

and it typically ends with a commission like that found in the twelfth chapter of Romans (vv. 9-18):

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil with evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Such is the way of life that Christian worship is meant

to encourage. We gather together for worship to be reminded of who we are, and we depart better equipped both to love God and to love everyone whom God places alongside us in our lives.

points us away from ourselves and reduces us to wonder over the fact that God is even mindful of our existence.

For many Christians, the central act of worship is the Eucharist or Holy Communion, a time when Christians share bread and wine just as Jesus did with his disciples at the Last Supper. The word *Eucharist* means thanksgiving, and the Eucharist is a feast of thanksgiving recalling the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and making Christ present to us in the bread and wine. The Eucharist is also a symbol of all the good things God gives us: food and drink and friends to share them. It is a symbol of the way in which God feeds us spiritually, physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. The words of the service remind us that all heaven and earth are full of the glory of God and that all creation gives praise to God. In the Eucharist, we are part of something far bigger than ourselves, a foreshadowing of the great feast that will someday take place in heaven. It is a precursor of the time when God's bounty will overflow all bounds and

God's grace will flood the universe.

What experiences of worship do you find most meaningful? What do you think the purpose of worship should be? How important is the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist in your own life?

When we participate in worship, and especially in the Eucharist, we step outside ordinary time for a brief moment to a place where we catch a glimpse of the world as God sees it. When we leave worship to reenter ordinary time, we do so as changed people.

As individuals, we can worship God anywhere and anytime, but corporate worship provides a public rhythm to the Christian life. Worship starts, and it stops. Christian life is a repetitive cycle that moves back and forth constantly between worship and work. These two activities, worship and work, have been likened to spiritual breathing: What we inhale in worship we exhale in our work. The conclusion of corporate worship is, accordingly, a transition to work,

the church is called to be a community of the never-satisfied-until-all-are-satisfied, a community with hope that the power of God's love can remake both our own lives and the shared life of the entire planet.

Worship

It is not always easy to feel the ache of compassion that God wants to place in our hearts. We are often too busy to pay attention to such matters, and sometimes we do not want to hear God's quiet voice reminding us of the world's sorrows. We need to stop and listen; we need to be reminded of who God is and what God desires. Worship helps us in this task. In worship we present ourselves to God and ask God to remold our hearts and minds so that we can better see the world as God sees it, mourn for the world as God mourns for it, and ultimately love the world as God loves it.

Worship involves praise. We praise God as the

Creator, and we praise God for being our Savior. Many Christians talk about praise as something we "give" to God, but the idea of giving worship or praise to God needs to be qualified. While God certainly deserves to be worshiped and sometimes even commands our worship, God does not *need* our worship any more than God *needs* anything else from us. What God asks from us in the way of worship is actually something that meets our own deep needs. In worship, as in so many other aspects of life, our attempt to give something to God results in God's giving much more to us.

Worship reminds us of the structure of the universe and our place in it. In that universe, God is at the center of all that exists. We have graciously been given a place in God's grand miracle of existence, but we are not the center. In corporate worship, surrounded as we are by others, we experience this self-decentering reality of being in God's presence. We are merely one among many others entering the presence of God, and God is the shared focus of everyone. Worship thus

Christ and Culture, the twentieth-century theologian H. Richard Niebuhr describes several options ranging from total separation to an almost complete merging with culture.⁴ Some Christian groups remain separatistic (as, for example, the Amish), while others are more willing to use government access to further Christian ideals. From the perspective of history, both the rise of democracy and the separation of church and state are recent developments. With only two centuries of experience, we still have much to learn concerning Christian citizenship in a democracy, and the church will surely be working on this issue for a long time to come.

Should Christians become involved in politics? If so, in what ways? Is political partisanship always to be avoided? What special concerns should Christians bring to politics?

Meanwhile, Christians need guidance about when, why, and how Christians should enter the political

process. Present realities fall far short of what God intends for humankind and for creation as a whole. The church's role is not to defend things as they are but to speak as honestly as possible about the actual state of the world and then to work for change where change is needed.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann makes the case that genuinely prophetic action on the part of the church—action that calls the kingdom of God into existence in a given society—will almost always spring from sorrow rather than from anger.⁵ What moves us to civic action should be what makes us cry; our aching hearts should direct our concerns as Christians in the public sphere.

The public purpose of the church is prophetic: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the weary, and ask questions about why so many people are poor and naked and weary. The church is called to analyze the world politically, socially, and economically; to question current structures; and to propose new strategies of justice and compassion. In a real sense,

Merely by existing, the church declares God's presence in the world. Because the church takes its cues from God, as opposed to any nation, state, ruler, business, or individual, the church also relativizes all merely human authority. This world belongs to God alone and to no one else.

The church is called to live according to the rules of the kingdom of God, but the church is not that kingdom. The purpose of the church is to be self-conscious about what that kingdom stands for and to model what that kingdom might look like. It is also the calling of the church to invite others to join in the work of God's kingdom. But it is not the church's role to rule.

Ever since the fourth century, when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official state religion, Christian churches have had a complicated relationship with politics and government. Centuries of European history reveal a litany of intrigue between the church and the state. The era of Christendom, when the European Christian church was largely in

control of both the culture and the state (from the fifth century to the seventeenth century), is remembered for its excesses: the Inquisition, the Crusades, and various witch hunts. The adage that power corrupts seems to apply within the church as much as outside it, and it was largely these abuses of power within the church that led to the emergence of the secular state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Long before political power was wrested away from the church, however, numerous Christians had already become convinced that a healthy faith requires separation between church and state. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century made this claim, as did many of the so-called free churches (meaning free from state control) that emerged in the seventeenth century and after. Many of the Europeans who migrated to America were motivated by a desire to organize churches that were free from government control and also free from the corrupting power of governing.

Christians continue to discuss the appropriate relationship between church and state. In his book

Frederick Douglass once contrasted the false faith of slave-making Christianity with the genuine Christianity of Christ, saying that the difference between the two was so large that “to be the friend of one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.” Douglass declared shortly before the Civil War, “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”³

The list of Christian failures is shameful and long, including the many times Christians have killed and mistreated other Christians. Christians sometimes speak glibly about their love for one another, but global realities from Northern Ireland to the Balkans to Rwanda paint a different picture. Noting how frequently Christians are at war with one another, one Christian leader has suggested that a modest first step toward global peace would be for Christians to agree not to kill one another.

Long ago the Hebrew prophet Micah wrote that God

requires three things of every person: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Christians have sometimes equated their own human hopes and desires with the kingdom of God, presuming that God must surely share their values and views. But whenever we assume that God is thoroughly and absolutely on our side, justice can easily be pushed aside, kindness can dissipate, humility can be forgotten, and the church can lose touch with the kingdom it exists to serve. The one sure way to avoid that catastrophe is to remember Micah’s advice.

Is there a tension between justice and kindness? Are both justice and kindness required of peace-makers? How is humility related to the task of working for peace and justice?

The Church and the State

degree. Jesus described the kingdom in his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). It is a way of living in which people trust God, serve others, judge no one, pray for enemies, and refuse to retaliate. It is a way of being human that is welcoming and inclusive.

From the very beginning, the church worked to establish the kingdom of God by extending charity to those in need. In the second century, the church in Rome provided free meals for hundreds of people every day, even though the church was still illegal and faced persecution. Across the centuries and around the globe, the church has frequently exerted a positive influence. Schools have been started, hospitals have been built, the cruelty of rulers has been mitigated, and aid has been given to those who are suffering. Christians have a well-documented history of generosity and compassion.

But while Christians have done much good, a realistic appraisal of the church's record is full of cautionary tales. Paul once said that Christians possess the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:7).

Clay jars are flawed and fragile and easily broken, regardless of what they contain. The church has been entrusted with precious treasure, but sometimes its flaws are very visible.

What is the church's current reputation in the world? Are Christians more well known for doing good or harm? Regardless of whether that reputation is deserved, what can be done to improve it?

Perhaps the saddest and most damning example is the church's historic treatment of Jews. The history of anti-Semitism—replete with murder, torture, rape, persecution, and forced migration—is largely a history of Christian anti-Judaism. Sadly, this anti-Judaism has not been peripheral to the Christian movement, and some of the most well-known and beloved saints of Christian history have been involved.

Another example of the church's failure is Christian complicity in the African slave trade from the 1600s through the 1800s. The ex-slave and abolitionist

you or might you want to be involved? Since a church cannot give equal attention to every problem in society, how does your church determine its priorities?

True compassion is neither blind nor stupid. Hospitable people know that sometimes people will take advantage of them, but they open their arms anyway because they know how much they themselves have received from God and others. The result is self-sustaining. The church becomes a school of mutual hospitality where the opening and reopening of our lives to one another in welcome, forgiveness, repentance, and hope slowly mold us into people of true and genuine compassion.

The Church and the Kingdom of God

The church is composed of people who understand

what God is doing in the world or who have, at least, a hazy glimpse of it. The church is not, of course, the only conduit God has for getting things done in the world. God can work outside the church. What makes the church unique, however, is that its members know something about God's grand plan for the world, and they actively seek to cooperate with that plan.

The goal of the church is to help establish the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom of God was a key theme in much of Jesus' preaching and teaching. That kingdom—which is better translated as the reign of God or the rule of God—exists wherever and whenever God's will is being done, regardless of who is doing it and whether or not it is done with self-conscious awareness.

Unlike the church, the kingdom of God is not something to which a person *belongs*; instead, it is something in which one *participates* to a greater or lesser extent. Whenever justice is honestly sought, or mercy is genuinely offered, or love is truly evident, the kingdom of God is present in some way and to some

conscience, and honesty” to keep our wagons of faith rolling along.¹

When the church practices this kind of mutual hospitality within its ranks, the result is a natural overflowing of hospitality to others. Genuine hospitality is hard to constrain within the boundaries of one’s own community. Hospitable Christians will thus find themselves welcoming others into their midst and forgiving others as well. By contrast, whenever we try to limit our love and concern to those inside the church, those virtues tend to dry up at the spring. The purpose of Christian love is to serve the entire world, not to feather our own already cozy nests of faith to make them more comfortable.

This overflowing love is exemplified in acts both large and small. It is evident in the way church members in the little village of Le Chambon in southern France helped hide their Jewish neighbors when the Nazis took over the town during World War II. Eventually, their actions were discovered, and the pastor and other parishioners were arrested. When

asked why they risked themselves in this way, they replied that they simply had no other option if they wanted to call themselves Christian. It was what their faith required.²

A similar sense of empathy and compassion is evident in less dramatic fashion whenever churches run soup kitchens to feed the hungry, programs to aid single mothers, shelters for the homeless, after-school activities for latchkey kids, halfway homes for people just out of prison, rehab programs for drug addicts, and local health clinics. Because every person is worthy of love, churches reach beyond their congregations to help those around them. And Christians often reach out to the world more broadly, contributing to international aid, famine and disaster relief, medical assistance, educational institutions, and economic development programs.

In what ways does your church display compassion beyond its membership? Are there ministries of compassion your church might develop? In what such ministries are

who try to smooth over all disagreements; people who like contemporary music and people who prefer classical; people who are intellectual and those who are not.

The community of the church is characterized by unity, not unanimity—by our mutual concern for one another, not by our becoming mirror images of one another. We look out for one another. We help one another when help is needed. We make sure no one is left behind as we move ahead. We rejoice with those who are celebrating, and we weep with those who are experiencing loss, grief, and pain. We bear one another's burdens. We use our gifts and talents for the good of all. Just as crucially, we acknowledge how much we ourselves need to be recipients of the help, care, love, and compassion of others.

There is perhaps no better symbol of this mutuality within the Christian community than the practice of foot washing. This ancient ritual of having one's feet washed and washing another's—a ritual that is all too rare in the contemporary church—physically

demonstrates our acceptance of one another and wordlessly acknowledges our own neediness.

What has been your experience of church? Is your church characterized by mutual concern? How have you helped others in your church? How have you been helped? How does your church differentiate between unity and unanimity?

The Church for Others

The church is the place where the story of our personal redemption branches out and intertwines with the stories of other persons seeking redemption on the road toward full salvation. That road cannot be traveled alone. We need to traverse it in a caravan in which we can all share what the writer Anne Lamott calls the “rusty bent old tools [of] friendship, prayer,

being Christian together.

What distinguishes the church from other organizations that bring people together? What is it that defines the church as church? What is the relationship of the church to the rest of the world? What is the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God as Jesus preached it?

The Church as Community

Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage in North Africa, once famously set forth the proposition that there is no salvation outside the church. Even if that is an overstatement, he had a point. From the earliest days of Christianity, fellowship with other followers of Jesus—visible fellowship, physical fellowship, fellowship that acknowledges our total humanity—has been a necessary part of being Christian.

There are many New Testament images of the church, but virtually all of them stress relationships. Christians are called the people of God, citizens of a new city, guests invited to a wedding, the body of Christ. Freelance Christianity is seen as an anomaly. In the early centuries of the Christian movement, a person was considered merely a seeker—not a full Christian—until publicly baptized and welcomed visibly into the community of the church. A commitment to the church was seen as a necessary qualification for being a Christian. Christians belong to a household of faith and are not individual entrepreneurs for God.

The church as community does not require conformity. Christians are not meant to be cookie-cutter copies of one another. The naturally grumpy have a place in the community of the church along with the constitutionally cheery. Every other kind of personality has a place too: people who are spontaneous and people who plan everything in advance; people who are argumentative and people

life.⁶

Perhaps better than any other statement outside the Bible, the prayer of St. Francis lays out the pathway to gracious Christianity. It describes the way of life to which the Holy Spirit calls us and the life for which the Holy Spirit gives us power and strength.

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Being Church

Church is the group name for being Christian. It refers to all the followers of Jesus who have ever lived. This includes people who are Catholic and Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Amish, Lutheran and Methodist, Pentecostal and Baptist, and it includes many people who are not part of any organized denomination at all. This is the church in its largest scope.

More intimately, and just as importantly, church refers to a local gathering of believers, people who know one another face-to-face, people who put up with one another's quirks and foibles, people who genuinely try to love one another despite all their imperfections. The local community of the church is the social context in which Christianity takes living form. Being church is

In the long history of Christianity, perhaps no one has represented the joy of costly discipleship better than Francis of Assisi. Francis lived in the thirteenth century, and his contemporaries called him God's court jester. He exuded love for God and all living things; he personified joy. But Francis was also known for his self-effacing service to others, especially for his love of lepers, the most reviled social outcasts of his day. He had grown up rich but had left his family's wealth behind to become voluntarily poor so that possessions would never interfere with his love for God or his service to others. He so identified with the pain of Jesus that later in life Francis developed what are called the stigmata, bleeding wounds on the hands, feet, and side that parallel the wounds of Christ on the cross.

Do you know anyone like St. Francis? What might it mean to be an instrument for peace in your local situation or in the world? Is it ever appropriate to place one's own needs ahead of the needs of others?

Francis understood the full depth and breadth of the human experience, and because of that he understood the full range of the Spirit's work in the human world. His vision of discipleship was accordingly deep and rich and passionate and life affirming, as captured in the famous prayer that is attributed to him:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred let me sow love,
Where there is injury let me sow pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not seek so much to be
consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in forgiving that we are forgiven,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal

his theological writings spoke of a different kind of dying: Following Jesus requires the death of our self-will. The human will, deformed by sin, is selfish and small and addicted to comfort and ease. We place our desires ahead of the desires and even the genuine needs of others. But if we truly want to be a Christian, said Bonhoeffer, such self-centeredness has to die. He used language that was stark: To be a Christian is to be crucified with Christ. As long as we hold on to our own comforts and place ourselves ahead of others, we are not loving others with the self-giving love that God displays toward us. Saying no to our self-centeredness accompanies saying yes to God's gracious love for us and all people.

Do contemporary North Americans ever face literal death because of saying yes to Jesus?
Does saying yes to God always involve a risk of some kind?

Bonhoeffer described a second death that is required of Christians, the death of vengeance and revenge. He

likened this death to the death of Christ on the cross, saying that "as Christ bears our burdens, so we ought to bear the burdens of our fellow-men." The burden Christ bore on the cross, and the hardest burden any of us will ever have to bear, is the burden of forgiving the sins of others. In his typically straightforward prose, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear."⁴ Saying yes to God's forgiveness of us requires that we also forgive others; the two are inseparable.

Bonhoeffer believed that the end result of this dying to self and dying for others was not what might be expected. Instead of producing gloom or dreariness, the result was "ever increasing joy in the Lord."⁵ Saying no to those things that hinder our relationship with God and that undermine our relationships with others does not diminish us; it enlarges us so we can more fully respond to God's offer of life and can share that life with others. Only through dying to self can we truly live. Only by forgiving others can we experience the joy of our own full forgiveness.

the created order.

The Cost and Joy of Discipleship

In ordinary life, saying yes to one thing often means saying no to something else, and life in the Spirit is no exception. Saying yes to life in the Spirit will sometimes require saying no to certain desires, impulses, familiar routines, or old habits that are a part of our lives.

Saying yes or no is the way life works. When we go to a restaurant and pick one meal from the menu, it means we are not picking all the other items that are available. When we choose to attend one college or accept one job offer, we say no to all the others. When we marry one person, we leave all other suitors behind. Every accomplished musician, athlete, doctor, and artist has spent hours and hours practicing skills and honing them to perfection, and all of that practice

has involved saying no to many other pleasant pursuits. In a similar manner, saying yes to the Spirit means saying no to a variety of other ways of living in the world.

Saying yes or no to the Spirit is, of course, also saying yes or no to Jesus, and that choice is often portrayed as a decision between life and death. In fact, Christians say that being a follower of Jesus in some way requires our own deaths. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it bluntly: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”³

Bonhoeffer knew something about how weighty choices can be. When Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer had the opportunity to leave Germany, but he ultimately decided to stay home and help his fellow Christians respond to the evils of Nazism. A leader of the Christian resistance movement known as the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested and put to death for his involvement in an assassination plot against Hitler.

Bonhoeffer’s choices led to his physical death, but

about the final judgment when God is portrayed as a shepherd sorting out the “sheep,” who have done God’s will on earth, from the “goats,” who have not (Matt. 25:31-46). In this parable, the sheep are defined as those who have given food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and shelter to the homeless and who have visited people who were sick or in prison. The sheep are rewarded with heaven. The goats have done none of these things, and they are told to depart from God’s presence. Once again, spiritual maturity is equated with actions on behalf of others rather than with personal piety. It is also interesting that the sheep seem unaware of having done anything particularly good or spiritual. It appears that living in the Spirit is often a matter of unself-consciously caring for others, helping to preserve life when it is threatened, and reinvigorating life when it is beaten down.

Does every Christian have a special spiritual gift or gifts? Do gifts differ from talents? Can spiritual gifts be abused? What happens if

they are ignored?

The Bible also speaks of more dramatic gifts of the Holy Spirit that are given to specific individuals. These include special abilities such as teaching, preaching, healing, prophesying, the discernment of spirits, and speaking in tongues (see Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-11). These special gifts of the Spirit are to be celebrated and treasured for what they are, but they should not be seen as in any way trumping the more ordinary working of the Spirit. They are intended to extend and deepen the ordinary work of the Spirit in our lives. While they are given to individuals, they are not intended for individualistic use. Instead, the gifts of the Spirit are to build up the entire body of believers and to benefit all people. In fact, it may be more accurate to describe these spiritual gifts as gifts given to the world *through* a person rather than as gifts specifically given *to* a person. The gifts of the Spirit always serve the goals of the Spirit, and the Spirit’s desire is to help everyone become better lovers of God, better lovers of other people, and better caretakers of

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and our responsibility is to practice them daily.

In helping us follow the path laid out by Jesus, the Holy Spirit often guides and encourages us in fairly mundane ways: through strangers who give us the opportunity to treat them as neighbors, through friends who allow us to rejoice with them when something good has happened, through the words of a newspaper article or television program reminding us of responsibilities toward those in poverty, through traffic jams that test our patience, through unexpected kindnesses that give us opportunities to say thanks. By training us through our daily routines, the Spirit prepares us to respond graciously when we encounter new situations that push us outside our zones of comfort.

Who is the most spiritually mature person you know? What seems to motivate that person? How much or little is that person concerned with being perceived as deeply spiritual?

There are no secret marks of maturity in Christian faith. Everything is up front and out in the open. As described by Paul, Christian maturity is measured by the degree to which our lives reflect the fruit of the Spirit, which consists of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Christian maturity is a function of the way we live and the attitudes we exhibit. If we pray all day but treat others with disdain, our prayers are meaningless. If we study the Bible all the time but do not genuinely love our neighbors, our study is for naught. If we profess great love for God but never lift a finger to help others, our supposed love for God is hollow. The famous Orthodox collection of writings on spirituality called the *Philokalia* warns against putting even prayer ahead of concern for one’s neighbor. It says, “Visit the sick, console the distressed, and do not make your longing for prayer a pretext for turning away from anyone who asks for your help; for love is greater than prayer.”²

A similar point is made by Jesus in the story he told

widows or find themselves on their own for some other reason) are often the most vulnerable members of society. Simplicity in living helps us to remember the needs of everyone who is vulnerable and whose grip on life may be precarious.

What does it mean to be a steward of creation? What is our responsibility to the natural world? Should all Christians live simply, or is living simply a special calling meant only for some?

Yielding to the Spirit

The Holy Spirit comes to make us more human, more fully alive, and more energetic. The Spirit makes us more aware of all the truth, goodness, and beauty that exists in the world. And the Spirit also makes us more sensitive to those situations in which life is

currently being diminished by oppression, injustice, or prejudice. Where life is full, the Spirit inspires us to celebrate that fullness; where life is threatened or oppressed, the Spirit calls forth compassion and gives us the power to endure pain and to seek change. People who yield to the Spirit's leading rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and work for change wherever life is under siege.

Some people equate the notion of yielding to the Spirit with simple passivity. They seem to assume that being led by the Spirit necessarily involves less of their own initiative—less thinking, less deciding, less enjoying, less exerting themselves to get things done, and less risk taking. This view presupposes that the relationship between our own activity and the Spirit's work is a zero-sum game in which the only way to have more of one is to have less of the other. But the Holy Spirit comes to enhance our humanity, not to diminish it. Of course, some people identify the work of the Spirit too easily with their own wholly human impulses and intuitions. While the Spirit enhances life,

the short span of a human life, but inevitably, even that will pass to others. We are merely sojourners on this planet, people who have the wonderful opportunity to enjoy the world while we are alive, to share it with others, and to leave it when we die in good shape—better, if possible—for those who come after us.

The role God assigned humanity in relation to nature is that of stewards and caretakers, and our caretaking needs to be truly care-full. Our role is not to force the natural world to serve our desires, and it is certainly not to destroy species or ecosystems at will. Instead, we are called to join with the Spirit in helping the natural world flourish. This responsibility should not be overly simplified or sentimentalized. Nature is complex and often cruel, and human intervention may sometimes be required. But intervention never means running roughshod over the world. Rather, we are called to nurture and protect the world as if it were a precious possession entrusted to us by our dearest friend with the stipulation that the earth's treasures be

used for the benefit of all.

Out of respect for both creation and the Creator, many Christians throughout history have felt called to simplicity in living. We live in a culture that tells us happiness is found in owning things and that the more we own the happier we will be. But instead of deepening our lives or increasing our joy, the rush to accumulate possessions can make us shallow, greedy, and unsatisfied.

Living simply releases us from the tyranny of possessions and helps us appreciate the gift of life itself. It also redirects attention away from the newest fads and gadgets toward the basic necessities of life—food, water, shelter, and clothing—which so many people lack. Living simply on a voluntary basis is a discipline that brings to mind the millions of people who live simply, in poverty and on the brink of starvation, because they have no other choice. The Bible repeatedly identifies two groups of people who often need special assistance: widows and orphans. Today, single women with children (whether they are

rhetoric but also religious poetry. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of life, so the pleasure of existence is itself a gift from God. Indeed, the Spirit is the source of every aspect of who we are: physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional. Nothing that is part of being human is divorced from the Spirit.

This life-giving role of the Spirit is vividly portrayed in the biblical story of Adam and Eve when God, having fashioned the first human body out of the dust of the ground, breathes the breath/spirit of life into that dusty figure and it comes alive (Gen. 2:7). In the book of Ezekiel (chap. 37), we see a similar effect as the scattered bones in a dry valley come rattling back to life as the Spirit blows over them. The book of Job (chap. 34) stresses the life-giving powers of the Spirit by saying that “all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust” if God should ever “take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath” (vv. 14-15).

When have you been most aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life? Have

there been times when the influence of the Spirit has seemed especially evident in your church, community, or world events?

The life-giving work of the Spirit applies not just to humanity but to all creation. If there is life, the Spirit is there. Because the Spirit is everywhere, the famous naturalist John Muir believed that the lowliest lichen on a rock possesses life from God in the same way as the tallest sequoia, the most beautiful elk, or the most intelligent human being. Every living thing possesses at least a tiny puff of God’s enlivening breath; all life is sacred. Muir’s views came close to pantheism, the belief that the world itself is divine. The world is not divine, and it is not to be worshiped, but life in all its many forms is indeed sacred in the sense that life comes from God.

It seems equally valid to say that the entire world belongs to God. Thus, no person or company or nation can really own the forests or the seas, and, most certainly, no one owns the air or the sun. A person may feel in partial control of a small bit of creation during

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The Spirit and Life

God's gracious love for the entire world is nowhere more evident than in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blows through the world as the Spirit pleases without any Christian or churchly limitations. In one of the most famous conversations in the Bible, Jesus tells Nicodemus that, while the effects of the Spirit can be observed, no one ever knows where the Spirit is coming from or where it is going (John 3:8). In a sense, the Spirit is God for everyone.

At the famous Azusa Street Revival of 1906, where the modern Pentecostal movement was born, the work of the Spirit upset the social mores of the day when Africans, Europeans, Hispanics, and Asians all crowded together at the front of the church, praying for one another and seeking the Holy Spirit. Visitors were often shocked by this indiscriminate mixing of

people across the lines of race, but the leaders of the revival saw it as a restoration of the multicultural fellowship of faith that the Holy Spirit had inaugurated long ago on the original day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21).

How are we to understand the surprising and embracing impact of the Holy Spirit? While the Spirit of God remains free and unpredictable, are there any generalizations we can make about the Spirit's work? What does the Spirit have to do with gracious Christianity?

The Spirit of Life

The Holy Spirit plays many roles in the world, but there is no doubt which is most fundamental: The Spirit is the source of life in all its wonderfully varied and diverse forms. The Nicene Creed, written in the fourth century, aptly and succinctly describes the Spirit as "the Lord, the Giver of Life." That is creedal