

# FIREFLIES IN THE NIGHT

During the season of Pentecost we celebrate the birth and growth of God's church. Paul calls the church "the body of Christ on earth," because it was through the church that the Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. It all began shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, when Peter preached to the Jews in Jerusalem and over three thousand of them came to faith and were baptized in the Name of Christ Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit, these new believers went out into Judah, Samaria and, ultimately, to the ends of the earth, bringing the light of the Gospel to millions of people who were living in darkness. In doing so, they changed the world.

Now we need to be clear on one thing: the primary goal of the church is NOT to change the world—at least not in the sense of trying to engineer a more perfect and just society. That's a common misunderstanding about the church that needs to be corrected. Jesus created and commissioned His church to build His kingdom IN this world, but He made it clear that His kingdom was not part OF this world. His kingdom and the Kingdom of this World are mutually exclusive and they are irreconcilable. The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom where God reigns through the Gospel—a kingdom where sins are forgiven and we love each other in truth and action. The kingdom of this world is a kingdom where Caesar reigns through the Law—a kingdom where sins are retained and punished and we compete with each other for worldly things. In the kingdom of heaven, our sins are washed away; in the kingdom of this world, our sins are judged and punished.

When the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts at our baptism, our spirits cross over from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of heaven. Our eternal citizenship is no longer in this world—we become citizens of heaven. But we leave part of us behind—the part we call our sinful flesh or our "old man": he remains entrapped in this world—at least until death releases us from his grasp. And while we are here, our task as spiritual beings is to function as light-bearers from the kingdom of heaven—to carry the light of Christ out into the darkened kingdom of this world—just like the Apostles did—so that

the prisoners of that kingdom will see the light and be drawn to it and so be saved. So we must always keep in mind that the primary job of light-bearers is to bear light into the darkness. The darkness can neither comprehend nor understand the light which the light-bearers bring, but it cannot keep it from shining. Like lightning bugs on a dark summer night, the light bearers can't turn the night into day, but they can keep shining and they can light up the night just a little bit.

Maybe more than a little. A book by Alvin Schmidt, entitled *Under the Influence*, documents the light the Christian church has introduced into the world since its birth in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. To give one simple example, hospitals were first invented by Christians. The intellectual Greeks and practical Romans had no hospitals. There was, you might say, a pagan void. Hospitals were first introduced in the fourth century by Christians who were motivated by Christ's words: "*I was sick and you looked after me.*" For centuries, hospitals were built and supported only by Christian charity, but most of them now have become dependent on secular support from private and governmental sources. Still, when you look at the names of hospitals today, the evidence of their Christian roots is still plentiful: St. Luke's, St. Vincent Charity's, Lutheran Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian, and so forth.

And despite the criticism and acrimony the Church has drawn from some feminists, no institution in history has done as much to advance the dignity and freedom of women as the church has. Jesus welcomed women among his disciples—including women of questionable character—and conversed with them in public—a thing unheard of in the society of that time. He also taught them theology, which no pagan culture had ever done. On the day of His resurrection, he appeared first to women and He entrusted the good news to them to take to the rest of his disciples. Women were the first evangelists. The early church catechized, baptized and admitted women to the Lord's Supper. It didn't elevate women by demonizing men or engaging in sexual politics, but simply by loving them and including them as fellow citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

In fact, our hallowed idea of the equality of all human beings before God came from the early Christians. Paul had written: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all*

*one in Christ Jesus.*” Inspired by Paul’s words, the early church welcomed everyone into its fold, regardless of race, sex or ethnicity. The Apostles were Jews and the first church, the Jerusalem church, was a church of Jews for Jesus. St. Augustine, probably the greatest theologian the Christian church has ever known (except, of course, for Martin Luther!) was from Africa and was probably black. Thomas de Montesquieu, the French philosopher and jurist who was Thomas Jefferson’s source for much of what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, was a devout Christian.

As a side note, the later socialist and communist movements redefined “equality” in a way Christ never did: as economic equality with the state as the enforcing authority. Thus, communism has been called a Christian heresy.

The separation of Church and State is a profoundly Christian concept. Jesus simply said, *“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s”* That ended the conversation he was having then and it ought to end the one that goes on now. Having said that, the American guarantee of religious freedom which is encoded into the First Amendment of our Constitution was not put there to prevent people *from* expressing their religious beliefs, but to protect their right *to* express their religious beliefs. The idea was to encourage religious expression, not prohibit it. It is, after all, called the “free exercise” clause.

The Christian church was the primary force in ending slavery. Paul told Philemon to receive Onesimus, his runaway slave, *“...no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother.”* Paul also said that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. Many early Christians granted slaves full church membership and freed thousands of slaves. The first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine, outlawed the sale of children to be raised as slaves, and another emperor, Justinian, repealed laws that prevented freeing slaves. Slavery was virtually extinct in Christian Europe by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, and after it was reintroduced into the West, Christian abolitionists like John Newton, William Wilberforce and John Brown, were key figures in ending the slave trade in the British Empire and slavery in America.

Contrary to popular thought, Christianity made the rise of modern science possible. Alfred North Whitehead, who was a non-Christian philosopher of science, wrote that without Christianity's "insistence on the rationality of God," there would be no modern science. Luther's advocacy of the "priesthood of all believers" did a great deal to free the scientific mind from subservience to a professional priesthood, and helped unleash the empirical spirit that inspired men like Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, Louis Pasteur and even Galilei Galileo. Sir Isaac Newton, the inventor of classical physics, was a devout Christian whose vision of an ordered, rational universe derived from his Biblical faith. Only in the post-enlightenment, and now postmodern age, have people begun to subscribe to the false idea that Christianity and science are somehow at odds. There is no dispute between Christianity and sound science, for as Paul wrote, "*...our God is a God of order and not of disorder.*"

The idea of all men being equal under the law comes originally from Moses. Old Testament Israel was a nation of laws—moral laws, civil laws, and laws of worship. When Nathan confronted David with his sins in the affair with Bathsheba, David didn't invoke his rights as a king and order him out of his presence: he confessed his sins and repented. When we say that "we are a nation of laws," we have the Sinai Covenant to thank for it.

And so Christian light-bearers have helped enlighten a world which was plunged into darkness by sin. Our primary mission, once again, is not to build heaven on earth by making this world perfect. Jesus promised us that by following Him, we would *overcome* this world, not perfect it. As long as the Prince of this World is allowed to wield considerable power, we are not going to build utopia. But like fireflies in the night, Christians can't help but illumine the darkness a little when they let their light shine, and that is yet another way that God calls people out of the darkness into His marvelous light.

When I was a kid, there was a popular song sung by the Mills Brothers called "Glow Little Glow Worm." I couldn't help thinking about it this week because some of the words in the song seemed to apply to what I've been talking about in this sermon. So I thought I'd close with one line in the song that pretty well describes our job as

Christians in a darkened world: *“When ya gotta glow, ya gotta glow,  
so glow little glow worm, glow!”*

Amen