

THE TONGUES OF MEN AND OF ANGELS

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About the Author

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I. THE TONGUES OF MEN

There is something about the language used by Evangelical Christians that brings out the worst in me: I do a full body cringe, I start hyperventilating, and I have to stop myself from shooting sparks or lightning bolts or lasers out of my eyeballs. Perhaps I should specify: I refer to Christianese, the mother tongue of American Evangelicals and therefore the lingua franca in these parts of the Evangelical developing world that remain in thrall of everything American.

For the information of the average nominal Roman Catholic Filipino, allow me to apprise you of the following: there is the conservative theology based on a hyper-literalist approach to Scripture, the self-ghettoization that has created a billion-dollar market for bowdlerized Christian counterparts of “worldly” secular culture products like rock music and children’s cartoons, the intersection of corporate capitalism and faith that is the megachurch phenomenon, the gargantuan structures with 12,000-seat auditoriums and escalators and basement parking, suit-and-tie pastors projected onto huge video screens preaching a feel-good simplified prosperity gospel in carefully studied American accents. I must admit this response of mine is both unfortunate and inconvenient because: (1) despite appearances and reputation, I profess to be a committed Christian, and (2) I attend a small church within the UP campus that identifies itself as Evangelical.

Language as used by people of faith is fascinating, primarily because our deployment of language often reveals just how poorly we live out the tenets of our faith. Christianese functions as a secret language or a secret handshake, though I doubt it was ever meant to become the kind of jargon that keeps people out. Rather, certain words seem to be used as shorthand, to signal that one is part of the in-group, that one conforms to the established groupthink.

One is “soaking in the spirit” instead of merely reading the Bible, or undergoing “spiritual feeding” rather than listening to a sermon. One must do regular “journaling” during one’s “quiet time” in order to be on track with one’s “walk with the Lord.” One is “convicted” by a particularly fiery sermon or “blessed” by a tear-inducing “testimony” about the lowest point in the speaker’s life. One is told that “accepting Christ as personal Lord and Savior” is the one thing that changes everything. One is expected to pray to the “triune God”—the original three-in-one—before packets of sweetened instant coffee were invented. One communes day to day with the “indwelling Holy Spirit,” which is hard to do if one’s understanding of the HS is limited to the cartoon doves depicted in religious anime like *The Flying House*. One is also expected to bring a dish for the “potbless” that one’s “growth group” holds every month.

These terms aren't bad per se—some are even necessary to convey particular doctrines (“personal Lord and Savior,” “triune God,” “indwelling Holy Spirit”). But I find that the penultimate term in my snarky list of examples (“potbless”) is useful to illustrate my discomfort with Christianese. “Potbless” feels particularly odious to me because it smacks of legalistic piety, scolding, and policing—how one mustn't even say words like “potluck,” or “good luck,” or even “fortunate,” because this would imply that one doesn't fully subscribe to the tenet that God is in control of literally every single thing and event in the entire universe's past-present-future. (It just doesn't feel that way because of that all-important thing called free will.) Plus, “potbless” is just a really ugly word that isn't even real. It's a pious buzzkill of a word that almost takes away my enjoyment of all that food, and it definitely ruins all the warm, fuzzy feelings that “fellowshipping” with, uhm, fellow believers is supposed to create.

Another favorite bugbear of mine is the term “defense of marriage” or “fighting for marriage,” which I first encountered when a Christian writer-friend-turned-missionary shared in a Facebook post that her friend in the US was doing a cross-country run to “defend marriage.” This, of course, confused me because I didn't realize that every single marriage on this planet—religious and secular, past and future unions, all of these marriages including my own—were under vicious attack by some unseen force of evil. Seeing that he was in the US, I just thought my friend's friend was protesting divorce. A closer look at the posted photo showed the runner guy carrying a sign that said something about “Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve.” Being the intemperate person that I am, I of course fired back with my own Facebook post—but no naming or shaming on my part, for once—asking why we Christians cannot simply be upfront about our bigotry.

Instead of using code words and hiding behind cowardly assertions about “defending marriage,” we should just admit to being prejudiced against homosexuals. I feel, even today, it is better to be honest about our contradictions and hypocrisies than to pretend we are not asking the secular state to deny our fellow taxpaying citizens the rights that we married heterosexual couples enjoy as a matter of course. We really should just admit that we're bigots, so that we can repent, and try to be more decent and loving to our fellow men and women. (For the record, I believe secular marriage recognized by the state should be open to all. But please don't tell my pastor I said that. Not because I will be sanctioned in any way but because I have yet to articulate my position clearly to myself.)

I must say, however, that the absolute worst—what drives me to a silent, simmering rage during after-dinner discussions with our growth group—would be casual statements referring to Catholics and secularists as “unbelievers,” “the unchurched,” or “the unsaved.” These are not code words; this is the “Us versus

Them” mentality writ large. This is what makes people see Evangelical Christians as the self-righteous prigs we often are. Hearing these said by people I love and respect really makes me feel frothing-at-the-mouth, downright un-Christian, because such statements are astoundingly arrogant in the presumption that only we hold the keys to the Kingdom. That “our way” is the only way.

It’s hard work keeping the horror and judgment from showing on my face. And I suspect I often fail to hide my true feelings about the matter; I would feel my jaw tightening as I grit my teeth to keep the bitter recriminations from spilling out. As kids these days say, the struggle is real. During these times, my long-suffering husband would have to put a calming hand over my own, both to hide the white-knuckle death-grip I have on my dessert spoon and to keep me from damaging the relationships we have with these well-meaning couples who we admire and truly care for, but who sometimes lack self-awareness and are occasionally blind to their own upper middle-class biases and privileges.

Some terms and metaphors sound either weird or absolutely bonkers if you didn’t grow up within a Protestant or non-Catholic Christian context. Like newly converted Christians described as being “on fire,” as if they went about their daily routines and commutes while burning at the stake. Or like how Christian bloggers describe themselves as being “in His grip” or “gripped by God” when they disclose that they are in difficult or challenging circumstances. It seems a kind of robust macho upgrade from the metaphor of God having the whole world in His hands. But it’s so strange because of two things: (1) the church is described in Scripture as the bride of Christ, and (2) I truly believe in my heart of hearts that there needs to be less macho shizz in this world. Maybe it’s just the Baptists I hang out with who are weird? Because I realize I didn’t grow up with this kind of language at all.

Take, for instance, the concept of a “spiritual birthday”—the day of your conversion, which you’re expected to remember because it is the one most important moment in your life when everything supposedly gets better. This is, of course, problematic as it assumes there exists a single schematic template to be followed for every conversion experience. It assumes a dramatic binary, when in truth it’s more of a gradient; what really happens is a gradual change from one state to another, occurring over the course of one’s entire life as a Christian, until one is called home by God.

I once tried out this notion of having a “spiritual birthday” for a couple of seconds maybe fifteen years ago, during a conversation with Nathan, a friend who at the time was my colleague at the UP English department. By “trying out” I mean:

I mentioned in passing that I wasn't quite sure when my "spiritual birthday" was, and my friend interrupted me, demanding, "Are you turning Baptist on me?! Or worse—Pentecostal?!" To calm him down, I had to tell my friend that I was just trying out the idea, to see if saying it out loud would help me decide having a "spiritual birthday" was even applicable to me. For the curious, it's a no. I can't even type, let alone say out loud, the phrase "spiritual birthday" without the scare quotes.

Yes, we Christians are a fractious, judgmental, and divisive lot—some (like me) more than others (like my husband)—and this is something I learned quite young. My grandmother was quite vocal in expressing her disdain for the Católico Romanos, because they (according to her) pray with their mouths only, and with eyes open, fingering their rosary beads as their eyes go around and around, perhaps watching to see if they are being watched, intent on the spectacle and not the act of prayer and worship. Or so my Lola told me. There was also that blockmate I had in college, a pastor's daughter who identifies as Baptist, not Protestant, because (she says) they as Baptists never protested anything. It seems as if, at that moment during our freshman year conversation, the entire span of church history concerning the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation—beginning with Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to a church door in Wittenburg—must have slipped her mind.

I am being very unkind here, I know. But then, this was the same girl who told me that the peace sign used by 1960s hippies is the work of the devil because it's The Cross destroyed, hung upside down, and trapped inside a circle, with the horizontal part snapped in two so that they pointed down to where The Enemy resides. Something to that effect. I prefer to file these notions away in a mental junk drawer, where I keep other outrageous ideas such as the singer Gary Valenciano being demonic (he's openly Christian) because he makes rock music (more like pop and dance tunes). Maybe it's a matter of fundamentalists being unable to tell the difference between music genres? Like, if it's fast and loud, then it must be rock and therefore the Devil's music?

The young people at my church are so fluent in Christianese, so unironic in their use of the idiom, that I sometimes fear for the future of the small church I belong to. I am only partly joking here. I do trust that the Diliman Campus Bible Church, founded in 1976, will survive yet another forty years and even beyond since we are perfectly positioned in the campus to reach out to young people who need God, or at least a community they can worship with. Never mind that we will probably remain semi-nomadic in that we have no permanent church building since much of our budget goes to ministry and support for our missionaries in rural areas and abroad. We (and the whole world, haha) are in good Hands. As an old Sunday school song taught me, with matching hand gestures:

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,
Open the doors and see: the church is the people!

Still, when one youth member, who was also my student at the time, actually said a familiar aphorism (“the problem with being on fire is you burn out too fast”) out loud, I was partly horrified and wholly embarrassed—for her, for saying it out loud, and for myself, for judging her. I am ashamed to admit that at this age, as I enter my fourth decade, I remain so condescending and worldly—concerned with my silly pretensions about what’s cool, what’s intolerably dorky, and whatever else lies in between. I need to remind myself of what all these labels make us forget: that we are supposed to be one body, united as the church of Christ.

II. A MIGHTY FORTRESS

Believe it or not, I was born into a mainline Protestant family. Along with my grandmother, my cousins, uncles, and aunts, my sister and I attended worship service at the Citadel Church on Katipunan Avenue, in front of Blue Ridge subdivision, from birth until high school in the late 1980s. Citadel has been around for more than six decades now, and is part of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), which I believe has roots in the Presbyterian denomination.

I realize now that “The Citadel” is also a very strange name for a church. Growing up, I had only known the word as the name of our church, not as a medieval keep, the meaning of which came to me only later as I started reading about the Crusades and the Middle Ages. On our building’s grey and rough-hewn Brutalist facade is the church’s name and motto, spelled out using letters of white molded cement: “A Mighty Fortress of Faith and Freedom.” The church’s name appears to be inspired by Luther’s hymn (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”) and in keeping with the UCCP’s progressive politics, we had a female pastor in the 1980s, the Rev. Rose Quebral. I also remember seeing both General Fidel V. Ramos and Senator Jovito Salonga visit my old church once or twice, sitting among us in the pews.

My earliest memories of the big church—which is how Sundays Schoolers like myself referred to the main church building—always involved sounds. There were hymns and cantatas, yes, but also more mundane noises like the clatter of coins against those deep, round wooden plates used during the offertory. I always thought noisier was better when it came to offerings because more coins made louder sounds. Then I learned to count and discovered that money bills had higher value. I started to notice the tithing envelopes that adults would place carefully into the offering plates, with the names, dates, and amounts written on the outside

for transparency and accountability. The envelopes usually lived in the large and ornately carved wooden cubby system that hung beside the church's front doors. I couldn't help but contrast this memory with what nuns would usually hold out to the faithful at Catholic masses— those bags at the end of long sticks, looking like the netted *panungkit* we used to pick macopa fruits from the tree outside my grandparents' house in Project 4.

Now, at the church currently I attend, the language of offering is a little different. What used to be the "offertory" is now the "gathering of tithes and offerings." Offerings and tithes are sometimes called "gifts," and even tithing is no longer set at ten percent because, as our senior pastor says, we need not be legalistic about these things. Sometimes the word "collection" is used, as in announcements that "a second collection" will be made at the end of worship service if a church member needs support for hospital expenses. But more often, a "second collection" happens whenever typhoons hit the country and help must be extended to rural churches or missionaries affected by the disaster. There is a moving away from the traditional language of liturgy to something more informal, more familiar, almost ad hoc. I remain unsure of how I feel about this.

I read somewhere that Evangelical churches are doing away with the "altar call" where people stand up and approach the altar to publicly declare their new faith in Christ, and that there was a "biblical" reason for the controversy. "Biblical" in the conservative Evangelical sense simply means something is directly referred to in scripture, synonymous to "scriptural." This can mean that pretty much anything, including marital rape and genocide and the proscription against homosexuality, can be labeled as "biblical," and therefore correct, doctrinal. Which renders this "biblical" label not just meaningless but bordering on oppressive.

In my childhood, altar calls were much simpler because we didn't even call them that. Unlike in Catholic churches, where wooden pews have built-in kneelers for the people sitting on the row behind, Citadel Church's kneelers were limited, and placed near the front of the altar. On the left, these were in front of the chairs and lectern used by the pastor and the worship leader; on the right, the kneelers were found between the upright piano and the raised seating used by the choir. Anyone who needed special prayer or were going through problems were encouraged to approach so they could kneel and pray a little closer to the altar. During the congregational prayer, the pastor would always refer to those in need of an extra measure of grace, and I just knew it was those people kneeling up front who needed extra help.

My first time to pray on those kneelers was with Lola Santa, my paternal grandmother, after she told me that when I contracted measles at age two, I almost

died from an allergic reaction to the penicillin given by my doctor. Lola said my lips were blue and my face was pale, and that we should go up there to thank the Lord for keeping me alive. Because our hard wooden pews were quite uncomfortable, I looked forward to resting my bony 6-year-old knees on the cushioned kneelers. I could say that was also my very first experience of feeling “gripped by God,” feeling and knowing that my life was in God’s control, and that He literally gives life.

I guess it shocked me to know that I was at one point literally saved from death, a feeling I could not articulate at age six but which I now recognize as knowing somehow that my life was a gift, and that therefore my life was not really my own. A kind of reverse memento mori, this realization that I have life because I was given life. Would this be considered merely a precursor to the conversion experience, or was it the thing itself? Or maybe there was no conversion at all because I was only six, and did not have the necessary faculties for conversion? This experience and the subsequent loopy argument in my head is why I feel ambivalent about the adult water baptism (full immersion only!) that “Baptistic” Evangelical churches require for membership.

I appear to have been using Baptists as my favorite whipping boy in this discussion. That was not the intention. It’s just that Baptists have always been the easy foil for examining my own personal history with the church. The reason I chose not to join the conservative Baptist megachurch that is Greenhills Christian Fellowship, aside from the deafening spectacle that is their praise and worship session, has more to do with how such a church experience does not speak to me. Not in the sense that “I don’t feel God there” (which simply isn’t true!) but in that I am not my best self when placed in that context. Put me beside a Baptist and I will probably start sinning in my head even before I have exchanged ten words with them. This is really a case of “it’s not you, it’s me.”

Perhaps it doesn’t help that when I mention to Baptists my growing up in a UCCP church, I sometimes see a quickly-hidden disapproval on their faces. I have even been informed by a much-loved friend that my UCCP church, which taught me the centrality of justice in building the kingdom of God, was problematic because they were infiltrated by communist agents during Martial Law. I had to bite my tongue to keep from giving this writer-friend, a long-time missionary for Campus Crusade, a rebuttal accusing her own organization of being used by the CIA during the Cold War.

All this name-calling and divisiveness destroys our Christian testimony to the secular world. My fear is that this very essay, in tackling this matter, not only demonstrates this but also further weakens my own testimony as a Christian. This is why it has taken me many years to complete this piece. It was intended as a

contribution to a spirituality anthology edited by Louie Jon Sanchez and Rica Bolipata-Santos. I missed their deadline by a couple of years because it's just so difficult to even wrap my head around what I want to say about my faith. I have been advised by many well-meaning friends that I should pray hard about writing this essay, about whether I really need or want to write it. I have thought about this religion thing for years, and have prayed so very hard about it. Even now, I wonder if I'm saying things right.

I began with language and labels because it was the easy starting point; these helped define who I think I am in relation to Evangelicalism. I started thinking about this term in 2001, when a student of mine identified herself in class as Christian. Like a true blue mainliner, I asked her which Protestant denomination she belonged to, and was baffled when she said she was non-denominational because she was Evangelical. I had never heard of the term used that way before, as a label for believers. I just knew that all Christians, to be worthy of the name, must evangelize or spread the gospel.

Later research showed me that Evangelicalism developed in postwar America as a kind of third way, a middle ground between the "extreme" liberation theology embraced by mainline Protestants and the hardcore right-wing conservatism of fundamentalists. The movement's image in the larger world, however, has not been favorable (cf. a *TIME* magazine cover depicting an Evangelical as having a party balloon for a head). It must be noted that Evangelicals have often cast their lot with vicious demagogues and have voted into office such bigots and misogynists as Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte. The reactionary politics displayed by American Evangelicals, which in turn is parroted by most Evangelicals in this country, has been giving the Evangelical movement a bad rap.

The so-called third way of Evangelicalism is now facing its own backlash in what is called "the emerging church": a decentralized movement of people who are disillusioned with organized churches, seeking to live out their faith in postmodern society. We can see this movement in the growing number of house churches, and in Christian hipsters (yes, they're a thing) who prefer hymns and call themselves "followers of Christ" or "Christ-followers." But I am sure, from the outsider's perspective, these petty labels don't matter. They work only in the way a Wikipedia page would use the pejorative term "Manalista" as a way to disambiguate the *Iglesia ni Cristo* from other similar groups. Even the Oxford English Dictionary does not make distinctions between Muslim, Moslem, and Mohameddan. What matters is that we are sadly known more for what we hate than for what we love. Yet we don't realize this.

It is entirely possible that I may have been “on fire” once, for an entire week. A late night phone call with my friend from Campus Crusade led me to go back to church after having stayed away for fifteen years. It was anger at God that had stopped me from going to church back in high school. My father had been kidnapped by military intelligence agents, tortured and held incommunicado for a week, during which time we thought we would never see him alive again. It was Martial Law all over again for my family. And I was angry at God for allowing that to happen. My decision to go back to church—which I cannot rightly call “conversion”—was never about leaving one religion for another, nor exchanging a set of rituals for another. Nor was it my moving from a state of total unbelief to belief, from darkness into light, as it were.

It was instead about a recognition that I was not really the free agent I thought I was. I needed to be—or realized that I actually was—accountable to some other person. It was a moment’s understanding, an epiphany, that I was not really a good person to whom bad things happened. The turning point was a change in the condition of my heart, having felt for the very first time the need or compulsion to tell another person that I know I had done some terrible things. Maybe I needed some reassurance that despite my being an awful person, I was still me. I don’t remember now why I felt I had to go talk to that particular friend. Her being a missionary had little to do with it. I just knew she would make time for me, and listen to what I had to say without judgment.

I sometimes still think that “being on fire” is Christianese of the worst kind because it has been rendered meaningless and trite by bombastic worship leaders in megachurches all over the English-speaking Evangelical world. Those are the times I know I’m being a jerk again. Because it really does feel like fire. Just not the kind that burns or destroys; it’s the kind that makes things clean. As in smelting or glass-blowing (but a lot less painful), it is a fire that makes things pure, so that gold or steel or glass can be used to make good things. This “fire” is a warmth that is *in* you, or maybe *on* you. Like a prickling under your skin. Or a flickering that’s just beyond the tips of your fingers or toes. One is sort of lightheaded, but not really because there is, most of all, an intense clarity. It’s like there’s something at the back of your eyes—the opposite, I suppose, of what it feels like when you’re about to cry. The world looks different; it looks new. Incandescent, almost. Lit from within. I make it sound like a fever, a delirium or hallucination. Maybe it is. No matter. Your brain tells you that the world is different but also not—it is you who has changed.

III. SING UNTO THE LORD A NEW SONG

My first exposure to contemporary Christian music (CCM) was in the 1980s, when the Citadel Chancel Choir would sometimes hold cantatas or choose songs from albums produced by the Maranatha! Music label. Unlike the traditional hymns we usually sang at worship service, accompanied on the piano or electric organ by my piano teacher Ate Lois, the cantata songs were modern, recorded with more instruments, and were therefore glamorous and inspiring. It made us feel all sorts of things—cool before I was really concerned about being cool. It was the first time I heard pop music in church, and it was okay because it was about God.

I guess Citadelians were quite fond of Maranatha's discography because the children's concerts which we held twice a year (at Christmas and Easter) always drew from the *Psalty Songbook* and *Kids' Praise* albums. By the 1990s, I had stopped going to church, and became this sullen teenager who would rather listen to grunge music and what was later called alternative rock. Coincidentally, this was also the time when the formerly nonprofit Christian music ministries exploded into a multi-million dollar industry, the most visible and profitable example of which would be Hillsong Music from a megachurch in Australia. So, despite efforts from my cousins to invite me to regularly attend their megachurch, I couldn't bring myself to come back because the music turned me off.

I was used to hymns, which are so very different from CCM's popular and overproduced offerings. CCM has this preoccupation with packaging, with singability, its marketability often based on how many times the name Jesus appears in the lyrics. But what is curious about these songs is that they are so very self-centered and inward-looking, even self-congratulatory: the words "I" and "me" appear so much more often than "God" or "Jesus." And when Jesus does get mentioned in the song, the name sometimes gets reduced to an exclamation or a signal to your body to start releasing oxytocin and adrenaline because the power chords are telling you you're supposed to have all sorts of strong unnameable feelings at those pre-determined high points in the song. CCM is a rush that gets you high on God.

No doubt, CCM works: the lyrics are easy to remember, and the melody is never too difficult for even the most tone-deaf person in the congregation. The music and lyrics are written by professionals who know the right formula to get people hooked and make them sing with their eyes closed and their hands waving in the air. Still, I find myself not wanting to sing along. I didn't trust the feelings evoked by the songs because Scripture tells me the "heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). But it could also be just me wanting to remain contrarian and cool, to be hipster before we appropriated a mid-twentieth century term for something else entirely. Most definitely, I often refuse to sing because I am an arrogant jerk.

When Psalm 96:1 tells us to “sing unto the Lord a new song,” I do believe it means there is a need to write new songs. There’s a mildly distressing trend right now among CCM aficionados to just create new arrangements or new melodies for the old beloved hymns. This is similar to what happens these days in Catholic masses, when new melodies for the *Ama Namin* and the Amens are sprung upon an unsuspecting crowd of the faithful, and those not in the know feel awkward and left out. I am sure this is done with the best intentions.

There is nothing wrong with having the cool kids in church use contemporary music during worship service, but reworking the hymns feels like window dressing, to make them conform to contemporary hipster notions of coolness. The jangly U2-style guitar, the power chords, the breathy gasp-y singing, and the obligatory well-placed “whoa whoa whoa”—they don’t go too well with the solemn grandeur of “Amazing Grace.” They make us forget we are in the presence of a King.

I would rather see the exhortation to sing a new song unto the Lord as a call for newness along the lines of mercies that “are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22-23) and being transformed “by the renewing of [one’s] mind” (Romans 12:2). While there is value in being literal and coming up with actual new songs, I would rather not sing a slick corporate product in church. It came as a shock, then, when I discovered that what I thought was an old hymn, “In Christ Alone,” was actually written and recorded quite recently in 2001. Yet according to a BBC survey, by 2005, it was considered the ninth most popular hymn of all time in the UK. Perhaps it was the strong Irish melody, perhaps it was the credo—or belief in Christ—so baldly (boldly?) stated that may explain its appeal. The truly good songs will stand out from the shiny, overproduced titles to become classics, the same way that the goats will be separated from the sheep, and the wheat separated from the chaff.

I’ve always liked “Be Thou My Vision,” not just because of the melody (the Irish folk tune “Slane”) or the content, but also because of the history behind the hymn. It sounds like a love song because it actually is a love song for God. I love that we get to sing about swords and battle shields while wearing our Sunday best (we sing the 1912 Hull translation, not the bowdlerized 1964 Methodist one that took out all references to medieval weaponry). I love how Irish monks were already singing it back in the 8th century, more than a thousand years ago, and how we’re still singing it in church today.

Another thing I like is the phrase “morning by morning new mercies I see” in “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” which is based on verses from the book of Lamentations, of all things. But that shouldn’t be too surprising because when things go really, really bad (like what’s happening to this country now) and we feel utterly destroyed or powerless in the face of evil (like when we read comments by trolls praising

the government's drug war), only God's constancy can keep us from despair. The truth of that hits me really hard so that I can barely sing the words because my throat gets too tight. The song in English already works wonderfully but its truth resonates more when powerfully rendered in Filipino: "Tunay Kang Matapat."

And then there's the final stanza of "Amazing Grace," which our late senior pastor Dr. Isabelo Magalit half-jokingly called our international anthem. I love that it was written in both remorse and rejoicing after a former slaver realized how vile his former life and deeds had been—and how much he was and is loved by the One who died to save him. There is a physical, bodily response in me whenever we reach that part, usually towards the end of worship service, before the benediction. I actually get light-headed as I imagine the kind of eternity promised to us:

When we've been there ten thousand years
bright, shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun.

Certain lines or images from hymns hit me hard, but often it's because I remember being struck by these same words or images when I was very young (between ages seven and ten). They remind me of the kind of child I once was, and how my mind had worked. I could say that those moments when my mind wandered and wondered about the strangeness of language were also the first times I had the kind of experience I would later have while reading poetry in college. Lines like "not a mite would I withhold" from "Take My Life and Let It Be" made me wonder as a kid what mites (the insects) were doing in a song for God, but the real meaning became clear much later as an adult, when I learned about "sacrificial giving." The Jesuit-educated among us have that prayer from St. Ignatius; I have the image of mites crawling all over someone's open palms.

I love the majestic weight, how the stresses fall, in the line "Casting down their golden crowns upon the glassy sea" from "Holy, Holy, Holy." I know now that I had misheard the lyrics—the correct preposition is "around" and not "upon." Hearing the song, I had pictured golden crowns crashing into a sea made of glass. And it shocked me. Because what a huge mess that would be. I remember thinking: all that *bubog* and broken jewels in the water—people might get hurt! I also thought: *sayang naman yung* expensive crowns, which I then associated with my Lola Santa's story about throwing a heavy gold bracelet into the river in Laoag when she was a child. She had hated that bracelet—it looked *panlalaki*, too masculine for her. So many lines in hymns remind me of my Lola and how she always wanted me to sit with her in the big church at Citadel instead of Sunday school because I would learn more there. She has gone to the Lord now, but every time I open my mouth

to sing hymns at DCBC, I think of her and find myself tapping my feet in time with the music, just like she did.

There are times when what thrills me most is not even the content, but the particular way that a song is meant to be sung. I am blessed to be part of a small church where we sing Lutkin's "Benediction with Sevenfold Amen" immediately after our pastor gives the benediction, at the end of worship service. Unlike in many churches where a choir or a worship band sings the benediction to or for churchgoers, at Diliman Campus Bible Church, the entire congregation sings the song a cappella to each other. Everyone somehow figures out which voice to sing—soprano, alto, tenor, or bass—and we all find our pitch the same way we figure out our niche in the church.

We find our place in the song the way we find our role in how to build His kingdom. But most importantly, we bless each other whenever we sing that song. It's not a top-down thing like in other, more hierarchical institutions. Hymns remind me of friends and loved ones, both here and those already called home by the Lord. Hymns make me realize how so many of us across the centuries and across continents are connected to each other through the God who loved us first, and how we are all moved miraculously to love Him in return through songs.

In the Qur'an, the phrase "People of the Book" refers to the followers of all the Abrahamic faiths that came before Islam, which include all Jews and Christians. Judaism, however, believes the term should be applied exclusively to Jewish people and the Torah, as well as later works such as the Talmud. The Roman Catholic Church has rejected this label because the Vatican does not agree with Luther's "sola scriptura," believing instead that faith should be based on both the Bible and Catholic tradition. I am glad that the various Protestant groups and denominations that make up the Reformed Church—Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Puritans, Evangelicals, and more—have rightly embraced the term and claimed it as the one thing that distinguishes them from all other traditions.

But I would rather think of us as "People of the Word." There have been many versions of "The Good Book," with some versions or translations seen as more "true" and "reliable" than others. (Fun fact: some people believe the 1611 King James Version is the best one because it's also known as the Authorized Version, forgetting that it was merely King James of England who authorized it, and not God Himself.) And many more translations will be produced in the breadth of time that stretches before us—because the goal is to spread the Word, isn't it? In every nation and in every tongue, as scripture tells us. We hold Bible studies, we figure out new methods of evangelism, we go to seminary school to learn the finer points of doctrine. We lead such busy lives as Christians.

But the sad truth is that many Christians forget to share the most important part of the good news: “The Word.” As in, “The Word” referred to in the Book of John, the Word made flesh in the man called Jesus. We all know how “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But its familiarity makes it no less mind-boggling, no? What does that even mean? To help clarify things, the Jesuit and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has a magnificent description of Father, Son, and Spirit—“Utterer, Utterèd, Uttering.” More than anything else, Christians—no matter what label we choose to slap onto ourselves—need to be people of The Word again, uttering the good news with both the tongues of men and of angels.