

# When Grace Appears

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

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Most of us abruptly end our celebration of Christmas, perhaps after lighting a last candle on the Advent wreath and singing a carol or two. December 26 brings the bustle of “after Christmas sale” shopping and holiday gift returns, and New Year’s Eve parties loom just around the corner. No sooner have the candles been extinguished and the New Year’s countdown begun than the holy season is over and we put it away as a memory.

In the book of Titus, the early Christian perspective on Christ’s appearance is not as suited as ours to personal comfort or consumerist scheduling:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

*Titus 2:11-15*

Far from putting Christ's birth away "auld lang syne," Titus sees the flash of the glorious, unexpected appearance—or epiphany—of Christ beginning a transformation that continues throughout our lives. We are to become students following a new curriculum of grace, reflecting the difference Christ's presence makes in the world.

### **IDENTIFYING WITH TITUS'S COMMUNITY**

In the first century, much like in ours, community identity and memory were shaped by popular heroes, gods, and political figures. Communities erected statues and leaders commissioned coins featuring their worthies. Most people in the ancient world, including Crete where Titus lived, assumed that the gods appeared in human form, magically intervened in our affairs, and then returned to doing whatever it is that gods do. Today, people flock around celebrities and athletes. A prominent movie theater in my community hosts a fundraiser for a children's charity each year. The theater donates its services, invites a celebrity to premier an upcoming movie, and receives contributions in the charity's name. This event is a classic example of celebrity culture, marketing strategy, and public fawning, all in the name of a "good cause." People stand for hours along a red carpet, snap pictures of their hero, and donate money, but never get personally involved in the cause. Much like the ancient world, the supposed gods descend, wave a few times, and return to whatever it is they do.

Early Christian communities flocked for different reasons. They came together to be shaped around a common identity in Christ and to be taught how to live the Christ life. They listened to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them. Through this process, Christ became a real and continuing presence who constantly confronted them and transformed their gathered communities into the living Body of Christ. Jesus' birth and anticipated return provided a forum for texts such as the book of Titus to guide the community's memory and identity.<sup>1</sup>

Titus 2:11-15 fits within a larger group of early Christian texts addressing the difference that following Christ makes. All of them occur in contexts where memory, oral instruction, and communal reading play significant roles. These activities are mentioned explicitly or exemplified in 1 Timothy 4:13-16, Hebrews 10-13, Ephesians 5:19-6:9, 2 Timothy 1:4-2:26, and Titus 2. Each of these passages employs the ancient concept of *paideia*, consisting of instruction, discipline, and formation. Titus 2 specifically asks how Christ's coming shapes the believer and the community.

### **TRAINING IN GRACE**

This passage in Titus describes a way of living formed by the coming of Christ. This community remembers, rejects, and trains.

*Remember.* The passage evokes memories of Jesus' birth in the back of a Bethlehem cave.<sup>2</sup> As the passage is read, the community remembers God's first appearance (v. 11) and hopes for his second epiphany (v. 13). The audi-

ence lives in the real world not of celebrity worship but of Christ-formed people. They have been given a complete picture of the way life begins, with a baby born to a teenager from Galilee. By coming into the world as a baby, God invites a decision from all people to receive the Christ child.

*Reject.* By taking up the Christ child, a person chooses to lay down a life shaped by “worldly passions” and be embraced by a baby who demonstrates a new way of living. This decision to accept the Christ child means rejecting “ungodliness and worldly passions” (v. 12), a reference presumably to the kinds of things a Greco-Roman audience might observe as part of the curriculum of training, or *paideia*, in their society.

In the ancient world, the virtuous life revolved around the personal attainment of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. These cardinal virtues, if mastered, opened the door (from *cardo* for hinge) of the heart. The center of moral decision making was the individual. In what we commonly refer to as “self-help,” people could live well as long as they learned how to make virtuous decisions.

This approach poses a significant problem, and Titus alludes to it. Personal effort toward prudence, justice, temperance, and courage cannot cure the darkness of life. No resolutions to mark the New Year can overcome the difficulties. Our preference for idols (whether the gods or entertainment and athletic celebrities) corrupts us. We do not naturally reject ungodliness and worldly passions. People’s desire to live better does not make them better people.

Through Christ’s birth, God provides divine help by exposing the darkness of our hearts. As the carol says, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”<sup>3</sup> The baby that appeared in Bethlehem requires us to lay down our attempts at living apart from God’s revelation and getting things right on our own. Instead we must undergo a new kind of training that can only come from this child.

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*Train.* Just as a person needs a new way of living to be a parent, so we need training in how to love and be loved by the Christ child who instructs us. As we learn to receive the gift of the Christ child and anticipate his return, we are trained in a curriculum of grace.<sup>4</sup>

Rhetorically, the text uses a *sorites*, or stair-step approach, interlinking the virtues in the curriculum and the people who listen. Through the divine

power of grace, we are taught (v. 15) and receive correction from one another to live with self control or temperance. This instruction leads to upright living (justice/righteousness) and eventually to godliness (sound judgment/reverence). Notice how these moral qualities produced by the training echo the cardinal virtues of the ancient world. Grace teaches that without God's help and training, nothing is possible. As we hear these instructions given in community, our lives are linked together virtuously with others who hear. We teach, correct, and train each other in a grace-full process of accountability.

### **MY CONTINUING EDUCATION**

Even a pastor needs training from a baby, especially when we think Christmas is over. Following a nice Advent and Christmas, my spouse and I, like most pastors' families, look forward to some uninterrupted free time and quiet nights with no parties. On New Year's Eve in 2009, we greeted the New Year by dozing off while watching the Times Square celebration. At 2:00 a.m., the phone rang and the voice on the other end identified himself as a police officer. He sounded vaguely like one of the youth at church, so I assumed this was a New Year's Eve prank call. Insisting he really was a police officer, he asked if I really was the pastor of First Baptist. He regretted to inform me that one of our sheep had been stolen. Still in a daze, I asked him to explain how our sheep could have been stolen. We did not own any. The officer politely explained that someone had stolen one of the sheep from the Nativity set on the church's front steps. Having just recovered the sheep that was being carried down Main Street, the officer asked if I could come downtown and identify it. I asked him in a very pastoral way, "How hard is it to identify a plaster sheep? We are the only church in Knoxville that places sheep on the front steps." He relented and allowed me to stay home.

A few weeks later I was summoned to appear in court concerning the stolen sheep. Perturbed because the court date was on a Friday, my day off, I waded through the line and waited in the packed court room. Looking around at the folks who had gotten in trouble during the holidays and at some of their victims, it became apparent that Christmas was not going to end so quickly for me that year. It was time for my training in the Christ child's curriculum of grace.

You see, if I had been paying attention early that New Year's morning, I could have resolved the issue with the officer by appearing at the church. But instead, the defendant (who had a very brief history of theft) and I had to appear together in court. The district attorney allowed me to share my story of receiving the phone call on New Year's morning. I left her my card and told her to go easy on the young man.

When I turned around, he was looking straight at me. He stood with his wife who was pregnant with their first child. I was right where the Christ child had summoned me, looking at the real lost sheep. Pastors are supposed

to be specialists in identifying and caring for lost sheep, but apparently I still needed some training.

The sheep snatcher served his sentence by performing community service at a church, and I had an epiphany.

## NOTES

1 I develop this theme further in *Delivering from Memory: The Effect of Performance on the Early Christian Audience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

2 G. K. Chesterton drives home this point in his chapter “The God in the Cave” in *The Everlasting Man* (1925).

3 Placide Cappeau, “O Holy Night” (1847), verse 1, translated from French by John S. Dwight.

4 Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, volume 1: *A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 143.



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