penn State, I continued supporting gay and lesbian students. I directed the absurdist playwright, Edward Albee's, *The Zoo Story*, a two-man play of *estrangement*, at a bench along PSU's elm-lined Mall on campus. After the play, I led a conversion on how estrangement is answered by faith in Christ. I directed Albee's *The Sand Box* and Samuel Beckett's one-character play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, using these, too, to illustrate the meaninglessness and utter despair without the Good News of Christ. I also produced and hosted a series of six panel discussions patterned on David Susskind's TV show, with professors, other chaplains and guest panelists on six contemporary controversies: *The Playboy Philosophy's* slim and slimy view of sex, the sanctity of life before birth and throughout life, the tragedies of anti-Semitism, Freedom of Speech vs Censorship, "recreational" drugs, and the *biggest event of the entire series* – in terms of attendance – "The Homosexual Revolution". The next day, Penn State's newspaper headlined: "Homosexuals Mob Auditorium".

I led follow-up discussions on each of these six topics in campus dorms in the weeks after the panel's event. I led the conversations into questions of *ultimate concern* and into *the biblical answer that's found in faith in Christ*.

As my Penn State chaplaincy year ended, and now with a generous loan from my uncle and aunt, I stayed on at Penn State to do research for my doctoral dissertation, reviewing and critiquing the etiological research and the various clinical responses to homosexuality. With a rationally cognitive approach, I assessed and critiqued findings in ethnography, etiology and the clinical interventions for treating the alleged "mental disorder" of homosexuality. And, *whaddayaknow!* My very early notion on "givens" was "confirmed" – *as it were*.

My investigations and analyses of all the many notions, theories, findings, and clinical responses, etc., in these peer reviewed psychiatric, psychoanalytic, psychological and sociological research journals, led to my conclusion that *no obviously consistent causal link or espoused treatment was shown to explain, demonstrate or establish any of all of the various and conflicting etiological theories that were promoted for what "causes" same-sex attraction and no clinical efforts at intervention were found to be, in any way at all, effective in reducing or eliminating a homosexual orientation or in forming any substitute heterosexual desires, let alone, a heterosexual orientation*.

The many *alleged* "causes" ranged from the ridiculous, e.g., "the pernicious influence of Italian opera" and astrological quirks, to an "unresolved Oedipal complex", to *phobias* about the other sex, to chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, to poor child rearing, etc. In view of all of these many *conflicting* theories and *resultant confusion* on etiology and disagreements over whether or not homosexuality is a "disease", it's understandable that there were *conflicting* "remedies", treatments, interventions, therapies, prognoses, and "accommodations", etc., but, finally, *no convincingly demonstrated sure cure*.

There were, of course, individual therapists who personally *claimed* to "cure" private patients, but these were *their claims*, without rigorously scientific backup or oversight, and, in the *long run*, even

these *repeatedly turned out to be utterly, even harmfully, unsuccessful, whether* for reducing or eliminating *same-sex orientation* or replacing it with any *heterosexual* desire at all. So many of their patients reported the truth, after they, themselves, had finally come to a point of *accepting* their same-sex attraction.

My *conclusions* on all of the examined evidence in those mid-1960s have never been shown to be, *in any significant way, incorrect or insufficient*. In well over the intervening half-century since, what I found and wrote up as my conclusions has been shown to be, still, the case. What I *concluded, aligns* with currently *accepted professional* views on these matters of etiology and treatment of a “given” homosexual orientation.

The many *tragedies* of prior views and “treatments” and the later sham of the “ex-gay” promises propagated by antigay religious leaders call for *clear, rational accommodation, adaptation and acceptance* of this “given” *orientation* for a rationally healthy lifestyle.

I’m grateful for the strong support I received from my dissertation committee, for in those days, there was *squeamishness*, even among academics, on this topic. PSU’s psychiatrist, John Walmer, was a strong supporter as was Carlfred B. Broderick, editor of *The Journal of Marriage and the Family*, a Mormon bishop and frequent guest on *The Tonight Show*, where he’d talk with Carson about the latest news in psychology and sociology. Broderick wrote: “Dr. Blair is scrupulously thorough and shows a remarkable analytic ability in his evaluation of the research of others. Indeed, his survey on the etiology of homosexuality is to my mind the best in existence.”

The *problem* of homosexuality is *not* the *predisposition* of sexual attraction to others of the same sex. The *problem* is *prejudice* against those who discover, *in themselves, their given same-sex orientation*, just as the *antigay* people discover, *in themselves, their given heterosexual orientation*. *All prejudice aimed against others aims to boost one’s sense of self*, whether on race, gender, wealth, nationality, etc. All such prejudice is rooted in *self-image* problems *within the prejudiced*. They try to deal with *a sense of their inferiority* by “putting down” what they perceive as *favored* in “others”. But the “put down” is, down deep, an unintended *compliment*. Such defense mechanisms never achieve what the defensive aim to achieve, for the defensive are still *stuck inside their own versions of themselves*.

While *doing* my research at Penn State, the evangelical German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, pastorally suggesting that, as homosexuality is “unsusceptible to medical or psychotherapeutic treatment, it could be thought of as a talent that is to be invested.” (Matt 25) In Jesus’ parable, what had been *given* and *put to use* was *rewarded*; what had been *given* and *not put to use* was *lost*.

While *writing* my dissertation, the noted evangelically Reformed apologist, Francis Schaeffer, founder of *L’abri* in Switzerland, was explaining, in a 1968 letter, that some people are “born so that they have a natural tendency to affection and sexual practice with their own sex.” Schaeffer noted: The mistake that the orthodox people have made is that homophile tendencies are sin in themselves, even if there is no homosexual practice. Therefore, the homophile tends to be pushed out of human life (and especially orthodox church life) even if he does not practice homosexuality. This, I believe, is both cruel and wrong.”

Over half a century later, Schaeffer’s *empathy* is *utterly rejected* by his own PCA that *demand*s that even its *celibate* homosexuals *stop calling* themselves “*homosexuals*”. Yet even with PCA’s “head in the sand”, it can’t block out its awareness of its loveless selfishness in mandating sacrifices by others while indulging themselves. Hence, the PCA’s mandate to, “Shut up!”. A truly troubled conscience can’t be at ease – even if stuck in the sand.

We read that, at Christ's return, He'll tell the *selfish who refused to share with others, what they hoarded for themselves*: "You refused to help me." We read that, "They'll be sent to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life." (Matt 25:40ff)

Here in the meantime, rather than continuing to go on so *selfishly*, isn't it long past time to learn to live by the biblical calls to *love others as we love ourselves*? (Lev 19:17; Mark 12:30f) Jesus gave us the very simplest way for us all to do *exactly* that, by our *extrapolating empathy for others from our own empathy for us*. It's the *easiest* way to *render empathy for others*. And it's so lovingly pragmatic. Jesus gave us the blueprint. (Matt 7:12) We can't deny our *awareness* of that blueprint. But we *ignore* it. Let's *not*.

While finishing the writing of my dissertation, I served for two years as an assistant professor in the City University of New York. During that time, I was the Director of Counseling for what's now called CUNY's City Tech. Then, in 1971, I founded The Homosexual Community Counseling Center, and continued my rationally cognitive approach to psychotherapy in private practice, for it's the best route to *clearer* thinking for *resolving emotional distress* and into *better decision making* for *wiser choices* in life.

It always makes *good sense* to *receive what we're given*, not only *for our use*, but *for the welfare of others* who've been given what *fits with our givens*. We're *privileged* to *receive* whatever we're *given* to *put it to good use* in loving God and loving others as we love ourselves. This can all be shared in *our unique ways*, as Christians, responding to the question of *who Jesus is*, from *our* experience of Him and His gifts for *our* lives and ministries. We do this by *learning* from what *we're given*, and by using this *insightful personal experience*, to *identify with others* with the *same or similar* needs, whereas *those without these particular – even, peculiar – givens*, can't quite do for *these others*. But we, naturally, *can do*, assisting in *their welfare*, we, *who've learned from our own givens that are shared experientially and thus empathically, with them*.

It's this *common ground that counts so constructively* for *our sharing* with those to whom we can testify in *obvious*, or even *subtle* ways, about who Jesus is to *us*, and who Jesus is and, can be for *them* and for *their welfare* too, here and hereafter.

This has been the *basis* of our 47 years of Evangelicals Concerned – in Bible studies, fellowship, retreats, our quarterly publications and on our website, www.ECinc.org.

Well, even after having done my doctoral dissertation on homosexuality and founding the Homosexual Community Counseling Center, it was, "mum's the word" on all of it, in my parents' home in Youngstown. Even when I and the HCCC were twice mentioned in the syndicated columns of the Mayo Clinic's Walter C. Alvarez, in 1972 and in 1974, it was still, "mum's the word" – that "mmm" sound of a closed mouth and a resistant mind.

Yet, for years, I'd known that my father was an *avid reader* of Dr. Alvarez' nationally syndicated column, "Medically Speaking", carried in our *Youngstown Vindicator* and all across America. I recall, so clearly, at home, while he was reading Alvarez's column, my father would say, "Listen to this!", and then he'd quote Alvarez. But, in 1972 and in 1974, did he say to my mother, "Listen to this!", and then read to her what Alvarez wrote about their son? Here's what Alvarez wrote: "I am much cheered by a note that I saw recently in the journal, *Siecus* [Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.], that a non-profit health service for homosexuals and their families opened in New York City last October. This Homosexual Community Counseling Center maintains a staff of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and pastoral counselors. The director of the center is Dr. Ralph Blair." Alvarez then *approvingly* reported that, "able psychiatrists maintain that they can help a homosexual by helping him to accept himself and to cope with the loneliness, unkindness and injustice handed out by employers and others, perhaps even by

his own family. Fortunately, our people are becoming much more understanding of the homosexual, much less hostile to him, much more willing to learn about him.” Alvarez went on at length, and even included HCCC’s phone number so that people needing our help could get that help.

And then, again, in 1974, Alvarez took note in his syndicated newspaper column, that, “Ralph Blair has written a splendid survey of the etiology of homosexuality.” And again, I never heard a peep on this from my father, Dr. Alvarez’ habituated reader. Still, I was glad that he’d likely read both columns and was, perhaps, in *some way*, given *some* reliable reassurance on this matter and about me, from his favorite medical doctor.

Along these lines on our home front, I knew that my mother frequently listened to Barry Farber’s late night, New York City-based radio talk-show from WOR, as it was also broadcast in Youngstown and in cities across the country. Although I was Barry’s radio guest on several occasions, discussing and even debating other of Barry’s guests on homosexuality, my mother never said that she’d heard *these* programs. Maybe she *did* miss *these* interviews. And, maybe not.

Maybe my parents just respected the fact that *I, myself*, never *brought up* this topic with *them*. But *timing* is always important and, especially, with controversy, especially with my father, the *arguer* who had a wide reputation in his circles that he must always be “right” and always let them know it. At any rate, my parents seemed confident of my having *good common sense* and they never *voiced* any worries at all about me, to me.

“Dear Abby” also was carried in our hometown paper, and she, too, referred readers to HCCC. But I don’t recall that my parents were her readers. She said in one of her columns on HCCC: “I’m sure they’ll be able to help you. And don’t worry, they won’t laugh at you, or think you’re queer, or anything like that.” Her use of the word, “queer”, predated its rise from being an *insult* to being a matter of “pride”. And, she supplied her readers with our HCCC’s office address on Madison Avenue, to help them find us.

After my parents passed away, I was told that my father had asked his sister, my Aunt Velma, wife of my Uncle Dave, if *she* thought *I* might be “one of *those*”. She summed it up by saying, “Jim, what’s important is this, he’s a good son and a good person”. My father is said to have agreed, but to have added that, he *really didn’t want to know*. Just as I’d thought. And, that’s so understandable for a father who was born in 1902, so long before the word, itself, could even be *said* in public, without an ugly sneer.

After my uncle and aunt died, their grandson inherited *their* copy of my dissertation, dedicated to them in gratitude. Later, their granddaughter’s husband “came out” as gay. I’d known him for several years at our annual weekends of fundraising for Christian apologetics that “D. D.” had launched, and I’d never suspected that this young man was *gay*. He’s a father of “four amazing kids” as he’s now shared in public interviews as gay. But I shouldn’t have been surprised. Same-sex oriented relatives can be found in *any* Christian family – including the families of evangelicals, e.g., Oral Roberts, Richard Roberts, Jim Rayburn, T. D. Jakes, Charles C. Ryrie, V. Raymond Edman, Tim Keller, Ed Dobson, William Edgar, Anita Bryant, Roger and Debra Talley, Lloyd John Ogilvie, Bishop Benjamin Crouch and Sandra Crouch, Lyle Schaller, Charlie and Martha Shedd, Earl and Helen Holkeboer, Tim and Beverly LaHaye, Walt and Ginny Hearn, Thomas Hanks, David Gushee, Ford Porter, John Ortberg, Jr., Carl McIntire, C. T. McIntire, Kathie Lee Johnson, Sherwood Lingenfelter, James Merritt, Samuel T. Logan, Jr., Chuck Swindoll, George Verwer, Caleb Kaltenbach, Danny Cortez, James Brownson, Mel White, Philip Yancey, *et al.*

We all must live the life we’re *given*. We *should* do so, as *rationaly* and as *lovingly* as we can. *Doing so, reinforces our continuing* to do so. *Not* doing so, winds up in so many ditches. *Rational* thinking, *rational* living and *rational* loving, at *each step along that way, reinforces that way forward*.

I've seen this borne out in all of my years of counseling Christians and in all of my psychotherapy practice with clients – some who're Christians, many who're not – as well as some who then became Christians by their exposure to what they heard and learned in the psychotherapy *and then in EC*. These Christian conversions occurred especially during those darkest days of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, after atheism, Zen altars and New Age gurus failed to be of any help at all. One such convert to Christ, from New York's high-style fashion world, exclaimed to his partner who was at the top in the art world, and, along with him, was dying of AIDS, as two newly converted and serious Christians: "How do they do it without Christ!"

After founding Evangelicals Concerned in 1975, and launching EC's summer retreats in 1980, two *heterosexual* classmates, friends from our years at BJU, accepted my invitations to keynote at an EC ConnECTION. One of them was Fisher Humphreys, a major Southern Baptist theologian and Samford professor. He keynoted for EC in 2010, attending our retreat with his wife. Another was Bob Wennberg, who taught philosophy at Westmont College for many years. Bob agreed to keynote, but he suddenly died before he could keep his commitment. We three had met in BJU's Pi Gamma Delta. A much more recent BJU alum, Jared Porter, a gay great-grandson of Ford Porter, the Fundamentalist Gospel tract publisher, keynoted in 2013, attending with his gay partner. Virginia Mollenkott, who graduated from BJU in 1953, three years before *I* arrived there, was the first of our EC keynoters, in 1980. She'd been the NIV's English style advisor.

Although IVCF's national office refused my *reappointment* to IVCF staff at Penn back in 1965, due to my support for gays, 23 years later, Steve Hayner, an evangelical Old Testament scholar, was the National President of IVCF. He advocated *for* EC and was willing to be an EC keynoter, but our *calendars* often conflicted, given his seminary presidency's academic year schedules. Two years before he suddenly died of cancer at 56, he wrote to me: "Yet again I am honored both by your invitation and by your persistence. One of these years this is going to work out, but unfortunately, I already have an engagement for that weekend." As with Bob Wennberg, Steve Hayner had a *Higher Engagement* that intervened. Sad as we were for *ourselves*, nothing competes with the *joy of a true Christian's beautiful Homegoing in the Lord*.

Past EC keynoters who've since moved on into Christ's nearer Presence include Don Dayton, John F. Alexander, Rosalind Rinker, R. Maurice Boyd, Nancy Hardesty, Jean Hanson, Henk Hart, Wally Howard, Kay Lindskoog, Jack Rogers, Charlie Shedd, Val Clear, Lew Smedes and Gerald T. Sheppard.

Keynoters who are still on this side of Christ's nearer Presence are Tony and Peggy Campolo, Randall Balmer, Clark Barshinger, Cynthia Clawson, Roy Clements, Todd Komarnicki, Jane Bradbury, Justin Lee, Tom Key, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kirk Talley, Marsha Stevens, Chuck Smith, Jr., Jim Rayburn, III, David G. Myers, Daniel Dobson, Ken Medema, Amy Plantinga Pauw and many more of our EC colleagues.

My faith in Christ motivates me to do what *I* can, to help folks *integrate a same-sex* orientation under God's Grace. But no matter *what it is that we find in our own lives*, if *interpreted* and *dealt with* in terms of *what we find in what we rightly understand from God's Word*, our lives will be, for us, *so very much more worth living*, and *can be of real help in the lives of those around us* and, possibly, for those we'll not meet in person in this life, people who are living on this increasingly interconnected planet by way of the internet connections with over half of the world's population.

So, we need to ask ourselves, as Christians, do we use *our* "givens" to abuse and lord it over others, trying to see *ourselves* as *better* than *others*, as *better* than "those", than "them" – as so many with their *given* heterosexuality do *vis a vis* those with a *given same-sex* attraction – or, do we use *our* "givens" as gifts that *are given* to us to *receive to be given forward in our loving support* of one

another? Even as *heterosexual* Christians *know*, from *their own* experience, how important *their own loving life of sexual companionship* is, *their experiential given*, can be extrapolated to what can be quite well understood as *the very same need fulfillment* in the life of *same-sex oriented* folks. As sinners, saved only by God's *given grace*, how can we all *not well afford to love* all others through that same gift of amazing grace that we've been given by God, and may thankfully and conscientiously extrapolate into empathy for all others?

God's grace is God's gift, *given* to be used *intelligently, lovingly, but never selfishly*. Thus, as Paul advised: "Be humble, gentle, patient, *bearing with one another in love*." (Eph 2:2) Said Peter: "Above all else, love each other, for *love overcomes* a multitude of sins." (1 Pet 4:8) And it surely does, thanks to God!

All of this is based in *Jesus' teaching!* *Truly living* such a *life*, in and through *all* that we *think, believe, speak* and *do*, can "*say*" so much more *effectively* than *words, alone*, without a wider *context of thoughtfulness and its matching acts of lovingkindness*, can "*say*", so to say, *who Jesus is to us* today.

What all we *think, say* and *do about anything*, in *our minds, our hearts* and *our lives* – *always in this chronological and logical sequence* – *launches* what we *send to others* about anything – including, *who Jesus is to us*. *All our thoughts* – including *all of our pre-theoretical presuppositions* – *all our words* and *all our deeds, together*, *say* who Jesus is to us, before we ever *say a word about Him to others*. Our *whole life's evidence* is the *crucial context* that frames who He is to us far more *immediately* than any definition that we may *recite by rote in some self-righteously obligatory way*. Living sequences of love give us *podiums* from which to be *heard*. Spouting a list of dull dogmas drowns all of what's dumped.

And yet, certainly, *what's heard, or not*, is the story of the one who hears or doesn't hear. What we *mean* to convey must be *interpreted* by the one to whom we attempt to communicate. *We're* responsible for *our sending* what we aim to convey, by words and otherwise, but whether what we aim to convey is *received* is the *responsibility* of the *one* to whom we send it. Still, if it's not *sent with love*, it can hardly be *received with love*. And, yet, thankfully, it all takes place under God's Sovereign Love and God's Wise Will. Let's depend on that.

All that "*says*", so to say, *who Jesus is to us, in and by the living of our lives, may reveal who He is – or isn't*. Our *being* in the *company* of others – in person, on the phone, by email, however – can *say* so much about who *Jesus is to us – or isn't*. We *live a witness* of who *Jesus is, or isn't*, before we *say a word about* who *Jesus is, or isn't*. Our *life's witness* precedes another's desire to *listen* to us. *Being and behaving ourselves*, *says*, significantly, in *contextual* ways, so much sooner, than so many words apart from such contexts. All "*witnessing*" can be quite deliberately, *intentional* or utterly, *unintentional*. It's often the *unintentional* that *leaks a lot louder* than what's *so self-consciously, intended*. So, we must seek *still more maturity* in our Christian living. Whatever we *intend* to convey must be sent *prayerfully* and *left to God to deliver, translate and anoint*.

And still, it can't be denied and shouldn't be overlooked that, how anyone or anything ever *comes across to others depends on how the others process* what they see or hear. So, don't *personalize* rejections as such. People *interpret* what all they experience in terms of *their own* experience or *lack* of experience, in terms of *their own formative years long before you met them, their own agendas, etc., not* within the terms of *another's life experience* or *agenda*. *Interpretations* are the stories of the *interpreters*. But don't freeze-frame your own interpretation of others. Whatever the *ultimate* interpretations may be – with further inquiry, with an honest openness, and with God's Loving and Wisely Divine Intervention – remains to be seen, not only for now, but for later, and even for *forevermore*.

So, what we are, *within and across the range and reach* of our *thoughts, words and deeds, can tell* others – intentionally or unintentionally – who we say Jesus is. And, it's always in *His Presence!*

How we live our talk with others and *how we live our walk* with others, *all begins* within our *thoughts* and our *beliefs*, within our *life with Jesus*, that then gets expressed in what amounts to what we “say”, so to say, who Jesus is to us.

Who we say Jesus is, *involves* so much more than, *chatter!* And still, our *well-chosen words* are *vital for clarity*. Jesus *used* words, and *lived* them, in all that He did as *God's Word in flesh*. So should we, as His followers, *live* our words.

That's what Jesus' question is *all about*, in asking us, “Who do you say I am?” How do our answers *link* to what we *think, say and do*, each and every day of our lives, as we're in *His Presence* and in the presence of *all the others* who live in our daily lives, all those others who need to know Jesus for Who He *truly* is and whoever, by Jesus' guidance, may be watching and listening to *our witness?*

Let's *not stumble* over *ourselves*, over our mere *versions* of us, preoccupied with ourselves. Let's not be *stumbling blocks* to others. Let's be *building blocks* toward their coming to know the Lord. Let's *reflect, by His grace*, the *truth* of *Jesus*, in all that we, ourselves, *think*, in all that we, ourselves, *speak* and in all that we, ourselves, *do*.

One of the teachers of the Law was *so impressed* by Jesus' answers to Sadducees' queries, that he asked Jesus: “Which is *the most important* of all the commandments?” Jesus replied: “This is the most important: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the One and Only Lord. *Love the Lord your God* with all your *heart*, with all your *soul*, with all your *mind* and with all your *strength*.’ And, then, Jesus added: “The second, is *like it*: ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself*.’ No commandment is greater.” (Mark 12:28ff; Deut 6:4f; Lev 19:18) This teacher of the Law replied, “Well said!” To which, Jesus said: “You're not far from God's kingdom.” (Mark 12:32ff)

Still, on another occasion, in conversing with *his own close circle of disciples*, Jesus told *them*: “I'm giving you a *new commandment*: ‘Love one another as I have loved you, thus you must love one another’.” (John 13:34). Jesus, in *his own* “*new commandment*” to *his disciples*, raised the point of view by pointing to *the way that he, himself, loved us, and still loves us – for he came to pay our debts for our sins, taking into himself the deepest death that we deserved*. And he alerted them to this, his reason for coming.

This was Jesus' command to his disciples, before they knew, as we know now, with more details, what was involved in his agonizing crucifixion, taking all of our sins upon himself, nailed to a cross for hours of excruciating pain, dying the death that we each deserved, in his substituting his death for each of ours. How much more than *they, then, are we, now, responsible*, to follow His “*new commandment*” more *readily* and far more *understandably* and *gratefully* in loving one another as Jesus has loved us.

This all calls for what's *far beyond empty* words, *mere genuflecting* or a few meagerly *good-for-nothing gestures*. Many Christians have had to, *literally*, lay down *their lives* as martyrs for Christ. Can we be as readily willing to lay down even our *selfish gripes* and our *petty grievances* when we're, maybe, *ignored* or even *castigated* for what's so far less significant than Christian faith? *How do we dare neglect or reject Christ's love in our daily – often difficult – lives with others?* And yet, we so easily *do* this, squatting in our selfish self-centeredness. But there's an easier way to brush away such “slights” by others, and that's to put them into the perspective of what Jesus did for us and for them.

Still, Jesus' way is a much *taller order* than only calling us to *love others merely as we “love” ourselves*, for we *do tend* to “love” ourselves so *stupidly, shortsightedly* and *self-destructively*. That's *never* a wise way to love *ourselves or anyone else*. Such “love” as ours is, for *us*, can so easily *rationalize* what's “best” for *us* and what's “best” for *others*. A case in point is the NYC Health Department's new approach

to *deadly drug abuse* by *supplying the deadly drugs* along with this stupid slogan for “ending overdose deaths”: “Don’t be ashamed you are using, be empowered that you are using safely.” This way failed very badly in Oregon in 2020. OD deaths went *way up, not down*. Of course! All want *someone else to blame* for their own misbehaving. This progressivist plan “fits” *all agendas*, before yet more, OD and die.

Loving others as we love ourselves really does *call for thinking of their truest welfare*, as we *should think about our own truest welfare*. It really does *call for our oral and written communication to be for their true welfare*, as we *should care about our own true welfare*. It really does *call for our attentive treatment of them*, as we so *attentively, yet, so often, so selfishly, so foolishly*, attend to *our own agenda for our so-called “welfare”*, if we’re ever to really attend to *others’ real welfare*. It’s *our Christian calling, to be alert*, to get out from under our own way, so as to even be able to better notice others’ needs. *Loving others as Jesus loved us, and loves us and loves them*, is a much *higher calling* and requires a much *deeper gratitude* and a much *wiser implementation*, and such a far more *generous application of love* than what we *merely posture as “love”* for others, from our own *foolish love of self*. Don’t love others for what you calculate it’ll get for *you*; love them because *you’ve already been loved into loving by Christ Jesus, Himself*, and all others need to be loved from that same *ever-free-flowing Fountain of His Love*.

All of our thoughts, words, and deeds are for us to *use and engage*, in all of our interactions with one another, *living our faith in Who we say*, in all of these many ways, *Jesus is to us – and Jesus can be to them, as well*. So, let’s be *right there at Jesus’ side*, as *He’s right there at our side*, doing what *He’d have us do*, about any and all of it.

What we *say about Jesus* is *said cognitively and emotionally* in ourselves and then, it’s *said verbally, emotionally and behaviorally* to others. It’s *how we, as Christians, think, believe, feel and behave* regarding *Jesus, us and others*, that *says, in all of our daily lives, in multiple voices, who Jesus is to us*.

In truth, *Who He is*, is, of course, *infinitely beyond* all that we ourselves can ever *comprehend or express in any way*. He’s truly so much greater than the sum of what all we may *think of Him*, however we may *love Him*, and however we may *live for Him*, in our internal lives and in our lives with one another. All the combinations of relationship between Him and us and others, *exceed whatever we can ever conceive all on our own*. And yet, all of it, and so much more, is all *comprehended by Him*. Of this we can *be sure*. In this we can *rest assured*. Thus, we get to *do our part*, by His grace and His guidance, *resting in the assurance that He’s always doing His part by His incalculable love for, and awareness of, all*. Some of this, we *may see*. So much of it, we *don’t, won’t and can’t see*. But *He sees it all, and He’s here with us, through it all*. So, we pray daily, “Lord, help *me* to help *them*.” *That’s, it!* “Lord, help *me* to help *them*.” So, we rest assured, He’ll do what He sees fit to do, in His sovereignly gracious wise way.

So, from that day when Jesus asked his *first* disciples, “Who do you say I am?”, we hear *Jesus*, just as *seriously*, just as *lovingly concerned with us*, just as *lovingly concerned with others in our lives*, and just as much to the *point of it all*, asking *us*, each and every one of us, this same question, daily, for *Jesus truly cares for the present, and the later and ultimate welfare of all of us, each and every one of us, each and every day of our life with one another*. And, as He asked it in the midst of the paganism back then, He asks it of us, today, in the midst of our 21st Century’s paganism. “*You, and you, too, and you, over there: Who do you say I am? Who am I to you, in your daily routines, in your priorities and in your lifestyle? Who am I to you, today?*” He asks this, *for our own welfare, and for the welfare of all of those who are in our lives in any way*.

His own *continuing present tense* matches His *continuing Presence* in His *loving* relationship with us. So, He asks us, today, “Who am I to you?” – not, who was I to you, some time ago, or who *might* I be to you, one of these days, if and when you get around to no longer trying to “get around” *your calling* to be My faithful disciple, but, *who am I, to you, today?*”

So, *here and now*, how open are we to receive and respond to *Jesus’ question in the here and now?* How much do we *hunger and thirst* for His *real righteousness, His Way, His Truth, and His Life?* How *evangelically concerned* are we, today, here, in EC?

Jesus repeatedly gave clear guidance when summing up *the whole of the Law* and *all of the Prophets* into one succinct sentence: “*In everything, treat all others the way you want them to treat you, for this is the essence of all of the Law and all of the writings of the Prophets.*” (Matt 7:12) And *that’s such handy and intuitive guidance!*

Yet, to *His closest disciples*, he said that *we’re* to “love one another, as *I have loved you*”. (John 13:34) This is the *highest* of all callings to the *truest discipleship* and it’s all stated so simply, in such straightforward terms that can be *intuited*, with absolutely no wiggle-room for any of our self-serving rationalizations in selfish evasions. There’s *no room* for our whining, “Well, if only, ...”, *no room* for, “*But she ...*”, “*But he ...*”, “*But they ...*”. There can be *no never-ending selfish blame games of excuses with Jesus’ true disciples*. There’s no room for any *refusal* on the basis of *one’s finding fault* with “*these*” or with “*them*” or *those “others”*, who we’re – *nonetheless* – *to love*, as *we’re loved* by Christ. And why on earth can *we not afford* to love *this way?* After all, *we’re already loved by Almighty God in Christ, our crucified Savior, our risen Lord!* *What greater Resources do we need than this Love by which God Loves us – and them?* *That’s every bit of the motive power that we need to do our part!*

Thus, *these* are the very *truest and most well-based calls to truest life as we follow the One who died for us and, for us, was raised from death for our lives in Him, with Him, here and now and there and then, forevermore!*

The more we truly understand *Who Jesus is* – The Son of Man! The Christ! The Messiah! The Son of the Living God! Our Savior! Our Lord! Our daily Companion! – how can we *not want* to have *this privilege, this pleasure of following* right alongside of Him? How can we *not readily act on this understanding* in *all that we think*, and in *all that we say*, and in *all that we do*, as *these three dimensions* – *thinking and saying and doing*, what we *think*, what we *say* and what we *do* – cover the *gamut of all interpersonal involvement in life with each other and with Another*, our most gracious *Creator*, our self-sacrificing *Savior*, and God’s companionable Holy Spirit? This all adds up to *our being alive – by Him, in Him, and with Him!* What we *think, speak and do, is how we’re to say*, so to say, *who He is* – and thus, *Who He is to us!*

Since all aspects of our lives begin in what we think and believe – cognitively, philosophically, spiritually – and thus, what follows from our thought life, will be our emotionally experienced life, and what then follows is our behavioral life.

So, the more we *think straight – cognitively, philosophically, spiritually* – the less we’ll be distracted by *feelings* of anxiety, frustration and anger that are spawned by *irrational thinking*, e.g., projections, predictions, extrapolations from our version of our sense of self, etc., and the better we’ll *behave* ourselves in terms of how we *regard* us and others, what we *say* to them and *about* them, and what we *do* or leave *undone* in our interactions *with* them. What we *tell ourselves*, in our *minds*, needs to be *informed by a rational analysis* and by *God’s Word, rightly interpreted*, so that, what springs *from us, from our thoughts*, into *our feelings* and into *our behaviors and activities with others*, is *well-grounded and well-informed by clear thinking* and by *God’s Love*, into true love and wise kindness

that's then made more possible for us to *do* in a life that depends on God's graciously wise guidance and God's profoundly provided providence.

This is why we must realize that it does *no good* to *try* to *tell* ourselves to, "*feel better*" and why ordering ourselves, or others, to, "*Cheer up!*" or "*Calm down!*" *doesn't work*. Such *nonsense* is sure to result in *frustration* in both the advisor and the advised, and then, turn into *hostility* in both. There is no shortcutting in this predictable sequence, yet no shortcut is needed if the sequence of steps is followed rationally. So, let's *think* right, to *feel* right and, to *behave* right, in *Christ's gift of His righteousness*.

But if we *don't accurately identify, challenge and change our irrational thinking* that creates our *unwanted feelings*, and *change our minds, thus, freeing ourselves from the consequences of our irrational thinking*, we're *stuck!* However, understanding that our *unwanted emotions* are *clues* to our *irrational thoughts*, is the *gifted signal* that we must *identify, challenge and change irrational thoughts to resolve our dilemmas*. *Rationally changing our minds* will change *unwanted fears, frustration and fury* into more realistic perspectives, even into *Peace in Christ* – no matter how hard are the *circumstances*.

It's really not hard to know we're *not* "fortune tellers". So, let's *not* hold ourselves as hostages to our *ill-informed and simplistic scenarios* of the future, especially when we've been down such rabbit holes of fictitious predictions so often before. But *feeling upset*, and *failing to identify our irrational thought* that sets us up for such feelings, *refusing to rationally revise our thought*, can *really upset* a lot of stuff. Furthermore, as Christians, we get to recall, that throughout it all, our wise Heavenly Father, the God of ultimate justice and sovereign grace, is readily available through all of it.

But if and when we tell ourselves, so *irrationally*, that we *need anything* to go "*our own way*" *right now*, and even try to *tell God* we *need* it to go "*our own way*", *right now*, we must remind *ourselves* of Who we're trying to *advise*, and then read the 23rd Psalm for reassurance and perspective that, *the Lord is our Shepherd*, and pray again, in wisdom, assurance and thanksgiving: "*Thy Will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven!*" (Mt 6:10)

Haven't we already learned from all of our previous trips into fantasylands of wishful thinking, that, a scenario can *literally fit* what we'd wanted, but then, the *experience* of it wasn't what we'd *expected it to be*. On other occasions, *what we'd dreaded, didn't turn out to be as dreadful* as we'd predicted. Indeed, what we'd *feared* about the *future* that we can *never*, at that moment, *get our hands on*, turned out to be *manageable*, maybe even *fine*, when the *fantasy future* became a hands-on *pragmatic present*. Doesn't *any future* tend to be yet another *mixed-bag* when it arrives in the *present tense*? Jesus taught that our perspective should be to *seek God's reign and God's righteousness*, for each day in this fallen world has trouble enough of its own, a day at a time. (Matt 6:24ff)

How *long* does it take for us to learn, yet again, these *elementary* lessons of life? We *can't depend on mere fantasizing about needing* things to go *this way* or *that way*. And how long does it take to learn this, as a *grown-up*, not to mention, as a *Christian with faith that the God of Grace, Providence and final Peace knows what He's doing?*

So, we must diligently *identify* what we're telling ourselves, *challenge* it *rigorously* as to its *reality* and *rationality* or, its *fantasies, projections, predictions* and even bald-faced *lies*, and, get rid of such *irrationality* that fuels our *disturbing and disabling emotions* and fires up *destructive behaviors* in dealings *within ourselves* and *with one another*.

Sadly, *unreasoned* "solutions" can and do, so easily spread like wild fire, with one's outrageous calls for *anything but a rational analysis and a reasonable solution*. Stupid thinking needs *revising*, a shifting

from dumb plots and pipe dreams that turn into pipe bombs of revenge, and self-righteously rationalized rampage that we read about in each day's daily news. In *clearing up* our knee-jerk irrationalities and rationalizations, we get to be more *clearheaded*. Thus, escaping the consequences of unrevised irrationality and unchecked rationalizing can already be *its own reward*. Replacing nonsense and even much worse, by reasonable, productive thoughts and consequently, constructive action, is *our calling* from God for *adaptations* under His Providence. Whether or not we obey is *our call!*

Underneath all of our irrational rationalizing is a recognition of what we self-righteously refuse to admit. It's what prompts all such rationalizing. We're all in obvious conflict between our being created in God's Image and our rebelliously reimagining ourselves as created in our imaginary images. This is idolatry! We fail to deal honestly with the fact that, our image of us is already a fallen image, a shattered idol. So, we do, as "all the bad guys" do. They rationalize their mugging of others, as looters rationalize their looting, as killers rationalize their killings, as rapists rationalize the rapes they commit, as embezzlers rationalize embezzling but never rationalize their being embezzled, liars rationalize their lying but never rationalize others' lies about them, etc. We know when we're rationalizing, for rationalizing requires our very deliberate rearrangement of facts and motives that get in the way of our fantasies and excuses. We all know when we're doing what's wrong. If we didn't, we'd not try to hide it, by rationalizing. Yet, admitting this, can open the way out of it. Refusing to act on knowing that we're rationalizing, traps us into continuing to do it, with no exit from our own rationalizing's own trap.

When one honestly admits to *being wrong*, and thus, *resolves rationalization* by a *truly rational analysis*, one can move ahead into the *resulting relief* of *realism*. Christians can fully afford to admit *we're wrong*, and resolve *rationalizations* by *refuting our wrong, by repenting of self-righteousness* by the grace of God's forgiveness in the gift of *Christ's righteousness* and then, acting on that repentance and revisioning by dealing differently.

Let's use the brains God gave us, above all of His other creatures. They cope by instinct; we're gifted to cope by rational intelligence and our personal relationship with Christ. The more we gratefully remind ourselves of our relationship to God, in Whose Image we're created and by Whose Son, we're saved, the more likely we'll behave.

Our thought life about Jesus, what we think, whether biblical or not, rational or not, says, nonetheless, who we think, thus, who we say, Jesus is. But we must be alert to The Truth and reject the falsehoods, to pass The Truth on to others.

Others *can't* "read our minds" or "our hearts" – at least, not with fullest accuracy – but what we have in our minds and hearts, about Jesus, and seek to "say", in whatever way, can get *blocked* by others' selfishly *self-serving* filtering systems. All such systems can be aimed at blocking what's already seen of Jesus *in us*, but what entails what's perceived by others as too "inconvenient", too *challenging*, to explore for themselves.

What are they telling themselves about Jesus? What are they open to learning and believing and doing about Jesus? That's all about them. It's all in the Lord's Presence, in His Loving awareness. And we're called to do our faithfully loving part in the matter.

But, there's no wiggle room in responding to Jesus, since Jesus was either who *he* said he was or Jesus was "a liar". He *can't* be just another of the many figures and idols in religious history, as many so foolishly, so very defensively, try to consign him. Either Jesus told the *truth* in pointing to the *source* of Peter's testimony, or he didn't. If he was telling the truth, *it's the most profound self-disclosure ever made on this planet.*

So, one's responding to Jesus' response to Peter's repeating God's revelation of Who Jesus is, given the logical alternatives of agreement or disagreement with what Jesus affirmed, one is given the most *consequential* decision of any response to anyone in *one's* entire lifetime. What will be your response to The Question? On "the one hand", *nothing could be more relevantly true*. Therefore, *there is, no "other hand"!*

Considering the facts that Jesus' disciples, after his arrest and during his crucifixion, were not only grieving and depressed, but in hiding, frightened for their own safety, their very lives. But only three days later, after now having met the *risen* Christ, they were *completely reassured* and *so rejuvenated* that they then went on to *martyrdom*, *willingly*, convinced that, *in Him*, they were *forever safe*. What are we to conclude then, not only about *who Jesus was, then*, but about *who Jesus is to and for each of us, today?*

Our *thoughts of Jesus*, and of all else we think about, are all stored in our *minds*, where we've filed them away, in our own habituated way, in cells of our 3-pound brain. It's surrounded by a very hard skull for safety from the *outside*, but *not* for safety from *false thoughts within*, where we so often hold *ourselves* hostage to fantasies and to heresies *against a truly realistic relationship with Him*. Those cells have to be cleaned out, falsehoods thrown away, and the Truth of Jesus, be received and understood.

We owe it *to ourselves, to others, and, to Jesus*, to take Him seriously, in utmost sincerity, for, *if* what he said is *true*, and there's such they know no better way to deal with their low sense of self for they have no awareness of how truly they're loved by God. *h* good evidence that it *is*, he took, and takes *us*, so *seriously, lovingly*, in giving up *all*, to do for *us* what was necessary to save us from *ourselves* and *from all of our sinful rebellion* and *from our self-inflicted damnation*, to give to us, what *his lovingly sacrificial death and victorious resurrection from death accomplished for us – forever*. In Him, we're given His *gifts of redemption and resurrection*, with no damnation, since *our own* crucifixion, as it were, took place *without our awareness at the time*, some *two-thousand years before we were born*. Yet, *deeper still*, as we read of God's love for us, "The Lamb of God was *slain for our salvation from the foundation of the world*." (Rev 13:8) *Contemplate that!* Then, *take action* on its *truth, with fullest gratitude for eternal relief in your own resurrection in Him*.

Our brain cells contain so much that we all use so automatically without ever giving it a *conscious thought*. But our brain cells also contain our thoughts, our knowledge, our memories, beliefs, intentions, evaluations – in short, whatever we *think* about. And, again, whatever we *think*, then, so directly influences whatever we *feel emotionally*, as well as whatever we then see our way clear *to decide to do or not to do* about any of it. This sequence is pregnant with many *consequences* – not just for ourselves, but for others, too.

And, surely, there's truly no *thought that can possibly count more than what we think, and then what we do, about Jesus*. *All that truly matters begins and ends in what we think and do about Jesus*, even if not everyone sees that that's so. And yet, for some 2,000 years now, it's all *been quite so*.

Whatever we think must be *identified* in order to *revise it*, if *need be*. In the case of Jesus, if we're to revise what we're telling ourselves, *all on our own*, by way of *ignorance* or *wishful thinking*, we cannot get to a *reasonable resolution*. Simply consulting *one's ignorance or opinions*, apart from all of the credible evidence, is *futile*. We need more than *our bias* and *a hunch*. We need to look into the reliable sources. We need to be *honestly open* to the abundant and credible biblical evidence that's already, so available and that's mentioned earlier in this keynote.

In these inevitable *connections of interactions and alignments* between our *thinking* and our *feeling* and then, our *doing* what reasonably follows, we're reminded of a very wisely appropriate Hebrew Proverb: "As we *think* in our *hearts*, so we *are*." (Prov 23:7)

What we *really believe about Jesus*, in our brains and receive into our hearts, thus, *feel* and, what we *do or don't do, about Jesus*, follows this Proverbial pattern. It's not what we merely *pretend*, but it's what we *really do think in our most elemental thought* and consequently *feel in our heart of hearts* and then commit to *do about it all, in all seriousness*, that can *entrap us* in what's *fatally false* or can *free us* for the very greatest of all freedoms – *freedom for eternal life in Him, beginning here and going on forever*.

In our relations with others, we don't always *say* what we *think*, in order to *appear to be nicer or smarter* than we *think* we are. But we can't fool *us*. After all, *we're in on our own cover-up* since, *we're who planned it and we're who think we need it*. Don't we think *we know our trick*? Well, we know what we *intended*, but *not* what we *didn't intend*. Such *tunnel vision tricks us into trusting that our trick will do the trick we intended*, but, *watch out*, for our *trick can trick us!* Weren't we under some *distractions of distress, in duress*, in thinking up *that trick*? That's *not* the very clearest of heads for *planning a trick*.

No matter if it fools *other* fools, it *can't* fool the fool who thought it up. And if it *does fool* anyone else, why would we think the response won't be *jealousy, envy, anger, hate and maybe even outrageously bitter revenge*? *Oops!* See, how tricks trick their own distracted and naïve, tricksters? Still, tricksters tend never to learn their lessons.

It's such an altogether different relationship in yoke with Jesus! Here's His generous, welcoming invitation: "Come to me, *all of you* who are weary and burdened down. I'll give you rest that you truly do need. Be yoked with me, learn from me; for I am meek and gentle, and you'll find the truest rest for your souls, your deepest selves. My yoke will make your load so very much lighter, because *my burden is light*." (Matt 11:28ff).

When it comes to what we *think* and what we *do*, about Jesus, there's so very much at stake – from *bondage in self to freedom in Christ*. Given this *choice*, we're graciously given the *motivation* to make the *right* choice, to *truly inquire* of Jesus with the attention it *truly requires* to be open to his gracious invitation to *Life, together with Him, Forever*.

All of our *nervously* shared lives with others has more in common than we realize, for our fears of failing to get *another's* approval are their fears, too. *Their fears of rejection are rooted in their own misuse of their self-centered focus on their own versions of themselves, just as our fears of rejection are rooted in our own misuse of our own self-centered focus on our versions of us*. But each one so foolishly *extrapolates* from what each one *doesn't like about one's own sense of self*, and then thinks that, that content inside one's own brain cells about one's own self-obsessing worry resides in the cells of *others'* brains – as if all that's been collected and stored inside one's own brain, through one's own separate heredity, separate formative years, separate experiences and lack of experiences, and private self-perceptions, is *oddly, duplicated identically* in another's brain cells' chemistry. My "me" is in their brains? How *egocentrically stupid!* Others have more than enough to contend with in their consuming themselves with all of how *they* think that *they* don't measure up. Each one's sense of not measuring up is more than enough for each to try to cope with, every day. Let *your own irrationality* remind you of *their irrationality*. The *distraction* is the *same*; the *details* are *each's one's own*.

One of the best purposes of *group* therapy is to let all members of the group *see for themselves, the evidence* that, however they're *obsessed with their own agendas and their own versions of "self"*, that's *their priority, it's their preoccupation*. And it's *their property, not the property or the preoccupation of others* who, likewise, *are preoccupied with their own property, their own, versions of themselves and their own agendas*. *None can escape from this experience of one's own version of self, but neither does anyone else experience another's version of self*. In group therapy, members can learn from others' irrationality, to spot that *same sort of irrationality in themselves*. They can learn from *others' use of the rational tools being taught*, that it might be well for them to put these same tools to good use in dealing with *their tripping over their own "selves"*.

But thinking that others actually have access to what all we think in our own brain cells is *bizarre, for our own thoughts are biochemically entwined within all of our own life's experience, memories, and all of that is in our own brain cells*. Even if we try to *spell it out* for them – provided they can even lend us an ear, preoccupied as they are within themselves – is more of our *silly self-centeredness*. Supposing others' self-centered distractions over *their* senses of not measuring up, will be put aside in their own self-centered brains so as to even *listen* to our efforts to measure up, is just as *bizarre*. Yet, rationally resolving one's *misuse* of one's own myopic sense of one's self, *enables one to listen*, with a degree of *empathy*, even some loving care, so as to learn from *others' mistakes in misusing their versions of self*.

Our true resolution must be in *The Ultimate Resolution* in a *living relationship* with God, who, in the flesh, was tempted in all the ways we're tempted, yet without yielding to the temptations, and as this *sinless one*, died for us and was raised from death for us, He calls us to be yoked with Him in this life's journey to Life in His Love beyond this life, Forevermore.

All of our failures are so very far deeper than merely some *psychological* stumbling, for they're really the *debris of depravity* from the primal Fall of our entire humanity, still infecting us all. And *that* problem can be solved *only* by the Powerful Love of God in Christ Jesus, when we truly know how to answer, so very thankfully, His question to us: "Who do *you* say *I am*?" To *yourself*. To *others*. Are we yoked with this loving Savior, or are we still trying, so stubbornly, so *self-righteously*, to make it through our woefully wayward way in this world *in our own self-righteous way, all on our own*?

So, don't be a *set-up* for disappointment or *worse*, by taking whatever others merely *tell you*, as representing where they're *really at*. And, don't do *it*, yourself, to *them – or to yourself*. *Buttering up* is a *booby trap*, and it'll *inevitably snap and entrap*, at some point, as it's *snapping constantly* inside each *deceiver's awareness, entrapping each deceiver, each and every day*, for one *cannot escape* one's own brain cells and one's own *guilty conscience* in that lockup in which one squats in "self". All who try to escape a troubled sense of self by hiding in plain sight of one's own sense of self, and boasting, blaming, and boozing, entrench themselves inside their own self-destructive delusion.

There's no use to try to present a *false witness of ourselves to ourselves*. Yet we so often *try* to do so. Psychologically, it's called, "denial". The *useless* thing about *denial* is that, we, ourselves, *can't get away with it*. And yet, that's also the *useful* thing about *denial*. For, behind all efforts at denial, *we're quite well aware of what we're trying to deny*. How could we not? We're trying to *cover up* something that, in order to cover it up, we need to be staring it in the face, as we *try*, in vain, to cover it up. And, we'll continue to be aware of what we've tried to cover up, for, we know exactly where we've tried to hide it, and we have to keep a wary eye on it, lest it be dug up by someone else. How *stupid!* Let's *wise up to how stupidly self-righteous*, we all can be.

This is all so very much more germane in contemplating Jesus, for the consequences of what we *think of Him*, and what we then *do about our thinking of Him*, are crucial for our *fullest freedom from all of our egoistic nonsense – nowadays and forever*.

Treating others as we want to be treated isn't only nice, it's wise, for lack of kindness, shows lack of empathy that reinforces a sense of isolation in self. But some meaningful connection can remind us that we're so much like those we criticize and "can't stand". Let's see "us" in those we "can't stand", and then, do for us what we can't do for them.

All attempts to *make* a "good impression" take a *lot of effort* and take a *big toll*, given that, to us, they're at least, *a bit strained*, shall we say? So, all of our strained attempts at this, are a *real strain on us*, as we're afraid that our *spin* can *sink us, in their sense of us. After all, from our viewpoint, our spin is already sunk.* And, of course, they *well recognize spinning*, as such, *for they all do their own such spinning in the same old threadbare way.* But, *ours sinks us from the start* – inside our scrambling brain cells, as *theirs sinks them from the start* – inside their scrambling brain cells. What all we *try to tell ourselves* about us, *who we want to think we are*, but *can't*, is taking a really rough road full of lots of ruts, and to *no good end*, for *no one can believe one's own false witness of one's own tiresome "me, me, me".* Yet, that sense of oneself can be the useful *realization* that one *truly needs* to take another, very different Road, altogether.

The *only Altogether Other Road* is in *yoke with Jesus* on the way Home with Him by our side. He will *free us* from our counterproductive egocentricities, as, *absolutely nothing is hidden* from Him. *Still, He remains right there beside us*, helping us to carry our load, and forgiving us for all of our failures of faith, inspiring us to "*keep on keeping on*" with the *only One with Whom that oft-evoked motto of continuing partnership truly makes any practical sense*, for He's the only One Who truly, realistically invites us to, "Come to Me, all you who are weighted down with heavy loads, be yoked with Me, for My burden is light and you will find rest for your weary souls." (Matt 11:28f) He's the One Who can assure that, with Him, we do "keep on keeping on" with Him, Forever.

And, need it be said, it's never of any use whatsoever, to ever try to keep Jesus in the dark? Trying to do so would prove we'd forgotten Who it is we're trying to keep in the dark. That "try" really would actually prove *our not measuring up*, even in the basics of reality. We may, of course, be *rightly ashamed* of our sins. Thank God *we can be rightly ashamed* of our sins and then be forgiven by God's grace in Christ.

Forgiveness is always Jesus' loving response to all who're *truly sorry for their sins.* Perhaps, we'll *learn* a lesson from the *aftermath of that particular sin.* He helps us to experience the *stench of our sin*, the *senselessness of our sin*, and the *wisdom and the freedom in resisting and rejecting sin as we walk along, beside our loving Savior.*

How could we ever think that it's possible to pull *anything* over on *God?* As we're reminded in two very ancient and rhetorical biblical questions: "Does He who made the ear, not hear? Does He who made the eye, not see?" (Ps 94:9) Confession of sin is not for *informing God*, but to *remind us* of what our sin *really is* – *ours.* So, let's *recognize* our sin as such, *confess* it in repentance, and *be forgiven* by God's mercy, and, in His mercy, *move ahead, learning lessons from disobedience and its consequences* and freed to live more faithfully in and through Christ's Compassionate Companionship.

Paul summed it up for Greek Christians in his day and for us, here today, when he so pointedly wrote: "In conclusion, beloved, *fill your minds* with what's good, worthwhile, true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable." (Phil 4:8)

Our *thought* life includes our *prayer* life, *meditation* on scripture and on *all else that we read*, to which we give mental attention. We're not to waste our precious time and intelligence on *uselessly distracting conflicts*, on *mere rumors, gossip* and *uncritically* buying into whatever is nothing but lies and self-righteous propaganda.

Our thought life is in the Companionable Presence of our Lord and Savior, our Father and The Holy Spirit. What comforting Presence *He is!* We're never alone in living in *Him, with Him and for Him. He's here with His love, forgiveness and guidance.*

Our life in thoughts and contemplations, can say – convey – who we say Jesus is. Our *thought life* includes studying, recalling and interpreting Scripture, remembering hymn texts and other resources that may resonate in our minds as we're otherwise engaged in daily routines as we walk or ride to work, get a bite to eat, and as we fall asleep at night and wake up the next morning for *yet another day, awake to Jesus' Presence and in His service, through us, for others, abounding to the good of us all, through all of the gifts of another good day by His Side.*

Our life in words, what we say and write can say – convey – who we say Jesus is. Loving others as we love ourselves includes our daily *communicating* with others, whether friends, neighbors, co-workers, those we serve in our work, strangers with whom we interact, etc. Do we have to *like* or *approve* of everything about *them*? Of course, not. Do we have to *agree* with everything *they* do or say? Of course, not. Do we have to *regard them and their welfare as we regard ourselves and our welfare*? Of course! *That's loving them as we love ourselves!* But we're *not called to control them to suit ourselves.*

Extrapolating from what *we want for us* can, indeed, indicate what *others may want for themselves*, at least in *general* ways. And it's likely to be contaminated with *selfishness* in both cases, theirs and ours. So, it's really not hard to know more about them than we suppose we do, for *we are "them"*, in ways we may not like to admit. But even in *that*, we can *learn* about ourselves and *do* something about *that* in *our* lives, though we can't revise the *others from within* themselves. Still, we can be more *patient* with them when we see how stubborn, self-centered – or whatever – we, *ourselves*, can *still be.*

Our life in deeds, what we do or don't, can say – convey – who we say Jesus is. We're to *love others as we love ourselves, behaving ourselves with them* as we're called to do, no matter how much they may *misbehave toward us*. Our *calling* in Christ is surely not to a lifestyle of "tit-for-tat". What *we do*, must be *in sync* with what we're *called* to do. But *is it in sync with that, or with its opposite?*

Our obedience, *vis a vis*, others, should, and surely can, flow from our gratitude for Christ's obedience unto death, *for us and for all*. What more *moving motivation* do we need, to get *moving on* with our commitment to love others as we love ourselves and as Christ loves them and us? The better we really do know ourselves, the better we'll really know others, for we all have so much in common – especially all of those ways we may try to deny that we have *that* in common with *them*. If we admit *this*, we're ready to *do* something about *this in us*, and to understand this a bit better in them.

When Jesus called himself, "The Son of Man" – referring back to Daniel's dream – he was identifying both his *humanity* and his *divinity*, as *God Incarnate*, as God in *human flesh!* And it was all done, as Paul said, by the Triune God, from "before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4) *We*, who our Creator graciously created in His Image, and then sacrificed Himself on that torturous cross to rescue us from the depths of death to which we'd plunged, need to live our informed thankfulness to remind us of all of His gifts in our daily lives.

When Jesus used the title, "Son of Man", for *himself*, he was confirming his *dual identity* as *God Incarnate*. It was in this *dual identity, truly man and truly God*, that he *could* come to this earth *to do what needed to be done* to *redeem fallen humanity from ultimate death*, brought onto humanity through humanity's own willful sin.

Old Princeton's theologian, B. B. Warfield, stated it so biblically: "The doctrine of the Incarnation is the hinge on which the Christian system turns. No Two-Natures, no Incarnation; no Incarnation, no Christianity in any distinctive sense. ... The glory of the Incarnation is that it presents to our adoring gaze, not a humanized God or a deified man, but a *true God-man*." Thus, as Dorothy L. Sayers noted of this God-man, "Jesus Christ is the only God who has a date in history." And, in all of world history, nobody's birth has ever been more repeatedly recalled than Jesus' birth.

Yet, the most popular Christmas recording that refers explicitly to Jesus ranks down at No. 71. It's Boney M's, "Mary's Boy Child / O My Lord", from 1978, in Harry Belafonte's 1956 hit with, "Oh My Lord" by Farian and Jay. "Oh, my Lord! You sent Your Son to save us. Oh, my Lord! Your very Self You gave us!" "Mary's Boy Child", was written by Jester Hairston, a grandson of slaves, committed Christian, choral conductor, and actor.

Catchy as the music is, it's obviously *too focused on Jesus to get a higher pop rating.*

Each December, and for several weeks before that, Jesus' birth is "celebrated", *as it were*, with some 700 billion dollars spent on not particularly desired, thus, often regifted, "Christmas" presents, and on plenty of party food and far too much booze. The latest "Christmas Tree" at Rockefeller Center, even in the midst of Covid-19's crises, created crushing crowds, cuddled around 50,000 blinking lights on its 80-foot-tall, 12-ton mass of spruce branches – *and all in order to take their hundreds of millions of self-centered, self-preoccupied selfies!* What a "commemoration" of Christ's birth *that isn't!*

Each year, for two millennia, *Jesus' death on the cross* is recalled on Good Friday and *His resurrection* is recalled on Easter Sunday. But what surrounds and suffocates this annual weekend of sorrow and rejoicing? Hot-cross buns for Good Friday and dyed eggs, chocolate bunnies and show-offs in their latest spring fashion on Easter Sunday.

"*The World's Most Powerful Address*" is another *weird* "tribute" to "Jesus". It's called, "Limestone Jesus". It's a ritzy apartment building at 15 Central Park West, dubbed by "shelter porn merchants" at reality blog, *Curbed NY*, six days before Christmas in 2007. Allegedly, "the most expensive site in Manhattan", it's filled with fancy multimillion-dollar apartments. Its limestone façade is said to come from the quarry that supplied stone for the Empire State Building's façade. But, didn't Jesus *bless* the world's "poor in spirit", not *the world's show-offs*? Yet it's *such "stuff"* made of *stone* that the still *unsatisfied* rich buy into, instead of seeking refuge in the Rock of Ages, in Jesus, whose grave-cave stone was rolled away by His resurrection.

Now, in 2022, *Forbes* prophesies what it says "could change the world" and *Wired* predicts, "could power the future". They, too, mislabeled it with the name of the One Whose Power not only brought the entire universe into existence but *really changed the darkest world of fallen humanity into our brightest future* for all Eternity. But *Forbes* and *Wired* aren't connecting their dots to *Him*. They're all atwitter over a so-called, "Jesus Battery" to power electric cars in just 15 minutes instead of 12 hours! *Wow?* Where in all of this commercialized chaos of *self-gratification* and weird *worldly* "riches" is there even a tiny bit of a hint of the *true power* of the *self-sacrificing Jesus*, God, Himself, in human flesh, crucified and risen?

Well, back in 1989, the Supreme Court ruled that a "Christmas tree is *not a religious symbol*". It took the Supreme Court to establish the commercialization of Christmas? Still, the Supreme Court got it all wrong. The Supreme Court failed to find that this tree is a "religious" symbol of the *false religion of secularism*.

In a 2021 Rasmussen Poll, 62% of the public said Christmas is *too-commercialized*. But, even among Christians, this “Holiday” Season, as it’s dubbed, gets spent on far too much spending and on far too many Santa Clauses with their sleighs of eight flying reindeer *led by the light of one reindeer’s shining red nose*.

Nothing in all of this *in-Santa-ty* of self-centered, “holly jolly” jingles of *distraction* can bring us anything like the *Holy Joy of God’s arrival in flesh and blood, born to a young virgin in a borrowed cattle stall, to which the amazed shepherds were led by directions of the bright Angels “bending low” in that deep night sky, while Wise Men came from the East, led by the light of The Bethlehem Star*.

Instead or recalling *The Savior’s* coming, to live his sinless life, *on our behalf*, to die his sinless death in shedding his blood, *on our behalf*, as *our substitute*, *we substitute our self-toots*. *His life of self-denial can save us from our lives of self-delusion and self-deception, self-indulgence* and, at last, *our self-destruction*.

However, His Incarnate Intervention for us – from within that *virgin’s womb*, and *throughout his sinless life* and on *through his agonizing crucifixion*, then *put into a borrowed, but soon, an ever-after empty tomb, from which he arose* – His *gift to us is salvation, eternal life with This Son of Man, in the Life of Resurrection, Forevermore*. He, *Himself*, is the *One and Only True Christmas Gift* that this world has ever *needed* and that this world has ever, so lovingly, been so *blessedly given!*

But to so many, even at Christmas, the commemoration of his holy birth in Bethlehem, He’s as *unwanted* as an outdated bowtie or yet another regifted fruitcake.

At first, it was just another night of shepherding – just another night – except for Him – when, angels from above, brought Good News of God’s great Love, to shepherds in those fields ‘round Bethlehem. *Glorious News from up on High! Glorious News for humankind! An Infant* in a cattle stall – *born to save us, one and all – born this Holy Night in Bethlehem!* (Luke 2)

It was just another night – except for Him Who always does make All the Difference.

At last, it was just another day of mourning – another day of missing Him – when, at that *empty tomb*, Mary Magdalene saw, through tear-soaked eyes, one she mistook to be a gardener. Replying to her asking where they’d put his body, the risen Christ said, *“Mary!”*. In joy, she cried out, *“Rabboni!”* He said, “Don’t clasp to me, for I’ve not yet ascended to the Father. *But go and tell* the brothers, that I’m returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Later, Jesus met with His disciples. He showed them his wounds. Then He sent the disciples on, to go and to spread His Good News, and He breathed on them, God’s Holy Spirit. (John 20:16ff)

Now and forevermore, it will never be just another night or just another day, because of Him Who always makes All the Difference. This is Who Jesus is!