

# ichth<sup>+</sup>us

a student journal of Christian thought and expression at Harvard College



## Noel

CHRISTMAS 2020

# Note from the Editor

A cultural observer in 2020 gets a front-row seat to the fragility of everything made by human hands. When things fall apart, and fault lines are revealed, we are naturally drawn to the things that don't crumble. As time seems to stop, we get a chance to think about the end of times. Two Christian observers, Jeremiah and Augustine, had the same vantage point, separated by a thousand years, as they watched their own civilizations crumble. As Rome decayed and fell in front of him, Augustine is said to have observed:

God does not raise up citadels of stone and marble for us; outside of this world he raises up citadels of the Holy Spirit for us, citadels of love which could never collapse, which will for ever stand in glory when this world has been reduced to ashes.

There are plenty of witnesses to record the problems with today's broken world. Like Jeremiah and Augustine, we too lament the deficiencies of our present reality. But as Christians, we are uniquely able to view this chaos in expectation of an everlasting peace. This is especially so in the season of Advent, a time the Church sets aside to look ahead to a future more stable than any kingdom. At Christ's birth, God's unchanging plan intersected with our fragile reality. Leading up to Christmas, we wait in anticipation of the "citadels of love," which are waiting for God's faithful. When it is so easy to dwell in the hardships of the present, we hope our writing proclaims, in the spirit of the apostle John, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:21)

Bryce McDonald  
Editor-in-Chief  
The Harvard Ichthus

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Lauren Spohn

# Man's Medley



I wasn't looking for George Herbert when I found him in the basement of a used book store two blocks down from the Eagle and Child. I was, predictably for an Inklings devotee, looking for C.S. Lewis. It was a gray, rainy afternoon in Oxford, and I was on the hunt for a copy of *The Great Divorce* to give as a Christmas present to a friend. I ducked into the dusty two-story shop, shaking the rain from my hair. Like every other Oxford bookstop except Blackwell's and the Bodleian Library, Lewis was nowhere to be found.

"Ah, Lewis and Tolkien sell like hotcakes here," the clerk told me. His eyes twinkled behind tortoise shell hipster glasses. He looked like a quintessentially British hybrid of Uncle Diggory and John Lennon. I sighed. I suppose it's nice to know the old mythmakers' magic still hangs around this place, despite the inconvenience. I headed downstairs. Rockstar Uncle Diggory was right—no Lewis and no Tolkien, not even in the religion section.

A half-second before I turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of a slim black spine with neon lettering, its title cracked in half by years of use. *George Herbert, Selected by W.H. Auden, Penguin's Poet to Poet Series*. I remembered Herbert's name through a hazy English mist. Did someone mention him at an *Ichthus* meeting last fall? Or was it the pastor at

the YouTube Easter service this spring? Was Herbert even the Christian poet I was thinking of, or was it Gerard Manley Hopkins? Six months of coronavirus quarantine, and memories start running together like watercolors. I shrugged and plucked the volume off the shelf.

*Heark, how the birds do sing*

*And woods do ring.*

*All creatures have their joy: and man hath his.*

*Yet if we rightly measure,*

*Man's joy and pleasure*

*Rather hereafter, then in present, is.*

George Herbert was born in Wales in 1593. At age sixteen, he enrolled in Trinity College, Cambridge, with the idea of becoming a priest. Time and chance had different plans. A few years into his studies, he was appointed the University's Public Orator and caught the king's attention with his rhetorical skill. James I whisked Herbert away to Parliament, where he wordsmithed for dueling politicians until the king's death in 1625. Abandoning his secular ambitions, Herbert retired to a church ten miles south of Stonehenge, where he served local parishioners until his own death by consumption in 1633. It was there that he wrote the poetry I found in

the basement of the Oxford book shop 387 years later.

*To this life things of sense*

*Make their pretence:*

*In th' other Angels have a right by birth:*

*Man ties them both alone,*

*And makes them one,*

*With th' one hand touching heavn'n, with the other earth.*

Reading Herbert's story in 2020, I find it hard not to relate. His life took a drastically different course from anything he could have expected. He went into university with a plan and had to watch, all but helpless, as circumstances threw that plan outside the window—and threw the man who wanted to be a priest into the lion's den of secular striving. An orator and poet, he lived a life of the mind and died of a disease of the body. He might have expected to nurture his parishioners' souls into old age. Instead, he passed away at age thirty-three. Herbert is a witness to the split every person must straddle between intention and action, mind and body. In his poetry and in his life, he struggled with this paradox of being a creature made from both spirit and flesh—"Man's Medley," as he calls it in the *Penguin* collection. What does it mean to be human, the one creature in all creation who ties together both heaven and earth, alone?

*In soul he mounts and flies*

*In flesh he dies.*

*He weares a stufte whose thread is coarse and round,*

*But trimmed with curious lace,*

*And should take place*

*After the trimming, not the stufte and ground.*

Before I read Herbert, and certainly before I lived through the coronavirus pandemic, I thought man's medley was simply a Christian interpretation of the Cartesian split between mind and body. In my thinking, "spirit" covered *res cogitans*: everything invisible, intellectual, heavenly, and eternal. "Flesh," on the other hand, covered *res extensa*: everything tangible, earthly, physical, and temporary. I layered the contrast with sensory impressions I borrowed from Books II and III *Paradise Lost*; the red-black bogs Satan tramps through on his journey from Hell to Earth, and the airy white light that blinds us when Milton tries to peak into Heaven.

In us, the fallen humans, these forces of spirit and flesh war against each other with the intensity St. Paul describes in Galatians 4. But they find perfect unification in the person of Christ, the Godhead made human, born of the Lord's Spirit and a woman's body 2,020 years ago. And this same incarnate God, who sanctified our flesh even as he gave us a new Spirit, promises to clothe us in new bodies when he remakes the new Heavens and new Earth. Until that day, I thought,

the task of all men caught in the mind-body medley is to discipline our flesh, like St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, until it submits to the will of our spirit.

*Not that he may not here  
Taste of the cheer,  
But as birds drink, and straight lift up their  
head,  
So he must sip and think  
Of better drink  
He may attain to, after he is dead.*

This dichotomy I sketched between mind and matter captures an important piece of the truth. But it was only after 2020 that I realized how easily this simple picture lulled me into a false sense of control. Even as I believed Augustine's confession that man can do nothing apart from God, I still envisioned the "flesh"—that part of me still stuck in this world—as something *mostly* under my own power. In hindsight, this thought makes sense. It's easy to believe we can put our mind over our matter if by "matter" we only mean our bodies. If "the flesh" is simply our baser instincts, our greed and selfishness, our physical desires, it's something we can easily tell ourselves we can rein in with puritanical discipline. I might need God's help in exercising that discipline, and I might need his grace when I fail, but so long as the scope of "the flesh" is limited to my own body, it feels like something that falls within my ju-

isdiction. Indeed, one of the longstanding myths of Christian culture, especially in the United States, is that God owes something to the believers who best exercise this ascetic ethic. God owes me social esteem if my actions demonstrate my righteousness, or material prosperity if I sing his praises on Sundays, or good relationships if I abstain from sexual sin. All I have to do is beat my body into upholding its end of the bargain.

But this year has forced me to rethink the scope of "the flesh." The coronavirus pandemic—and the economic, social, and political fallout that has come from our attempts to contain it—has forced everyone to think outside ourselves. The virus is both a personal and a global threat; it jeopardizes my own body, the bodies of everyone around me, and the national and international body politic. Now—as we see in lockdown laws and social restrictions and regulations around wearing masks and using hand sanitizer—what we do with our own flesh has consequences far outside ourselves. And what happens to our own flesh depends to a startling degree on what everyone else decides to do with theirs.

The pandemic, in an important way, has been a crisis of control. How much of my own health is in the hands of my roommates, my neighbors, the people I sit next to in the subway, the people an ocean away who break quarantine rules and cause a Covid-19 outbreak that causes my governor to impose travel restrictions that keep me from seeing

my family at Christmas? How much of a say do I have over where I study this afternoon, where I work for the next six months, how I start a career or support a family? Who gets to decide whether I contract coronavirus, consumption, or a cold?

*But as his joys are double;*

*So is his trouble.*

*He hath two winters, other things but one:*

*Both frosts and thoughts do nip,*

*And bite his lip;*

*And he of all things fears two deaths alone.*

Suddenly my flesh isn't the only thing that seems temporary and intractable. It's also the circumstances outside my control—circumstances that shape my day-to-day life and mold the ideas, priorities, plans, and actions that determine who I'll be in the future. How much control do I really have over who that person will be? Being human is not just about wrestling with our fleshly desires, trying to bend our character into a holy shape. It's also about wrestling with just how little power we have over whatever shape that character takes—how much of our projects, personalities, and relationships we owe to contingencies. A king might whisk us to Parliament, or a pandemic might lock us in our homes, and the way that we serve God and love others is going to change as a result. If we really are a creature caught between heaven and earth, we have to come to peace with the fact that

we don't get the final say in anything—and even if we did, would it really be “our say” if it were the circumstances outside our power that made it such?

*Yet ev'n the greatest griefs*

*May be reliefs,*

*Could he but take them right, and in their ways.*

*Happie is he, whose heart*

*Hath found the art*

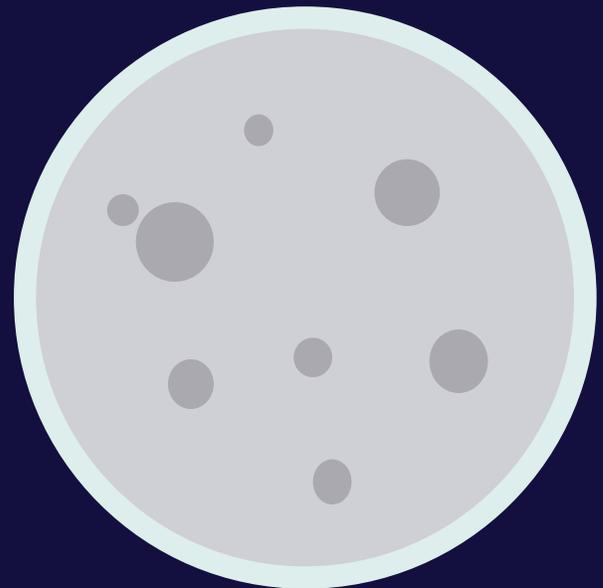
*To turn his double pains to double praise.*

It's sobering to realize how far the scope of “the flesh” extends beyond our control. We don't simply live in a fickle, rebellious, obstreperous body; we live in a fickle, rebellious, obstreperous world. We are caught in swells of grief and trouble, like a sailor on a rickety lifeboat tossed into a storm at sea. Who are we to shout at the waves, demanding they bend to our will as our own hands and feet do?

But in the midst of these griefs, we can take solace where George Herbert found it, in the Savior who commands even the winds and waves. Surely God has shaped the circumstances that shape us, in the midst of Parliaments and pandemics, and surely, he promises peace to those who praise him in the storm. He has prepared in advance the good works for us to do, even if those works take us in directions we cannot now foresee, or even desire. We might say grace makes

room for serendipity in seemingly random circumstances. And if we can learn to take the chaos in its way, as occasion for trust instead of trembling, we can praise God for the rainy days, the double pains, and the chance to find new poets in the basement of old book shops.

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# Acts of Love

My youngest brother, Elie, has a passion for the Axis & Allies board game. He is now the proud owner of four versions—1914, 1941, D-Day, and the 50th anniversary edition—and has been strategizing continually, spread out on our living room table among the miniature plastic biplanes and battleships, ever since his school closed last March. Elie turned eight years old in August, has striking blue eyes and a brand-new gap-toothed smile, and wears his bathing suit or camouflage cargo shorts as pajamas whenever he can get away with it.

When I am away from home, I call Elie once a week to read to him. In the two and a half years since I started college, we've read through *Le Petit Prince*, all five volumes of *La famille aux petits oignons*, and at least four *Le Petit Nicolas* books. He constantly interrupts me to laugh, ask questions, and repeat jokes. He is unabashedly joyful, endlessly curious, and—even when my phone calls pull him away from the Battle for Caen or an alternative-history Italian counteroffensive—always ready to give of himself, resplendent with the indissoluble love of a little boy for the sister who sang him to sleep and still holds his hand when crossing the street.

Elie once admitted to my father that he wishes he were the middle child. He, like me,

is deeply aware of his place in our family of five siblings. If I carry the weight of leading the way, then Elie, trailing six years behind the second-youngest, brings up the rear. He is coddled and doted upon, yes, but he is also our safety net. Often, he reciprocates our affection only because he can sense that we need to give and to receive it. In the face of a disappointing exam score, a fight with our parents, or a difficult breakup, Elie never fails to remind us that we are unconditionally loved.

There have been times in the past eight years when I hugged Elie and, his cheek pressed against my shoulder, hid from him that I was crying. In high school, when I put him to bed, I sometimes lay with him in the dark, holding him like a life raft while he fell asleep playing with my hair. This fall, in a time zone six hours away from home, I called my mother once during a sleepless night and asked her to put Elie on the phone.

“He’s the family comforter,” my mother told me afterwards. “He knows it.”

I wonder whether Elie knew, then, that I needed him. I wonder whether he knows how much he can give of himself, and how much we take. I wonder whether he ever feels that weight on his shoulders.

I once thought that it was possible to love any person in the way that Elie loves me, no matter how much it cost me to do so. I thought that time could not erode the strength of what I felt for someone else—on the surface, perhaps, in my fleeting *feelings*—but not deep down, not at the level of what C.S. Lewis calls the highest love, *agape*, the selfless love of God for humankind.

Two years ago, I wrote a short piece in which I explained such an experience of love:

“I love you,” then, may be terrifying, but it is neither inevitable nor unreachably. It may not necessarily mean “happily ever after,” and the risk of saying those three words simply cannot be avoided, but it should imply a level of commitment that has just begun to brush unconditionality. To me, this means that I recognize in someone else an intrinsic, transcendent sort of humanity, a love that is totally independent of their actions and of my transient emotions. Their existence, irrespective of my relationship to them, brings me immense joy.

I still resonate with this imperfect definition, particularly its emphasis on joy and unconditionality. And yet love, as one of my best friends often reminds me, is not just a noun but a verb, an action—*praxis*. When we “give” love, we really *are* loving, not merely demonstrating an ideal. There is no difference, no veil or degradation, between the idea of love and the act of loving. Love, then, is not made known through a secondary ac-

tion like “recognition”—it is in itself a noun and a verb, self-evident and self-realised. We *feel* and *name* and *know* love only by freely loving.

So how can I love any person in the way that Elie loves me, if I sometimes feel incapable of giving love? If I am so hurt that I feel repulsed, is there really a higher level at which I still love? If, despite my best efforts and intentions, I struggle to appreciate and understand someone else, can I ever say that I love them? If, in time, I feel nothing but indifference for someone I once loved, what did it mean to say that I loved independently of action, time, or circumstance?

My baby brother, my own, human example of *agape*, pushes me gently in the right direction every time he sets down his tanks and soldiers to hug me or say hello on the phone. He is a little boy; the way he loves me is not deliberate or theoretical but spontaneous, often clumsy, and undeniably *real*. He gathers the four of us in the kitchen to dance with him uncontrollably to Christmas music; he (sometimes) patiently helps me set the table; he fiercely defends his team’s honor by racing through our muddy backyard grass and throwing himself on the soccer ball before it crosses the goal line. Elie’s love is deeply incarnate.

This kind of love is made known to every one of us through the perfect, capital “I” Incarnation: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son” (John 3:16). Love it-

self was made living flesh through God's first human breath. It was made known to us through God surprised at the loss of his first tooth, God learning to help his mother set the table, God running on sore, bare feet, God weeping at the death of a close friend and praying quietly in a garden before being betrayed by another. God coming into the world as a wailing, mottled newborn boy covered in blood in a derelict farm building is just as powerful a gift—an *act* of love—as his death at the hands of his own creation.

What we celebrate now, at Christmas, is that Godly love was made human flesh, giving us free and direct access to it. When we love, Christ—love incarnate—acts *in* and *through* and *with* us. When Elie loves me, however imperfectly, however clumsily, however *humanly*, I see Christ.

Realising this two years ago was what prompted me to think that I could love any person in the way that Elie loves me. I tried to channel my relationship with my little brother in all of my relationships. But I fell short. I did not actualize my ideals. I fell out of touch with old friends. I was not always able to give new ones the affirmation that they needed. I said that I loved unconditionally, but I did not always feel or give love. And for a while, I felt guilty. What had gone wrong? I was trying to act *in* and *through* and *with* love incarnate, so why was I not always *enough*?

This guilt is as much my own as it is each

of ours. It is the experience of our tainted nature—the human inclination to search for fulfillment apart from God. If we say that we love, but we do not *act* in love in the time and space that we have been given, then we are deceiving ourselves and failing to pursue the only worthy endeavor in a human life. Confronting this reality requires awareness, courage, and humility. It requires us to come face to face with our own impotence. It requires us to accept the Fall, and to move forward in love with the understanding that we are not and cannot be perfect.

Ever since I began to come to terms with my own imperfection, I have no longer felt guilty. I know that I will fall short. I am not God. God is infinite; I am finite. God is infinite love; I only experience this love in a finite space and time. I will not be able to love just any person in the way that Elie loves me; the love I feel for another will sometimes fade; I may find it impossible to love certain people and easy to love others. But I continue to try, to the best of my ability, to enact the Incarnation. I choose to use words like “unconditional” and “endless” because they are full of beauty and hope and remind me of the world towards which incarnate love guides us. I experience *agape* in human moments that, like the Incarnation, open windows and draw paths to a world beyond space and time where Godly love is the only reality.

If you ever read this, Elie, know that caring for you was the first real window in my life to that world of endless, unconditional Godly love. It is no accident, I think, that Jesus is God's son. And I also want you to know, Elie, that you are only the "family comforter" if you are able to be. You do not ever have to give me anything, even if I need it. Sometimes, someone else will need you more. Sometimes, you will not be able to give at all.

You are, after all, only human.

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## Daniel, Christmas, and the View from the Ground

There's something about the Book of Daniel that I've found both challenging and encouraging in the last few weeks: the way that Daniel presents wisdom. It has forced me to think about what on earth I can do when I feel like all I have is a view from the ground. It is, I think, a Christmas message.

Nothing can keep Daniel down. He is educated in every way, he is fearless in the face of danger, always faithful, elevated politically again and again, able to interpret dreams and writings on the wall. It's about the least relatable thing I've ever heard of. If there's anything that almost all of us can feel right now, it's the feeling of *just not knowing*. Not knowing where we'll be next semester. Not knowing what to believe in. Not knowing if it's worse to expect pain and disappointment or be surprised by it once again. Daniel saw the view from heaven, and I can't see more than a few feet in any direction with my view from the ground.

But there's another Daniel we meet in chapters 7-12. This Daniel may have been able to interpret anything for anyone else, but the fate of his own people leaves him at a loss. The only thing he understands without having it be told to him is the weight of the sin of his people (Dan. 9). But when he sees these heavenly visions, he falls back down to

the dust. Somehow, his legendary wisdom coexists with the fact that he doesn't understand what he wants to most. Yes, Daniel gets to have visions of the end of all things explained to him by Gabriel, but it leaves him saying, "I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it" (Dan. 8:27). It is this distraught, uncomprehending Daniel that is called "most treasured" by God himself. And at the end of his life, he is promised that he will die, despite it all, but that one day he will be lifted up from the grave and shine like the stars of the heavens.

Daniel is called wise and beloved and given promises he never dreamed of because God had been acting even in Babylon, when all promises had seemed to have come to an end. Daniel isn't a story about knowing everything, but about the incredible difficulty of acting faithfully when we understand so little it leaves us feeling sick. That's the kind of world Jesus entered into when he was born two millennia ago. He, like Daniel, would end his life not with an answer but with a tortured question. He, like Daniel, was a descendant of King David who would leave no physical children behind him, even though God had promised him descendants forever. Jesus was born into a life like that so that he would "lead many to righteousness" (Dan.

12:3).

Daniel was promised the heavens (Dan. 12:2-3), and Jesus descended from them, but like us, they lived on the ground. They had to live in occupied territory their whole lives. Because the view from the ground is the best view for seeing how we can be refined and love others better. The view from the ground is where Daniel's visions can actually teach us something. Jesus coming to the earth transforms knowledge from something impenetrable to something that penetrates the depths of who we are. Because knowing him is the kind of knowledge that meets us, here on the ground, that grasps us and gives us hope.

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# Consider the Wild Flowers

At 4pm on the 19th of December, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that London and the Southwest of the UK would be put under a Tier 4 lockdown effective at midnight, shuttering all non-essential shops for the next two weeks. The British Retail Consortium estimated the lockdown would cost high street stores £2 bn.<sup>1</sup>

As I headed out for the last eight shopping hours of 2020, I walked through department stores piled high with stock received earlier that day. With so many of the items winter- and Christmas-specific, I hoped they could be sold online, or put back on racks in January or Q4 2021. However, the only ghost of Christmas' future I could see for them was the landfill or furnace. In 2018, Burberry burned £28.6 million worth of unsold clothes, accessories, and perfume to avoid their goods being sold at a discount which would thereby devalue their luxury brand.<sup>2</sup> I imagined all the clothes in Southampton and Dover warehouses that hadn't even made it onto shelves that will end up discarded, contributing to the 20% of industrial water pollution that is caused by the textile industry.

While I grieve for the absolute lack of stew-

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/20/rishi-sunak-urged-to-match-new-uk-covid-rules-with-more-economic-support>.

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44885983>.

ardship for the environment—and lack of regard for the wellbeing of the people who labor to make us our clothes—I was grateful to have had the chance to purchase some last-minute Christmas gifts. In my family, the journey from childhood to adulthood is signalled when toys are dropped from the Christmas wish-list and replaced by shirts, trousers, and if you're really mature, socks.

Ever since Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves, clothes have been something we *need*. Nehemiah praises God for his provision for the Israelites in the wilderness, when “their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen” (Nehemiah 9:21). Clothes are a powerful means of identity: Jacob tricks his father into thinking he is Esau by wearing Esau's coat, and therefore wins the birthright. And the daughters of kings are often described as dressed in fine purple and gold, symbolising the beautification of Israel and God's bounteous provision.

However, clothes can also cause us unnecessary worry. Jesus speaks to a multitude in Luke 12, “Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these” (Luke 12:27). Increasing awareness that environmental damage is most heavily shouldered by the

Global South and Black, Brown, indigenous and migrant communities within the United States leads us to a deep reckoning with the forces of the modern textile industry, and perhaps capitalism as a whole, that incentivize us to exploit rather than care for Creation. Perhaps I could even go so far as to say that clothing is a visible marking of sin. It seems impossible to justify taking advantage of our global neighbours just to buy our immediate loved ones Christmas gifts at a discount.

Gift-giving is perhaps the most misunderstood of the five love languages, which also include words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, and physical touch. Speaking to a friend of mine recently, she said that giving someone a gift means that they were present with you even when you were not physically together. Her friend loves to give her a packet of Percy Pig sweets whenever they meet together, and she is deeply moved that her friend works hours at a menial supermarket job just so she can give her something with no practical use besides pleasure.

While the moral of *The Grinch* may be that Christmas is about people not gifts, I would say that gifts are a way we can signify love for one another. The Alpha and Omega of the universe, our God of love, becomes visible to us through signs. God shows Godself giving signs of the burning bush, the bread and wine in the Last Supper, or Christ come down. Eastern Orthodox scholar Vladimir Lossky writes that just as the sun is fully pres-

ent in each of its rays, “[God] is wholly present in each ray of His divinity.”<sup>3</sup> Signs are a showing of the love we could not comprehend all at once.

For many of us, it can be difficult to receive if we immediately feel the pressure of repaying. I think about the final scene of the 1946 classic Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, when hordes of money are poured on the table. Who can say if the outpouring was worthy enough to recompense George Bailey for his lifetime of service? Or, who can say if one man's work can be monetised into an entire town's savings? To consider how we can remove our indebtedness to others is an insult to the abundant gifts we have been given. The money in *It's a Wonderful Life* is not a ransom but a sign of recognition and gratitude for Bailey's gifts that the townspeople will never be able to adequately repay. How could we ever begin to repay our parents, siblings or friends for the love they have shown us? It makes even less sense to talk of repaying God.

I think of the lavish excesses that love truly delights in. Mary Magdalene pours her jar of nard over Jesus' feet without measure or care; Jesus gives himself on the cross over and over until the end. So as we prepare to lavishly pour out on our loved ones this Christmas, may we not equate excess with waste and a lack of regard for the common love that binds us all.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1991), 74.

There is a growing movement to connect us to the makers of our clothes. Small businesses have greater supply chain transparency and also invest in their communities. Shopping local minimises transport-caused environmental damage. Underwear and bedding company Bedstraw & Madder uses natural plant dyes that don't poison the water supply around factories. Companies can pay living wages, cut commute times for their workers, and invest in education for their employees' children. Brands can upcycle, or like clothing company One, take their own clothes back to be recycled once customers are done with them. Sustainable practices allow us to be purposeful in giving beautiful, well-made, and ethical gifts. Akojo Market, for example, provides an interface for artisans across Africa to sell their products, giving designers the opportunity to negotiate fair prices and handcraft personalised items for customers around the world. On social media, the zero-waste movement urged people to give digital courses, exercise classes, fresh produce subscriptions, concert tickets, and other experiences as meaningful gifts that don't cost the earth. We can still be lavish in our gift-giving, but I pray that we may also be excessively generous in the care we grant to our neighbors around the world.

One of the first occupations to be blessed in the Old Testament is craftsmen: in Exodus 31, the Lord tells Moses, "I have filled [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God, with under-

standing, with knowledge, and with all kinds of skills to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts." God tells Bezalel to fashion the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of Testimony, the altar, and the woven garments of the priests. Chapter 28 goes into exquisite detail of how Bezalel is to make the priestly garments—the materials, the colours, how the clothes will be tied or fastened, and how to set the precious stones and engravings. The priestly robe is to have pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn alternating sewn on the hem.

The functional purpose of clothes is tied up in their beauty and craftsmanship. This Christmas let us give gifts to the artisans who make gift-giving possible. In the face of the evil and inertia of the textile industry, "rend your heart, not your garments" (Joel 2:13) and maybe then we can redeem clothes from the legacy of sin that first made them necessary.

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# Love and Rules

There is a perpetual debate within the Church over Christians' need to adhere to biblical rules. Overall, we hope to condemn legalism, while not condoning sin. Legalism in the Christian context is to follow the letter of the law, but not its spirit—to love rules more than God or our neighbor. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their legalism, in which they paraded themselves around as righteous, while preying upon the poor in practice: “You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matt. 23:27).

Today many Christians fall into one extreme or the other, when it comes to following the Bible’s rules. But these Christians handpick certain points of church doctrine to emphasize, while neglecting others. By exploring some key biblical passages on the topic of love and rules, I will argue that it is impossible to make sense of either God’s love or His law without the other.

*“If you love me you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)*

Love is the center-point of the Christian faith. In Jesus’ words, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you

have love for one another” (John 13:35). To paraphrase the understanding of the early Church, love is the “way of life, and the haven of promises, and the treasure of faith, and interpreter of the kingdom.”<sup>1</sup>

Love today is often seen as indefinite positive affection for someone else. In this understanding, a parent who sees his child misbehaving might decline to punish the child, to make clear his deep “love.” Likewise, as children of God we might assume God has the same understanding of love. Even as we stray from His commandments, we might tell ourselves (consciously or not): ‘the important thing is that I love Jesus, even though I’m not always good about adhering to His “rules.”’

Jesus made clear that this is an untenable position: when we do not follow His commandments, we are not truly loving Him. To see why this is, we need to refine our understanding of love to better match that of Jesus. A working definition of love is the one presented by St. Thomas Aquinas. For him, to love someone is to will their good.<sup>2</sup> While this may sound like a sterile way to think about something so passionate as love, this definition encompasses all the different uses we have for such a complicated concept.

1 E. A. Wallis Budge, "The Paradise of the Holy Fathers" (Seattle: St. Nectarios Press, 1984), 262-263.

2 <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/to-will-the-good-of-the-other/18268/>.

Another way of saying “will another’s good” is to will their proper end. For humans, we do not always will our “proper end”—what is best for us. That is why we sometimes must encourage friends to align their goals with what is good for them: we love them, so we want their good. But God’s will is always in line with His good. He *is* good. Thus, to love God, to will His good, is to will what He wills.

What *does* God will? We don’t always know. As Blaise Pascal writes, everything we see on earth implies the existence of a “hidden God” who “moderated the way He might be known” so as not to force Himself on unwilling humans. However, the Bible is God’s word given directly to us. To find His will, that is where we should start. Jesus’ incarnation, the “word made flesh” (John 1:14), verifies the authority of God’s word over us. Jesus showed that God’s word and God are one and the same. Jesus never supplanted any of God’s commandments, but grounded their authority in the person of God. Thus God’s will, as far as we can know and act on it, is found in His commandments. So, to love God—to will His good—is nothing more or less than to follow His commandments.

*“For the commandments...are summed up in this word: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Romans 13:9)*

God’s commandments found in the Scrip-

tures often seem dry and burdensome. But Paul argues above that all 613 of the Old Testament’s commandments can be applied in the simple admonition to love your neighbor as yourself.

It might seem like we’ve taken a wrong turn: we started out loving a perfect God, but now we have to love our fellow humans, even the worst of the worst. Yet the Christian philosopher Kierkegaard argues that a more perfect love is not one which has for its object a more perfect being. Rather, perfect love can love even sinners.<sup>3</sup> As we grow in love we will love those whom it is less natural for us to love, whether through distance or imperfection. Love for neighbor (near and far) is a natural consequence of love for God.

The question remains: why did God give all these rules if He could have just told the Israelites to love? Even though it seems that God’s commands changed (or simplified), God’s character never changed. We did. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, God only had one rule: don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Simple enough. Adam and Eve didn’t need any further help because they weren’t tainted by the tendency towards sin that plagues us today. But after the Fall, God gave His people the manual on how to live a holy life: pages and pages of regulation in the Hebrew scriptures. Humans need all those guardrails to keep from sinning. The Fall changed our nature, caus-

<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper, 1962), 76.

ing our moral compass to go off-track.

Then, Jesus simplified things. “Love one another,” He said simply. God’s word incarnate, He modeled for us what love is. In Him, God’s commandments jumped out of the page. He likewise sent a Helper, the Holy Ghost, to restore our moral intuition. All along, love was the point. God’s goal for mankind was relationship with Himself.

*‘If anyone says “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.’ (1 John 4:20)*

As John argues, loving our neighbor is actually foundational for loving God. To love our neighbor is to love what is good in him. That is, to love our neighbor is to love the ways he resembles God. Man is in the image of God. Put another way, humans are sacramental for God, the physical signs of God’s character. Since God is not here, our brother might be the closest to seeing God we can get.

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30)*

Besides loving our neighbor, Jesus’ only other explicit commandment is to love God. Thus, we’ve come full circle: to love God is

to follow His commandments, but to follow His commandments is nothing other than to love God. Even though we’ve made a circle, we have not wasted our time. Growth happens in circles, not straight lines. This circle is a flywheel of spiritual growth, where progress in one part leads into growth in the other, which leads again in turn to the first. To love God is but to be drawn back down to earth to love our fellow humans, who in turn help us practice and strengthen our love for God.

However, one might reject that following commandments is enough to fulfill our duty to love. That is nothing more than the legalism of the Pharisees, whose “love” for God was actually just a cover for their egotism. The key to ensuring that loving God is not just legalistic self-love is sincerity.

Sincerity is the virtue in which our actions align with our ideals. Sincerity is the opposite of legalism, of hypocrisy. We are sincere when we let God’s commandments bore into our innermost being. Sincerity is what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: if we refrain from killing our brother but continue to hate him, we have not surrendered our lives to God’s commandments (Matt. 5:22). Jesus is praising sincerity when he says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

Living a sincere life means that one’s external behavior reflects an internal reality. The sincere person rejoices in the truth—he has

nothing to hide. We can grow in sincerity by scrutinizing our actions in the light of our ideals, and by raising our ideals through the practice of righteous action. Ultimately, sincerity creates a two-way channel for love to bloom into our actions, and for good works to increase our love.

We've seen how the path to love is deeply intertwined with obedience to God's commands. This gives the lie to both legalism and lawlessness. Any attempt to divorce love from obedience has not properly considered Jesus' path to the Cross, when He cried to the Father, "not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Love and obedience to God are united in Christ's perfectly sincere life, as they can be in ours.

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Joseph McDonough

# The Ballad of Ramah

*Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)*

Towards a home and weeping wife,  
my own soul right unstill,  
I came to Ramah wintertide;  
I left the pasture hills.

I found my wife a-kneeling there,  
the empty cradle's side,  
And rocking, rocking naught at all,  
"No more, no more," she cried.

My child, my son, my only one,  
Who from my hands did eat;  
One hundred sons, all done, all gone  
To dust, is Ramah's seed.

No words of comfort passed my lips;  
I had no peace to give,  
For loss destroys what peace we make,  
And we are left to live.

The season passed, but still my hands  
Felt cold along the trip  
Back to the pasture hills as if  
They missed some small, warm grip.

But shortly after I arrived  
A strange thing me befell;  
Some other shepherds circled round,  
They'd this strange tale to tell:

A host of angels flying o'er  
The flocks amid starlight  
Proclaimed all glory be to God  
And peace on earth that night.

And they my friends and honest men,  
I could scarce say they lied,  
But turning to the town I thought,  
An angel would have cried.

With these same thoughts I lay my head  
To rest upon a stone—  
When like to split the stone in two  
I heard a trumpet blow!

I raised my eyes and saw a man  
With meas'ring line in hand  
I asked, "Where to?" And he replied,  
"To where the city stands."

I'd not have recognized it then  
But for the signposts there  
For all about where Ramah was  
A pure light filled the air.

Four walls of fire with seven gates  
Inviting us within,  
On each inscribed this simple line:  
"An End to Suffering."

The man held out the meas'ring line  
And bade me measure round;  
"Good sir," (said I) "I'd surely try,  
If aught could span such grounds!"

"And more than that, it can't be right  
That such a holiness  
Should rest on Ramah, whose sole lot  
Is barren emptiness."

"The length: twelve thousand stadia;  
The width you'd find the same,"  
Supplied the man in terse reply  
And entered through the gate.

We walked along a golden road  
That ran up to the square,  
And there amidst a brilliant light,  
I saw a child, still, fair.

A voice like thunder knocked me down:  
"Behold my son, the Lord  
Of Peace, whose government increases  
O'er all within this world."

"Now seek the things you can't yet see,  
Seek out this paradise;  
For this, for peace on earth I gave  
My son, my sacrifice."

And as if waking from a dream  
The vision fled my sight,  
But 'neath the starry canopy  
Old Ramah seemed alight.

Though loss destroys what peace we make,  
While we are left to live  
Let us e'er praise the Lord above,  
Who his own peace does give.

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# Blood and Straw

Do not speak to me of the beauty of crèche scenes. They are too still. They are too peaceful. And they are all too often tainted by order: by a most pernicious (if also appealing) symmetry. The neat beauty of crèche scenes, however precious, can only tell half of the truth. Do you think the coming of Christ into the world was orderly? Do you think it was peaceful?

I doubt it.

If God meant to make a peaceful, orderly entrance into our world, I doubt She would have chosen to manifest Herself through the brutal, vulnerable mess of birth in a stable. As if that holiest of nights was actually a silent one, like the old hymn suggests! Nonsense. That night was far from silent. But mark me: when I speak of the noise of Noël, I do not speak of the glorious euphony of an angelic choir serenading shepherds, nor do I speak of the adorable *pa-rum-pum-pum-pum* of a little boy drumming. No. When I speak of the noise of Noël, I speak of the violent cacophony of human birth. I speak of God embodying Herself on earth amid a deluge of sounds: the braying of mules; the baa-ing of sheep; the baying of sheepdogs; the moans of a new mother who spills out God and amniotic fluid onto the dirt floor of a Bethlehem stable.

Before she wrapped Him in bands of cloth and laid Him in a manger, the blessed Theotokos mingled her blood with barn-straw and cried out in pain as Christ emerged from her body: *and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen the Word's glory*—the glory as of a mother's first-born emerging in messiness!

Much has been made over the centuries of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Christ; but as for me, I want a devotion to the Placenta of Mary: that holy, ugly mass which dwelt with Christ in the womb and nurtured Him and spilled out with Him. Blessed be that Organ, life-giving and ephemeral! Blessed be the bloody mess of Incarnation! The Eternal Word of the Living God: but now dirty and swaddled and small, yet Sacred all the same—if not more so!

And what can the mess of the Enfleshment teach us?

Remember: “theology” comes from the Greek *theós* (“God”) and *lógos* (“word”). We often expect our theology—our God-words—to be orderly, to be clean, to be complete. We often expect our theology to cast a neatness over reality; to order everything; to make everything make sense; to put all of reality in its right place. Some theologians go so far as to call their God-words *systematic*.

Thomas Aquinas even called his magnum opus the *Summa*—the “Sum Total”—of Theology. Have you ever explored the *Summa*? It is enormous. It is meticulously ordered. It is endlessly detailed. It is about as comprehensive as a philosophical system can be. And yet it is said that, at the end of his life, in a moment of deep prayer, Thomas beheld the glory of God in all its fullness. And it is said that, in response to that revelation, he completely abandoned his work on the *Summa*. Asked to continue writing, he declined, saying: “everything that I have ever written is like straw to me.” And so, paradoxically, the “Sum Total of Theology” remains unfinished to this day.

Poor Thomas. I imagine he would have liked to find all the right God-words, if he could. I imagine he would have liked to organize them perfectly and comprehensively. I imagine he was disappointed to discover that his life’s work was straw. Yet straw is not such a bad thing to be, if only we are honest about its weakness and its limits. What does it matter if our God-words are straw? Jesus Christ is the *Lógos Theoú*. Jesus Christ is the original God-word. It is Jesus Christ who gives any Truth to Scripture. It is Jesus Christ who gives Truth to any word we speak of God. And Jesus Christ first dwelt among us as a swaddled, dirty babe nestled in a bed of straw. Theology is weak. It is inadequate. It is a poor attempt at masking the glorious, complex mess of reality. Yet these facts do not

stop theology from being a manger for the Lord.

You dwell in our words, Christ. You dwell in our minds and in our hearts and in our bodies. But you do not dwell in these places because they are clean or ordered. You do not inhabit our reality because our reality makes sense. It doesn’t. Reality is absurd. Words are not enough. Minds are cluttered. Hearts are impure. Bodies are messy and raw. All of it is straw, and yet Mary spilled You out of herself and nestled You within that straw. Therein is the glory of Christmas, Lord Jesus: You rested there, despite the sounds of animals and the stench of manure: not because any of it was clean or orderly or worthy, but simply because You loved all of it, regardless.

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veritas christo et ecclesiae

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