

Dear Friends:

Jill is helping me out here because I guess I have picked up the dreaded Winter Virus. I decided to try to sit right down and right you all a letter. I hope that this might work. So here is my letter to the Church at Garrettsville, borrowing today from the Letter to the Churches at Ephesus from long ago.

I realize that I have been saying something more and more in the last 20 years. What is this phrase? It is this: **CHRISTIANITY IS BIG**. Well, what does that mean? Here is an example. For 32 years now, while leading adult Sunday School classes I sometimes ask the group this fun question: what is Christianity? I ask it with innocence. There should be no trouble with asking such a question. Well, as you can imagine, once the responses start coming in, sometimes it gets a little chippy. I normally hear the following: *“It means to follow the 10 Commandments.”* *“It means to believe in Jesus.”* *“It means to live a good life.”* *“It means to believe in the Apostles Creed.”* For some they say *“It means to be baptized.”* Others say *“It means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.”* Some actually say *“Being a Christian requires that you must speak in tongues.”* Some just say *“You must be a believer.”* Others will say *“You must be born anew.”*

There are in fact people who cling to different things in this short list which leads me to believe that Christianity is in fact really big. It seems to have a lot of parts, and I think that they are moving parts, which does complicate things. But here we are, the first Sunday of a new calendar year, one of these Church **holy days**, one that I have come to appreciate so much, the Sunday when we usually think about the coming of Three Guys on camels across the desert. We say that they are wise. Sometimes we say that they are kings. We tend to focus on these men that they are bringing special gifts, although somewhat odd gifts, especially the last of the three. We sing songs about these 3 camel riders, we read their story (which only appears in Matthew’s version of the story, which should make us ask some questions all on its own). We have them in our manger scenes, even though the manger is **ONLY** in Luke’s story, and there are no wise men there. Just frightened shepherds, animals, angels overhead, and the Holy Family. But we tend to mix our stories [did I mention that Christianity is big?]

Is there some other name that we call these three Wise Men? We have a special name for them, although we might now have checked to see what it actually means. The NT actually calls these visitors “magi-oi” which means “star gazers from the East, probably Babylon.” They are experts in watching the stars at night and the movement of planets in order to predict the future.

A funny thing about this is that this practice is frowned upon in the Bible; the Book of Deuteronomy speaks very harshly of “astrologers.” Let’s just cut to the chase here: these men might be horoscope people who are trying to figure out the meaning of life and the future by watching the night sky, or interpreting eclipses and other things. But amazingly, according to Matthew only, they come to find baby Jesus, and actually wander into some danger with Herod, who is truly a gangster and a bad man.

The keep part of all this that does not seem to get our attention is the identity of these Wise Men/Star-Watchers: who are they? Well, this much we do know... they are not Jewish, they are not connected to the people of Israel in any way. They are totally GENTILES. And this is the thing that makes this day so great. At that time, Gentiles were in the dark about the God of Life. They were worshipping all sorts of crazy things. To the south from Israel, the Arabic peoples were worshipping at least 350 different desert gods. The Babylonians had many different gods and goddesses. Who had any connection to the God of Creation, the One God of Life? Children of Abraham, eventually to be known as Jews.

Now, how great is it that at the birth of Jesus, foreign Star-Watchers come to bow before a little Jewish baby, born in the city of King David? They had never known anything of this One God of Creation. But now something made them go West, on their camels, to connect with something entirely different from anything they had ever known. This is Epiphany, the Unveiling and Revelation of the God of Israel to the non-Jewish people of the world. These three Magi-oi were the first to come to the party. And they brought gifts. They were happy, because their world had changed forever.

So this leads us to our explanation of why it all matters, this Epiphany. We only need to understand 2 concepts from Ephesians chapter 2, which is probably one of the crucial chapters in the NT. What are the 2 concepts? Let’s review. (get ready to read off the screen) [look at the early verses] The writer talks about being redeemed and rescued by the power and goodness of God. The first part here says that we do not and cannot save ourselves in any way. If we could, it would be spiritually dangerous, because in our human weakness, we would mess it up and turn it into something to brag about and hold over others. We cannot do this. We are rescued only by God’s Grace. But then we have part 2. The writer offers a little reminder of how the old world was. What great advantage did the Gentiles have? Nothing. As we were reminded long ago,

“remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Okay? What was so great about the past? We and our ancestors were without Christ, aliens from Israel, strangers to the Covenants of God, having no hope, and without God in the world! That about sums it up.

Where I come from, if you are in the dark, so lost that you don't even know you are lost, and then Someone comes to rescue you and brings you into the people, that has to be the best day ever. That is Epiphany. This is the day when we are reminded that our ancestors were on the outside looking in. Once per year we have this Sunday in order to give us a special flu shot, a shot that should make us humble and thankful for another year, until we have a chance to hear the story again. We who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. God used Jesus to be the special connector to our Gentile ancestors. We don't have to become Jewish to be connected to the God of Life.

Folks, I jokingly tell people that Christians in the world today are usually a little big for their britches. It was probably much worse 500 years ago, or even 1,000 years ago. The Church ruled the Holy Roman Empire, and it thought it was big stuff. There was not much humility. Of all religious groups of people in the world today, Christians should be naturally humble and gentle. 80% of our American society today wants no part of being in a Church family. I wonder how those 80% would describe “Christians” today, if we were to ask them. Do you think they would be quick to say *“Oh yes, Christians are humble and gentle”*? I fear they might have other things to say. Ask your friends who have no interest in who and what we are, ask them how they would describe “Christians.”

God loves us, and all the world. This is why God offers us tomorrow. The future comes, and we never have to stay where we have been. If in the past we have not been gentle and humble in our dealing with others, and with our sharing of our views on life, there is still time to fix it. We are picked last to come to God's party. Let's just be thankful that we received a ticket to attend. Happy Epiphany. I hope to see you all soon.

Sincerely, Rev. Rich