

Nativity of Our Lord (I)/Christmas Eve, Epistle, Year A

THE APPEARANCE OF GRACE

Titus 2:11-14

Nativity of Our Lord/Christmas Eve

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,
12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in
the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright,
and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the
manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus
Christ. 14 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Appearances

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Appearances Are Everything

If things look right, that means they are right. Right? How we appear to others can make the difference between whether we are accepted or rejected. So if we can appear acceptable, maybe we will be acceptable. Making a good impression is everything, right?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): What Will the Neighbors Think?

Our need to look good to others is connected to our concern about what others think of us. Are we smart enough, beautiful enough, fit enough, worldly enough to impress our neighbors?

What will our neighbors think?, we ask. But we aren't really concerned for our neighbor's welfare; beneath this question we're concerned about ourselves. When it comes to survival of the fittest, we want to be the fittest. Fixed on our own survival, we not only focus on our own needs, but we forget about how our actions affect others. Our lack of reverence for God and God's creation hurts those around us. With little self-control we leave a debris field of relationships in our wake. Neighbors be damned.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): What Does God Think? With all this concern for what the neighbors think, we have no time left to care about what God thinks. That doesn't make God happy. He is mystified by our self-concern. He is perplexed at how we treat our neighbors. And, worst of all, God is confounded by how we clutter our lives with self-concerned attempts to be enough. After all, wasn't it God who from "the beginning" called us "good," so that we could turn our attention beyond ourselves. Call ourselves godly? More like "godless"—meaning without God. And that's just hell.

PROGNOSIS: Appearance

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Grace of God But, wouldn't you know it? Right when we were getting all full of ourselves and empty of God, God interrupts by making his own appearance in the flesh—in a baby. What will the neighbors think about that?! Well, the angels explain: This child is born, not to dazzle the high and mighty or put on appearances, but to "bring salvation to all" (v. 11). "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" (v. 14). This baby isn't on the take; he isn't looking out for No. 1. He gives his life away, so that we may know what God looks and acts like: the grace of God appears in human flesh to show

us true godliness. And, as if that first appearance weren't enough, he appears after death so that we might see the "manifestation of the glory of our great God" (v. 13) in the resurrection.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Teaches Us

Looks aren't everything. Jesus doesn't show us God's glory just to dazzle us. That glory is meant to move us to faith. When we hear that God's plan is to bring us salvation, and that he is willing to give himself for the cause, we are changed. Suddenly our obsession with appearances seems shallow, regrettable even. We repent of our concern about whether others will think well of us. Instead, we are concerned about what God thinks? If God's grace (Jesus) has given us salvation, what will that already-given-grace look like in us? We're not worried about what the neighbors think, we are more concerned that God's thoughts may be our thoughts. Sounds pretty godly.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): A Glimpse of the Glory

Such godliness doesn't toot its own horn. It's not piety practiced in public or the godly bragging about self-control. It merely reflects Christ's appearance. So followers of Christ kneel in service. We renounce the passions that prevent us from caring for the neighbor. And in small but significant ways we manifest God's glory. The grace of God appears.