

My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation

He had a promise.

The LORD had given him assurance – he would see the Messiah before his death.

Simeon lived with something more than hopeful expectation. He knew. As firm as the ground beneath his feet – he knew.

All his years of righteous devotion found their ultimate reward when he saw that face. That small, innocent face.

The Christ child. The light and revelation to the world. And so he proclaimed for all to hear:

“My eyes have seen your salvation.”

She was nothing.

She was lowly and humble, yet the LORD had chosen her among all women.

Mary had nothing to offer but her obedience and praise. When the Maker of the world became the fruit of her womb, she responded in the only manner that made sense:

“My soul magnifies the Lord.”

He was a prophecy.

His life had been ordained from beyond his birth. He was the voice crying out in the wilderness making straight the way of the Lord.

In the womb, John jumped for joy when his Lord drew near. In life, he proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom. When he saw his Savior approach, he gave witness of all that had been made known to him:

“Behold, the Lamb of God!”

What about us?

We are faced with unspeakable evil every day. We are confronted with injustice, pride, greed, and apathy. The world is broken, seemingly beyond repair.

But we have seen the Lamb of God. He has been revealed to us in our lowly state. The darkness of our lives has been transformed by the truth and love of the great Light of the world. Our broken ways have been made straight. Our souls magnify the Lord for we have seen with our eyes His salvation.

But it cannot end there.

We are now faced with the same truths and the same impetus at Simeon, Mary, and John. Now that we have seen salvation with our eyes, it is for us to share this good news of great joy to the world. Our sins have been washed by the blood of the Lamb of God, so it is for us to proclaim his coming. We have been visited by the Great I AM, so our souls magnify the Lord.

We, who have been given this greatest gift, are now the gift-givers. We carry the light to a world stumbling in the darkness. We cry out to the lost that the Lamb of God has come and salvation is here. We live lives of praise to the only one who is worthy. How can we do anything less? Our eyes have seen His salvation and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior!

Merry Christmas from Rambling Ever On!

Five Reasons “Away in a Manger” is the Worst Christmas Song Ever

I love Christmas music. I believe my unblemished record of staunch Christmas musicophilia on *Rambling Ever On* [says](#) it [all](#). Yet, not all Christmas music is created equal. For every transcendent *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, there is a painfully awful *Last Christmas*. For every majestic *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, there is the horrifyingly terrible *Christmas Shoes*. So, while I love Christmas music and celebrate it every year, I don't embrace every Christmas song out there. Case in point: *Away in a Manger*. As bad as the previously mentioned songs are, they aren't nearly as terrible as the manger song, due to its insidious nature. It poses as a beautiful, sacred song. It gets played on Christian radio. It gets sung to small children. It even has the audacity to get sung in church! I reject it. Yet its soul is as black as night. I reject all of it. Here are my five main reasons.

It is biologically fraudulent

Let's get the most obvious one out of the way. Jesus was fully God and fully man. Which means He was fully baby. If Jesus had been born and then placed in a manger, and did not cry at any point, as the song states, something would have been terribly wrong with Him. Babies cry. It's a good thing they cry. Doctors make sure they cry as soon as they are born to test

their lungs. Babies cry when they are hungry and thirsty. They cry when they need to be held. If Jesus did not cry then He was developmentally stunted. And we know that is not true. Which leads me to point number two.

It is emotionally manipulative

At its core, *Away in a Manger* is a lullaby. It seems to have been written for the express purpose of convincing children to go to sleep. So the wording used in the song is deliberately manipulative to that end. The thinking behind must have gone something like this – “Good little children want to be like the “little Lord Jesus”, right? Well, He didn’t cry so they shouldn’t either. And if they do cry, then they are not like Jesus at all.” That is almost unconscionable.

It is poorly written

I get really irritated with songs that change perspective. *Away in a Manger* is a big offender in this regard. It starts off third person for the first three stanzas but suddenly goes into first person on the three final and climactic stanzas. Why? Because the writer ran out of more drippy examples of insipid, idealized first-century life? Or because the writer wanted to really pour on the guilt trip for the listening children that were struggling to go to sleep like good little boys and girls? Or was it because the songwriter wanted to include some lame declaration of love to the “Lord Jesus.” I say lame, not because loving Jesus is lame, but because tacking it on at the end like that is sloppy, ham-fisted, and obsequious, not to Jesus, but to the listeners in an attempt to convince them that this is truly a good, Christian song.

And the line, “no crying He makes” is just bad poetry on every

level. Did Yoda get co-writing credit on this or something?

It is patronizingly ordinary

The incarnation of Christ is one of the most miraculous and amazing things to ever happen. It is good to sing songs about it. It is good to be brought to worship thinking about it. What *Away in a Manger* does is take that magnificent event and turn it into a sickly-sweet, mushy, touchy-feely mess. Shepherds, angels, and kings worshipped this child, and the best this song can do is celebrate his sleeping, his sweet little head, and that he didn't cry? O come let us adore Him indeed!

It is theologically bankrupt

I don't expect deep theological truths from every song. One of my all-time favorite Christmas songs, *O Holy Night* is not the most theologically impressive song out there. But it is poetic and beautiful and contains enough truth to make it worthwhile. *Away in a Manger* is none of those things and is most definitely not worthwhile. Beyond the silly stuff about Jesus not crying – which contradicts the rest of the Scriptural account of His earthly life – the final stanza is a hodgepodge of pseudo-religious sounding phrases mixed with shockingly modern day spiritual sentimentality. Let's unpack it, shall we?

First, Jesus is not “looking down from the sky” and if He were why would he look down from the sky “and stay by our cradles til morning is nigh”? I guess you could argue that the writer is trying to say that Jesus is everywhere, but if that is so, why start with the idea that Jesus is looking down from the sky?

Second, the penultimate stanza has the singer asking Jesus to be near them, or us. We don't have to beg Jesus to stay near us. He has promised to be with us in his Word. Many times, actually.

Third, when you further examine that stanza, you come upon an even worse question – “love me, I pray.” Once again, not necessary as it has already been promised. And to make this even more ridiculous, this song is about Jesus as a baby – His incarnation. What more proof did this writer need of Jesus' love than this act of complete sacrifice? “Look, I realize that you just gave up Heaven and your power, and you came to earth as a human baby, with all the awful stuff that entails, but do you think you can do something else to prove to me that you love me?”

Finally, the last stanza closes things out in spectacularly wrongheaded fashion. It starts off okay with a request for blessing for all the children that are in Jesus' care. I can get on board with that. It ends with a request for Jesus to take us all to Heaven to live with Him there. It doesn't work like that. Jesus doesn't just take everyone to heaven. That's where repentance and salvation come into play, but let's not get hung up on the very foundation of the Gospel or anything!

This Christmas, listen to as much music as you can. It is a profitable and worthy endeavor. Yet, for the sake of your soul, and the souls of those around you, avoid garbage songs like *Away in a Manger*. While there are probably more aesthetically offensive Christmas songs out there – I'm looking at you *Christmas Shoes* – there is no song that is as deviously evil as *Away in a Manger*. It cloaks itself in religious language and holy imagery, in a vain attempt to hide the utter darkness of its twisted and corrupt heart. Flee from it my friends. Flee for your lives.

5 Truths About the Diversity of the First Christmas

O Christmas, do you ever remind us that people think their way of talking, writing, and celebrating is *the* way. Christmas starts quarrels over minutia more than all of the rest of the holidays combined. From what phrases to say to when to listen to music, we ironically turn this allegedly peaceful time of the year designed to put our focus on the birth of the most significant person ever into a self-aggrandizing time of opinions and disagreements. I realize many of these things are not meant to be taken too seriously (I honestly do not care if you consider *Die Hard* a Christmas movie) but if we are honest, we know that we get disproportionately passionate in defending some traditions.

If we study the first Christmas, we find that it was quite diverse. And I have no doubt an application to this is that we really need to realize that diversity matters to God. Much of (and dare I say most of) our way of “doing” Christmas are not absolute truths to be followed and argued. And it may be that these silly differences of opinion about Christmas represent bigger and more serious issues we have with a lack of diversity in things things that do matter. Like worship and community life.

With that in mind, here are five things about the first Christmas and its diversity that can teach us to embrace the differences we have with others.

The worshippers were diverse

Mary was a young virgin. Joseph was a carpenter descended from King David. The Magi were astrologers and may have been kings. The first group of people commanded to go see Jesus were laity shepherds. Zechariah was a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Anna was a very elderly prophetess. Matthew, an author, was a Jewish tax collector. Luke was a Gentile doctor. The messengers from God to man about Jesus were angels and not even human. And I'd even include the animals as well, since their feeding trough is mentioned by name in the story.

The voices of Christmas are far more diverse than we are accustomed to in our lives. Perhaps Christmas should awaken us to this fact and motivate us to long to hear from a variety of sources on how to understand and serve Jesus. And it could be very edifying to worship with a diverse community and buck against the typical cultural model of a church filled with people as similar to me as possible.

The reactions were diverse

The Angels comforted Mary and the shepherds, both of whom were terrified. The shepherds told people about Jesus and glorified God. Mary pondered the events deeply and treasured them in her heart. The magi bowed down to worship and brought gifts. Anna, Zechariah and Simeon gave prophecies. Simeon held Jesus in his arms. John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb. Elizabeth gave a glad cry.

How we react to the Christmas season may seem so important to us that we expect others to feel similarly. When in fact there are many ways to react to Christmas and if they do not have anything to do with gift-giving or Santa or even huge family gatherings, they can still be good. As long as they are legitimate reactions to who Jesus is.

The geography was diverse

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. After his birth they went to Egypt for a while and then back to Nazareth where he was raised. The Magi were from "the East" and while it is impossible to say for sure where exactly that meant, it was a long distance from Galilee.

The lady who leads the prayer time at my church on Sunday mornings before Sunday school often brings requests from magazines that talk about places and people I have never heard of. I appreciate this instead of always just praying for our church, our neighborhood or our missionaries. God is indeed a God of the whole world and even Christmas reminds us of that.

The prophecies of Jesus as Savior were diverse

Jesus's name means "Jehovah is salvation" so centering the idea of Christmas around "Jesus is our Savior" is perfect. Yet even that phrase was broken down theologically that first Christmas. Consider just in Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-80 that he teaches, among other things, that Jesus would be:

A Redeemer

This is a word that in and of itself has layers of meaning. A first century Jew who knew their Scriptures could think of Ruth, Job or even Levitical law and understand that Zechariah meant that God sent Jesus to rescue us from spiritual slavery and that in some way he was going to purchase us for God out of our pathetic circumstances. As a family-redeemer. This explains why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6 that "you were bought at a price" and in Acts 20 he claimed the church was "purchased by the blood Christ".

A Warrior King

The literal phrase Zechariah used was “horn of salvation” which is found in several places in his Scriptures to communicate victory over enemies and security and refuge. Combine this with the fact that Zechariah references David, the general king who led Israel to many war victories, some translations call Jesus “a mighty king” in this prophecy.

The Jesus of the Gospels did get angry and even violent (Mark 11) but he came to die and was a willing sacrifice who did not fight back against his human enemies. Yet to Zechariah’s audience, they knew that God was a Mighty Warrior King, as in Isaiah 42:13:

The Lord will go forth like a warrior,
He will arouse His zeal like a man of war.
He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry.
He will prevail against His enemies.

And then Revelation describes Jesus this way:

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His name is The Word of God. The armies which are in heaven were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

We know from the New Testament that our enemies are not other humans. They are Satan, sin and death. And that Christ came to conquer them all. I think the resurrected Jesus is very much an image of the Old Testament Triumphant Warrior God and also of King David the War General, not victorious over the Philistines or Assyrians but over evil forces of darkness and over physical and spiritual death. And I think Zechariah prophecies this. The doctrine of the first Christmas goes much

deeper than the incarnation and the image of baby Jesus.

Our covenant.

Zechariah referenced Abraham, which was the covenant he knew at the time, but we now know a covenant that is better and forever in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15).

A light to all nations.

Darkness has a strong association with secrecy and wickedness and confusion. All of these things were true of most nations spiritually before Christ. But he came to bring knowledge of not mere morality but of salvation to God for everyone.

And there are more I could discuss. But what all of these phrases have in common is that they describe Jesus as Savior in terminology that demonstrates how profound, complex and marvelous that phrase is.

The object of worship was not diverse

And this is the most important thing of all. It is easy in our culture to bow down to diversity so far that we consider all beliefs and religions equal. And while I do not unnecessarily disrespect any belief or worldview, I without shame proclaim Jesus Christ as my Lord and God, the only means to get to God and the unique object of my worship. Christianity is exclusive by its nature because of Jesus, as any monolithic religion is and as all truth claims have to be in some sense. Christianity is significant not for how inclusive it is of all beliefs, but rather how distinct it is. It desires to be inclusive of all

people, notably all types of people and the New Testament reiterates this over and over. Yet the way to Heaven is narrow. Jesus is the only door.

No matter your traditions this Christmas, the original story is exhaustively about Jesus and his role in human history. It wasn't just a birth. It was a collision of God and humanity that changed everything that matters in eternity.

As always, we welcome feedback in the comment section below.

He Lies Laying

The v-like manger-cradle
balanced the babe in a bed
so cold but comfortable
 He lay

in the midst of the struggle
the manger-cradle king
with star-found worship
 He lay

when they saw heaven on earth
in the clouds greater than the sun
between the branches of David's line
 He lay.

Our winter stars shine in adorned
worship when heaven on earth
 lies laying

grace in the midst of our struggle, the

v-like manger-cradle
balances the babe
 lies laying

love in our cold but comfortable
battle worn defense of the fire
 He lies laying

joy when He lay laying
the venom's lies left
when we left our sins

and truly
the babe lies laying still.

The Lines of Our Joy

Undoubtedly, no amount of writing
describes the unmeasured happy, leaping joy,
the loudly whooping folks and toys,

the happy days,
the mellow ways
the lays, the lines
streaming the tree of time,

doting time,
times of dreams
and dreams in dreams.

I'll watch them laugh
all splayed with wishes and
ways of yuletide joy

in the measured time,

doting time,
dreams in tracks of time,

the happy days,
doting ways,
dipped in lays and lines
streaming the tree with times,

And no word or measure
defines our happy times and toys
nor the whistling tracks of our timeless joys.

Unpopular Opinion: Christmas Music

“I love Christmas music but I don’t want to hear it on the radio until December.”

“Christmas music before Thanksgiving should be against the law!”

“I hate Christmas, joy, peace, and every good thing all the time because I am a miserable, unhappy, grinchy Scrooge.”

I have heard variations of those statements every year for as long as I can remember. (I will concede the third one is probably just my loose interpretation when I hear people whining about Christmas music.) Each year around Thanksgiving, radio stations begin to play “all Christmas music all the time” and for some people, that is the worst thing ever. They rant and rave about it on social media. They write long Facebook posts about how awful it is to play Christmas music too soon. They bemoan. They complain. Then they pontificate

about how it cheapens the season or some such nonsense.

They are wrong.

In their twisted little world, they believe that it is only acceptable to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world for about three and a half weeks in the month of December. Don't you dare celebrate the SALVATION OF HUMANITY for longer than that! Don't you dare sing songs to commemorate the incarnation – the coming of the Christ – until after Thanksgiving!

Is that really the world in which we want to live? Do we want to confine our celebration of this most sacred event to only one month of the year?[1. And if we are honest with ourselves, we don't even get the whole month of December because as soon as the 25th comes and goes, Christmas music disappears again.] Do we want to be the kind of people that would mock and ridicule others for wanting to enjoy this time of year for all that it signifies?

In the spirit of the season, I am willing to be gracious and concede a minor point to the haters and scoffers. If you are ranting about hearing songs like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" or "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" then I'm with you. Those are flimsy, superficial things. They are the candy to the more spiritually robust songs main course. Mock those type of songs as much as you want – or at least, mock the too-soon playing of them as much as you want. They have a specific time of the year to be played and heard.

However, the same cannot be said about spiritually deep songs like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" or "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Those songs have eternal value far beyond one month of the year. Why is it okay for us to sing and listen to songs about Christ's death and resurrection any month of the year but we recoil when we hear a theologically rich song like "Joy to the World"?

Stop being joyless Scrooges. Instead, be joyful Ebenezers[1. We used to sing a song in Panama called “Ebenezer – which the chorus translates to “So far the LORD has helped us.” That is what I think of every time I see that name.] recognizing all the wonderful things God has done for you – which includes what He did on that first Christmas two thousand years ago. Don’t confine that celebration to a few weeks of the year. Let it spill over to every time of your life.

REO Gives Thanks

Thanksgiving.

At its best, this is a day to show our gratitude to God for everything He is and everything He has done. It is also an opportunity to reflect on all the little, seemingly insignificant blessings in our lives. Spiritual or mundane. Eternal or earth-bound – we all have so much for which to say “thank you.” We hope that you have a fantastic Thanksgiving and that you take some time to recognise the Giver of all good things.

Ben Plunkett



Most of the time when you ask someone to say what they are thankful for at Thanksgiving time they will name stuff like God, family, good food, and a warm home. These are very great things to be thankful for and I truly am. However, this Thanksgiving I want to highlight a little something that is usually forgotten: Seasonal changes. That's right. I'm thankful for seasonal changes. It fights mundaneness. Although I don't love all four seasons, some more, all of them have unique things to appreciate.

Fall is easily my favorite, so I love it for all four months. There are so many reasons why I love fall. The colors, the increasing coolness, Thanksgiving, and yada, yada, yada. The list rambles on and on. Plus, some of the best parts of the Lord of the Rings takes place during the fall. (I don't know if that's true. Totally made it up.)

I do appreciate winter though—for a few hours. No, really, I do think there is beauty in trees without any leaves. And the snow, when and if it comes, as annoying and inconvenient as it can get is also beautiful. It does not take me long to tire of winter, though. Most of it is dreary days of scratch-out-your-eyes boredom and stagnancy. Really, I can think of very few things that I really like that come in winter. There's Christmas, of course, which barely comes in winter. That is one of its few saving graces.

The sunniness and greenness and growth of spring is a welcome change. While I don't love it with all of my heart like fall, I like it a lot. We like to think that spring is a time of sunny wonder when we prance with happy bunnies through fields of red and blue flowers. Yeah, that doesn't happen. Ever. There are taxes, though. We can prance with all those forms and stuff. Anyway, I enjoy spring for approximately three and a half months and then I want fall to be here.

But before we can get to that, we have to get through summer, my second least favorite season. Summer is fine and dandy if you can stay inside the majority of the time. But then you have to go outside doing all this “fun stuff” and you just end up getting all tired and sweaty with mosquito bites and sunburn welts and greasy, disheveled hair. However, I do appreciate this seasonal change as well. I give it six weeks and then fall better be getting here soon or else.

This blurb may make it seem like I am only thankful for fall rather than seasonal change in general, but I really am thankful for all of the seasonal changes. It’s all about variety. In Tennessee and in many other parts of the world, all the seasons have defined changes. While I like some of the changes and seasons a lot better than others, I am thankful for the variety of a typical year.

Many of my REO comrades agree with me about fall, by the way, you can see our collective diatribe [here](#).

Phill Lytle



To keep with the spirit of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for times of feasting. While I love food (as is evidenced by my profile picture) this is not really about the food. It’s about what happens around a table with friends and loved ones. Some of my favorite memories happened sitting around the table, eating good food, and spending time with people I care about.

One particular moment that comes to mind was when we had most of the active REO writers and contributors to my house for a Christmas party. It was a beautiful and heart-warming time. I mean that seriously. My heart felt warmed and full by the end of the night. I was as content as I have ever been.

Another memory that will never leave me is a visit to a Japanese conversation partner's host family's home while I was in college. We ate delicious Japanese cuisine, talked, laughed, and then spent the rest of the evening around the fireplace listening to the host father transfix us with story after story.

This Thanksgiving, my family is coming to my house. My parents will be here. My older brother and his family will be here. And my Chinese "daughter" will be here as well. The food will be great – of this I have no doubt. The time spent together, talking, laughing, and feasting on all that God has done in our lives will be even better. I am and always will be thankful for times like that.

Gowdy Cannon



Something out of the way of faith and family that I am very thankful for is fantasy literature. And notably, I am thankful for my wife and REO for influencing me to read several classic works that turned me into a fan. More than TV and movies, a good fantasy book really stirs my heart and mind at the same time.

It goes beyond entertainment to me. I have no doubt I am a better preacher because of fantasy literature. Just this past Sunday I was preaching about how God works in spite of injustice and is going to right all wrongs one day and out of nowhere I blurted out "Aslan is on the move!" And I appreciated a few people in the crowd nodding and smiling in response.

I also have no doubt reading about humans, dwarves, elves, and hobbits becoming a fellowship has very creatively kept a vision in my mind of what a church can be with ethnic

diversity. I would love to have a church filled with English, Spanish and Polish speakers together on a spiritual journey with a common goal. And Tolkien ignites my imagination when I read him.

And then there is just the way my wife and I bond over fantasy literature. We've talked about books, watched movies and even taken trips to London and Orlando just because J.K. Rowling wrote a fantasy world, good vs. evil epic.

I'm very thankful for the color that these books add to my life, my marriage, and my ministry.

Debbi Atwood Sexton



I am thankful for Starbucks blonde roast, unsweetened, mellow and soft cold brew coffee.

Years ago, I fell in "like" with iced coffee and since then, I've spent countless dollars on little glass bottles of Starbucks frappes. After I realized that I had spent about \$2,751.00 on those little bottles, I tried making it myself! Not great, but I drank it anyway because of, you know, money. Eventually, I fell off the wagon and started buying the bigger bottles! At this point, I was an addict and figured there was no AA for coffeeholics.

However, God is all-knowing, all-wise, all-seeing and He cares about our life's crises! Someone, somewhere, with the help of

the Holy Spirit, no doubt, had the brilliant idea to stock the shelves with Starbucks cold brew that costs under \$5.00 for 6-8 servings!! It has rocked my world. I can now have iced coffee every morning for a fraction of the price of those little bottles of liquid gold. My wallet, my bank account and my husband are extremely happy!!

“The only thing I know for sure about today is coffee. Everything else is just wild speculation.” – Nanea Hoffman

In case you didn't know, coffee has a spiritual origin!!

C.O.F.F.E.E

Christ Offers Forgiveness to Everyone Everywhere

We are handling the end of the week a little differently. If you are a regular reader, you know that on Fridays we publish The Five. As today and tomorrow most of us at REO, as well as most of our readers, are busy with friends, family, and loved ones, we have opted to combine our Thanksgiving feature with The Five, except it will not be published on Friday. Instead, we are running it today.

As you may have noticed, there are only four blurbs above. This is where you come in. In the comment section below tell us what you are thankful for. It can be something serious or it can be something as simple, yet life-changing, as indoor plumbing. Without you, this is just The Four that was published on the wrong day, and that would not be cool at all. So, lend a hand, help us out, and make this the greatest REO article ever!

Happy Thanksgiving!

REO Top Ten: Pies

Thanksgiving may primarily be about a heart attitude, but is there any image we associate more with the day than food? And is there any food other than turkey that we think about more than dessert? And is there any dessert we love more at Thanksgiving than pie?

With that in mind, REO had another round of voting with abrasive arguments, snide comments and manhood questioning. All over pie. Here are the ten that came out on top, in reverse order:

10. Apple Pie



Gowdy and I had a hard fought battle over who would write a tribute to the goodly apple pie. In the end, I slew him with my gleaming scimitar and then ate some apple pie. Kidding. I didn't slay him and I haven't had apple pie in some time.

I have never made an apple pie, but I have had the honor and privilege of being on the receiving end of masters of the art of apple pie cookery. In my mind, there are few pies as American as apple pie. Maybe pumpkin, pecan, or cherry. For my money, though, apple pie beats out these worthy opponents as far as U.S. citizenship. The apple pie can be deserved in a variety of different and very delicious ways. I have personally had so many superb types and styles that it is difficult to say an apple pie absolutely has to be in such and such a way to be a work of art. Two things, however, I do consider crucial in all varieties of apple pie: 1) A good, substantial crust and 2) a side helping of vanilla ice cream. This second is an extremely important issue. There is no adequate substitute. Anything else is uncivilized and un-American. (Ben Plunkett)

9. Key Lime Pie



I will be the first to admit that Key Lime pie is not for everyone. Unfortunately, all great people and even great foods

have their detractors. After all, many are called, but few are chosen. If you like a bit of sour with all that sweet then this is the dessert for you. That delicious graham cracker crust puts it over the top. If Key Lime pie is wrong then I don't want to be right. (Mike Lytle)

8. Cherry Pie



Maybe apple pie is more “all American” but cherry pie tastes so much better that it should be the pie that represents our great nation in all international pie competitions. Nothing says THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA better than a homemade cherry pie with lattice crust cooling on the window sill of a little house out in the country. Topped with vanilla ice cream or even whipped cream cherry pie never disappoints. The awful 80s rock band Warrant named a terrible song (and album) after this great dessert but even that travesty could not ruin it for me. My only regret is that I did not fight harder to move this higher up on our list. (Mike Lytle)

7. Snickers Pie



Snickers won our best candy bracket so the built-in taste of Snickers in anything is going to be gold. I didn't grow up with it in pie form so for the last few years I have had to make up for decades of no Snickers pie. I often look for Snickers flavored anything when going to a place that offers deserts and I am often rewarded. So putting the best candy with one of the best forms of a dessert is a can't miss. And it didn't miss, landing in our Top Ten. (Gowdy Cannon)

6. Cheesecake



Back in 2016 I did a March Madness bracket on best dessert and cheesecake won. By a landslide. It dominated the field like the '98 Yankees. The final score of the championship was 74-43. It was like watching Reagan vs. Mondale.

I heartily concurred with the result. Candy excluded, I don't know that there is anything I enjoy more for the old sweet tooth than a well-done cheesecake. Having Eli's and the Cheesecake Factory close to my Chicago address is sublime. Heck, I'll even take the \$8.99 version from Aldi. Cheesecake is that good.

True story: one of my friends that used to live in Chicago wept the first time she saw a cheesecake at Eli's. Literally cried. I mean real tears, streaming down the face as if watching the *Friends* episode where Ross and Rachel break up. What more can you say for this dessert? (Gowdy Cannon)

5. Peanut Butter Pie



I've always enjoyed Peanut Butter pie. I'm a big fan of pie and of peanut butter, so the combination of the two is right in my wheelhouse. That said, a few years ago, I was at my mother's house and she had baked a pie earlier that day from a new recipe. It was a peanut butter pie with around half the sugar as the typical peanut butter pie. My mom is a great cook but I doubted that a pie with half the sugar would be something I would enjoy. I also was pretty confident it was another of my mother's attempts to help me to do something about some of my baby fat that had proven dreadfully difficult to get rid of. [1. Side note: When baby fat hangs around for nearly 40 years, can we honestly still call it baby fat? I contend that's a bit of a gray area.] My love of pie overruled my suspicion of my mother's true motives and I ate the pie. After two pieces, I pushed away from the table with complete confidence that it was the best peanut butter pie I had ever tasted. (Phill Lytle)

4. Fudge



We were unable to find a volunteer to write the blurb for Fudge Pie, even though it finished in our top five. So, in place of another well-written, witty, and intelligent blurb, we are going to peel back the curtain and let you see how the sausage is made at RE0. Here is a sampling of our discussion about who should write the blurb:

Mike Lytle: *I like fudge pie alright but not enough to write a blurb for it. Who was pushing it during the bracket?*

Ben Plunkett: *Good question. I don't even remember ever eating it.*

Phill Lytle: *Fudge beat out:*

Banana Cream (1st round)

Strawberry (2nd round)

Peanut Butter (3rd round)

It lost to Pecan in the Final Four.

I'm pretty sure I voted for it in the first two rounds as I don't like those other pies. I know I voted for Peanut Butter over it. (I was the only one evidently as PB lost 1-5 against Fudge in the elite 8.)

Ben Plunkett: *What in the world was I thinking? Not only haven't I tried Fudge Pie, I love Peanut Butter Pie.*

after a few minutes of doing a bit more research on how the
vote went down...

Phill Lytle: *I was wrong. I voted for Fudge. I know why. At that time, I hadn't tasted my mom's Peanut Butter pie – which is far superior to any Fudge pie I have ever had. Ben, you voted for PB over fudge. You were the lone PB supporter.*

Nathan Patton: *FWIW (I don't know if it's already been mentioned, but I'm too lazy to check) today is National Peanut Butter Fudge Day... also National Absurdity Day, though that's not as relevant... though maybe it is...*

And there's your blurb for Fudge Pie.

3. Chess Pie



Chess pie is above all the tired and mealy-mouthed protestations made by foodies, elitists, and health conscious. They decry its simplicity. They denounce its unashamed reliance on ingredients we have been told are no longer acceptable to a refined and mature palate. Chess pie hears their high-pitched, meddlesome squawking and rises above the fray. Chess pie hears the noise and responds with silence. Chess pie is itself the answer. Before its face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?

Check mate. (Phill Lytle)

2. Pumpkin Pie



This remains by far my favorite kind of pie. My love affair with this slice of lusciousness began with my mom's masterpieces. These have yet to be beat in mine eyes. However, (and this an incredibly strong "however.") there is something about any pumpkin pie when capably done that earns it this elite place on our list. That flawless blend of pumpkin and spices. That sweet, sweet ooze in the mouth. That harnessing in pie form of the fall and Thanksgiving spirit. Perfection. (Ben Plunkett)

1. Pecan Pie



A great pecan pie can be difficult to make. Actually, I don't know this to be true from first-hand experience. I've learned it's best to only be involved in the of eating of pies and not the process of making pies. Which is fortunate for me because I get to reap the delicious rewards from excellent bakers like my wife and mother. It's also fortunate for the world because they are not subjected to my pitiful culinary creations. Some of my baking attempts ended up as twisted monstrosities. I've yet to see masses brandishing pitchforks and torches gathered outside my house, though the sight wouldn't surprise me. But I digress! My taste buds tell me that not all pies are created equal. Some varieties are better than others. And even among a specific variety like pecan, some turn out superior to others. They also inform me that when a pecan pie has just the right balance of taste, consistency, and sweetness then it's the pie which all others look up to in envy! Like so many things in life balance is the key. "I am one with the Pie and the Pie is with me." "May the Pie be with you... always." (Mark Sass)

We Have This Hope

Another day, another mass shooting.

Another day, another senseless act of violence and unspeakable evil.

How do we respond when the world around us feels like it is collapsing in front of our eyes? How do react when evil seems to triumph every day? Every hour? Every minute?

We are confronted with an almost unrelenting surge of evil – a tidal wave of horror stories and despicable acts. Acts that pierce our hearts with a bone-wearying sadness. Acts that just keep coming, over and over. We feel so overwhelmed, so broken, and so alone, that we feel nothing at all.

Or maybe that is just my response. I hesitate to speak for anyone else because we all process things differently, but based on conversations I have had, most of us fall somewhere within that range of emotions. We are horrified, sad, angry, and confused. We feel the onslaught of evil and we grieve. We grieve for those suffering the fullest effects of these profound demonstrations of depravity. We grieve because we feel helpless in all of it. We grieve because we know this level of wickedness is not something that can be contained by laws, regulations, or rhetoric. We grieve because our ability to grieve is slowly dying.

Where does this leave us? As the church, what should our answer be to the question of this great evil? From what I can see, we feel so very small in all of this. We feel alone and isolated. We are islands surrounded by darkness and death. To paraphrase one of my favorite films, *The Two Towers*, “What can we do against such reckless hate?”

I have many more questions than I have answers. I have no perfectly crafted words that will allow any of this to make

sense, to hurt less, or to move us more. What I have is likely insufficient, but as I have thought about all this over the past few days, and at various times prior to the most recent tragedy, I keep coming back to a few truths that have helped me. Perhaps they can help others as well.

I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

I never want to tell someone how they should react to anything and I hope I am not doing that now. That said, when the next random act of wanton violence occurs, even if I am numb from all the previous atrocities, I know I should be moved in some manner. Now, that will likely look different for me than it does for anyone else, but as a child of the King, it is my call to be like my Father and my Father is deeply moved when evil seems to rule the day. God grieves for the broken, the hurting, and the neglected. He champions the orphan and the widow (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 34:18). His example should move me to care, to respond, and to grieve, even when I don't feel like it. Even when I have been desensitized to the evil in our midst. I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

Perhaps you are like many I have spoken to who feel so battered by the constant stream that you cannot seem to really care anymore. I've been there and in some ways, I am still there. One thing that I have noticed with my response, is that it is much more spiritually rewarding to avoid finger-pointing in the wake of a tragedy. I feel less and internalize less when I spend all of my energy blaming this person or that, this group or that, this worldview or that. I'm not saying there are no people, groups, or worldviews responsible for many of the most heinous acts we are witnessing. I'm simply stating that when I only point fingers at the monsters outside of my gate, I cloak myself in self-delusion and self-

righteousness. For each of us, “there but for the grace of God go I” should be a constant refrain. We are all capable of great evil. We are all susceptible to giving in to our fallen nature. That knowledge should spur us to repentance, thanksgiving, and grace. We shouldn’t hate those that do evil. We should mourn that sin has disfigured the image of God in their lives almost beyond recognition. We should long for renewal – of those that do this great evil but also of the world itself. These tragedies are stark reminders how far from the Kingdom the fallen world truly is and it should be our ever-present mission to bridge that gap.

Prayer should be our first response.

Secondly, we need to pray. In today’s culture, that sounds so weak and inadequate and there are many who have responded with animosity and derision to calls for prayer. To the world at large, prayer is synonymous with naïveté and inaction, when the opposite is actually true. To a believer, prayer should be our first response. Our first defense. Our greatest and most powerful weapon. (I Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 29:12, Matthew 5:44)

Prayer does not always come easily to me. Or better said, my prayer life is too self-focused and too limited. If you are like me and are active in your local church, you hear prayer requests often. I commit to pray for these requests and I almost always follow through. But my prayers are usually quick, little, one-and-done affairs. I fail, time and again, to go boldly to the throne of God with those requests. These times of tragedy remind me how flawed and undisciplined my prayer life usually is. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would commit to seeking the face of the Lord in an intense and focused manner, we would see God move in ways we cannot imagine. I am also convinced that we don’t pray that

way. If anything good can come from a tragedy like a mass shooting (and if you believe in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God you have to believe that He can use it for good) then perhaps believers falling on their knees in committed and fervent supplication will be the first step towards that.

We are never alone.

Finally, we are never alone. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned how isolated these events can make us feel. We see example after example of humanity hurting, killing, and destroying and it convinces us that we are alone. That there is no remnant in the land to stem the tide. That is a lie from hell itself. A dangerous and powerful lie. Do not believe it. Regardless how you feel, how things appear, you are never alone.

I Kings 19 tells us the aftermath of the Mount Carmel story. The prophet Elijah has just experienced one of the most amazing and powerful displays of God's power. Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and the LORD answered by sending fire from heaven to show the land who the true King of Israel was. A short time later, Elijah is by himself, hiding in a cave, and he prays to God, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." He was convinced that he was the only faithful person left. Without reading too much into the passage, I've always wondered why Elijah felt this way. The Lord responds to him and tells him that there are 7,000 others that never bowed the knee to Baal. 7,000! I don't want to sound flippant, but it sounds like Elijah needed to find himself a good church home! He felt isolated in part because he had isolated himself. There are too many in our

society that do this as well. They do not connect with a local body of believers. They do not feel the need or importance of putting roots down in a local faith community. So when tragedy strikes, of course they feel alone.

But even bigger than that, when we are disconnected from the worldwide church, we do not see how God is moving outside of our small sphere of living. We might be plugged into our local body, but we still feel cut off from the larger body of Christ. In some ways we are islands, but each of our small islands are joined together by the life-stream of the blood of Christ. These horrific acts should spur us to stronger connections, clearer focus, and more passionate action. Our light should shine brighter. Our prayers should be bolder. The importance of building the Kingdom should stand in stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us. Our lives should be a constant and unified declaration of grace, hope, and love to a broken and fallen world.

That's all I have so far. I wish I could write something that would help make sense of things. I can't. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to the constant barrage myself. But these few things have helped me, so hopefully, they can help you. I'll leave you with the words from the writer of Hebrews. It's a powerful reassurance of our position and value to God. When life is chaos we have hope – a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Let that be a comfort to you.

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.
Hebrews 6:18 -19

Why We Can't Get Enough of the '80s

Within the span of a few weeks in Summer of 2010, Hollywood gave us movies by the name of *The A-Team* and *The Karate Kid* wrapped around a 7-game NBA Finals between the Boston Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers. I posted to Facebook "I'm going to miss the 80s when the Summer is over!"

Oh, 1980s. We love you so much. We love you so much that we've never truly let you go.

The meteoric rise of the TV Show *Stranger Things* has proven this true. Don't worry; this isn't another article about the show. It's just to say that for all the hoopla, one recurring theme you hear fans talk about is the nonstop '80s references. For people like me, who love the '80s, it is absolutely part of the appeal. Even Will's bowl haircut.

But *Stranger Things* isn't even close to alone on this. As people my age have begun to become producers in Hollywood, the love for the decade has become common. There are so many 80s references in *Psych* I cannot even count them or catch all of them. But there's no mistaking why Ralph Macchio has a guest spot on the show or why Shawn once said "ding ding" to Carl Weathers.

I have often and loudly proclaimed the '80s as the best decade for just about everything. It was, in a phrase of the times, rad. Here is why:

The Music

I'll brawl to the death over this one. The only time I have ever felt cool in the history of my life was in second grade riding in the back of my brother Tracy's T-top Mustang on the way to school, listening to "Money for Nothing" by Dire Straights. And "The Power of Love" by Huey Lewis and the News. And "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor.

Does life get any better? I submit that it does not!

I grew up dreaming about the day I would dance with my wife to "Can't Fight This Feeling" by REO Speedwagon and "Lost In Your Eyes" by Debbi Gibson. And you better believe I fulfilled this dream with Kayla in 2014. I can take you to the exact spot in Walker-Gamble Elementary when I first heard "Every Rose Has Its Thorns" by Poison. And who among us doesn't automatically feel like dancing without inhibition when we hear "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" or singing in unison with a huge group of people during "Come On Eileen"?

Some of my favorite memories ever are being at karaoke hearing Josh Crowe sing "Total Eclipse of the Heart". Or singing "You Spin Me Right Round" at the top of my lungs at 9 years old without an ounce of self-consciousness. And to go all Hebrews 11 on you, what more can I say? Time doesn't permit to tell you about Bon Jovi, Tom Petty, Aerosmith, U2, Prince and Guns N' Roses.

I'm positive in a Top 100 song decade vs. decade battle, the '80s would annihilate the competition. And if you still doubt that I offer up the following as a mic drop:





and



Television

I'll be honest: in any list of my favorite shows of all-time, the #1 show (*Seinfeld*) is from the '90s and most of the rest of the Top 10 will be from this century. Yet despite this, back then we still had no shortage of shows that were perfect for that time. *Family Ties*, *Who's the Boss?*, *Growing Pains*, *The Cosby Show* and even lesser known shows like *ALF* (I had the

lunchbox in 4th grade) and 227 (with Hal Williams as Lester Jenkins) were weekly viewing for my family. I have often said that I know my parents made us work when we were children, and we played outside a lot but it seems like if you name a show from the 80s, we watched it. And we loved it. Who didn't love Tuti from *Facts of Life*?



TV Theme Songs and Intros

Half of our [TV Theme Song Top 10 list](#) features shows from the '80s. Because that decade was the golden age of introducing shows by putting the perfect music with the actors' names in real life. Some told epic background stories (*The A-Team*), others gave welcoming, feelgood invitations (*Cheers*), some were impossible not to sing along with (*The Jeffersons*) and others just played cool music over cool video (*Magnum PI*, *Miami Vice*). They just don't make TV Intros like they used to.



Saturday Morning Cartoons

Here is another category where the '80s dominates the field. It's hard to fathom the fact that for a short time in my life I got to watch *ThunderCats*, *He-Man*, *Muppet Babies*, *Transformers* and *G.I. Joe* all in the same week. We all grew up not just watching these shows, but playing them outside, pretended to be the characters, owning the action figures and using our imaginations in a way that seems foreign these days.



And it wasn't just make believe that we learned. We all learned wisdom and life knowledge and that "Knowing is half the battle." (G.I. JOE!!!)



A few years later brought the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Duck Tales*, cementing this decade as the most prolific cartoon decade of all-time.

Movies

Again, other decades can compete in this category but any decade that gave us *Back to the Future*, *Die Hard*, *The Goonies*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Karate Kid*, *Rambo*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Indiana Jones*, *The Princess Bride*, *Top Gun* and *The Terminator* has to be on the short list for best ever. Not to mention that many consider *Rocky III* and *IV* to be the best of those movies and the '80s introduced us to Yoda and a more authoritative, finalized version of Darth Vader. And that there is widespread belief that *Empire* is the greatest Star Wars film.

Beyond that the 80s brought us timeless coming of age pieces

like *The Breakfast Club* and *16 Candles*, child acting legends like Corey Haim and Corey Feldman, and some of the best fantasy ever in *Labyrinth* and *The NeverEnding Story*. David Bowie was a legend that probably didn't put his pants on one leg at a time. And man I had a crush on Jennifer Connelly. And it's a shame that kids today will never know the thrill of going to the local video rental store and getting *Spaceballs* for the 17th time. Ridiculous speed! My hometown had 300 people growing up, one traffic light and zero fast food places. But we had two video rental stores!

And again, lest there be any doubt, go find *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* and watch it. I rest my case.



Professional Wrestling

Ric Flair and Four Horsemen...Hulk Hogan slamming Andre the Giant...Dusty Rhodes, The Road Warriors, The Ultimate Warrior, Hacksaw Jim Duggan (H00000!!!!), The Rock N Roll Express vs. The Midnight Express, Randy Macho Man "000H YEAH" Savage (wrestlers made a lot of random, boisterous sounds but they were super cool), chairs thrown in the ring, steel cages, referees getting knocked out, bad guys cheating, heroes dashing in from the dressing room...what a time to be alive! If my dad wanted to me punish me, a very effective way was to

take away Saturday wrestling.



NBA Basketball

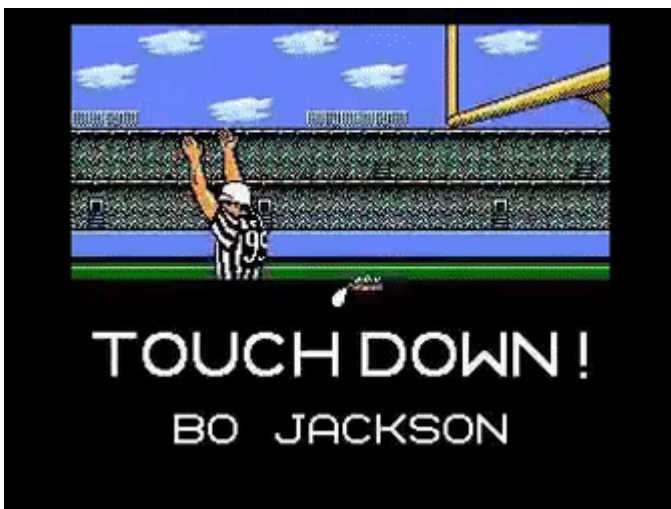
There were great moments all across sports this decade by people like Jordan, Montana and Kirk Gibson, but all decades have great moments. Only one decade has ever given us Lakers vs. Celtics, Celtics vs. 76ers, Lakers vs. Pistons, Celtics vs. Pistons, and Larry vs. Magic. The modern NBA era is close, closer than any other. But the NBA in the '80s is about as white-hot as any league could be. Somewhere between Bird telling all of the Lakers he was going to make a three in all their faces in a Finals game and Kevin McHale giving Kurt Rambis a Russian Sickle (classic 80's wrestling move), the league entered rarefied realms of entertainment. Hearing the Garden Crowd chant "BEAT L-A!! BEAT L-A!!!" is something I'm thrilled to have witnessed live.



Video Games

Two Words: TECMO BOWL

And before that there was John Elway's QB. And before that "Ten Yard Fight". And before that the Atari football game where you had to make the block men face forward before each play. What an evolution!



And there is so much more! In some ways, I miss the 80s the same way Toto misses the rains down in Africa. Yet in others, I don't really have to. Thanks to *Stranger Things* and *Psych* and the magic of the internet, I can transport myself back in time on a whim.

Do you remember the '80s? What did you love most about it?