

Arrival of Love

Kenneth Tanner

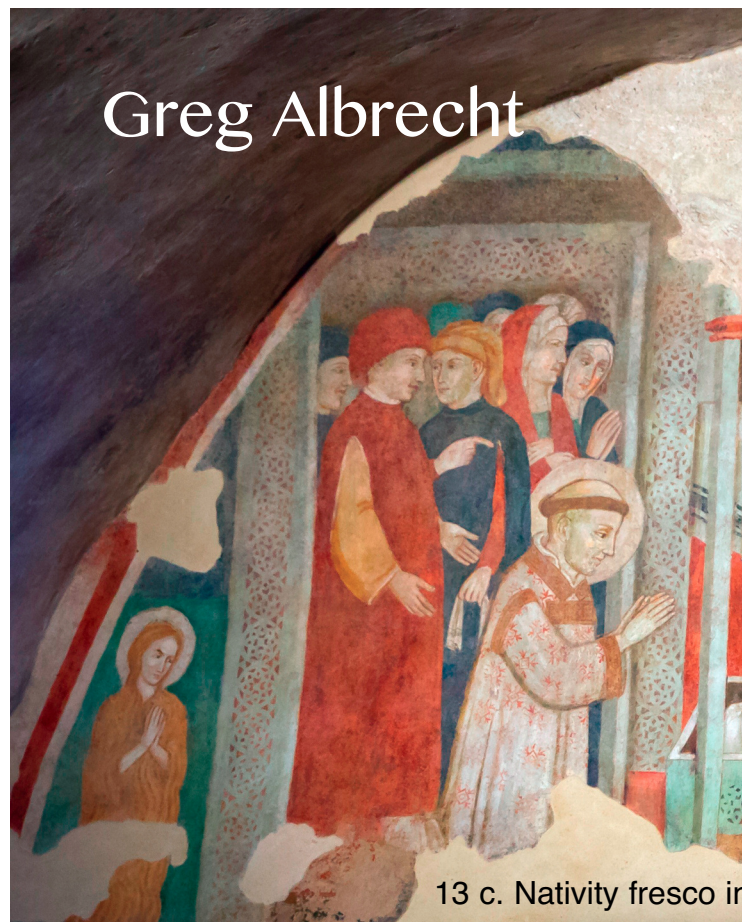
It is a great poverty to imagine that God takes a human body only that he might die. We cannot reduce the Incarnation in this way. If in Jesus Christ the Creator becomes what he makes, then God has bestowed on human flesh unimaginable dignity.

At the heart of this movement down to the creature is an unfathomable (and in human terms, impossible) love. We cannot become what we make. But God decides to become nothing in the universe but human. When the Son takes flesh from Mary, the most intimate connection is made between the divine life and human nature.

God does not become what he does not love. God does not become what he hates. God becomes what he makes and this is a love and a solidarity exceeded only by God's willingness to die also for what he makes. We must come to understand the infinite divine love involved in God becoming human. All theologies that do not marinate in this mystery will distort the Incarnation and the Cross, and will give us a false image of God and a false image of humanity.

The image of God and the image of humanity is the incarnate God, Jesus, nailed to wood. □

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A pastor was invited to give the guest sermon at a town several hours away. He drove up Saturday afternoon, intending to spend the night in a hotel and be rested for the Sunday morning service. Before he checked into his hotel, he noticed some letters he had placed on the front seat of the car. Some were urgent and needed to be mailed.

He had no idea where the post office was since he'd never visited this town before, but on the way to his hotel, he saw a ten-year-old boy riding his bicycle. The pastor stopped his car and asked the boy for directions. After the young boy told him how to get to the post office, the pastor told him that he should invite his parents to the Sunday service, because he would tell everybody how to get to the kingdom of heaven.

The young boy looked at him long and hard, then said, "How can anyone trust your directions to the kingdom of heaven—you don't even know the way to the post office?"

Speaking of directions, here are **four road signs that direct our steps toward the kingdom of heaven.** They won't get you to the post office,

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN



in Greccio, Italy

but they will help you on your journey with Jesus, the King of the kingdom.

1. Grace and peace to you from him who is, who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4).

Jesus is the King of the kingdom. He came as God in the flesh, he remains with us and will return bodily once again. God's kingdom is both present with us now and also a future reality. It is already here—and not yet here in its fullness.

2. I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable

(1 Corinthians 15:50).

The kingdom of heaven is not a physical kingdom. It is not defined by physical dimensions, boundaries and limitations. But

the kingdom is real—it is certainly not pretend or imaginary. The spiritual dimension is far more true and authentic than the physical—of eternal significance rather than passing temporal limitations. By God's grace, we live in the kingdom of heaven now.

The kingdom now is limited, in the sense that it does not exercise universal domain or rule. Not everyone is part of the kingdom of God now. The kingdom now is the very real presence of **eternity now**. But the eternity of God's love that we experience now is an inheritance to be fully given and received in the future.

3. We will receive our full eternal inheritance of God's kingdom in the future.

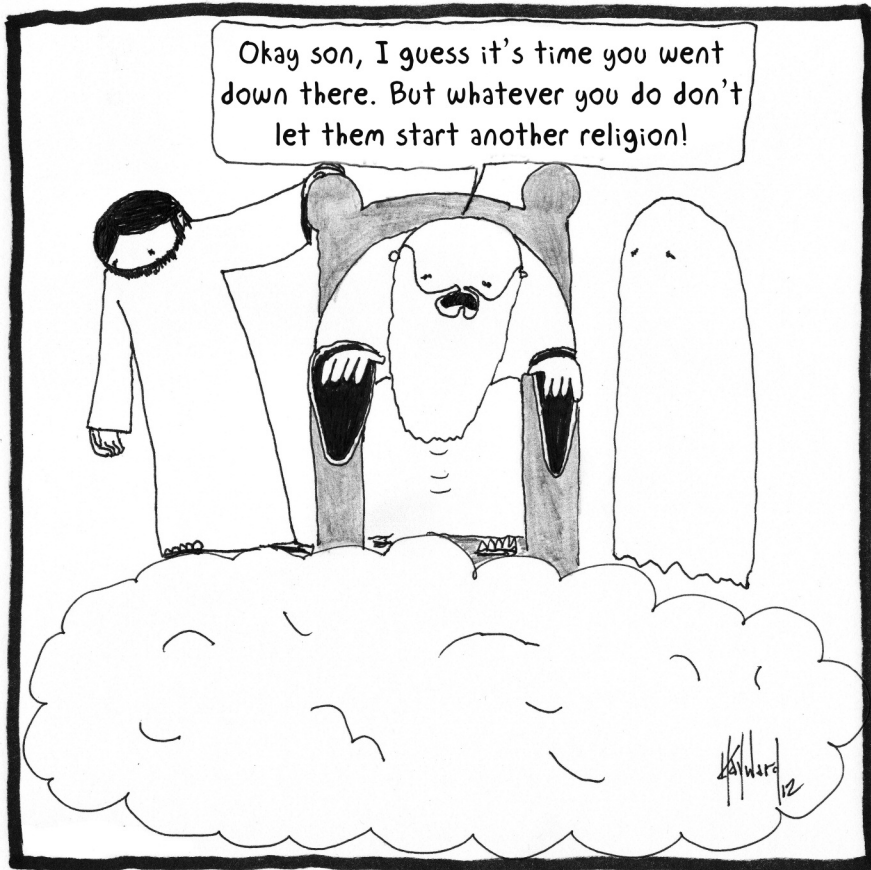
The complete fulfillment of the kingdom, in its totality, is future. We will experience the

future kingdom when we are immortal—when we no longer age, decay or suffer disease and death.

The future kingdom will transform our earthly reality. In its future dimension, the kingdom of heaven will be, as the book of Revelation says, a new order of things—the old order of things will have passed away. The future kingdom of God will be universally present—it will be without limit and encompass the universe.

4. The kingdom of heaven is the presence of God. Jesus is the Prince of peace, and his presence in and with us is the peace and presence of God.

When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), we are inviting the peace and presence of God to progressively



about property: location, location and location. Likewise, Christless religion focuses on what can be seen and observed.

By contrast, God's love transcends the religious emphasis on external conformity.

Christless religion is interested in filling the pews and the chairs, the parking lots and the offering plates. God desires to transform every human being with his love.

Christless religion tells its followers that heaven is compensation—the wages given to those who earn heaven. But the kingdom of heaven is not compensation—it is a gift. We do not gain the kingdom of heaven through our attempts to be righteous. Righteousness is given to us by God's grace.

In Romans 3:21-22, Paul teaches that the righteousness of God is made known apart from the law and its regulations—the righteousness of God has no human origin. Paul says the righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ.

God's righteousness is not demands placed upon his children. God's righteousness is his love, God's gift of himself, his very nature, to all humans who accept his invitation to receive it.

God's righteousness—his love—is not limited to a physical place or particular rituals, ceremonies or creeds. God is present with you wherever you are, regardless of location.

One of the most detailed references to the kingdom of heaven in the Bible is found in the book of Revelation. It describes the new heavens and the new earth, the New Jerusalem which comes down to

and relentlessly unfold on earth as it perfectly reigns in heaven.

I like that word "reign" because it sounds like the refreshing liquid that comes down from above, the gift of rain that enables and fosters life. Without literal *rain*, there is no physical life—without the *reign* of God there is no spiritual life.

Now, having considered our road signs on the kingdom of heaven, let's turn our attention to **four illustrations of God's love** that magnify and illuminate his kingdom.

God is love and his kingdom is the rule and reign of love. The predominant feature of the kingdom and reign of God is love—not just any kind of love—but the love of God.

When we walk toward the kingdom of heaven, we are constantly moving away from

this present evil age, out of darkness into his wonderful light. The many ways in which God's love is declared illuminate our path—**four illustrations of God's love** specifically help us see and observe the kingdom of heaven. These four manifestations put "meat on the bones"—visible traits and hallmarks that help us identify God's kingdom and observe it in action.

1. God's love transcends the religious, obsessive fixation on external deeds.

God's love transforms your heart, not simply your outward compliance to external regulations.

Christless religion is somewhat like that old real estate proverb—when buying a home people are often advised to remember the three most important factors

this earth from heaven. There is no temple in the kingdom of heaven—because *we* are God's temple, where God dwells in the age to come (Revelation 21:22).

2. God's love is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is one way in which God's love is difficult—so difficult that we cannot forgive as he forgives, apart from God's grace.

I recall a story about a little boy who got into a fight with his big brother. Before their mother could separate them, the big brother had inflicted a black eye and bruises all over his younger brother.

For the rest of the day, their mother tried to reconcile her two sons—she tried to get them both to apologize to each other. The big brother was willing—he came out of the fight virtually unscathed. But the little brother was seething—he became more and more bitter as the day went on.

As part of their discipline, both boys were sent to bed early. When the mother went into her youngest son's room to tuck him in and kiss him good night, she asked him, "Why don't you forgive your brother before you go to sleep? You know the Bible says that the sun shouldn't go down while you are still angry."

The young boy still had no intention of forgiving his brother, and that bit about the sun not going down confused him. He thought for a few moments and then responded, "But Mom, how can I keep the sun from going down?"

It's a great question, isn't it? We are no more able to forgive those who God calls us to forgive than we are to stop the approach of night. And that's the very point—

if all we have is our own power to forgive, we will always fall short.

God's love, however, is all about forgiveness. Forgiveness characterizes God's kingdom—both his kingdom now and his future kingdom in all its fullness. When we live in Christ and he lives in us, we are citizens of the kingdom and God's forgiveness fills us.

3. God's love is Christ-centered, not self-centered.

God's love is empathy and compassion. Jesus Christ came to reveal the Father. God's love was seen in Jesus' earthly ministry, filled with empathy and compassion. He embodied and perfectly illustrated the love of God.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3). We see the love of God revealed and demonstrated in the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. *The Son is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15).

In Christ, God provided the ultimate demonstration of his love for us, by laying down his life for us. Philippians 2 talks about the humility of Christ. When he lives his life in us, he enables us to lay aside selfish ambition and vain conceit and truly look at the interests of other people as equal to those of our own.

God's love is not simply being kind to people we like—God's love is universal. So, as Jesus lives his love in us, we become truly caring and giving to all people—whether or not they are particularly likable.

God's love is the opposite of self-centered, self-important and

self-serving humanity. For that reason, it takes a miracle of God's grace for us to be a part of his kingdom.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:12-13).

To be a part of the kingdom of heaven, now and future, we must undergo a foundational transformation. In John 3, Jesus describes it as a spiritual rebirth. When we enter the kingdom of heaven we become, by God's grace, something completely unlike what we were before.

4. God's love is forever.

God's love is unlike so much humanly produced love, here today and gone tomorrow. God's love doesn't depend on flighty, fluctuating and fickle human emotions and desires.

Hebrews 13:8 tells us that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever*. God loves us just as much today as he did yesterday and just as much today as he will tomorrow.

God's love does not depend on how well we measure up—God's love depends on his nature—he is the great, generous, giving and gracious God.

God's love is forever. He will never leave you or me, he will never abandon us. He will never walk out on us. He will always be there.

God's love is always and forever, just like his kingdom. □

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