

## **Creativity And The Kingdom**

*by Richard Zenith*

Fifty years ago men still believed it was impossible. Twenty-five years ago it was considered highly improbable. Yet on July 21, 1969, two men walked on the moon. Their names are known around the world— Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin—but what did they do, really?

Doubtless they deserve our admiration for their expert handling of equipment during the journey, but they had nothing to do with the making of the equipment. Many engineers working together made the equipment, and they depended on physicists who supplied the theory. There were computer scientists, technicians, and many others who contributed. Obviously nothing would have happened without American tax dollars.

The Apollo-11 Mission was not an exclusively American endeavor either. Knowledge gathered by the Russians in their first forays into space, research and materials from other countries, and fundamental theories of science and mathematics going back thousands of years, all paved the way for the Apollo-11 spaceship.

What does it mean? Was the moon landing an ultimate expression of what man can do? Was it a culmination of a phase of human history? Space exploration has not stopped by any means, and life goes on as before. Yet the world felt that something of extreme significance happened when human feet touched the moon.

“One small step for man . . . a giant leap for mankind.”

Pretty words. And more. That sentence is an excellent summation of what happened that day. Not only Neil Armstrong, not only the scientists at NASA, not only Americans, but every man, woman, and child from all the continents participated in that first step onto the moon. It was not a culmination; it was a beginning. It was truly a giant leap, for it lifted our imagination to new levels. Colonies on the moon? Men on other planets? Highly improbable? Perhaps, but we will no more dare to say that such ideas are impossible.

Yet, there has been an even greater leap in human history. I refer to the sojourn of Jesus Christ on earth, when the eternal Being leaped into time and space, taking on human flesh. But God’s feet did not touch the earth out of mere whimsy or accident. Like the entire history of science behind the Apollo-11 Mission, so there was a history of God’s dealings with man for thousands of years before the Messiah arrived. There was a race which received the promise, prophets who prepared the way, and a whole world that was laboring and crying out to God.

So Jesus came. He taught us and He died for all our sins. But we know that the story does not end there; it is only the beginning. Christ arose and is still present, operating through His Body, the Church. Truly a giant leap for mankind.

This leap operates on a personal level also. We call it the *leap of faith*. From doubt we leap into belief. We leap out of ourselves into God. Of course, our years as unbelievers were not wasted time. We saw and suffered much that brought us to the kingdom of God. Now, united with Christ, can we say that we are at the end of the road? Is our commission merely to relax and enjoy the promised land?

Does this world look like the promised land? Is this God’s best? Our best? Many of the people who were crying out to God before His coming are still crying out. We ourselves are sometimes insecure. We have touched base with Christ’s kingdom, but it is not a finished kingdom. In some sense it is finished, for Christ Himself is that kingdom (see Luke 17),

and He has come and is here within us. But as long as there is war and injustice we cannot say that the kingdom has been fully manifested.

*“They will hammer their swords into plowshares, their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war”* ((Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).

Those words are not rhetoric, nor are they merely figurative. God wants a new earth, a reign of peace. Exactly how it will come about or what form it will take we cannot know. But we know that all of God’s dealings with man point to that kingdom. Read the Gospels. Christ’s message was clear: The kingdom is at hand!

Christ is the kingdom, the perfect union of God and man, spirit and flesh. In the eternal cosmos it is finished, as Christ Himself spoke on the Cross. Indeed, the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world. But in our cosmos the redeeming work of Christ has only begun.

Don’t misunderstand. Christ has redeemed us, once and for all, and there is nothing we can add to His redemptive work. But there is time and space, and that is where we eat and sleep and love and live out our lives. “Love” and “God” are mere words without practical meaning until they are seen acting in our world.

It is significant that Christ spoke in parables, and without parables He did not teach the people (see Mark 4). This was a direct affront to the religious leaders of the time, who were fond of caviling over terminology and speculating on the after-life. Jesus would have no part of that. He clothed his teaching in stories about farmers and fishermen, weddings, young women and men. His teaching was eminently practical, because Jesus did not come to take us away from the earth. He did not come to transport us into a spiritual, trance-like state in some ethereal realm.

Jesus was truly “*down to earth.*” He did not overturn the old covenant or take away its meaning by “spiritualizing” it, as some suppose. Rather He enlivened it. Jesus Himself is the embodiment of the written Law. He turns stony hearts to flesh, but they are still real, beating hearts.

The kingdom has come, and yet it hasn’t. There are still many stony hearts, and there are many more swords than plowshares. The point is this: the kingdom will never come into full form without us. God’s leap into human existence through Jesus Christ was a foundation. We are the ones who continue to build on that solid rock.

Paul commented to the Colossians that his sufferings would help fill up that which was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. It is a difficult remark to understand, for it could not mean that Christ’s sufferings were insufficient. Christ died for all men, and there was nothing deficient in His redemptive work. But in bringing about the full manifestation of that redemption, Christ established His Church. God has ordained that we too should suffer. We participate in God’s planting of the kingdom, not because Christ was insufficient, but because God has ordained to include us. Our sufferings are not symbolic; they are real and they are worth a great deal to God, because He has made them worthy.

The union of human and divine was not a one-time flash in the darkness. Christ was the beginning, the first light which enlightens others until darkness will finally be put away from the world. God shines His light through the Church, headed by Christ, and thus inspired, we will create His kingdom. We are not mere instruments to express the divine fiat. We are creators with Him, because He has made us so, and He will not bring it with Him.

We don't know exactly what the coming kingdom will be like, but we know that it will be characterized by peace and harmony among men. Unfortunately, technological advancement is not taking us to peace. Clearly some radical change is necessary. There is enough food to feed the whole world, yet millions are starving. There are enough resources to develop a cure for cancer, but we have chosen to develop bombs instead. We don't need to make more things, but we need to make things in a different way. That is our calling: not to produce more of the same, but to create a new order. It is not productivity, but creativity, which will bring about the kingdom.

"Producer" and "creator" describe two fundamentally different approaches to life. A *producer* thinks *in terms of usefulness*. He has a need to feel useful, so he throws himself into activity without further ado. He relies on the premise that more is better. His sense of self-worth is often determined by how much he can produce. If at some point he should realize that there is no longer a demand for his services, he may simply ignore the fact by steeping himself all the more in mindless activity. Or he may try to destroy other producers so as to increase the demand for his own productivity. The biggest fear for the producer is that he may one day feel useless. If that happens he will become morbidly depressed.

A *creator*, on the other hand, does not operate out of compulsion. His guiding principle is not quantity but quality. He thinks *in terms of beauty*. If a creator stopped to think about it, he might conclude that his life was indeed useless, but it is doubtful that a creator would stop to think about his life. For the creator, life is not a problem, it is a gift. He does not need to prove himself. His eyes are not on his own life, because life for him is not an individual affair. Life for the creator is his vision of beauty. It is the divine image—poetry, if you will—stamped on all of creation.

A creator is so overwhelmed by the mystery of the gift of life that he forgets himself. That is why he can act freely. A producer must feel useful, he must satisfy his own needs. His actions are predictable: he will do whatever he thinks will bring him the most benefit. The creator's acts are spontaneous. You cannot predict what he will do, and the creator himself does not know until he does it.

A creator does not live in the clouds. No, he is very aware of everything that is going on around him. Man's creativity is not *ex nihilo*. Creativity for man means response. A creative man interacts with whatever he finds. A producer, although often materialistic, operates in a vacuum. He cannot see beyond himself, and he operates out of his own meager storehouse of stock ideas. In contrast, a creator, although he may have high notions of God's beauty and grandeur, is very much in touch with life. He listens to what others say, and if their words strike a chord within himself, then he acts on those words. The creator walks the world with his eyes wide open. He sees what is happening and he responds. He has a vision of God in some event or in some thing, and he jumps on it. God calls and the creator responds. In this way, piece by piece, the kingdom is built on earth.

Jesus was the model creator. He had a definite commission—the salvation of the world. But His "program" to achieve that end was vague at best. He did not hunt out trouble. Rather, He wandered around Palestine and responded to people's needs, healing this one or consoling that one. Jesus knew! that the Cross lay before Him, but He lived from hour to hour, not forcing His way but shaping His ministry to fit the changing needs He encountered.

The creator is not afraid of change around him or in him. That is why he can let the world affect him at each moment. The creator responds to life, but the producer reacts. Reactions are predictable. Whenever *x* happens, the producer will react with *y*. He may produce a lot of *y*, but he is much too insecure to ever respond with something new and untried.

Creativity and productivity are not mutually exclusive. We might call the merger of the two “invention.” If necessity is the mother of invention, then creativity is the father. Invention, like productivity, is born out of necessity insofar as it is useful. But whereas a mere producer will react to the need  $x$  with answer  $y$  (the answer he has always given), the inventor will not be so hasty. The inventor is a creator. He is attentive to the times and the circumstances, and he may get a glimpse of a new and better solution, namely  $z$ .

A timely illustration is the energy crisis. Faced with a shortage, we can react by simply producing more, using the same old sources. When the oil runs out we can mine our coal reserves, which will last a very long time. The mining of coal will be costly in both a pecuniary and ecological sense, but it is one solution. But the creative approach is to look carefully at all the knowledge and technology which scientific research has amassed so far and to invest in further research. Hopefully (creativity always relies on faith and hope) we will be able to invent another safe and less-costly means of producing energy.

There are creators who respond to life’s mystery without knowing what the mystery is. Of course no one can fully comprehend the mystery, but we as Christians understand that the mystery is Christ in and among us. We know that our creativity is fully dependent on God, for we cannot respond until He calls us. Not only that, God Himself is the strength which empowers us to respond, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*” (Phil. 4:13). Whenever God commissions us to do something, He provides all that is necessary to complete the job. The Old Testament is rich with illustrations to prove the point.

Take, for example, the construction of the portable tabernacle, which was to be the home of the Shekinah Glory for many years. Moses made this report to the people:

*“The Lord has called by name Bezalel . . . and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge and in all craftsmanship . . . so as to perform in every inventive work. He also has put in his heart to teach both he and Oholiab. He has filled them with skill. . . . They are able to do works of all kinds, and to do it with originality”* (Exodus 35:30-35).

And God also specifically called and prepared the hundreds of other artisans and donors who were to do the work and provide the materials to complete the job. “*Then Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful person in whom the Lord had put skill, every one whose heart stirred him, to come to the work to perform it*” (Ex. 36:2).

Notice that before anything else could happen there was God’s call. Also notice that the skill and wisdom to carry out the call proceeded directly from God. But who responded? *Everyone whose heart stirred him*. God is not an arm-twister. He will never force us to do anything. He calls us. It is our decision to respond or not. The question is not: Should we respond? The question is: Do we want to respond? I think most of us do. Freely we received, freely we will want to give. That is only natural. Because theirs was an uncoerced, free response, Bezalel and Oholiab were able to do their work with originality. At another time and place they might have done the work somewhat differently (always with equal skill and originality), because things happen and times change.

That is why it is an error to try to imitate Jesus’ life or the life of the early Church. We do not live in the same world. If Jesus came today, “He” might be the daughter of a government bureaucrat, and a Methodist instead of a Jew. Creativity is not stubborn adherence to our own rigid ideal. Rather it is our willingness to be affected, our openness to change.

It would be comforting to have a model which we could mindlessly follow. The producer does that. He has a certain way of doing things, and he will never change. But a creator’s

life is in flux. He lives on the brink, in that tension between the human and the divine. In the creative process the unchanging God and all the virtue that He is (truth, love, beauty, and goodness) become concretely present in our tenuous, temporal world.

The creator is the one who stands in the gap. It is a difficult position to maintain, and those who try to do it single-handedly usually fail, often in a big way. In a fragile world that is ever changing, a creator needs something solid on which to place his feet. We believe there is nothing more sure or stable than union with Jesus Christ. No one can dissolve that union (see Romans 8).

But “Christ in me” only becomes meaningful when I understand what “Christ” means apart from me. I must look outside myself for a minute at Christ the universal. What do I find? I know that Christ is love and strength, but love and strength do not exist in the air. I only know love and strength (and indeed Christ Himself) when I see them in action.

The Church is Christ in action. Our consciousness of union with Christ is confirmed and concretely manifested in our union with one another. As Jesus prayed to the Father: *“With Me in them and You in Me, may they be so completely one that the world will realize that it was You who sent Me.”*

Fruitful creativity, then, is a joint effort. Our Old Testament example is very clear on that point. Bezalel and Oholiab may have been the apparent genius behind the work, but the hundreds of other artisans were just as necessary to its completion.

The building of the kingdom in our day is likewise the endeavor of the whole Church. Individualistic efforts will yield nothing of lasting value. The moon landing is a testament to what mankind, when working together rather than warring, can do. The kingdom of God on earth will be a testament to the true union of all believers with each other and with Christ. The moon landing is peanuts compared to what the Church united in Christ will do.

A producer thinks this way: “If I don’t do it, who will?” A creator knows that his work is vital, but he doesn’t take himself too seriously. He knows that God and beauty will still be here even when he is not, and he knows that there is a whole community of creators who are bringing the kingdom into clear view.

Artists who are egocentric are less creative, because their creative works are not done freely but out of compulsion, in order to prove and promote themselves. Their works, although technically brilliant, may well lack the poetry of life, thereby mystifying rather than profoundly touching the onlooker.

We should not be quick to judge artists, however. Tolstoy made a remark to the effect that the artist takes the best of life and puts it into his work, with the result that his work is beautiful and his life is bad. Isn’t that what a true saint is all about? He doesn’t worry about how he looks to others. He is so engrossed in living life that he is scarcely aware of whether or not he comes off as “good” or “holy.”

I have tried to show that, far from being the exclusive province of the arts, creativity is a way of approaching life. Or, if you like, life is art. Creativity means “responding to life.” It is the incarnation, giving body to God’s kingdom here on earth. It is the union of God and man, not in that other realm that existed before the foundation of the world, but here on planet earth. And—who knows?—maybe someday on the moon.