

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

One doesn't have to read long in the letters sections of the paper, especially around the big festival seasons, to find some person trying to inform us Christians of what it means really to be a Christian. It happened again this year in a letter that the Journal Gazette titled "Insightful Analysis." In it, an emeritus IPFW philosophy professor scolded a Christian from New Haven who responded to a Muslim man from Manchester's "Wish for Christmas."

The Muslim man's wish for Christmas was that we "put Christ back in Christmas – and beyond," that is, "to study, learn and reflect upon one of the most beloved, most influential figures in history," but "most importantly, to put his teachings in practice." Yes, most important to this Muslim man for Christmas is that we follow the command of Jesus "(peace be upon Him)" to "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12:31). He even mentioned the Parable of the Good Samaritan to remind us Christians that this message applies to the stranger, too.

The Christian man from New Haven responded to this letter commending the Muslim for his "worthy call for Christians to act like they are Christians." But he turned to real meaning of the season, not a call do more acts of charity (which Christians are encouraged to do in the season — you are encouraged to give more to the "Cup of Kindness," you are met by Salvation Army bell-ringers during your shopping, etc.). The real meaning of the season, though, is not a call to "*love your neighbor*," but a preaching that God loved the world in the sending of His own Son in weakness and poverty, in the flesh of a little baby, who is the Savior of the world. The purpose of the New Haven Christian's letter was to tell this Muslim man, who rightly said that Muslims honor Jesus as a prophet, that Jesus was more than a prophet who called people to "*love your neighbor*." Jesus is the very Son of God. And he invited the Muslim man to "'complete' [his] love for Christ by recognizing him as God in the flesh," and invite Jesus "to move into his heart," not language I would use as a Lutheran, but it is the common way evangelicals talk.

Back to the emeritus IPFW prof ... he found this latter letter "patronizing, insulting and extremely unchristian," with "no argument [from Scripture apparently] to substantiate his view." He found the Christian's letter unchristian. The "problem," he said, "is that it is not what Christianity requires." And then he quotes "the Christian Bible" in Matthew 25, "*whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" And he concludes that the Muslim gets it ... "the love commandment," but the Christian does not, a statement that I found to be condescending itself and most uncharitable, given that the Christian commended the Muslim. I say, the prof doesn't get it. The call to put Christ back in Christmas by calling people to love their neighbor is the thing that is "unchristian."

“Unchristian, you say?” Yes, that’s right. Oh, it is true that Jesus answered, in response to a question about the most important commandment, that “love God” is most important, and the second most important is “love your neighbor” (Mark 12:30-31). But there is nothing especially Christian about the call to keep the law and do good. Every religion worth its salt calls upon its adherents to do good to others. Our Lutheran dogmaticians remind us, though, that this is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions: other religions preach “do good” as a way to merit something; Christians “do good” in response to the good news. That makes Christianity a religion of the Gospel; all others are simply of the law.

In fact, from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of Mark to the end, Jesus’ message was one of repentance and faith, believing and being baptized—not of doing, for the Gospel message is not “do” but “done.” As Luther asserted, “The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace [that is, the Gospel] says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done” (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 26).

Thus, our New Haven Christian’s simple understanding of Christianity is far superior to the IPFW professor’s sophisticated one. And far from being unsupported by Scripture, the Christian’s understanding is indeed what the Scriptures are about from beginning to end. It is what God called Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh: God’s message, a message that led the people to repent of their ways and believe in the Lord. Jesus Himself also proclaimed *“the gospel of God”*: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

This is the Scripture message. The Evangelist Mark begins *“the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”* with the preaching of John the Baptist, sent to *“Prepare the way of the Lord”* (Mark 1: 1, 3), and John proclaimed: *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4). According to Matthew, he preached *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt. 3:2).

This is the message to be proclaimed to people burdened by the law: not do, but done. Not *“love your your neighbor,”* but *“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”* (Acts 2:38), as Peter preached. Not do this, but believe this: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household”* (Acts 16:31), as Paul and Silas preached, and the Philippian jailer and his household were baptized. Yes, Jesus concludes His preaching in Mark by sending the disciples out with the gospel, not do, but believe and be baptized: *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”* (Mark 16:15-16).

But the Gospel message is not just believe in the abstract, but believe in something concrete. Paul said it: *“believe in the Lord Jesus.”* Thus Jesus preached: *“The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”* That is the

Christmas message that our New Haven Christian was conveying as well. The time has been fulfilled, for in Jesus' birth, the time was fulfilled. We hear these words echoed by St. Paul: "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son born of woman.*" Mark focuses our eyes on Jesus, for when Jesus said, "*The time has been fulfilled,*" He is proclaiming HIMSELF, the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises, the beginning of the New Testament age of grace.

"*The kingdom of God is at hand,*" Jesus preached, that is, near; near, in the sense that soon all the events surrounding our redemption, culminating in Jesus' crucifixion on the cross and His victorious resurrection, would soon be taking place. This is the work of Christ through which the whole world was reconciled with the Father in heaven, and the whole world has been forgiven. By the blood that poured from His side, He cleanses you from your sins. By that river of living water that poured from His side, He empowers your baptism and gives you the living water that wells up to eternal life, the water that quenches your thirst for righteousness.

"*The kingdom of God is at hand*"—near, Jesus preached, near, also, in a more personal sense, for Jesus Himself was near, and Jesus brings with him the kingdom of God. Heaven is not just some far off place and some time in the future; heaven may be found, may be experienced, here on earth, albeit not in its fullness. Now we still struggle with sin. Now, we admit, "We [don't love God] with our whole heart; we [don't love] our neighbor as ourselves. We [do] justly deserve [God's] present and eternal punishment" (LSB DS, setting 1 confession). But in repentance and faith in Jesus, we are forgiven, and the kingdom of God is near.

And even more palpable is the kingdom of God for us today, for He who promised, "*behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20) comes today among us and gives Himself to us. In the "*take and eat*" and "*take and drink,*" of His Sacrament, in the "*this is my Body,*" "*this is my Blood,*" Jesus says to you, "*I am bringing the kingdom of God near, for I am coming down from heaven to place Myself on this altar, to place My body broken, to pour out My blood once spilt on a cross into your mouths.*"

In the Sacrament is "heaven on earth." It's what we acknowledge in the liturgy. "Therefore, with angels and archangels and with ALL THE COMPANY OF HEAVEN, we laud and magnify Your holy name. . . ." We acknowledge that as we join with the heavenly choir, and we sing the song of the angels. The angels are in the presence of God; they're in heaven. And so are we as Jesus comes down to us in His Holy Supper. "*The kingdom of God is at hand.*"

Dear saints of God, sanctified by the washing of water and the word, whose robes have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb, today again you have the opportunity to join in this heavenly hymn and eat and drink of the Lamb

slain for you. Today again you have opportunity to receive Him in your mouth, and be strengthened in your faith in God and your “fervent love toward” your neighbor. Yes, Christians seek to follow the command of love, and I encourage you in it.

Hear me now. Go forth from here strengthened and emboldened in your love for others. And we have an opportunity to express that love this coming Saturday — why not “do good” by coming out on Saturday and be encouraged for life at the rally, for the love of the littlest neighbors among us? Why not march for life through downtown Fort Wayne? That would be a good act of love.

But trust not that this will save you. That's not Christianity, not even if sophisticated emeritus IPFW philosophy professors proclaim that's what it's about. No, salvation is found in Christ alone. Jesus' words today are “the most basic statement concerning the Christian faith” (Voelz, Concordia Commentary, Mark 1:1-8:26, p. 153). The time of your salvation has been fulfilled in Jesus. “*The kingdom of God is near*” in Him. “*Repent and believe*” this gospel word of Christ; partake of His supper; and you shall be saved.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.