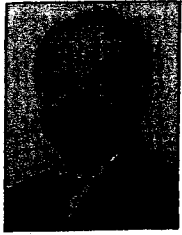


Living for Giving



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ANY SERIOUS CONSIDERATIONS OF Christian living must begin with God. The self-disclosive activities of God reveal that the nature of God is to give. From the beginning, to the center, to the end, giving is what God does. God made giving the sustaining principle of creation and life. This is evident in nature, where even that which is considered dead replenishes the earth and nourishes life. The sun gives, the atmosphere gives, the soil gives, the seed gives, the plant gives—life is a continuous giving cycle. Living is for giving.

Creation is an act of divine release for the living empowerment of all. Contrary to traditional approaches that project a creative being creating life as an exercise of power and sovereignty, establishing control and demanding glorification, the Christian testimony presents a God who does not control life, but gives life. God releases Godness for the purpose of creation. In the combined creation narratives of Genesis, one encounters the Creator who releases breath and energy and who shapes and invests in the life of the cosmos. Being is birthed by the acts of God as the creator offers life for life.

In giving for life, God establishes the authentic paradigm for powerful existence. Power is no longer a function of domination, control and hierarchical superiority. Power is characterized as possessing enough life and security in being that one can release life from one's center (breath), to offer and birth life in empty and lifeless space. The omnipotent God is so secure in being that God is not threatened by the giving of life to all life. Life flows from the giving of the greatest giver.

God's power does not diminish, restrict or limit life, but rather creates flourishing abundance. The power revealed in creation is not the power to be over, but rather the

power to be with: life-giving power. Real power neither destroys, kills, binds, nor takes, but rather fruitfully releases life-force to create, heal and restore.

The glorification of the truly powerful God is the product of neither coercion, external command nor divine demand. God is glorified by all that has experienced the life-giving power of the creator. The giving God has imprinted all of creation and the image of God in the living is giving. The heavens give and declare God's glory and everything that has breath

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(everything that has experienced God's giving) should give and praise God.

In creating humans in the divine image, God calls us to life-giving responsibility. We are made in the image and commanded to be fruitful and to multiply. To be fruitful is to be like God and to give of self to bring forth life. Reducing the meaning of fruitfulness to mere sociological significance obscures a critical theological point. When reduced to biological activity, fruitfulness and multiplication become expressions of reproductive activity and fertility. One would reflect God by having children only and, tragically, many believe that they authentically express their womanhood or manhood by simply having babies.

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While one must be careful not to diminish in any way the sanctity of human reproduction, one must note that fruitfulness is not a limited function of potency or fertility. Fruitfulness is the act of imaging God by giving one's life-principle to bring forth life in empty, lifeless spaces. To be fruitful is to experience the gift of life from the life giver and to live to give.

Fruitfulness is breathing life and offering light to those places where the

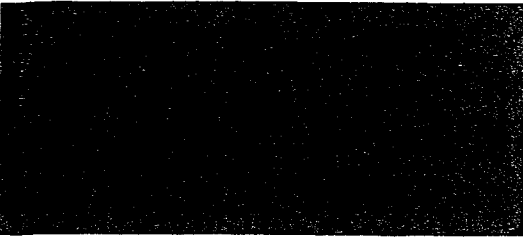
powers of death and darkness have staked a claim. "Be fruitful" is the original command and you shall be known by your fruit. Fruitful existence will enable creatures claiming and celebrating the image of God to move into "dying" communities, relationships and people and release life to bring forth life.

In this manner, humans become partners in creation; we are pro-creative. This is the original command, not just multiplication, but pro-creation. In the image of God, one gives life for the purpose of fostering and furthering life. This observation prompts the realization that one should not multiply until one is committed to being fruitful. Multiplication is not always pro-creative and it may take fruitful, pro-creative presences to offer abundant life to places and persons that simply "have" babies.

Humans are given life to give life in fruitful existence. With the blessing of life comes the responsibility of guarding and cultivating the garden. To guard the garden is to value, protect and care for the life given; to cultivate the garden is to work, invest and give oneself in such a way that life continues to come forth. Death and separation enter the garden when we stop giving and focus on getting and taking.


In the beginning, we are fruitfully relating with God, fruitfully living with





self, fruitfully communicating with neighbor, and fruitfully cultivating with nature. We live in a relational cycle of life. The cycle is broken by the abdication of our responsibility and ceding authority to those seductive elements of a free moral universe that invite our acceptance of and participation in that which is alien to the Creator's desire, design and intent. The snake symbolizes these seductive elements and, when seduced, we surely die. The snake distorts the character of the life-given and the value of the gift of life.

The snake presents a God who is neither giving nor with you, but rather a God who is over you trying to keep you down and limit your possibilities.



The giving God becomes a withholding, threatened God. The snake presents a lie and paints a picture that is not in harmony with the God revealed in creation. The snake not only lies about God, he lies about the character of human creation. The value and flourishing of humanity is diminished and we are projected as denied, inadequate beings who can only experience real power by getting and possessing something outside of ourselves. We believe the lie and the cycle of life giving is broken. Death and separation enter the world and the abundant life of giving is diminished

to taking and dying.

Succumbing to the lie, we are distanced from the God who is with us and hide from a God who is beyond us and over us. We now are separated from our true selves and we are ashamed of the bodies that once glorified God. We are now in conflict and competing for place with those who were once partners and viewed as gifts from the creator. We now struggle with nature and destroy the garden.

We now play power games of coercion, manipulation and control by modeling the

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over-God, repressing our bodies, competing with neighbor and warring with nature. One no longer lives by giving, but one functions by controlling and getting something outside of self (fruit of the tree of knowledge). Value is in what you get, have, keep and control, not in who you are. Neither celebrating life nor giving life, we try to be somebody by getting something. Rather than giving fruit (be fruitful) and offering life we take fruit (eat) and enter death. Rather than imaging God and giving life, we struggle to be gods and die.

This is the real, tragic consequence of the fall. We take into ourselves God-

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alienated knowledge and make it the foundation of our discourse, even our theology. Theology constructed from the *logos* of the Fall gives rise to snakeology. Perpetuating the Fall, snakeology teaches that God is the powerful ruler over you who is threatened by human self expression and is glorified when you stay in your place. Power is when you can control in the manner of the supreme God. The more power you have, the more you can get and

the more power you get and keep the more value you have. Domination is divinized, superiority is sacralized and stratification is spiritualized. In fallenness, we glorify and institute as the Creator's design a competitive hierarchy where we seek to move up while keeping others in their place.

Fallen, alienated knowledge speaks constantly of your wretchedness and reminds you that any move away from self-negation is an act of pride that causes you to slip further into the morass of sin. The snake splits the body from the spirit and engenders a body-negating syndrome in your religion where you are "ashamed" of the body and view it as a source of evil that must be repressed and controlled. The lie has us suggesting that the destruction of the world is a sign of the coming God and the violation of the beauty and life of the garden called earth is a divine necessity.

Embracing the lie of the snake, everywhere we were connected, related and one, we become broken and fractured. We are separated from God, separated from neighbor, separated from self, and separated from nature. In this state, our understanding of living is ruled by principles of hierarchical power, control, personal benefit and getting. The distortions about God and ourselves, in practice and precept, are rooted in the consequences of the "fall" and our captivity to snakeology.

Our hope and joy rest in the fact that the snake cannot alter the character of our God. God still releases Godness for the empowerment of all creation. God is still the power-filled giver who is so secure in and so full of life that the Creator lives to give. God still gives life where death tries to stake ("snake") a claim. The living God is experienced as the one who so loved the world that he gives and who is revealed in the seed of a woman that bruises the head of the serpent. Jesus Christ is the son and the seed who exposes the lie of the snake and provides the resource for the recovery of the true God and our true selves. He is fully God and fully human. This I believe! Δ

This article has been adapted from Dr. Kinney's 1998 Mitchell Lecture, "What and Why I Do Not Believe."