

# A Message the World Forgot

By Neil Earle

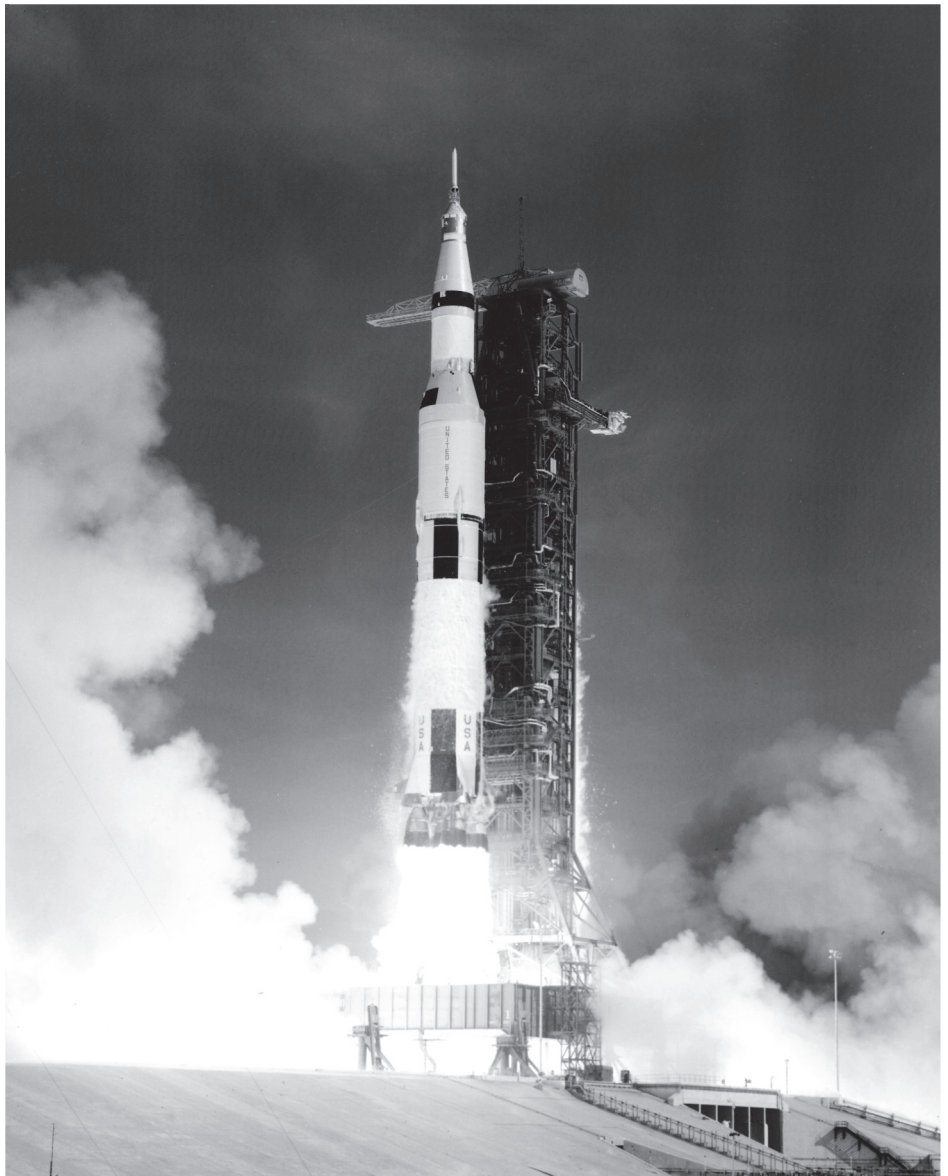
**F**orty years ago, two men landed on the moon. One of them spoke unforgettable words. The other did something equally momentous.

In the summer of 1969 the news was literally "out of this world". Though we have always been space travellers—our planet logs millions of miles every day—the landing of Apollo 11 on the moon was truly a turning point.

Pictures of our sparkling blue planet suspended above a bleak lunar surface underscored an already growing sense of the fragility of "Spaceship Earth" in the vast cosmos. The first Earth Day quickly followed on April 22, 1970.

Canadian thinker Marshall McLuhan called for a new commitment to environmental responsibility, observing that "on Spaceship Earth there are no passengers; everybody is a member of the crew. We have moved into an age in which everybody's activities affect everybody else."

Buzz Aldrin had somehow wedged into his stowage pouch a plastic bag. In it were a small flask of wine, a chalice and some wafers.



**Apollo 11 lifts off:** Forty years ago, Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin of the Apollo 11 mission became the first men to set foot on the moon. The Apollo project, which landed five subsequent manned missions on the moon, lasted for 14 years and cost \$25 billion, employing some 400,000 people at its peak. It has been called the greatest technological achievement in human history.

Books such as *The Limits to Growth*, *Small Is Beautiful* and *If You Love This Planet* helped birth the phrase "quality of life." The anti-nuclear movement, the New Age movement, micro-circuitry and science fiction were all given a boost by the Apollo 11 images of human beings investigating the lunar dust.

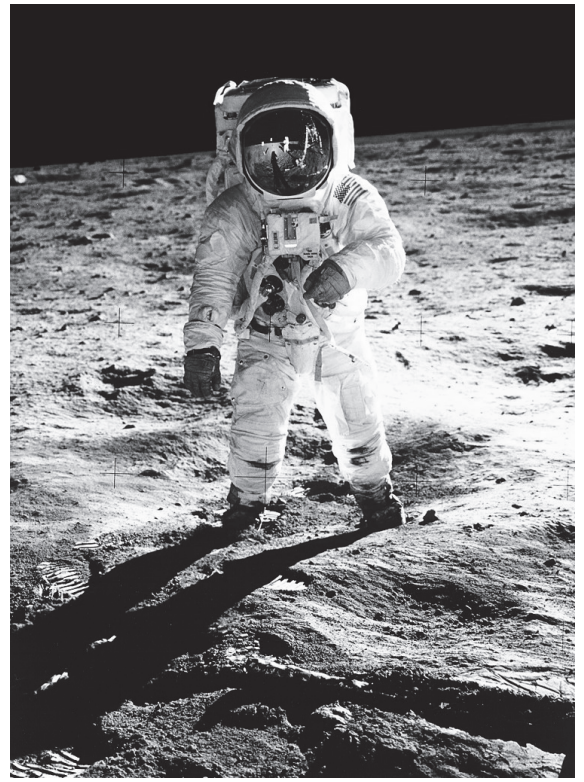
But something even more fundamental to the quality of life was on the mind of Apollo 11 crew member Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin that unforgettable July 20, 1969.

Earlier, in December 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 had drawn legal fire from atheist groups for reading from

Genesis 1 while they orbited the moon on Christmas Eve. Broadcasting a reading from a religious book during a government-sponsored space mission seemed to some Americans to compromise the separation of religion and state. To avoid more legal problems over the issue, NASA asked the Apollo 11 crew not to recite any scriptures. (On a humorous note, one judge eventually threw out a legal challenge filed against Apollo 8 by claiming that the event "was out of his jurisdiction.")

An Episcopalian, Buzz Aldrin had somehow wedged into his stowage pouch a plastic bag. In it were a





**One giant leap:** Buzz Aldrin in the lunar module (above left) and on the moon (right). Below: The moon surface beside the lunar module, and Buzz Aldrin's boot print in the lunar soil.

small flask of wine, a chalice and some wafers. About 5:57 p.m. Houston time, he set the elements on the fold-down guidance-computer table. He spoke into his microphone: "This is the LM [Lunar Module] pilot speaking. I'd like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way."

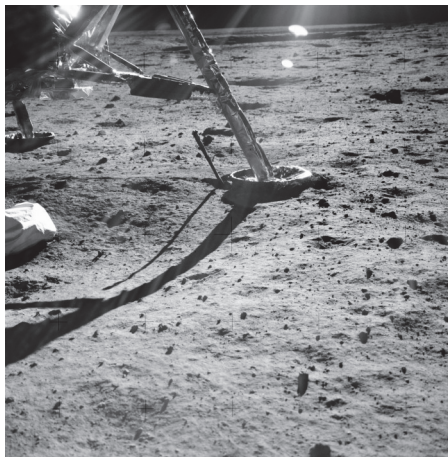
Aldrin's way of giving thanks was to gently pour the wine into the chalice. He then recited—silently, as NASA had requested—John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches.... Without me you can do nothing."

Taking Communion on the moon!

### What is man?

This remarkable story is relayed in Andrew Chaikin's history, *A Man on the Moon: The Voyage of the Apollo Astronauts*. Back on earth, Aldrin's wife Joan marvelled—Buzz had not forgotten the deeper significance of what was happening on July 20, 1969.

On his return to earth, Aldrin reflected aloud on the meaning of the words written some 2,800 years earlier by another gazer into the starry night: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,



the moon and the stars, what you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, humanity's most stunning technological feat took some of its key participants back—if only for a few moments—to their own humble place in the cosmos. As the apostle Paul told a group of advanced thinkers back in Athens, Greece, in the first century, "God is not far from every one of us".<sup>2</sup>

The world has all but forgotten Buzz Aldrin's call to thanksgiving and his Communion service, standing as they do in the shadow of Neil Armstrong's famous words, "That's one small step for a man, one giant



leap for mankind." But that humble acknowledgment from space of our dependence on the Creator of all things and our union with Jesus Christ speaks to the quality of human life in ways that will forever transcend even our most amazing technological achievements.

#### Notes:

1. Psalm 8:3-4
2. Acts 17:27



Neil Earle, who lives in Duarte, California, has served as a pastor and journalist in the USA and Canada for 36 years.