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ANGEL

by Quinn G. Caldwell

Buried right in the middle of that word "evangelism" is another word: *angel*. It is no accident, either of etymology or of meaning. To do evangelism means simply this: it means to accept the call to be God's messenger; to bear the Word of love to a tempestuous, broken, and beautiful world. It means simply this: to be an angel... **Page 7**

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by Rolanda Ward

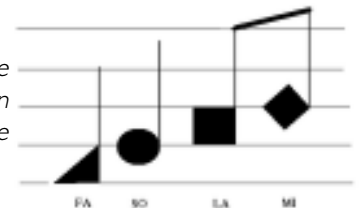
. . . their lives are filled to the max with lots of additional responsibilities and pressures that were non-existent back in the day... **Page 10.**

**THE SACRED HARP:
 A Treasured American Institution**
by Harry L. Huff

The room is spare but warm, with rows of chairs arranged in a square in the center, a hollow space within the square. I am greeted by the meeting's organizer and confirm that, yes, I am here for the singing. He directs me to where I can pick up copies of the hymnals: two hardcover books, wider than they are tall, one with a maroon cover and one in black. The maroon book is inscribed with golden letters proclaiming "The Sacred Harp." This is why I am here – to join in the near two hundred year old tradition of indigenous American song that is Sacred Harp singing.

Such was the initial experience of a young Brit, James Croft, who is one of the students this spring in my Harvard Divinity School class, *The American Spirit in Music*. One of the requirements of the class is to take a field trip to a Sacred Harp singing [sometimes also called "fasola singing" or "shape note singing"]. For his mid-term paper entitled "The Profane Harp: The Sacred Harp Tradition as a Model for Secular Musical Fellowship Communities," he wrote about his participation in the singing held monthly in Brookline on 2nd Sundays from 4 to 7 pm at Christ Church Unity. To give you the feeling of what singing in such a Sacred Harp group is like, I will let him tell you the rest of his story.

I flip through the book and recognize the unique characteristics of the music: the notes on the staff are drawn as shapes, three repeated shapes plus one single shape making up the notes of the musical scale (Figure 1 & 2).



The signal is given to take our places in the square, and I occupy a seat in the second row of the side of the square where the tenors (and some sopranos) sit, and we will carry the melody in the songs sung this evening (Figure 2).

We begin singing with a small number of participants and, initially, I'm confident. I am a trained classical singer with many years of experience, I was a choral scholar at the University of Cambridge, and I am a proficient sight-reader and veteran of many excellent choirs. I am fairly certain I will be able to read this music with ease and get stuck into it right away. But as I try to sing the very first song, beginning, as is traditional, with a sing-through using the 'fasola' syllables appropriate to each shape, I find that the challenge of matching the sounds to the shapes is far harder than it should be, and my mouth stumbles. As we progress to singing the verses, I realize that the words are all on the "wrong" line, requiring me to look back and forward between my notes and the words to attach to them. I'm out of practice in reading ahead in the music – it's been years since I sang hymns in church which required this skill! It's three whole songs before I realize that I'm singing the wrong line entirely, the harmony rather than the melody. I feel like a complete fool.

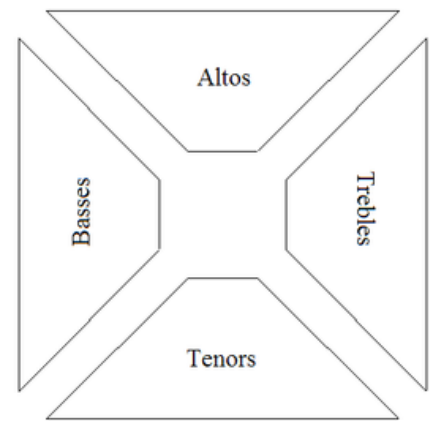


Figure 2 Sacred Harp C Scale using shape notes (left) and Seating arrangement for singing (right). Illustrations from Wikipedia.org.

But it's impossible not to be swept up in the sound, and I feel myself finding the rhythm of the leader; the syllables slowly slotting into place. It feels great just to SING! I feel myself becoming more competent, and with simple pieces I can fit the "sols", "las" and "fas" into place. The occasional "mi" still throws me off, but I feel more comfortable as I contribute to the rising sound.

And what a sound – loud, full, slightly edgy, almost harsh, with broad open fifths and meaty thirds, with the occasional 7th adding a harmonic twist. This effect is amplified by the octave doubling in the treble and tenor sections, which creates a remarkably rich, broad noise that seems to expand around you as you sing.

I find myself singing in a completely different voice – my singing teacher would kill me – a more nasal sound, like the folk-songs of northern England I sometimes like to listen to. My foot is thumping on the hard wood floor; and before long I join others in beating time to the music, my hand knifing up and down in the air.

After about an hour, I feel the need to lead the group in song – I want to be in the middle of that square, to hear the sound come at me from all sides, to be within its beating heart and feel the puissant pulse rush round me. But what can I lead? I've never sung the shapes before! My friend reminds me that we did sing a least one song in class, and I remember I still have the music with me, annotated with the fa's and sol's! I scabble for my photocopy of number 45, "New Britain," more commonly known as "Amazing Grace" (Figure 3).

After reading through the transliterations of the shapes to boost my confidence, I ask the group's organizer if I might lead a song. He says, "Sure!" offering to come into the square with me for "moral support." I gratefully accept his offer, and wonder when I might muster up the final courage to call out my number – I'm thinking I will leave it a couple more songs at least, or perhaps wait until after the break. But after a mere moment, the leader suggests "Now seems like a good time – there's a lull" and, before I know it, a voice has called out "Forty-Five!" I'm on my feet before I realize that it was my voice, sounding surprisingly assured given how nervous I feel. The organizer gives me a few words of advice (which wash over me in a blur), and I call out the verse numbers – "One, three and five!" Pitch is established by the tenor leaders, and we're off.

I decided to do as I had seen done by a few of the leaders at this gathering and turn as I conduct, trying to make eye contact with some of the singers. I feel exhilarated as I catch their eyes, knowing that mine are shining just as brightly with the invigoration of the song, the sound of which is now hitting me from all four sides at once. The experience is intoxicating,

enhanced by the prismatic paintings behind the singers, by the looks on their faces, the feeling of my blood pumping in my ears, breath bursting from my lungs, crazy colors on the wall, vibrations in the gut, tingle in the hands, song in my soul. This is singing. I am enveloped by the song, carried up by it, exulted and exulting.

When I arrive back in my apartment, I realize that I have walked the whole way from the T-stop to my front door without any conscious recollection, my mind filled with the sounds of the shapes and, as I type these words, my fingers continue to buzz with their energy.

This professor could not have been prouder of "turning on" yet another young person to the joys of Sacred Harp, a genre that has haunted me since my earliest youth. I was raised in the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee, the descendent of generations of shape-note practitioners.

My maternal grandfather, William Burnette Lewelling had been a singing-school teacher of the Old Harp (a more rarefied version of shape-note singing, utilizing seven, not just four shapes – a practice confined to three counties in the mountains of East Tennessee). He would ride on horseback from mountain hamlet to mountain hamlet, setting up shop in the local church or school, and would spend two weeks at a time teaching the shapes every night to the entire community.

He died in the 1930s, so I never knew him. My mother and all of her siblings could sing and play the piano by ear and read music – but only by shapes. She sadly viewed this quality as being a mark of poverty and lower-class sensibility, so from the time I was in her womb she had grandiose plans for me to have a proper classical music education. Consequently I grew up surrounded by this music, yet separated from it.

It wasn't until I was a graduate student at Yale University and was faced with writing a final thesis that I first encountered the whole universe of Sacred Harp. My adviser, Kerala Snyder, who is the world's leading expert on the

Baroque master Dietrich Buxtehude, just happened to be captivated by Sacred Harp music. At that time (the mid-70s) musicologists were just beginning to learn of this dying art and were forming singing groups in colleges. Professor Snyder reminded me that this music was in my DNA and encouraged me to investigate it in a scholarly fashion.

So I went back down South where the art had never died out and spent a summer touring around, interviewing and recording those who continued to attend regular singings, some in their 90s who had been singing shapes since they were toddlers. This epiphany resulted in my 1978 thesis, "Harp Singing in the South," a thoroughly researched but somewhat patronizing exploration of the genre.

In the ensuing years, my appreciation has become far more visceral, less cerebral, as I am now fully aware that Sacred Harp only reveals itself in the actual participation of it, not from writing about it. Having stated that, the genre is so rich in history, lore and idiosyncrasy that some basic background will serve to whet the interest of those for whom it is a strange phenomenon.

A Brief History

No one has yet been able to ascertain the specific origin of the term "harp," although many modern-day "harpers" have their own favorite legends concerning this odd nomenclature. Some say it came from the Old Testament period of Babylonian captivity (Psalm 137). Certainly a parallel may be drawn between the Israelites, who, held in bondage in an alien land, "hanged their harps upon the willows" and wept, singing the songs of Zion, and the fervent harp singer, who is a "captive of this world," a "stranger to this place," who, indeed longs for his "home over Jordan" – phrases common to a multiplicity of harp tunes. Others insist that the name "harp" was coined from the unique harp-like strumming effect produced by the strong rhythm of the harpers when they sing.

The Puritan attitude toward music was responsible for a period of great musical famine in Colonial America. The stern New England Congregationalists took a dim view of any musical performance outside the church meeting house. Even if musical instruments had been available, they would surely have been shunned as "tools of the devil." By the third generation of Puritans, very few remained who could even read music; as a result, church singing fell into rapid degeneration. Men who were leaders in the community began to advocate schools of singing instruction. By 1725 it had become standard practice for a singing-school teacher to come to a town and teach singing by note in the local church, town hall, or tavern for approximately eight weeks at a time, receiving a compensation of around \$1.00 per student. The most famous of these singing-school teachers was the colonial tunesmith William Billings, who established a singing school in the Old South Meetinghouse.

The combined influence of "The Great Awakening," a movement beginning in 1735 away from religious establishment to the sovereignty of the people, and the increasing unpopularity of the British government, encouraged compilers of the new songbooks to comb the American countryside in search of tunes. This new interest occurred, however, only after the general acceptance of the free hymn texts of Watts and the Wesleys — as only the metrical psalms, which were more faithful Biblical paraphrases, had been permitted earlier. These new hymns provided impetus for 19th century revivalism.

Around the beginning of the 19th-century, it became desirable to devise a system of notation which could be more universally understood. In 1800 William Smith and William Little published *The Easy Instructor*, introducing a system of four shapes without the use of a staff, with "fa" as a rectangle, "sol" as a circle, "la" as a triangle, and "mi" as a diamond. This system quickly became standard practice for all fasola notation.

NEW BRITAIN

John Newton, 1779 Columbian Harmony, 1829

TREBLE

ALTO
A - maz - ing grace! How sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like

TENOR

BASS



Figure 3: *New Britain* (Amazing Grace) from the 1991 edition of *The Sacred Harp*. Illustration is public domain.

Between 1798 and 1855, thirty-eight tune books of the four-shape variety appeared; twenty-one of these were Southern. After 1850 literally hundreds were published. These tune books shared many common characteristics. They were generally oblong in shape and called "lap books," since they were designed to fit comfortably in the laps of the singers, the average size being seven by ten inches. Many had lengthy introductions, including a description of the system of notation used, a chapter on the rudiments of music, and a dictionary of musical terms, all written in the flowery style of the antebellum South. The tune book which has received the most long-lasting and far-reaching success was compiled in 1844 by Benjamin Franklin White and was called *The Sacred Harp*. Though revised many times – the last revision being in 1991 – this is the standard tune book for singings throughout the country today (Figure 3).

Performance Practice

The real art of harp singing is not merely in the tunes themselves but in the actual context of their usage. Minor regional differences notwithstanding, the procedure and performance practice of harp singing is common throughout the country and has remained virtually unchanged for over one hundred fifty years. The harpers usually assemble at 10:00 am for two hours of singing. Prayer opens and closes every session. After simple parliamentary procedure, minutes are read, new officers are elected, and leaders are chosen for the song session. These are usually older men and women who have sung harp since childhood and know their tunes and texts from cover to cover. Each leader selects two favorite tunes (or sometimes three, if he or she is particularly respected or venerable). The morning session closes promptly at 12:00 noon, when all adjourn outdoors for "dinner-on-the-ground," generally a bountiful feast with chicken, ham, beef, fresh vegetables, pies, cakes, coffee, and sweet iced tea. The singers reconvene at 2:00 pm for a second session ending at 4:00 pm.

The singers usually sit in the front stage or chancel area, while the audience sits in back of them. On some very familiar tunes (such as "Amazing Grace"), the audience joins in the singing. Figure 2 indicates the arrangement of the singers. Each leader calls out his tune by its page number in the book. Most harpers recognize the tunes from these numbers, rather than by tune names or first lines, and have no reason to consult their books for either solmization (singing the shapes) or text. The leader then selects a pitch that suits both trebles and basses (most harp tunes are notated extraordinarily high and must be placed as much as a major third lower). He gives the "fa" on a pitch pipe, or gets it from a "tune heister" within the group – one with good pitch. As



soon as the pitch is given, the leader runs from block to block pointing to each part and shouting "basses," "altos," "tenors," "trebles," and each obliges, chiming in his or her opening note. This method of tuning is referred to as "chording."

After chording, the leader shouts, "syllables," after which the solmization is sung. In modern harping, this is more for the benefit of warming up or lengthening the short tunes rather than for teaching the music. Following the solmization, the leader shouts, "poetry," and the harpers sing the text. The leader beats time with his hand from side to side or up and down. The singers likewise keep their own sturdy tempo by tapping their feet or patting their thigh.

The tonal production of harp singers is perhaps the most difficult aspect of performance to imitate or recapture for the non-Southerner. It may be likened to the nasal drone of the mountain dulcimer, whose sound is remarkably similar to the even older bagpipe, native to the British Isles, where fasaola singing started many centuries ago. Not only the piercing tone, but also the connection by portamento of practically every interval, especially those of the fourth or fifth, suggest the influence of these ancient folk instruments.

Many people who are not accustomed to the harp-singing sound complain that the tunes all sound alike. Many reasons account for this perception. The placement of the melody in the tenor and the melodic independence of the other voices already serve to obscure the tune. This confusion is only compounded by the doublings occurring from the distribution of the parts: men and women sing the treble, women sing the alto, both sing the tenor, and men sing the bass.

This complexity increases with the peculiar melodic improvisation common with harp singers and their forerunners, the folk singers. The aforementioned

portamento combines with many other country “graces” to transform a plain skeletal tune into an elaborate melodic line. Equally important as portamento and ornamentation are the colorations given certain pitches, notably thirds and sevenths. The “blue” notes, readily associated with black music, may be traced farther back to the folk-singing England from which harp singing evolved. Folk singers from that day until now have utilized various shades of intonation on thirds when falling from tones three to one, and on sevenths when falling to tone five. These colorations are called “neutral tones,” as they are neither major nor minor, but somewhere in between. The mood of the music determines the brightness or darkness of these thirds and sevenths. Another interesting practice is the tendency for the singers to slip briefly into falsetto when falling from one strong note to another or at the end of the final note.

Sacred Harp at Old South

Since my first foray into the world of Sacred Harp with my Yale thesis, I have attempted to recreate this genre with my various church choirs. For two decades I conducted a semi-professional choir in an Episcopal church in New York. I knew that I couldn't really replicate the raw primitive sound of real harpers, so I opted for a gentler, albeit non-classical manner: “Women, sing like Judy Collins; men, sing like James Taylor.” In other words I approached the tunes as folk songs. Imagine my delight when I first presented this type of music to the choristers of the Old South Choir, many of whom are classically trained opera singers. I played them a recording of “the real thing,” and immediately they altered their technique to reproduce the effect of actual harpers. These opera singers were sounding just like East Tennessee hillbillies! So, November 8, 2009 was designated as Sacred Harp Sunday at Old South, and the entire service – organ music, hymns and anthems were drawn from the harp tradition, with the Choir seated in the traditional four blocks facing a hollow center.

Since I began my position as Minister of Music in 2008, I have dreamed of having a regular Sacred Harp singing here at Old South on a monthly basis. There are currently four monthly singings in eastern Massachusetts: the one which my student James attended in Brookline, as well as singings in Newton, Plymouth and Newbury Center. The Holy Spirit is surely smiling on this church, because *on May 8, 2010 Old South will host a full day state convention of Sacred Harp singing in Mary Norton Hall!*

Perhaps, this event is just the catalyst we need to launch a new group of regular harpers right here in our church? . . . *May it be so!* †

ORGANIC COMMUNITY: Building Small Groups at Old South Church by Elizabeth Myer Boulton Minister for Discipleship



In the Book of Genesis, God says to Adam, “It is not good for the human being to be alone” (Gen 2:18). We are created to live in community: to gather together to be known, to be cared for, to be challenged, and to find out how God is calling us to deepen our relationships with one another, with God, and with the world.

To this end, Old South Church is working hard to invite members, friends, and visitors to pray together, feast together, serve together, and share their lives together in small group communities all over the greater Boston area.

When someone visits Old South for the first time, more often than not, they walk away with the impression that this is a friendly and welcoming community. Being a “friendly” church, however, is still a ways short of what God is calling us to be at Old South: a church where people can easily and genuinely make friends, and where friendships can flourish like flowers in the summer sun. The God of Genesis says it quite plainly: human beings need community. We’re made for it. It’s “not good” when we lack it. And community is an organic thing; it cannot be forced or created by any one person or leader or special event. It has to take root and grow, one connection at a time, day in and day out.

In his book, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*, Joseph R. Myers encourages churches not to focus too narrowly on developing what he calls, “if we build it, they will come” community. Churches need to let their small group ministries develop organically, because what grows organically tends to be stronger and last longer. The days of assigning members to small groups that meet weekly to work through a prescribed curriculum are over. This “top-down” approach to small group life, Myers argues, often does more harm than good. Because of its “one size fits all” approach to community life, new members are often nervous about diving in head first, and folks juggling busy lives, families, work, etc., might not be able to commit to weekly gatherings and ultimately feel they have no place in small group life.

Myers suggests that clergy and lay leaders need to concentrate their time and energy on creating environments where community spontaneously emerges. Instead of working with a “master plan” approach to building small groups, he encourages leaders to listen attentively and empower what he calls “organic order.”



This change is what we are trying to do at Old South. We are trying to listen well, empower leaders, and design/support programming, small groups, and service opportunities that are flexible, self-determining, and organically flow out of our life and work together as a community.

For example, when a group of people get together during coffee hour and start talking about (1) their shared passion for scrapbooking, and (2) their shared interest in starting a small group for all those who share this common interest – the leadership at Old South Church says, “Yes!” Our goal then becomes to help the scrapbookers find other like-minded individuals, give them permission to meet wherever, whenever, and as often as they would like, and empower the group to think about how their members can deepen their relationships to one another, to God, and to the world.

Whether it’s a knitting group, a house church, a monthly neighborhood potluck, an affinity group for artists, hikers, scrapbookers, adoptive parents, newly engaged LGBT couples, cancer survivors, gardeners, etc. – whatever brings the group together, we want to help support the group’s members to grow together, grow in faith, and grow into a deeper relationship with God’s world through service and tender acts of kindness.

For example, if the scrapbook group meets monthly to create photo albums for their own families, they may prayerfully decide that twice a year they will dedicate their monthly meeting to create care packages for children awaiting adoption, complete with a digital cameras, pre-made scrapbooks, and so on.

With this organic approach to small group development, we believe we can build small groups that fit our community, kindle our interests and passions, and strengthen the connections between us, between us and God, and between us and God’s world. Because the flip-side of God’s remark in Genesis, and the thing that drives us in our small group ministry here at Old South, is this: “It is very good for human beings to be together!” ✚

Here is just a partial list of the Small Groups at Old South that are meeting regularly right now.

Mothers' Night Out, 1st Wednesday of the month at West on Centre in West Roxbury. Come gather together with other mothers to talk, share stories, eat, laugh, and support one another. Contact Kim Nicoll at <knicoll@roxburyprep.org> or Debbie Brendemuehl at <debra.brendemuehl@comcast.net>.

“For the Love of Reading” Book Group (2nd Wednesday of the month at 7 pm) is now reading *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. In April, we will gather in Brookline at the home of Diana Strange. For more information, contact Anne Brown at <albrown1128@yahoo.com>.

Bread for the Spirit: offers a regular opportunity to gather for informal discussion of the issues that surround faith. Anyone participating in the life of the congregation is invited to share their issues, passions and questions in matters of faith. Watch Sunday bulletin for next meeting.

The South of Boston Potluck meets on the 3rd Sunday of each month at 5 pm in Quincy and extends an invitation to all who dare brave the S.E. Expressway or the Red Line to find that Quincy is not on Cape Cod, but a mere 20 minute ride from Old South! Please join us at the home of Bill and Marilyn Adams for an evening of scintillating conversation, music, and potluck. Please bring food for six people. For more info, contact Bill & Marilyn at <marilyn.jacksonadams@nemoes.com> or (617) 481-2777.

The North of Boston Potluck (2nd Friday of each month at a rotating site) has just begun with over twenty members and friends of Old South coming together at their first two gatherings, with offers to host to last through the year. Please bring food for six people along with a beverage. For more information or to RSVP, e-mail <northofboston@oldsouth.org>.

Young Adult Group (Events as announced). Looking to deepen your faith? Looking to strengthen your discipleship? Looking for friends to share the experience of being a young adult Christian? So are we! Join us for our monthly brunch and small group conversation. All young adults at Old South are welcome. For more info. or to join the e-mail list, contact Field Education Intern Jocelyn Gardner at <jocelyn.b.gardner@gmail.com>.

Mothers' Group (3rd or 4th Sunday of each month at 10 am) meets in the fourth floor kitchen. Come join other Old South mothers for an informal monthly gathering in the warmth of the fourth floor kitchen. For more information, contact Maggie Mode at <mjmode@earthlink.net>.

Faith on Tap (3rd Tuesday of each month at 6:30 pm at McGreevy's Pub at 911 Boylston St.). Food, drink, conversation, and God, all in one place! It's Faith on Tap, a relaxed chance to get to know one another and God more deeply through holy socializing and discussion. On April 20th, we'll be led in conversation by Rev. Hurmon Hamilton. For more info., contact Field Education Intern Jocelyn Gardner at <jocelyn.b.gardner@gmail.com>.

LGBTF is a fellowship group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and their allies. All are welcome. For more information, contact James Dager at <jdjr211@rcn.com>. Scheduled events and monthly breakfasts on 4th Sunday of each month (next is April 25th at 9 am). Join us for good food and equally good conversation.

Knitting Group meets on the last Sunday of each month (next is April 25th) at 10 am in the Gordon Library. The Old South Knitters gather together to practice the art of creating Prayer Shawls. For more information, contact Diana Strange at <dtstrange@verizon.net>.

Allston-Brighton House Church. If you live in the Allston/Brighton area, if you are looking for a way to make your faith real in day-to-day life, and if you want a weekly respite from the frenzied world, contact Jon Geldert at <jkgeldert@yahoo.com>. ✚



ANGEL by Quinn G. Caldwell from a sermon preached on January 31, 2010

Among the obscurer branches of late antique and medieval theological speculation is the “science” of angelology.

Christian tradition—based on biblical sources like Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the Gospels, some of Paul's writings, and the Book of Revelation, plus a fair amount of oral tradition and imaginative speculation—has it that the angelic population of heaven is organized into nine groupings, or choirs, of angels. Each choir has its own rank, purpose, physical (or at least visual) attributes, and dignity.

At the top are the *Seraphim*, who have three pairs of wings, one to cover their eyes in God's presence, one to fly with, and one to cover their bodies; their wings may or may not be covered with eyes. They are so bright that even the other angels cannot look at them. They tend God's throne and spend all day shouting praises to God. You can see one artist's version of a seraph in the window above the great wooden tower doors over our entryway (photo above).

Next come the *Cherubim*, who are *not* fat babies. They have four faces: a human, an ox, a lion, and an eagle—which just happen to correspond to the animals used to represent the writers of the four Gospels. They have two pairs of wings totally covered with eyes. You can see somebody's version of Cherubim up around the Alpha and Omega windows. They serve as guards; the book of Genesis says that cherubim were set to guard the Garden of Eden after humanity was expelled.

Next come *Thrones*, who unlike the others have almost no anthropomorphic characteristics. They look like two sets of wheels, one within the other, each covered with eyes. They serve as transport for other angels, especially the Cherubim.

Now, for these next few choirs, things get a little sketchy. Different authors call them different things and place them in different orders, and nobody seems *quite* sure what they do. But here's my best shot. First, the *Dominions*, who look like beautiful humans with wings and are in charge of the different nations of the world.



Next, the *Virtues* who, depending on who you ask, are either in charge of the movements of the celestial bodies, or of imparting their namesakes to humans, or both. You can see some of them up there to your left in the round windows.

Next come the *Powers* or the *Authorities*, who serve as warriors. In Christian mythology, Satan may or may not have been Chief of the Powers before he fell. So they say.

Next come the *Principalities*, who often wear crowns and carry scepters. They work with the Powers, they carry blessings to the world, and are sometimes said to be a source of inspiration, sort of like muses.

And finally, the lowest of the two choirs, and therefore the ones that you know best and humans are most likely to interact with: archangels and angels. Here we're on solid ground again, at least in terms of agreement among the medieval. *Archangels*—the second-to-last group—look like gorgeous humans with wings. Some archangels you've heard of include Michael, guardian angel of Israel and of the Church, and Gabriel, who announced Mary's pregnancy to her.

Last, and least in terms of stature though not number, are just regular old *angels*. These are said to look pretty much like archangels, though they seem to be easy to confuse with humans, at least sometimes. They often show up as hosts, like that one making the Annunciation to the Shepherds. They are the least otherworldly, the most this-worldly, and therefore the best-suited to interacting with us. Their name comes from the Greek word that means, simply, “messenger”, for that's what they are. They bear messages to the created world from the divine realm.



Left to Right: Angel Thrones, Dominions & Virtues
Nine Orders of Angels by thomasvcp at YouTube.



Illustrations (l. to r.) of
Angel Cherubs, Powers &
Principalities from
<www.angel-ology.com>



Now, trying to order the *seraphim*, *cherubim*, *thrones*, *dominions*, *virtues*, *powers*, *principalities*, *archangels*, and *angels* in their ranks may seem to you like just so much silly speculation, that from here there's no place to go but to ask how many of these choirs can dance on the head of a pin. And you're right; this sort of thing can obviously get out of hand and waste a lot of time.

But what this sort of speculation does do is this: it communicates a trust that God has ordered the world aright. That there is some sort of plan for the world. That there is a system at work here. That at least some of God's ways are knowable. That, most importantly of all, the bases are covered and the jobs that need to get done *will get done*.

But here's what I don't understand. It seems to me that, in their wisdom, those medieval speculators left a choir, God's most important choir, at least for those of us who live on earth, out.

God comes to the boy Jeremiah and tells him that he has been chosen to be a prophet, a messenger, an angel to the nations (Jeremiah 1:4-10).

Jeremiah balks. He demurs. He fears for what the people will do to him; he worries about what they will think of him. He thinks himself unequal to the task that God has set for him; he seems to think that it's the kind of job that should be given to a celestial being, not a mortal one. But God doesn't think so. God thinks that he's just the one for the job. Of course he's unequal to the task God has set him, but God's not, and God promises to help him out, to give him what he will need to make it happen. "With my help," God says. "With my help, Jeremiah, you will turn this world upside down, which is to say you will turn it—finally—right side up, my side up. Have no fear."

Jeremiah was called to do what he did during a particularly difficult time in the life of Israel. The kingdom was divided. Powerful neighboring nations swept through the land in wave after wave of invasion: the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians all took their swipes at Israel, culminating in a great siege and the fall of Jerusalem itself to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The city was destroyed. The Temple was leveled

and its treasures carried off to far lands. The leaders of the nation were deported. There was every reason to think that the great project that God and the people had been about for so long would fail, that the name of Israel would become a byword and a warning, the name Yahweh would be forgotten forever, the promises of God would fail.

Into this mess, God sent Jeremiah. We call him a prophet, which is true, but you might also call him an angel, a messenger who bore words of hope, and tidings of return, and the promise of restoration and fulfillment. He didn't think he was up to it, but God did, and God helped, and here we are millennia later, reading his story and his words, which means, I think, that God's plan worked.

Now, before we go on, I need to use a word. It's a controversial word, a word that some consider to be basically a swear word. It's not to be uttered in polite society, and certainly not from the pulpit of a church as illustrious as Old South. It will make some of you angry; it will make most of us, and I include me in that, uncomfortable. I'm sorry to do it, but it has to be done, and here I go:

Evangelism.

There! I said it! Do you feel that queasy feeling right down here? *Evaaangelism*. Do you feel it? If I'm not mistaken, that's the feel of crudely drawn cartoon tracts telling you you're going to hell if you don't do what the lady handing them out on the corner says. If I'm not mistaken, that's the feeling of opening your knocked-upon front door to find a freshly-scrubbed 19-year old with carefully parted hair, a conservative tie, and a great big smile. If I'm not mistaken, that feeling you feel down here is what that terrible and silly question, "Have you been saved?" feels like.

If you feel a mite queasy when I use that word evangelism, there's probably a good reason. It's probably because you've had someone do it to you in the past, and it hasn't felt very good. It's probably because those who have done it most, and to some degree most successfully, have had an understanding of our shared tradition very different from your own. And, most regrettably of all, it's probably because we in liberal, progressive churches like Old South have not

been using the word, or doing the deed, for a long time now. We have convinced ourselves that our wide-open doors are enough, that all we have to do is open them enough, and then sit in here and wait, and the world will be saved by coming to us.

But here's the thing. There's a whole world full of people out there who feel as if someone has marched into their lives, has invaded their lives, and carried the good stuff off into exile. Who stand in the wreckage and wonder, what has happened? Who stand in the piles where their temples, and their hopes, and the places of their meeting God once stood, and feel as if their names will become a byword and a warning, and wonder whether the promises of God have failed.

They're not going to come into this place on their own, because they think they know what they will find if they walk in here, because they have been in other churches where they were told that they are not welcome because they are gay, or because they are women who have something to say about God, or because they insist that science, logic, and intellect have a place in the church. They have walked into other churches and heard hateful words; they have met people who bear the name Christian who have told them that they are going to hell. They have met others on the street corners, or on their front porches, or at work, who have told them that they are outside the promises of God—and they have believed it.

There's a whole world of people out there who don't know that the promises of God still hold, that hope is not a silly thing, even in this world. There are people out there who don't know that church can be this good, who don't know that there are Christians that are trying this hard, who are trying to do it the way we are. There are people out there who have heard Pat Robertson preach but who have never heard a sermon like the one Nancy Taylor preached last week (*Sweeter Than Honey*, January 24, 2010). And how will they ever, unless a messenger comes to tell them?

God does have a plan for dealing with this. There is a system at work here. There are beings, not heavenly ones but earthly, who have been called to bear the message to the nations. And while you may not like it any more than Jeremiah did, you know who they are.

You don't have to stand on street corners. You don't have to knock on doors. You don't have to be preachy, or creepy. You just have to be you, and you just have to try to be unafraid.

If you need to leave work right at 5 pm to get to Bible study, don't tell your boss you have errands to run; say where you're going, and do not wince. If your friends want to know why you don't want to stay out too late on Saturday night, be bold and tell them. If they despair over Haiti, tell them you know a people who don't feel helpless because they are doing things to help. If they seem surprised that somebody like you goes to church, tell 'em they ain't seen nothin' yet, and invite them to come along. Trust that you are a good, normal, high-functioning person. Trust that when they find out the truth about you, they will not think you're less cool for going to church; trust that they will think church is cooler because you go to it.

If they ask why you are as good, or as kind, or as peaceful, or as hopeful as you are, tell them what you know about God. If they are broken or beat down, tell them what you know; God will give you the words. That's what evangelism is.

The world is in need of faith like the faith you have here. The world is in need of places and people like Old South Church in Boston. The world is in need of God, and God has a message for the people.

Buried right in the middle of that word "evangelism" is another word: *angel*. It is no accident, either of etymology or of meaning. To do evangelism means simply this: it means to accept the call to be God's messenger; to bear the Word of love to a tempestuous, broken, and beautiful world. It means simply this: to be an angel.

So. Because I believe that God has ordered the heavens and the earth rightly. Because I believe that God has made a plan for the world and has made provision for its saving. Because I believe that the people in this place have true things to say to the nations, and the nations need to hear it, I propose this: a tenth choir. It'll go like this:

Seraphim,
Cherubim,
Thrones,
Dominions,
Virtues,
Powers,
Principalities,
Archangels,
Angels...

and you.

So may it be.
Amen. ✚



Illustrations show an Archangel above and a plain "ordinary" angel below. From *Nine Orders of Angels* by thomasvgp at YouTube.



TEEN LIFE: It Ain't What It Used to Be! by Rolanda Ward

Will you take a trip down memory lane with me? I want you to go back in time. You can do it. Don't stop there. Go further. If you are somewhere between ages 14 and 18, you are right where you should be. Now think about what life was like for you. Think about your school's location. Think about what you did in school. Were your school friends from the neighborhood? What about homework? How many hours of homework did you have each night? After you completed your homework, did you play with your buddies living on your street? And what about church? Did you go to church each Sunday, and if you did, what did you do at church?

Most of you remember a time where everyone on the block knew each other. Perhaps you entered kindergarten with your friends from your block, and you graduated from high school with the same set of friends. Your time in school was typical; you went to school for six hours, came home to eat a snack and to complete the worksheet your teacher gave you that day in school, and played outside with your friends until you were called inside for dinner. And when it came time for church, your church home was probably close to your house. You went to Sunday School, listened to the nice lady tell you about Jesus, and sat through service wondering what everyone was thinking so hard about. I'm sure your walk down memory lane conjured up some fun times, but it also brought up feelings of *how did I make it through my teenage years in one piece!* Well, the same can be said for today's young people. However, now, their lives are filled to the max with lots of additional responsibilities and pressures that were non-existent back in the day.

Old South Church has a vibrant Youth program. Anywhere between 12 and 19 youth gather for one hour each Sunday to stop and reflect upon their lives. During this brief glimpse into their lives, I, as an adult, think how the heck would I make it as a teenager today given the number of activities that fill our youth's lives. But church, I'm here to tell you that OSC Youth are thriving in today's world. Even as life has quickened its pace and created new opportunities around each corner, our youth are focused, engaged, and ready to take life on directly. They have integrated their school, extracurricular, and church lives.

Since many of our youth were baptized as babies, attending church on a regular basis is not an issue. Little babies become Confirmands, and Confirmands become youth group members. Their faith development shifts from retelling the stories of our Christian faith to living the values that mean so much to all of us. Today's church youth programs are geared to promote

problem solving through fellowship and friendship in a non-class format. With beanbag chairs spread throughout the Youth Group room, some would say that our one hour of group time is spent hanging out. I would say that the relaxed environment of group gives our young people one hour to let loose, to share the events of their lives, to get input from their peers if "stuff" is going on, to laugh at and with their peers in a safe and confidential environment, and to pray with a group of young people who share their beliefs. We only have one rule in group: *what is said in group is kept in group.* With this one simple rule, youth know that group has no strings; it has no expectations of them.

Church is also a place where Youth get to retreat and serve others. Youth are invited to attend two retreats each year. Retreats are filled with a little God time and a lot of fun time. Sometimes our Youth retreat in the church and sometimes they travel to the Cape. Old South's Youth love the Cape, not for the lovely beaches but for the hardcore tradition of flashlight tag that is played in the dark on the Craigville beach. Let's just say that leaders would be remiss to skip an opportunity to play flashlight tag! But our retreats are also filled with opportunities to be in harmony with the ocean, to walk a labyrinth carved into the sand, and to sing morning praises in the Craigville pine chapel. Even though our retreats times are short, they are what Youth need and request.

Youth practice doing justice throughout the church school year. Youth pick hundreds of apples in Stow during harvest time in order to bake more than 24 apple pies from scratch—yes, including the crusts! After picking and baking all night in the church, Youth rise early in the morning to deliver pies to the Veteran's Shelter, Haley House, and St. Francis House. Not only are Youth good cooks, but they are good organizers and doers as well. Over the years, Youth have collected books to build a children's library for Indians on the Navajo Reservation; they have farmed sustainable fields in Roxbury; they have served meals with a smile at local soup kitchens; and they have packaged meals for homebound adults. And let's not forget, they have flipped pancakes for *you*, the OSC family, at the fall and spring Pancake Breakfasts.

The day of a basic education is now a day of specialized education. No longer is a high school education good enough. High school is a place where youth learn how to take on college. Our Youth take Honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses. Our Youth don't complete one

OSC Youth cooking (or is it wrestling?) up a great Pancake Breakfast (photo by Diane Young Spitzer).



worksheet of homework each night. Rather Youth report they have four to five hours of homework each night. Even as science tells us young people need at least 10 hours of sleep each night, today's school load is a full-time job! Youth are looking forward to the joys of sleeping in on Saturday just as much as you and me.

The OSC youth are well balanced. They participate in a variety of in and out of school activities. We have soccer and lacrosse players, wrestlers and swimmers, runners and tennis players. Their activities don't begin and end with sports. Youth are creative and artistic. Youth sing in school choirs, glee clubs, and award-winning youth choirs. They play piano, flute, recorder, saxophone, and acoustic guitar. They are playwrights, directors, producers, actors, and techies for school productions.

It is hard to imagine that with all their homework and their ever-changing after school commitments that youth have the stamina to do more, but they do. Our Youth volunteer in their spare time. Youth tutor younger children after school; they shadow doctors; they shovel snow for their neighbors after each and every storm.

Recently, Michele Shin and I had an opportunity to take a peek into the lives of a few of our Youth. We came away amazed at their dedication to their teammates, their friends, and themselves. Here's a look at three afterschool activities.

While some of us like to blast the music and shake our bum bums when no one is at home, Chrissy Gregg lives, eats, and sleeps dance. Chrissy spends most, if not all, of her afterschool time at her local dance studio. With dance practice five days a week, three hours a day, Chrissy strives to perfect her modern dance, ballet, and jazz moves. Her dance studio looks like most studios: girls in black leotards, large mirrors exposing every flex of the body, and a dance bar that serves as an anchor for those more delicate moves. However, her dance studio is also filled with a set of friends that move as one when the music plays and the instructor calls out a series of moves. It appears as if this studio is not only a home away from home, but a second home that fits her soul like your best pair of worn-in shoes.

Marissa Bulkley showed off her directing abilities in *A Separate Peace*. The play was a creative collaboration between students from two schools. Even with a plot decades removed from a teen's life, Marissa, as the director, captured the events and subtleties of the human journey towards end of the life course. The play featured a young man attempting to escape the realities of his life at an assisted-living home. Marissa's talents shined through her vision of what *A Separate Peace* is meant to convey. This play was not Marissa's first time directing. Last year she wrote and directed a short play for her school's theater group. She is also an avid actress, participating in a series of plays throughout her high school tenure.

Who knew Stephen Kuenstner, Nate Davis, and Reid Spitzer could wrestle? But, oh, can they! A trip to their school one afternoon provided a glimpse into this Greco-Roman sport. While watching the sport can sometimes make one flinch, these young men have skills that make you say, "Did he just do that?" Even though wrestling is a one-to-one sport, it requires an athlete to remain calm under pressure in order to hear the calls of support and strategy that come from the bench. What was surprising about each of them, including their teams, is how relaxed these young men looked as they took on their opponents. Knowing very little about wrestling, except that wrestlers on WWE are crazy, I expected to see a hyped-up team. Instead, I observed the team relaxed, laughing, and talking with each other throughout the match. There was a true sense of support and camaraderie present in the gymnasium. When it was time for Nate and Reid to meet their opponents at the center of the mat (Stephen didn't get to wrestle that day because it was a seniors-only match), their focus was unpenetrable. They took the lead from the get go, and they didn't relinquish their control of the match. With a few quick moves, they each got the break they needed to win points that would put them in the lead. And with the ref's pounding of the mat, the match was over; they were victorious.

So now that you have peeked into the lives of OSC's Youth, what do you think? I know, I know—how do they do it? They do it with the help of their parents, their friends, prayer, and their church family—You! ✝

Michele Shin and Rolanda Ward co-lead OSC's Youth group. If you are in high school & would like to join group, we meet each Sunday at 10 a.m. in the Youth Group room. See you there!



OSC Youth at Pancake Breakfast -photo by Diane Young Spitzer.



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