



“The Vine”

Growing Together in Christ

Newsletter for New Hope Christian Fellowship



Plus:

Why the 25th? What's Behind Some Christmas Cards?

From Pastor Dennis

"I Am Coming Soon"

The following excerpt is from an article on leadershipjournal.net by Chris Armstrong, titled "Skipping Advent?" -- "As an adolescent, when my parents tried to impress on my two brothers and me the importance and the intricacies of Advent observance, I could hardly keep from rolling my eyes. In a country that spends its cold Decembers in hot pursuit of food, presents, and parties, the historical niceties of an ancient liturgical season seemed...well...irrelevant. These days, on the other side of an evangelical conversion and nearly a decade of graduate study in church history, I've begun to see what excited my parents about Advent. Church seasons like Advent tie our lives to Christians throughout history.

"The word Advent means 'coming' or 'arrival' and for centuries has been a season of anticipating of Christ's return, as well as celebrating his first coming 2,000 years ago. The modern liturgy of Advent starts with sobering passages and prayers about the apocalyptic return of the Lord in judgment. Then it moves to Old Testament passages foretelling the birth of a messiah and New Testament passages trumpeting John the Baptist's exhortations and the angels' announcements.

"Every year these rich Scriptural reminders and the traditional prayers that accompany them set my blood rushing a little faster and bring a rising excitement: Christ came with plenty of prior notice! Prophets and angels joined to proclaim his coming! And now I can join too, with the cloud of witnesses stretching back to apostolic times, in the same proclamation!

"And in the quiet times of meditation, I can respond as I imagine believers have done on every Advent since the tradition began: I can bow my head and prepare my heart to receive the One who is always present, but who seems distant in the busyness of the season. I can mourn for my hardness of heart. I can hope in his grace. And I can rejoice that

in answer to the cry, 'O come, O come, Emmanuel' he came. I'm not rolling my eyes any more."

Revelation is a book about Jesus' Second Coming. Four times Jesus declares, "I am coming soon." The Bible ends with: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen." (Revelation 22:20-21)

The Greek word translated "soon" or "quickly" is *tachu*, which implies "without delay" or "suddenly" (by surprise). I've wondered why Jesus used the word, "soon," haven't you? There are various interpretations, but I think that Jesus always wanted his followers to eagerly look forward to his Second Coming. He taught them to pray fervently, "Your kingdom come." When receiving Communion, we anticipate fellowshiping with Jesus in person at his Coming. Revelation has been a book of encouragement to the Church through the ages. When we close our eyes at death, our next conscious moment will be in His presence forevermore. Jesus' own brother described our life on earth as a morning mist that quickly passes away (James 4:14). Jesus said, "I am coming soon." Let me echo John's response, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus."



The Vine *Growing Together in Christ*



STAFF BOX

John Siston	Editor
Mary Terry	Associate Editor
Dennis Pelley	Pastoral Advisor
You!	Contributions

Send articles or other contributions to
John Siston: john@travelgallery.com
or Mary Terry: 1508 W. Huntington Dr.
Alhambra, CA 91801 (626) 308-2961
mistyt92536@yahoo.com

New Hope Happenings

Thanksgiving Dinner in the Park.

Thanksgiving Day 8 teens, 3 children, and 5 adults from New Hope Christian Fellowship showed up to serve at Union Station's annual Thanksgiving Dinner at Central Park in Pasadena, CA. Our group helped set up beverages for the event with smiles.



(From left: Ian Lacy, David Leon, Drew Houston, Mark and Daniel Leon, & Mark Houston)

Bad Weather Shelter

Members from New Hope Fellowship served approximately 45 homeless guests at the Bad Weather Shelter November 30 at Pasadena Covenant Church. The shelter is weather activated and the guests were able to enjoy a warm meal and refuge from the cold and rain on this opening night.



(Setting up cots) Photos by Christine Leon



(Cora Grassmann fires up the pasta)

Reclamation Retreat

November 10th was the day of the third Reclamation Retreat. It was held in the Monrovia Canyon Park Convention Center in the Monrovia foothills.

Reclamation is the term we use to describe evangelism to friends and family who no longer attend church. The peaceful setting and relaxed atmosphere provided a nice opportunity for the participants to devote their time and energies to the work of reclamation.

We discussed "reclaiming the reclaimers" which refers to devoting time to think about our own personal journey into the Worldwide Church of God. What were the circumstances of our becoming members of the church? What was going on in our lives or the lives of our parents when we came in? How did we receive the changes that took place in the church over a decade ago? What thoughts and emotions did they elicit?

For some, these questions and those like them were not considered with much depth. It is only now, years later, that some begin to think about what their experiences all meant. The more people can understand the circumstances in their own lives, the better equipped they will be to help others in their journey as well.

The retreat also focused on evaluating approaches to reaching out to former members. - By John Siston

Christmas

Christmas, Truth, Christ and the Mile-Long Buffet of Worldviews

The mile-long buffet of worldviews that I have in mind is the shelves of books at Barnes & Noble. But before I explain why that is relevant, first consider Jesus' statement about why he was born, which he made when he was about to be executed.

Since Hebrews 2:14 says that the divine Son of God was born with a human nature so that "through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death," it is not surprising that in the hour of his death he would speak about his reason for being born. Pilate is questioning him about his kingship, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth."

There are layers of meaning in the phrase bear witness. It includes 1) speaking the truth of God as no man ever spoke; 2) being the truth of God in his person; 3) dying to establish the truth about God; and 4) sending us as the Father sent him to bear witness to the truth, both in speaking and dying.

1. *Speaking the Truth*

First, Jesus was born to speak the truth about God as no man ever spoke. For example, he said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). That is one of the most important truths in the universe: Jesus, the historical man, is the pre-existent God. Not only does he say he existed before Abraham (two thousand years before he was born), but he also called himself "I am," the name God had given himself in Exodus 3:14.

Then to make plain the significance of God becoming man, Jesus bore witness to the great work of salvation he would do. "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 my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28).



"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

2. *Being the Truth*

Second, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Paul said, "the truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21), and "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in him (Colossians 2:3). This is why he was born—not only to speak the truth about God, but to embody the truth about God. We never know the truth aright when we do not know and love the Jesus Christ himself.

3. *Dying to Establish the Truth*

Third, not only was the Son of God born to bear witness to the truth by speaking the truth and being the truth, but also by dying to establish the truth. The Greek word for witness (*martus*) became the word for martyr because dying for what you stand for is the ultimate witness to it. So in Revelation, Jesus is called "The Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Revelation 3:14).

This witness is thought of in terms of his death, resurrection, and reign as King of kings. For example, look at the sequence in Revelation 1:4-5, "Grace to you and peace from . . .

Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth" (Revelation 1:4-5). Notice the order: first, death (faithful witness), then resurrection (firstborn from the dead), then rule over all kings. He was born to witness to truth in the greatness of the achievement of his death.

4. *Sending Us to Witness to the Truth*

Finally, he was born to bear witness to the truth, not just in the thirty-three years of his life on earth, but in all the time on earth till he comes again. That he is why he says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). The church is called "a pillar and buttress of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The message we bring to the

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Truth



The Birth Story

I was born in a Navy hospital in Pensacola, Florida. No one knew I was breech until the wrong end of me presented itself to the doctor. Fortunately I didn't take too long coming out and there were no complications. I did earn the affectionate nickname of "Frog legs" for the first few days of my life.

Everyone has a birth story. Children delight in hearing about their births, and mothers love telling the details of how their babies came into the world. A birth is a miracle and often brings tears to the eyes of those who witness it.

Most births quickly fade from memory, but one will never be forgotten, even into eternity. It was ordinary from outside appearances, but its significance was felt around the world and continues to affect the lives of people everywhere.

This birth story is retold every year, to the point it's become cliché in some circles and scorned in others. But it was the most important one in history and needs to be told often. Perhaps a slightly different perspective can keep it fresh.

When Jesus was born, he became Emmanuel, God with us. Up until this point, God was "with us" only in specific ways and with certain people. He showed His presence in the pillar of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

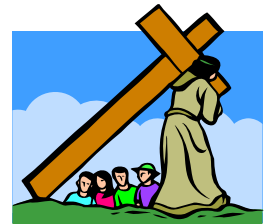
He was with Moses in the burning bush and with Joshua when the walls of Jericho fell down. But he wasn't really with us. His birth as a human made him touchable, gave him eyes, ears and a mouth. He talked to us, listened to us, laughed with us and touched us. He became more real to us than he had ever been. And he knew what it was like to cry and feel pain. Through his suffering and sorrow, he understood our suffering and sorrow.

He was with us and he was one of us. By becoming one of us, Jesus answered the timeless lament: no one understands me. Hebrews 4:15 says he is a high priest who can

sympathize with us because he went through all the temptations facing every one in every age. As The Message puts it, "We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality." He has walked the proverbial mile in our shoes.

A common misperception is that God lives in an ivory tower, far away and far above us. While this could be seen as the case in Old Testament times, there is now no basis for believing this. Jesus lived in a body just like ours. He identifies with the human condition and we can identify with him. God with us is still with us. When he died, we died, and when he rose, we rose. Because he lives, we live. And because he started out as a baby, he knows us, understands us and loves us anyway.

The birth of Jesus was more than the account of one more human born into this world. It was God's way of showing how much he loves us. -By Tammy Tkach



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world is called "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Ephesians 1:13). And when judgment comes, the condemned will be those who "did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:12).

So when Noël and I went to Barnes & Noble on Monday to buy a birthday present, I had my usual coldwater bath of awareness that there are thousands of voices competing to be heard by the world. Miles, it seems, of shelves with every imaginable worldview, all clamoring for the mind and the heart (and many other parts of the human body and soul). The God Delusion, You on a Diet, Jim Cramer's Mad Money: Watch TV Get Rich, He-motions: Even Strong Men Struggle; The Machines of War—a tidal wave of titles.

So as we walked out, I said to Noël—as a kind of Christmas resolution—that makes me want to work around the clock for the rest of my life to spread the truth. Jesus was born for this. "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth." Let's join him in it.

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Christmas



Why December 25?

It's very tough for us North Americans to imagine Mary and Joseph trudging to Bethlehem in anything but, as Christina Rossetti memorably described it, "the bleak mid-winter," surrounded by "snow on snow on snow." To us, Christmas and December are inseparable. But for the first three centuries of Christianity, Christmas wasn't in December—or on the calendar anywhere.

If observed at all, the celebration of Christ's birth was usually lumped in with Epiphany (January 6), one of the church's earliest established feasts. Some church leaders even opposed the idea of a birth celebration. Origen (c.185-c.254) preached that it would be wrong to honor Christ in the same way Pharaoh & Herod were honored. Birthdays were for pagan gods.



Not all of Origen's contemporaries agreed that Christ's birthday shouldn't be celebrated, and some began to speculate on the date (actual records were apparently long lost). Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) favored May 20 but noted that others had argued for April 18, April 19, and May 28.

Hippolytus (c.170-c.236) championed January 2, November 17, November 20, and March 25 all had backers as well. A Latin treatise written around 243 pegged March 21, because that was believed to be the date on which God created the sun. Polycarp (c.69-c.155) had followed the same line of reasoning to conclude that Christ's birth and baptism most likely occurred on Wednesday, because the sun was created on the fourth day.

The eventual choice of December 25, made perhaps as early as 273, reflects a convergence of Origen's concern about pagan gods and the church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun. December 25 already hosted two other related festivals: *natalis solis invicti* (the Roman "birth of the unconquered sun"), and the birthday of Mithras, the Iranian "Sun of Righteousness" whose worship was



popular with Roman soldiers. The winter solstice, another celebration of the sun, fell just a few days earlier. Seeing that pagans were already exalting deities with some parallels to the true deity, church leaders decided to commandeer the date and introduce a new festival.

Western Christians first celebrated Christmas on December 25 in 336, after Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the empire's favored religion. Eastern churches, however, held on to January 6 as the date for Christ's birth and his baptism. Most easterners eventually adopted December 25, celebrating Christ's birth on the earlier date and his baptism on the latter, but the Armenian church celebrates his birth on January 6. Incidentally, the Western church does celebrate Epiphany on January 6, but as the arrival date of the Magi rather than as the date of Christ's baptism.



Another wrinkle was added in the sixteenth century when Pope Gregory devised a new calendar, which was unevenly adopted. The Eastern Orthodox and some Protestants retained the Julian calendar, which meant they celebrated Christmas 13 days later than their Gregorian counterparts. Most—but not all—of the Christian world now agrees on the Gregorian calendar & the December 25 date.

The pagan origins of the Christmas date, as well as pagan origins for many Christmas customs (gift-giving and merrymaking from Roman ; greenery, lights, and charity from the Roman New Year; Yule logs and various foods from Teutonic feasts), have always fueled arguments against the holiday. "It's just paganism wrapped with a Christian bow," naysayers argue.

But while kowtowing to worldliness must always be a concern for Christians, the church has generally viewed efforts to reshape culture—including holidays—positively. As a theologian asserted in 320, "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of him who made it." -By Elesa Coffman
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2000/dec08.html>



Christmas

Theology in Tune

Take a look at the carols you sing this season—you'll find a nice primer on Christology. For starters, name these tunes:

- "God of God, and Light of Light begotten, Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb; Very God, begotten, not created"
- "King of kings, yet born of Mary, As of old on earth He stood, Lord of lords, in human vesture, In the body and the blood"
- "Jesus is our childhood's pattern, Day by day like us He grew; He was little, weak, and helpless, Tears and smiles like us he knew"
- "O that birth forever blessed, When the Virgin, full of grace, By the Holy Ghost conceiving, Bare the Savior of our race"
- "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail th'incarnate Deity"

For most of us, Christmas carols evoke warm memories, but the concepts they communicate were refined in often fiery debates. On December 7, 430, one man's views on "th'incarnate Deity" earned him a condemnation from Cyril, archbishop of Alexandria. He was later deposed and exiled by the emperor following the Council of Ephesus. But just how heretical Nestorius's views really were is open to some debate.

During the fourth century, two rival concepts of the Incarnation arose. The school of thought centered in Alexandria focused on Christ's divinity; the school centered in Antioch, Nestorius's home base, emphasized Christ's humanity. The Alexandrian side lobbed a heresy into play when the venerable bishop Apollinarius (c. 310-c. 392) suggested Jesus's human mind and will were completely subsumed by his divinity. This idea was refuted

by the Council of Constantinople in 381.



The Antiochene camp produced its own heresy a few decades later when Nestorius, an outspoken and abrasive preacher, began a sermon attack against the term Theotokos ("God-bearer") as a designation for Mary. His lay audience thought he meant Jesus was just a man; theologians believed he was suggesting that Christ had two natures and two wills, or was in fact two coexisting persons (one

human, one divine). The two-person theory became known as Nestorianism.

But is that what Nestorius really intended to say? Probably not. His attack on Theotokos arose from a fear that the term overemphasized Christ's divinity (the Apollinarian heresy), not from a desire to deny that divinity.

Cyril and others defended the title, at least in part, because devotion to the Virgin Mary was already on the rise, and because an assault on the term was in some ways an assault on the many respected theologians who used it.

But for his whole life, Nestorius was convinced his beliefs were perfectly orthodox. Though he does seem a bit fuzzy on precisely how Christ's natures blended together, he was most likely a victim of his own strident, unguarded language—the use of which had earned him the nickname "Firebrand."

- Carol quiz answers:
- O Come, All Ye Faithful;
- Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence;
- Once in Royal David's City; Of the Father's Love Begotten (yes, a few were a little on the obscure side);
- Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

-By Elesha Coffman

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<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/christmas/carol.html>



Book / CD Review

St. Augustine's Confessions

You know how much I stress the importance of reading truly great books. The problem is that great works of literature—especially those that are centuries old—can be intimidating. What you need is someone to guide you through the classics and make them more approachable.

That is why I am telling you about the "Great Books Audio CD" series by my friend Dr. Ken Boa. In the audios, Ken analyzes and discusses from a Christian perspective the classic works that have helped shape Western civilization.

This month, he introduces listeners to the Confessions of St. Augustine. The Confessions were written at the end of the fourth century a few years after Augustine became bishop of Hippo in what is now Tunisia. In style and format the 13 books of the Confessions most resemble an autobiography or memoir.

But they are unlike any autobiography written before or since. One of the things that sets them apart is Augustine's purpose in writing them: Unlike other writers who use the genre to justify their lives and actions, Augustine, if anything, is doing the opposite. As Boa tells us, Augustine confesses three things in the Confessions: his own sin; the truth of his faith; and the greatness of the living God.

Whereas other writers, including some Christians, who gloss over or omit the most embarrassing parts of their lives, Augustine does not spare himself. Not out of a desire for exposure, but as a way to emphasize God's mercy and grace. After cataloguing the sins of his youth, he cries out, "Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart—which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit."

Interjections like that one are a characteristic feature of the Confessions. As Boa says, Augustine's account is a life in miniature of the human experience—a tale



about our moving away from God and God's wooing us back. The enormity of what God had done in Augustine's life was as vivid to him when he was writing as when he was converted, maybe even more so.

Augustine confesses the truth of his faith by tracing his own spiritual journey—a journey that sounds remarkably modern. He describes his disillusionment with Manicheism, whose Gnostic elements have modern counterparts. And he describes how St. Ambrose helped persuade him of the reasonableness of Christian faith. It is clear that Augustine became a Christian not because of the way it made him feel—but because he believed that it was true.

If the Confessions were only a personal story, it would still be a must-read. But it is much more. Most scholars, both Christian and secular, rank Confessions as one of the classics in the Western literary tradition. And Augustine himself was the single most critical influence in shaping the civilization in which we live.

Given Augustine's impact and Ken Boa's skill in bringing Augustine to life, it is time for you to make Augustine's acquaintance. Reading him profoundly influenced me and my growth in Christ. So I heartily recommend to you that you subscribe to Ken Boa's "Great Books Audio CD" series. You can do so by visiting our website, www.BreakPoint.org © <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=449> December 3, 2007 ©

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Let's make Bethlehem a living truth-spreading organism. And remember: We know no truth aright, if we do not know and love Christ himself as the ground of it and the goal of it and the way it looks in true life. So we exist to spread a passion for Christ, not just ideas about Christ. That's more, not less.

He was born to bear witness to the truth. Let's resolve this Christmas that we will live for this.

Devoted to spreading the Truth, with you. - By John Piper.
<http://www.christianity.com/Home/Christian%20Living%20Features/11560485/> © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org John Piper