

Sunday Best

Mention the attributes of God and some people get on their face the look of a Minnesota Lutheran being confronted with a manifestation of tongues. It's all too ethereal for them, too mystical. Yet the qualities of our Sovereign are inextricably woven throughout every day of our lives—and no more so than on Sunday morning.



H O L Y

THE FINALE OF OUR CHRISTMAS MUSICAL ONE YEAR called for people to come from all over the audience, dressed in their workaday clothes, to light a candle from the one large candle onstage. I was taken aback when one older gentleman came up wearing white, paint splattered overalls, for I had never seen him in anything but his fine, Sunday morning suit.

Growing up, we always began preparing for Sunday morning on Saturday. Dad had my brother and I bring out the shoes we would wear, and on newspapers spread over the dining room table or livingroom floor, we'd polish and shine them to a warm gloss. Before bed we took our Saturday night bath, getting all scrubbed up for the next day. And in the morning we rose early (because on Sunday we included devotions with breakfast) then dressed in our white shirts, ties, and sport coats—complete with Sunday School attendance pins on our lapels—and combed every hair into place to look our best for Sunday School and church.

Mom, of course, looked fine in her dress and hat (yes, women wore hats to church in those days), and Dad wore his Sunday suit and fedora. Mom sang in the choir and, as Head Usher in our congregation, Dad always looked his very best escorting people down the aisle to their pews. And anyone who didn't know him would never have guessed that on every other day of the week he too would have been wearing dirty overalls, filthy from the grease pits at the local railroad yard.

C.S. Lewis

To some, God is discoverable everywhere; to others, nowhere. Those who do not find Him on earth are unlikely to find Him in space... But send a saint up in a spaceship and he'll find God in space as he found God on earth.

Exodus 19:10-11

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."



While I was learning to put on my Sunday best to go to church, I was also learning that God would accept me *however* I approached Him. He was a God of grace, mercy, love—a God who did not dwell on a mountain but within my heart, and considered the condition of that heart as more important than my exterior

wrappings.

Yet the message I was left with was that if I had shown up for church wearing my scruffy jeans, with a face still dirty from playing out in the back yard, if Dad had ushered people down the aisle with his face swiped with grease and wearing his grimy overalls, then we would have been showing disrespect for our Lord, for we had it within our means to wash and prepare ourselves for worship.

Leviticus 11:44-45

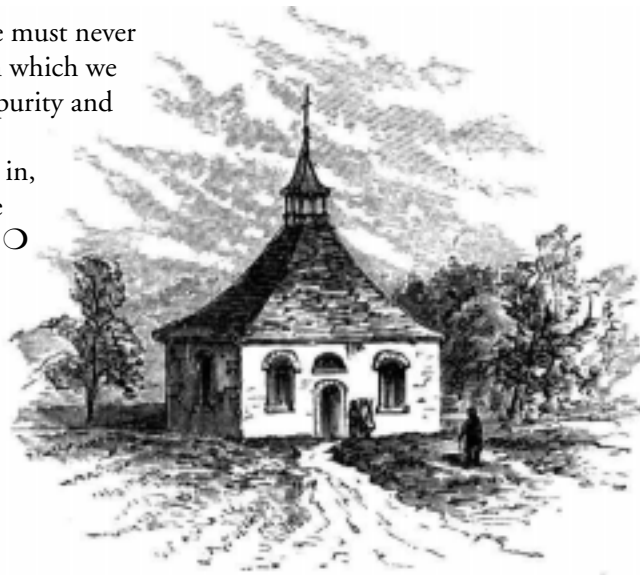
I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.

God doesn't get much respect these days. Either He is ignored by the unbeliever as an irrelevant myth, or is considered by the one in His family to be little more than a chum, or a great benevolent uncle in the sky. Few of us treat Him with the honor and respect He deserves.

The Christian is in possession of several articles of clothing with which he or she is clothed in preparation for meeting God. First, we must put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Without that one, essential article of clothing, we are not even permitted within the sanctuary. The ancient priest had to wash and meticulously dress in the linen purity of his office; we must dress in the blood Christ shed at the cross.

Second, we put on humility and reverence, for we must never forget that He is, indeed, holy—a terrible holiness with which we will never be clothed. To think too lightly of His utter purity and wholeness is to blaspheme His name.

Third, yes, we must cleanse ourselves outside and in, dress our bodies in the very best we have, wash our face and comb our hair, for our God deserves nothing less. ○



*O Thou, to whose all-searching sight
The darkness shineth as the light,
Search, prove my heart; it pants for Thee;
O burst these bonds, and set it free!*

*Wash out its stains, refine its dross,
Nail my affections to the Cross;
Hallow each thought; let all within
Be clean, as Thou, my Lord, art clean!*

*If in this darksome wild I stray,
Be Thou my light, be Thou my Way;
No foes, no violence I fear,
No fraud, while Thou, my God, art near.*

*When rising floods my soul o'erflow,
When sinks my heart in waves of woe,
Jesus, Thy timely aid impart,
And raise my head, and cheer my heart.*

*Saviour, where'er Thy steps I see,
Dauntless, untired, I follow Thee;
O let Thy hand support me still,
And lead me to Thy holy hill!*

*If rough and thorny be the way,
My strength proportion to my day;
Till toil, and grief, and pain shall cease,
Where all is calm, and joy, and peace.*

Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf

T R U T H

GOING THROUGH SOME OF THE BELONGINGS left behind after my aunt passed away recently, I came across piles of 35mm slides dating back to when she taught the Primary Sunday School class in our old church. Here were rows of fresh-faced girls and boys holding up their construction paper creations: something to show their mom and dad, something to show what they learned that morning in Miss Glidden’s class.

Apostle John: 1 John 4:4 NASB

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

Robert Law

Great as is the power of falsehood to captivate and mislead, the convincing power of truth is always, in the end, ‘greater.’ This ‘greater’ is the Christian’s sheet-anchor of hope when he contemplates the power of falsehood in the world.

Paging back through those memories, my mind fills with images of children sitting in miniature chairs formed in small circles around the teacher, next to her the ubiquitous easel and flannel graph, with its fabric characters moved about over cartoon cutouts of Jewish streets and homes, tinny voices singing “Jesus Loves Me” and “Trust and Obey.”

Over the years growing up, my opinion of Sunday School changed with the predictable epochs of childhood and adolescence. The wide-eyed wonder of the innocent little boy eventually evolved into the cynicism of the early teen; in a relatively brief period of time, Sunday School went from a place to learn about Jesus to a place to meet girls.

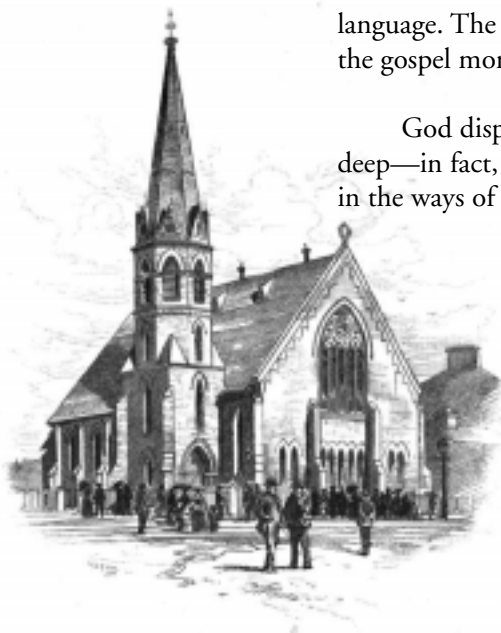
The children in all those faded slides are now parents and grandparents themselves. They’ve sent their own kids to the Primary class, and now their children are sending their own little ones in to sing “Jesus Loves Me” and listen to the flannel graph story. And with the sober reason that comes with time, I now realize that Sunday School was one of the best things in my childhood, for it was there that I learned the truth about God. It was there that I learned the stories by heart, learned about the love and grace of a compassionate God, learned about the sacrifice Jesus made for me.

Sunday School gave me the foundation by which I could grasp the meatier concepts being poured forth from the pulpit in the worship service. Without the fundamentals learned there, the pastor may have well been speaking in a foreign language. The childlike simplicity of the flannel graph prepared me to understand the gospel more fully as an adult.

God dispenses His truth in myriad ways, and the roots of Sunday School run deep—in fact, they run all the way back to Jesus Himself, and His own upbringing in the ways of God.

Luke 2:41-47

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listen-



ing to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

When He grew up, and began His own ministry, Jesus dispensed God’s truth using the same methods that He had learned as a child.

Matthew 21:23

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus’ authority was that He *was* the truth—and the truth is what we are to teach our children. The truth from God’s word, revealed and explained by a caring teacher, is the best foundation we can have for living in a world bent on creating its own. ○

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

I heard of a man who said that he did not like to prejudice his boy, so he would not say anything to him about religion. The devil, however, was quite willing to prejudice the lad, so very early in life he learned to swear, although his father had a foolish and wicked objection to teaching him to pray. If ever you feel it incumbent upon you not to prejudice a piece of ground by sowing good seed in it, you may rest assured that the weeds will not imitate your impartiality. Where the plow does not go and the seed is not sown, the weeds are sure to multiply. And if children are left untrained, all sorts of evil will spring up in their hearts and lives.

W O R T H Y

God gifted three people in our family with singing voices.

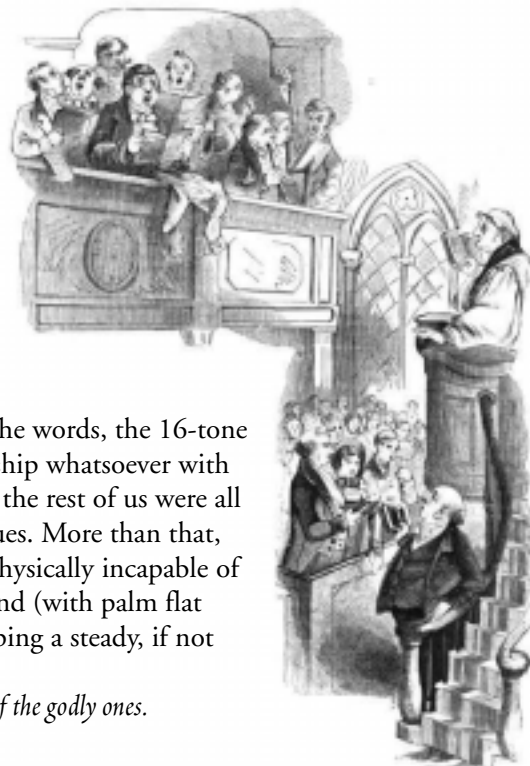
Then there was Dad.

MY MOST POWERFUL RECOLLECTION of childhood worship services in the old Second Street Baptist Temple is of my dad singing hymns. This memory is often my first thought when I observe people today who choose not to participate in the singing of hymns, claiming as their excuse that they haven’t a voice for singing. These people stand silent and solemn like inanimate totems, while everyone around them gives voice to their adoration or testimony.

Praise God in His Sanctuary!

Heaven knows, Dad hadn’t a voice for singing. Save for the words, the 16-tone discordant melodies that sprang from his lips bore no relationship whatsoever with the printed page—or what anyone around him was singing. If the rest of us were all reading notes from the page, Dad was surely speaking in tongues. More than that, Dad had a peculiar *method* of singing—one in which he was physically incapable of keeping his right hand still. From the opening measure, his hand (with palm flat and fingers aligned) would wave in off-rhythm at his side, keeping a steady, if not wholly accurate beat until the final “Amen.”

Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones.



*Sing praise to God who reigns above,
The God of all creation,
The God of power, the God of love,
The God of our salvation;
With healing balm my soul He fills,
And every faithless murmur stills:
To God all praise and glory.*

*What God's almighty pow'r hath made,
His gracious mercy keepeth;
By morning glow or evening shade
His watchful eye ne'er sleepeth;
Within the kingdom of His might,
Lo! all is just and all is right:
To God all praise and glory.*

*The Lord is never far away,
But, through all grief distressing,
An ever-present help and stay,
Our peace, and joy, and blessing;
As with a mother's tender hand,
He leads His own, His chosen band:
To God all praise and glory.*

*Thus, all my toilsome way along,
I sing aloud Thy praises,
That men may hear the grateful song
My voice unwearied raises,
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart,
Both soul and body bear your part:
To God all praise and glory.*

Johann J. Schütz

Back then—back when I was young and pews were made of very hard wood—I was more than a little embarrassed by my dad's singing. At the time, I wished he would respect the difficulty we all had staying on the correct note while his peculiar choice of note blared, full voice, in our ears. I wished he would tone it down a little so that God wouldn't be distracted from hearing our more pleasing, melodious and accurate sounds.

Let the godly ones exult in glory.

Today I realize that, of the two of us, Dad's song was probably the only one making it to heaven, and the one pleasing the heart of our God. You see, while I was concerned about myself, Dad was singing from his heart—from his very soul—and *that's* the sound that is pleasing to God. Maybe Dad realized that there are no excuses for not lifting our voice in praise. No trying circumstance, no disappointment, no peculiar arrangement of vocal chords is reason to deny God His adoration. ○

Psalm 150:1-6

Praise the LORD.
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD!

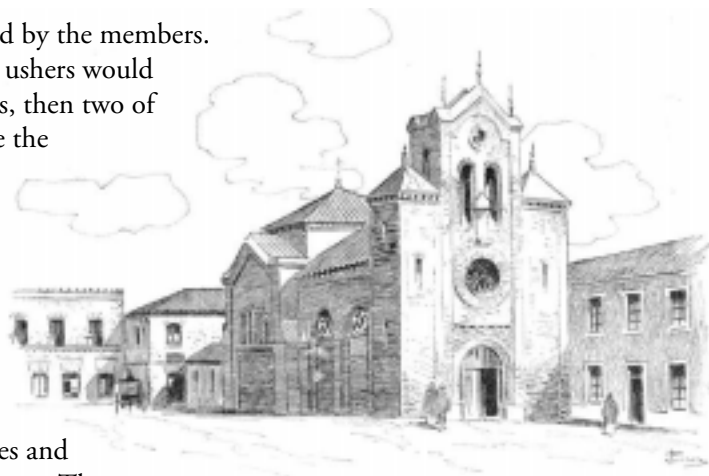
G E N E R O U S

AFTER SAMPLING THE TRADITIONS OF OTHER CONGREGATIONS during my adult years, it is with some regret that I recall the traditions in the church where I grew up regarding the offering. But then, what we did wasn't so different from the practices in a majority of churches today.

There was the obligatory prayer, sometimes by the pastor, sometimes by an usher. As the wooden plates were distributed to each man, the piano or organ would start up the offertory, *Muzak* to serenade the gathering process. The men would silently, solemnly, even stoically work their way down the aisles, from the front of the sanctuary to the back, passing the plates back and forth between themselves. The plates would fill with loose currency and change, but mostly the anonymous

amounts sealed into the small white envelopes used by the members. With the plates filled at the back of the room, the ushers would shuffle the smaller amounts into two or four plates, then two of the ushers would march them back down, to place the gleanings before the pastor and congregation. The one bright spot came next, when we would all sing the “Doxology.”

One can take some comfort at least in the stiff solemnity of those early offering-takings. Today, sadly, in many churches there has been added to the mechanical gathering of funds the tradition of the free-for-all *kaffee klatsch*—a room filled with nattering ninnies swapping recipes and football scores, completely drowning out the offertory. The offering has now been reduced to little more than a noisy intermission—a welcome respite from all that other religious stuff.



Apostle Paul: 2 Cor. 9:7

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

At a local church we visited a few times I was introduced to one of my favorite methods for taking the offering. When it came time in the service for the offering, the pastor would invite the rest of his family to join him down front near the altar. Then, beaming broadly, he would hold his filled-out check high over his head, and say a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the Lord’s generosity. The pastor’s tithe would be the first in the plate, and his jubilant spirit would set the mood for the rest in the congregation as they happily gave back to the Lord.

2 Cor. 8:10-12

And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

It needn’t matter so much what happens publicly, verbally, when a church collects its tithes and offerings. What matters is the condition of each person’s heart. The collection of our tithes and offerings is just another form of our worship; it should be done joyfully, yet earnestly. It should be accompanied by music and praise—not the inane distractions so mistakenly referred to as ‘fellowship.’ In our giving, we are to fellowship with the Lord, not those next to us in the pew. ○

Apostle Paul: 1 Cor. 16:1-2

Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

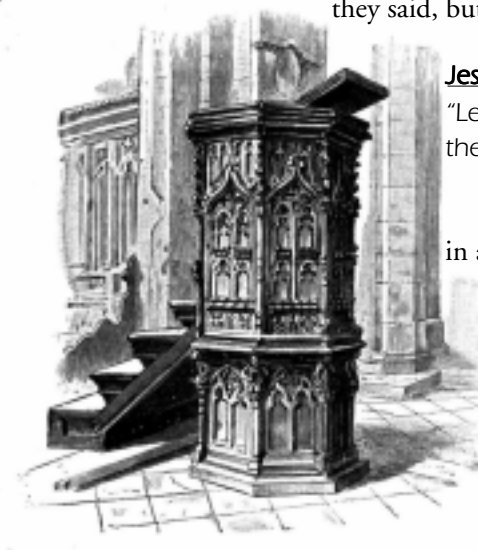


R E L E V A N T

Apostle Paul: 2 Timothy 4:2

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

I DON'T REMEMBER ONE WORD OF ANY SERMON preached to me in that long-ago church building—that majestic edifice filled with comfortable, worn oak and old stained glass. During my childhood in that building now relegated only to memories and faded snapshots, a succession of three different pastors, interims, and various visiting evangelists held sway over my upbringing. I don't remember a word they said, but I do remember *them*.



Jesus Christ: Mark 1:38

“Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

Mom and Dad started me going to church when I was still cradled in a woven basket. The smell of old wood and Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes has papered my lungs since birth. While still young enough to play with Dad's mechanical pencil (always carried inside his suit coat) and be entertained by the string of paper figures crafted by Aunt Norma's painted fingernails—while still too young to understand the words being said, I was being influenced by men behind the pulpit.

Not all were kind men, but all were men of God. All three were great preachers, but only two were great pastors. As those men have faded into memory, it is not their preaching I remember, but their pastoring.

Apostle Paul: Ephes. 3:8-11,20-21

Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

C.H. Spurgeon

The palace of Versailles with its countless representations of battles, sieges, stormings, surprises, and all other forms of wholesale and retail murder, is dedicated, according to an inscription on its front, “To all the glories of France.” One might as well consecrate a slaughterhouse to all the glories of a butcher.

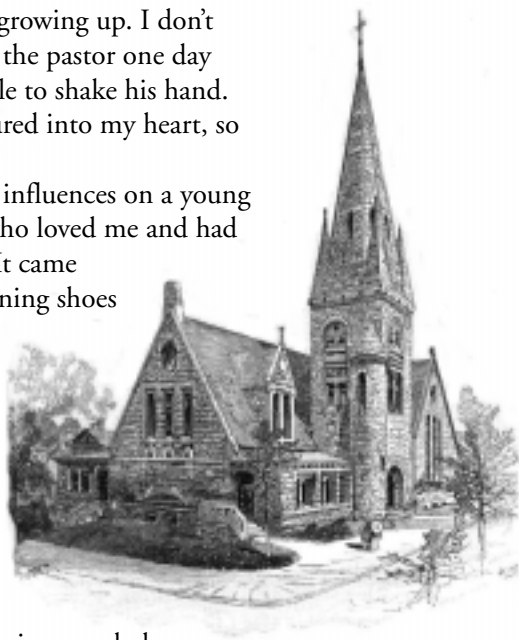
But what a glorious spiritual palace is the church, and how truly is it dedicated to all the glories of the Lord Jesus! Within its walls hang memorials of battles far more worthy of the historian's quill than those of Austerlitz or Wagram; victories are there commemorated which put to the blush all the achievements of Charlemagnes or Napoleon. For the contests are with evil principles, and the conquests are triumphs over iniquity and rebellion. There are no garments rolled in blood; fire and vapor smoke are not there, but rather the efficacy of atonement, the energy of grace, the Omnipotence of the Holy Ghost, the power of eternal love—all these are there, and happy are the eyes that see them. May the life of each one of us contribute a new work of celestial art to those which already represent to angels and heavenly intelligences, “the glories of Christ.”

I don't remember the words of the gospel I heard while growing up. I don't believe there was a simple cause and effect relationship—as if the pastor one day offered the evidence, then, having concurred, I walked the aisle to shake his hand. But, small piece at a time, the gospel of Jesus was steadily poured into my heart, so that at the tender age of eight, I accepted Christ as Savior.

That moment of salvation came about because of many influences on a young life. It came, first, as the result of living with Godly parents who loved me and had dedicated their lives to raising me into the image of the Son. It came because of Sunday morning devotions after breakfast, and shining shoes with my dad. My salvation came about as the result of sitting around patient teachers in Sunday School, with their picture Bibles and flannel graph stories, from standing next to Dad's ear-piercing, earnest singing, as well as listening to the more ear-pleasing sounds from Mom singing in the choir, and singing the "Doxology" over heaped offering plates.

All these influences came together to fashion a life—a *new* life—in Christ, but the pastor seemed to be the point at which they all came together. In that holy, reverent setting of dark-stained wood and old smells, the pastor brought together in an orderly fashion all the pieces of evidence that, when in place, smoothed the way for the supernatural touch of the Holy Spirit.

Without the groundwork laid by family and friends, teachers and pastor, that Spirit call may have been rejected, or misunderstood. But because of the solid groundwork laid, that gentle Spirit needed only the briefest moment to nudge me into the Savior's arms.



And Sovereign God was there throughout, His ineffable qualities woven into the day set aside to worship and learn of Him. ●



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