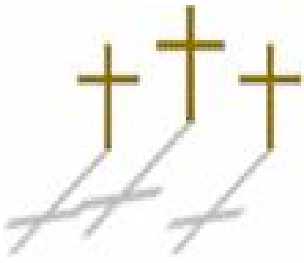




Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
1055 Williams Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201

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Merry Christmas!

May God grant you a peaceful, joyful Christmas centered on His Gift to us!





From the Pastor's Desk

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (1 Corinthians 9:19)

Here we are in Advent – the celebration of the incarnation, when God became man and entered into our world with us. I have been preaching through 1 Corinthians since September, and it seems to me that there is an inherent connection between Paul's words in ch. 9 and the incarnation of our Lord.

I have come to the conviction that there is a certain danger for us as evangelicals. It has to do with our definitions. I'm not talking about our theology or our doctrine per se, but rather how we put our theology into practice in our lives. At the heart of it is the question, "What are we trusting in for our righteousness?"

Like it or not, we as evangelicals live within a certain sub-culture. In many respects that is inevitable. After all, the church is God's distinct covenant community, and as Christians we are challenged to not be conformed to the pattern of this world. But the question is, are there certain elements of conformity to our evangelical sub-culture that are really extra-biblical, and do we define our standing with God not by biblical parameters but by what we have come to believe is required within that culture?

When we reflect on Jesus' life and ministry in the Gospels, we find that the religious leaders of Jesus' day were scandalized by Jesus' association with the likes of those he ministered to. He was often castigated for not abiding by the definitions of the religious culture. Think of the woman who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, or Zacchaeus whom Jesus led to repentance. Yet Jesus does not consider their concerns a high priority. In fact, Jesus, in his very advent into this world, like Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9, chose to make himself a servant and associated with us in his incarnation in order to win us to himself.

Interestingly enough, the same problem seemed to be infecting the church from time to time. Paul, the former Pharisee, is the one who saw through it and responded with such intensity as we see in the book of Galatians. In some respects, I believe it was this very issue in part that was at the heart of what he wrote to the Corinthian church in the passage above.

We here at Grace Church seem to do a pretty good job with our doctrine. We are decidedly Reformed, and I believe rightly so. We seem to do a pretty good job with our worship – I think most of us have a good idea of the distinction between man-centered worship and God-centered worship. I believe we do a pretty good job at our nurture and edification; after all we seem to be fairly knowledgeable about theological things. But our weak link has to do with our outreach. I fear we are intimidated by the prospect of engaging outside our cultural confines. "Those people out there are unbelievers and have an unbiblical worldview."

Of course they have an unbiblical worldview; they are not Christians! What do we expect? So what should we do? Are we afraid that if we take the time to learn their language, that if we cross the corridor to engage with them, that we might in some way compromise our faith, and thus our own commitment to Christ becomes suspect? Doesn't it then boil down to where we really believe our standing with God is to be found? Do we say we believe that Christ and Christ alone is our righteousness, or does our adherence to certain definitions of an evangelical sub-culture somehow play a part?

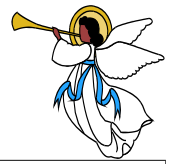
It is advent. It is the season when we celebrate Christ's association with us. May 2012 be the year when God will take us with the strengths that are ours and turn us loose in our community with his grace and for his glory.

Pastor Tom Bridgman





GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Operation Christmas Child

Thank you to all who contributed in various ways (as packers, carriers, greeters, record keepers, cookie makers, etc.) to our operation as a Relay Center for the Operation Christmas Child ministry this year. A total of 1159 shoe boxes came through our doors on their way to over children around the world. Please pray that these gifts would serve as “gospel opportunities” for these children and their families.



Women of Grace

The December meeting of the Women of Grace fellowship will be **Saturday, December 10th**, from **10 a.m.- 1:00 p.m.** at the church. We are using *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World*, as we seek to become more effective ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Women of all ages are invited to join us for an encouraging time of spiritual nurture, discussion, prayer, and fellowship over lunch.



Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men of the church are invited to join together for discussion, prayer and fellowship on **Saturday morning, December 17th, from 7-8:30 a.m.** at the church. Light refreshments will be served.



Christmas Joy: A Gathering for Women

Charleen Bridgman is hosting a Christmas Joy party at her home (1053 Williams St., Pittsfield) on **Friday, December 9th, from 7:00-9:00 p.m.** The evening will include light refreshments, Christmas music and carols, a read-through of the Christmas narrative, and a gift exchange (for details on this please speak to Charleen at 499-3040). Guests are also asked to share the joy by bringing a non-perishable food item that will be donated to a local food pantry. Feel free to bring a friend and **RSVP by Tuesday evening, December 6th**, at 499-3040. Hope to see you there!



Christmas Eve

On **Saturday, December 24th**, at **7:00 p.m.** we will have our annual **Christmas Eve service**. Please come for an evening of Scripture, carols, and special music. Invite a friend or neighbor for this special time of celebration of the true meaning of Christmas.



Condescension

by Ralph Brown, 1962

Amidst the season's joy and mirth
We remember the Messiah's birth
And ponder why He came.

From heav'n into a world of sin
To give us lasting peace within
Our Lord and Savior came.

From Father's home and loving heart
Becoming man in fullest part
The Son Incarnate came.

Leaving His throne and jeweled gate
Born as a babe in humble state
The King eternal came.

From the dwelling of eternal light
To rid the world of sin's dark blight
The light of life so came.

Leaving a realm of endless day
To die a death that sinners may
Forever live—the Lord Christ came.

From heav'n the place of peace and life
To show a world sore torn with strife
God's peace—Immanuel came.

He left it all, nor self did please
So why can't I forsake some ease
To tell men why He came?

Christmas Cheer

The Christmas holidays can be a lonely time for many people. Take the time to look around and see who could use some encouragement and company at this time of year. There are many things we can do to spread some joy and show the love of Christ: send a card, make a phone call, bake some cookies, make a meal, invite for tea or coffee, invite for dinner, shovel a sidewalk. Pray for opportunities, and act on them, in the name of Christ.



Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those



Missions Corner



News from Eve

“As we prepare for our traditional celebrations, let us remember those who will not be looking forward to this festival. Let us remember too how [our Savior] identified with the oppressed and the homeless. Let the joy of the festival touch more of the people of our world this year than ever before. May God be glorified and may people of good will once again experience His peace.”

-Denzil John, engineer & passenger on the Titanic

Of all the Thanksgivings I have celebrated so far, I believe this one in Russia was most full of the real meaning of this holiday. My Muslim friends invited me to celebrate my holiday with them in their home, and made it the most thank-focused Thanksgiving one could hope for. They asked how we pray, and we got to talking about how we each thank our Lord, and about the Books that are most important to us. I pray that this day opened us each up more for good, deep conversations in the future.

In less than a month, Lord willing, I head down to the Caucasus to study and learn down there for three months! A coworker about my age has offered to share her flat with me, so I am very thankful to get to spend time with someone from my future home.

May you be richly filled with His peace in this time to all celebrate together the coming of the Prince of Peace!

Love,

-Aâà

Go to this site to see some pictures from other, glorious days in this beautiful country:

http://vkontakte.ru/photo18003059_273088848

From Generation to Generation: A Report on the family of Ralph and Polly Brown

submitted by Margaret Barbour

From the beginning Grace Church began supporting missionary ministries. One of our Covenant signers was the sister of Ralph Brown who with his wife Polly were missionaries in Pakistan for many years. Recently Ralph and Polly were in the area and gave us an update on how their children are serving the Lord:

Ed, with his wife Susanna is the director of Care of Creation, a Christian environmental organization with projects in Kenya and Tanzania. They have a website- [Care of Creation.org](http://CareofCreation.org)

Stanley is the Project Director of an orchard development project in Kazakhstan under IDEAS (International Development and Education Associates). His wife Tami is an area coordinator under IDEAS for the Middle East and Central Asia.

Tom is professor of Optics at the University of Rochester, teaching, mentoring students and doing research. His wife Terry is a social worker.

Marilyn, with husband Cliff lives in Cambridge, MA and works as a nurse in the Health Department of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She blogs at “Communicating Across Boundaries.”

Dan, with wife Carol, is in transition from his position as Pastor in South Hadley, MA to moving overseas to head up a new “Institute for the Study of Religion in the Middle East” (ISRME).

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.

Psalm 103:17,18



December 2011



S M T W T F S

				1 7:00 Addictions Victorious	2	3
4 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	5	6	7	8 7:00 Addictions Victorious	9	10 Women of Grace 10am-1 pm
11 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	12	13	14	15 7:00 Addictions Victorious	16	17 Men's Prayer Fellowship 7:00-8:30 a.m.
18 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	19	20	21	22 7:00 Addictions Victorious	23	24 Christmas Eve Service 7:00 p.m.
25 10:45 Worship Christmas Day	26 	27	28	29 7:00 Addictions Victorious	30	31 New Year's Eve

Learning & Arriving: The Heart of Man

Doug Rose

King David wrote and sang of the heart of man: of its depths of depravity, of its hope of holiness, and of its longing for the LORD. In Psalm 51 – written by David as a confessional lament over his affair with Bathsheba and his vicarious murder of her husband, Uriah – David thrice visits the topic of the sinful heart. In v.6, David first notes that it is God alone who has disclosed to mankind the hidden truths of divine righteousness¹:

*Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*

David longs for the grace to repent and be forgiven, but then moves in v.10 from a prayer for pardon to a prayer of sanctification²:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

David was no stranger, however, to the corruption of the heart. In 1 Sam. 17, when the Israelite army was facing the siege of the Philistines in the Valley of Elah, a teenaged David visited the camp and was rebuked by his eldest brother, Eliab, for the prurient interest David showed about the potentially bloody combat:

Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, "Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle." 1 Samuel 17:28-29.

Scripture records that even from David's youth his heart, as is each of our hearts, was inclined to corruption and evil.

David acknowledged his brokenness and the evil of his heart. In v.17, he humbly confesses:

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

When a man is brought to the genuine fear of God and consequent self-loathing, he must in utter helplessness cast himself on divine mercy for salvation³. Only an empty heart can and will be filled by the Holy Spirit.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust; 2009), p.269.

² *Id.*, p.271.

³ *Id.*, p.273.

