

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”
Part Thirty-eight
December 27, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This is taking place on Christ’s Sunday which is the celebration of the birth of Christ which is always the Sunday after the four Sundays of Advent as we have celebrate the birth of Christ who came to save His people from their sins. Christ’s Sunday looks at what Christ is doing in the world and the anticipation that Jesus is coming again. Joy to the world the Lord has come and the Lord is coming. It has been secured for us because Jesus has been born into this world which comes from the blessing of His glorious work of redemption. One of the ways as Christians and as the Lord’s church we are able to manifest this glorious triumphant of His birth, life, atoning death, burial, resurrection, ascension and promised return, is to pronounce blessings.

We live in a world that pronounces cursings all the time. Look at the division, chaos, strife, factions and the lack of patience in our country right now. And it seems as though social media has become an instrument just to exacerbate all of it. Having said that God’s people can be different. We can return blessing in place of cursing. We know sin has its own curse and sin needs to be cursed. In fact, sin needs to be mortified but even in the context of that we are able to give the blessing of the love of Christ through us even to our enemies and to one another. The blessing of the love of Christ is manifested in the Bible by the inclusions of what we call invocations of God’s blessings, but also pronouncements of God’s blessings.

At Briarwood at the end of our Sunday morning service we do a pronouncement of God’s blessing after the benediction. Typically it is done when the pastor raises his hands toward the congregation as the congregations put their hands out to the Lord and then the pronouncement of God’s blessing is done. As we do this we are following a long standing tradition and a theological statement. The long standing tradition is that the benediction is not a prayer. A benediction is a good pronouncement of a blessing. In the word benediction, from bene in the Latin we get the word beneficial or benefit and then from the Latin word of diction we get a statement.

The opposite that will be heard at the Judgment that will send men and women to a Christ-less eternity in a place called hell is called a malediction. We also see Jesus in the New Testament giving malediction to the religious hypocrites, and those who would destroy the lives of others, particularly children’s lives. For instance, this was done by teaching them false things. Maledictions are statements of cursings so our Lord gives these as well, but the benediction is a statement of blessing.

In the early church the pastor would go around to every member, lay hands on them and give an appropriate blessing usually including a Bible verse. As the church grew it was harder to do that for every individual so the pastors would adopt the rabbinical postures of “touching” people by placing their hands in the air toward them. The invocation would be something like “Come Lord Jesus by the power of the Spirit” for the people as the palms are facing up and the benediction is the declaration of the blessing of God falling upon people thus the palms are facing out toward the people. Then the Biblical passage is given. Then for the people to affirm their faith in Christ for His blessings would raise their hands open to receive what was given by the pastor from the Lord to them. Then all would end by saying ‘Amen’ – so be it forever.

I say all of that to let you know my favorite apostolic benediction. There are a number of them I have memorized throughout the years but my favorite one is this; The grace of the Lord Jesus, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the love of God the Father be with you all, Amen.

Notice the language here. The grace of the Lord Jesus – because of who Jesus is, what He did on the cross and God’s declaration of victory in His resurrection and ascension, the grace that we need that is greater than our sin comes from Him. Therefore we say ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus’ secured by Him.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit – Jesus pours forth His Spirit so Jesus is with us by sending the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who was with Him has now been sent to us. The same Spirit that was with Jesus from His birth to the tomb and back to the throne now from the throne has been poured out upon us and He is with us from our new birth until we go to be with Him in the new heavens and the new earth. Why is all that possible?

This benediction ends with the love of God the Father. God the Father has loved us, gave His Son, who gives us the Spirit, as the Spirit brings us to Jesus and Jesus brings us back to give glory to the Father for His relentless, unconquerable love that pursues us, though we are undeserving, He brings us to Himself. These are just some thoughts about blessing in a world that is full of cursing as we come to the conclusion of a very interesting year (2020).

Bruce: What are your favorite Christmas traditions?

Harry: I’m not saying this because I’m a pastor but I love the Advent celebrations. I love all the performances that happen during this time and what our music ministry puts together during this time. I was grateful we were able to keep those events this year even though it was modified. That has become a big part of my family each year because we all look forward to the Advent celebrations. I look forward to the Christmas Eve services although I’m still recovering due to having to add services because of the pandemic so less would be in attendance so we had to five services rather than three. It is my privilege to make all that happen and of course all the work Bruce that you put in as well and everyone who helped to make all this happen.

I do love Christmas with my family. One of my daughter’s makes eggs benedict on Christmas Day morning. We love going to our families and seeing the kids open their gifts and having a Christmas devotion with them on Christmas Day. Then we love Christmas afternoon where all the families come to our house. I love to see how my own kids have to handle Christmas with us and their in-laws and trying to encourage them as they work through that. Then I enjoy encouraging them to establish their own traditions in the Lord and Christmas is a great time to do that.

I love our annual vacation we take every year. It all started one year after Christ’s Sunday where we got our kids in the car to go driving as my wife packed some things in a cooler to eat and then we just drive. We were headed toward Columbia, South Carolina and my kids asked where we were going in which I said it was a surprise but we were going to the beach because I love the beach in the winter. So that became a tradition right after Christmas in our family but they have their own things that they do with their families now but we loved doing that.

We enjoyed anticipating what we would do for our Christmas devotions but I really love Christ’s Sunday during Advent. All the frantic stuff is kind of gone at this point and you can just do some rejoicing and reflection at the same time.

Bruce: At that point you can relate to Mary’s pondering those things in her heart, kind of moment.

Harry: Yes, that's a good way to look at it.

Bruce: That is actually something I want to encourage people to do this week and because of what all went on in this past year. I haven't really pondered much but I have thought about a lot of things trying to figure them out as the need of the moment was upon me but I haven't really had time to stop and think back and learn lessons from this past year.

Harry: I'm so grateful for all our staff and all they do. To keep our church on mission, on message and in ministry to do so as safely as possible with the reality of the pandemic yet also doing so without being paralyzed by the pandemic, I'm so appreciative of the work put in by all our staff and volunteers to help make this possible.

I've been grateful that we have even been able to have some influence in our state in which the church and meeting for worship has been considered a non-essential. Plus we've been also to do meetings for worship in a safe way and still have the opportunity for outreach in sharing the Gospel. Last Sunday night I had follow up conversations with a number of people who came to see the Hallelujah presentation and that's couldn't have been done without the amount of work put in by staff and volunteers. Things are always cropping up where someone has been exposed to the COVID and we have to make changes. We were actually a half a person away of me singing in place of Darrell for that Hallelujah presentation (smile) but thanks to God's graciousness it went on.

Bruce: So when you look back over 2020 what are some lessons you have learned that you will hold onto?

Harry: This will be an outlandish comparison but when Abraham Lincoln became the President it wasn't so much that he had a burden to abolish slavery so much but he had a burden for the Union. He did see the abolishment of slavery as the right thing to do though. As the war went on and he wrote his meditations on the Divine will of God in 1862 and I believe he became a Christian between 1862 and 1863, he said "Things have clarified for me."

In trial and adversity things get clarified. I have taught and preached many times about the spheres of sovereignty – church, state and family. When a church, a state and a family in their interdependent relationship stay in their lanes it can really work well. When they don't or when someone attempts to take a crisis to broaden their lane and take over other people's lanes then that reveals something about individuals.

I probably noticed some things that other people didn't notice. For instance, given our President's background as a CEO, when this pandemic hit, I expected a lot of top down CEO crisis management decisions to kick in but when he said "Governors would know better what the situation is" some didn't know better but many did. This is called the principle of subsidiary that you put decision making into an organization as far as you can where there is greater affection, allegiance, knowledge and wisdom. That was great to see that happen.

Then I saw left and right where people want to politicize something or do this inappropriately but I also saw the church rallying together. There were some elders where the safety issue drove them more to do things and for others it was to stay on mission for people are dying and going to hell so we can't shut down, and rightly so. But then there were those coming together to take advantage of each other's strengths and weaknesses with various worship plans

in place when certain things happened. Other plans will take effect this coming year as we push back and take dominion for Christ of how we're supposed to serve Him.

Now sure if I answered this question well but I have been surprised at how some people take a crisis for personal gain or power or just to be a critic for there are many who like to sit in the stands and point out what others haven't done well, but I've also seen people who have gotten into it by listening to their brother charitably to work their way through and then I saw leadership and fellowship. I would see people who would see others in vulnerable categories and help them spiritually and physically with their needs – a sacrificial, thoughtful, charitable love. Whereas before some of these people didn't really care about doing these things at all. One of the reasons I wash my hands before I do something for someone is that I don't want to get any germs but I also don't want to give any.

Another thing is clarity of Christian witness in terms of medicine. In Christianity, preventive medicine, curative medicine, puritan medicine is right. Crisis for me as a way of clarifying things as I keep trying to look at it Biblically and it becomes an opportunity to really build relationships with people that are in the fight with you. Those kinds of things are long lasting beyond the crisis. There's a lot more I could say but that would be my initial response.

Bruce: I can tell that the work of sanctification is going on due to the fact the Holy Spirit wants me to make some conscious decisions and applications about. Then internally for me there are some interests and passions that have begun to change in this past year where I realized I have just put too much interest in and the Lord is saying "I'm going to take it away."

Harry: For people who have a nominal relationship with Christ and something like this pandemic happens, it becomes a license for them to be nominal and nobody can say anything because you hide and they have cover. But then there are people who love Jesus but are vulnerable to what is going on and they are longing to get back to serving Jesus, then I see leaders who work their way through it with various burdens and come to a Biblical, thoughtful and wise decision on leading the Lord's church. Then there are those outside the church in the political world that will misuse something and take advantage of it for personal gain and greater power, but here is something I want to clear about.

When we look at the world with its chaos and suspicion, we have to be constructively analytical so that we are wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16). There are some big issues going on in our world but on the other hand we can't become cynics or skeptics. We have to move forward trusting in Christ and even if I miss something Jesus doesn't miss it. That doesn't mean I'm going to careless for I'm going to be careful. Fear can paralyze you and so can over analysis of things. It can give you a critical spirit. I can be a critical analysis but I don't want to be a cynical critic that it always making people prove themselves. I want to believe the best. I need to be thoughtful but not sinfully naïve.

This past year has really worked on my personality and hopefully in a sanctified way of how I work through things like this and try to move forward thoughtfully, courageously, carefully with conviction but also believing the best in an excellent way. Love believes are things, endures all things, etc. for I want to live that I Corinthians 13 way.

Bruce: There is a question I get often that I feel I don't have a great answer for so I'm going to pose it to you. Often times I hear Christians say that pagans hijack the Christian holiday for

Christmas and I also hear ‘who chose December the 25th to celebrate Christmas?’ So if you could speak to both of these that would be appreciated.

Harry: Let me compound the problem by saying that half the church doesn’t choose December 25th but they choose January 6th. It’s the Eastern Church that chooses the 6th and the western church, the evangelical church chooses the 25th date. Early on in the church there was this desire to replicate the feasts of the Old Testament. There was the feast of Booths, feast of Pentecost, and feast of Passover. So there was the festival of celebrations in Holy Week culminating in the resurrection and there were the festival of celebrations around the Ascension and Pentecost. But early on the festival of the Incarnation or the birth of Christ for Advent Season was not found in the early church. The first evidences are in the late second and early third century and they are not in Rome.

People like to say the Christians didn’t want to do the pagan holiday but they went ahead and did a holiday, praise the Lord and they took the pagan saturnalia which was the winter solstice. But that’s just not true factually. Yes, Christianity did run out of town mythros and saturnalia but not because Christians tried to do something Christian at saturnalia for it happened otherwise. In my study of the history of Christmas it appears in the second and third century in North Africa. They are not up in Europe or the Middle East or the Asia Minor churches. North Africa became like a center for Christian learning where they produced me like Augustine, etc. The way it appeared there was really interesting.

It appeared in North Africa and began to spread during a period when the Emperor Diocletian’s really concentrated persecution, other than under Nero, of Christians happened in Rome. If anything the Christian church was withdrawn during this time especially when people were saying Caesar is lord and not Jesus is Lord. The desire to participate and paganize a Christian holiday would have been the last thing the Donatists would have done. There was really more of a two kingdom view – there’s your kingdom and here’s our Kingdom view. They might have been in the same geographical location but they considered themselves not the same. Anything that had to do with the Roman Empire was pushed away by the church, but it’s in that context that this happened.

So why would they take a Roman holiday and Christianize it when in fact they are trying to get as far away as anything Roman and participating as a Christian community? I think it happened out of the festival desire and they were already observing to some degree replacing the Passover feast with the Holy Weeks celebrations of the resurrection and ascension. They had already replaced the feast of Booths with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Pentecost. They had this desire to create a celebration of the Incarnation because the Incarnation is so tied to all the Christian doctrines. You don’t have Christianity without an atoning death. You can’t have an atoning death without a sinless Savior. You can’t have a sinless Savior without a birth of a Man who is sinless, without Adam’s sin nature. You can’t have that without the virgin birth and then the fulfillment of the prophecies. I could go on with all the tentacles of the doctrines that come back to the virgin birth of the Incarnation and the celebration of that. So there is a desire to promote that.

Saturnalia was the casualty for it wasn’t done to replace it, it was just done. By the way, saturnalia would actually be December 19 or the 21st and not the 25th. So why the 25th? In the examination of the death of Christ during the season of Passover that they came to the conclusion that it took place that year on March the 25th. In Hebrew wisdom and tradition the idea is that

the death of a man is directly related to the conception of a great man. So if you take March 25th as conception and go ahead nine months to birth then you end up on December 25th.

The Eastern Church didn't figure it that way. There are two different calendars at work here – the Hebrew and the Roman calendar. The Eastern Church was convinced that the conception took place on April 6th so that is the reason they end up celebrating Christmas on January 6th. That's how the date was established historically. So it didn't have anything to do with saturnalia and mythros but eventually they just got pushed out due to the Christian celebration of Christmas.

I understand my friend Kevin DeYoung who pastors Christ Covenant has written something to this effect that is on his blog about how the Christmas celebration came to be among the Christians. Also I think the Chuck Colson's Breakpoint has something on it as well but I'm not completely sure on this.

Bruce: We have time for one more question. Other than the outlaw Josey Wales, what are your favorite Christmas movies?

Harry: People will probably get so disappointed in me right now but I like to go back at Christmas and at Easter to the epics done by people like Cecil B. DeMille type stuff. I like movies like Exodus, The Ten Commandments, Ben-Hur and The Robe. I particularly like Ben-Hur because there is no violation of the second commandment there. They do it by shadows. I also love the story of how Lew Wallace was converted in writing Ben-Hur. By the way, Wallace was a civil war general who fought in the war for the state of Ohio. I enjoy those movie classics.

My wife and I like to see a movie, have popcorn and talk about it. I feel like I might lose my reputation right now but I actually enjoy Home Alone 1 and Home Alone 2. There are a couple of places in Home Alone 2 where the boy gets lost in New York and my family just about has to pick me up off the floor because I'm laughing so hard. I do enjoy slapstick comedy but there are certain pieces I'm not all that excited about.

Now my family always tries to find a good movie to watch together at Christmas and that was a big deal to be able to get my whole family to a movie theater. The last four or five years my sister has a larger screen television where we can select a really good movie and eat my son's really good popcorn. Again I love humor at Christmas and my family talked me into watching the Elf movie and they had to pick me up off the floor with that one as well. But I really love the Biblical classical movies to watch at Christmas.

Bruce: My favorite Christmas movies are The Bells of St. Mary's and then How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

Harry: The movie It's a Wonderful Life is one that many watch at Christmas but when I watch that I get into so much analyzing in that, that I don't enjoy it.

Bruce: I can't get past the bad theology of 'when an angel gets its wings.' I try but I just can't.

Harry: I understand why it's a feel good movie but that one is hard for me to get to. Yet it's a good opportunity to enjoy movies with your family. Don't dismiss all the Biblical classic movies that were done in the 1930s and 40s that were really well done.

Bruce: Please take some time this week to ponder things and reflect on what has happened in this past year and in your life. That is really important. Spend some extended time with Him. Please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and Lord willing we'll answer them in upcoming Q&A times. God bless you.