

For the Joy of the Journey



a memoir

George Robert Ezell, Jr

A Personal Journal

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This is a personal journal of George Ezell. It has been created to be a repository of writings about my life and experiences. The information, although personal, is intended to be shared. Perhaps it will be of interest to family and/or friends, if not in the present, in the years to come. It is my belief this journal will be a useful tool in coming to a better self-understanding. It is also my hope that I will be able to provide a window into my life through which others may better understand just who I am.

"You are going to feel like hell if you never write the stuff that is tugging on the sleeves of your heart — your stories, visions, memories, visions and songs. Your truth, your version of things, your own voice. That is really all you have to offer us. And that's also why you were born."

Anne Lamott

Foreword

This faith memoir is one of several volumes in my autobiography "For the Joy of the Journey". Volume **I** ends with graduation from Junior High School. Additional volumes planned include:

- AMERICAN GRAFFITI - High School and College 1956-1962
- FORD'S - Ford Motor Company 1962-2005
- AUTUMN - Retirement Years 2005 - ??

At 81 years of age, confidence about completing additional volumes is waning. It is my priority to complete this faith memoir first. Perhaps it can be described as an "ethical will", written to those I leave behind .

Telling your stories is the central act of a spiritual legacy. It is not a self-indulgence or a passing entertainment. As part of a spiritual legacy, telling your stories is the fulfillment of a responsibility—the responsibility to pass on wisdom. It doesn't matter whether you feel you have wisdom—your stories do.

Taylor, Daniel. Creating a Spiritual Legacy



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Introduction

After eighty years of life, I see the ways I have come. This is a memoir of a faith journey through turns, forks, crossroads and intersections on an irregular and turbulent road. What follows is an anthology of blog posts and other writings from my faith journey. My journey is closing. Hopefully this faith memoir will, in some small way, cast light for your faith journey.

Occasionally I encounter writing that so resonates with me that I am tempted to claim it as my own. Choosing not to plagiarize, I share excerpts from Chaplin Mike's post at Internet Monk. I don't know him personally but I feel a deep kinship, he spoke my heart.

On the journey

I stand on top of a rise in the road. Before me, a valley stretches, still shrouded in fog. Behind me, the sun has burned its way clear and I can see the ways I've come. I can make out a few of the sharper turns, various forks and crossroads where I chose this way or that for one reason or another, spots along the way where the road disappeared into a dark wood, then emerged on scenery wholly new. Well past halfway on my journey, I've forgotten more than I remember, and some of what I recall I don't trust. In some ways I'm more sure of my path, in other ways I've never been less able to plot my course.

...at this point in the journey, I'm not sure I know what wisdom is. I have some hindsight, for sure, and plenty of experience. Maybe that qualifies. I have a deeper trust in the sovereignty of God than ever before, but it is not the kind of trust that can be expressed in "answers." The thought of God's sovereignty is like the fog in the valley ahead of me — a mystery that envelops the world but obscures my view. To think that I would appeal to such a concept as comfort for myself or others seems kind of crazy, to tell the truth. People don't generally expect the guy down in the mail room to be able to delineate the intricate decisions of the CEO. About all I can say is, "I have no idea how to explain it, but I guess he knows what he's doing."

The world is broken, and I don't have a lot of wisdom to offer. I won't pretend to tell you what God is doing. But I know that love is real. I'm here to be your friend today, and I want to encourage you to be friends to each other. That's how Jesus showed his love to us — by befriending us and laying down his life for us. We're here to do the same for one another.

It's foggy ahead, and the way is not clear.

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Life Resume'

George Robert Ezell, Jr

I was born May 14, 1942 in Florence Alabama to George and Aurelia Ezell, who are now deceased. I have one bother, Chipper Ezell, who is eight years younger. My father worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority, which took us away from Alabama in 1950. After living two years each in Waverly, Tennessee and Paducah, Kentucky, my family returned to Florence in 1954.

My family and experiences were normal for the times and places. My father belonged to the Church of Christ and my mother was Methodist but converted to the Church of Christ. We were baptized at the same time when I was twelve years old. Church proved to be a core influence in my life.

Growing up in Florence, Alabama was idyllic in many ways. I have good memories of my school years there. It was the real 50's complete with rock and roll, Elvis, debutantes, gospel meetings, dancing, no dancing, roast beef for Sunday lunch, family reunions, going steady, social clubs, Sunday school, little league baseball, Friday night high school football, baseball in the spring, summers on the lake, sock hops and much more.

The approach of graduation from high school in 1960 brought to light the always present, but unacknowledged, conflict between the values and mores of church and the prevailing values and mores of my lifestyle. I had the option of taking the traditional college route, U of Alabama, Auburn etc. or making a break.

My decision was to go a different direction. I chose to attend Abilene Christian College in Abilene, Texas. ACC, a Church of Christ affiliated school, was the farthest place I was willing to go to escape. I crossed the Mississippi River looking for the promise land. I did not walk across on dry land.

After arriving at ACC, it didn't take long to find out that my ambitions to play college football were not realistic. Instead, I settled for baseball, which was a better choice for all concerned. My priorities at college were established early... baseball, friends, girls, and academics. But that didn't last long. The first week of classes I met Ann Watson from Memphis, Tennessee. By the second semester my priorities had been altered to: ... Ann, baseball, social club, friends, academics. You may wonder what happened to church. By the start of my second year of college, things got much simpler. One priority... ANN. Everything else was a distant second. We became engaged and set a wedding date for June 8, 1962. College was behind me.

We were married in Memphis, Tennessee and when we returned from our honeymoon we found an apartment in Florence. I took a job for \$1.25 per hour dumping coal cars. Between the low wages and my mother's supervision of our lives, it appeared that we might not survive the wilderness. Through a friend of Ann's family, I was able to get a job with Ford Motor Company at their Nashville Glass Plant. We moved to Nashville,



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Tennessee and a completely unexpected but very much appreciated career with Ford Motor Company began. I worked many hourly jobs at the glass plant and enjoyed the experience and the pay. Except for a brief lay-off shortly after I was hired and a two-year educational leave, I would work the next 40 plus years with Ford.

Nashville proved to be a brief but significant place in our life experience. Our first child, a son, Joe Carter was born December 10, 1962. Our second son, Clark Watson was also born in Nashville on December 4, 1963.

The Story

Learn rules. Keep rules.

Failure. Petition.

Pleased. You're loved.

Hard work. Bless me.

Heaven ... maybe.

Signed up.

Knowledgeable, unknowing

Full. Empty.

God man. Ungodly.

Holy Spirit. Verdict.

God. Intervention

Resigned.

Learn the rules. Keep the rules. If you fail, ask forgiveness. Then you will please God and earn his love. Work hard and God will bless your life and hopefully you will go to heaven.

I signed up.

I was knowledgeable but I did not know God. My life did not embody godly qualities that knowing God produces. Convicted by the Spirit and humbled by God's continual intervention,

I resigned.

I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Eph 2 The Message)



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It is not good for man to travel alone

What has proven to be the most significant intersection of my journey came on the first day of classes at Abilene Christian College (now Abilene Christian University) in September 1960. (Full disclosure: there has been some disagreement over the details of the story to follow. However, my account is completely true to my memory.)

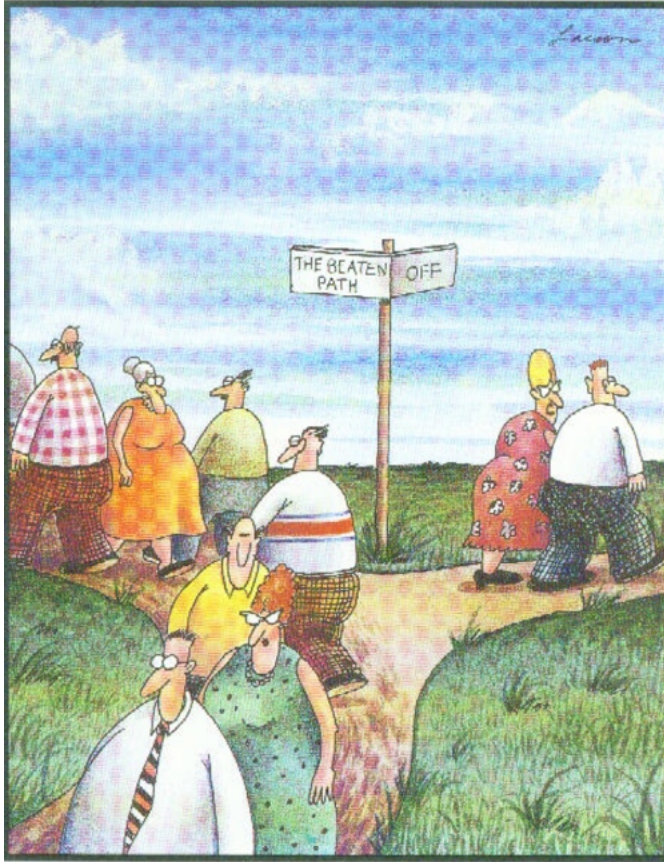
The first class I attended was something like University 101, an orientation class for freshman. It was held in a large classroom with 150+ in attendance. I arrived late and there were no visible empty seats, so I made my way to the back of the room. About 3/4 of the way back, I was surprised to hear a sultry voice call out, “You can sit here, big boy.” I looked over and there was this attractive brunette with a weird small gray streak in her hair with an empty seat beside her. Although, I managed to appear unfazed, as though I was used to such come ons, I was stunned. I did not know her name but she knew mine.

That’s how George Ezell from Florence, Alabama first met Ann Watson, aka Dee Ann Watson, from Memphis, Tennessee. That first encounter was interesting but I did not perceive it to be “the moment”. At that point, I don’t think either of us thought anything would come out of our meeting. It was only later that I came to understand that there may have been forces at work beyond our understanding.

I had no idea that In 1937 L. Arnold Watson traveled from Idaho to attend Abilene Christian College. On the first day of classes he met Ruby Mae White from Abilene, Texas who was also starting her college career. Their meeting began a courtship that would result in their marriage two years later. Leaving Abilene to move to California, they eventually had five children, three boys and two girls. Four of those children, including Dee Ann Watson, attended ACC.

Our first meeting pushed the pebble off the ledge. After a slow start our relationship began to gain momentum and by the end of the second year we were engaged and left Abilene and married in June 1962. Subsequently, we had five children, three boys and two girls. Four of our children attended ACU.

For 56+ years Ann has been my traveling companion. I hope that the legacy of her parents will continue and we also will enjoy 74 years of marriage.



"I don't know if this is such a wise thing to do, George."

Here are some thoughts I put together about life as a journey for a recent correspondence.

I believe our lives are a journey. A healthy life is characterized by growth and change. Each day holds the prospect of adventure and discovery. Life is not defined by seeking a safe place and hunkering down insulated and protected from the world around us. Each of us possesses a deep longing to go home. To find our way to that place that we were created for. The pathway we take is not always pleasant and there are dangers to be dealt with. But, there are many beautiful experiences along the way. Wonderful relationships with people. Beautiful sights and sounds and smells. We do not travel alone. Our creator leads us and watches over us. He gives all that we need for our journey. We meet many people along the way. Some of them join us our journey. Some we encounter briefly. Some encourage us and offer provision of our journey. Others do not understand and become enemies bent on disrupting our pilgrimage. No matter what happens to us along the way, we continue to travel toward our destination because we trust our creator who loves us and will not abandon us on our journey. He has promised us life.



A faith Journey

- **It is a faith journey!**

To travel by faith implies the unknown. Lewis & Clark's Northwest Passage map was marked]Unknown

Rom.4 Abraham Against all hope, in unbelief ;fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.

Heb 11:13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

- **They travel light!**

No extra baggage. Nomads don't accumulate unnecessary baggage.

Rom 8:1 no condemnation, set free

Matt 11:28-30 ""Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.""

- **They are outfitted for the journey!**

Matt 6:25 Provisions for the journey are assured.

We have the most experienced and reliable guide.

I will be with you. Ex. 3:12 I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

- **They are clear about their allegiance!**

Joshua For me and my house. Mary I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me as you said. The Lord is my shepherd..

Eph 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ;

- **Â The journey is immersed in mystery, awe and adventure ;**

Infinite God, mysterious and wonderful.

An adventure not of a lifetime; but of an eternity.

Rom 11:33-36

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

""Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?""

""Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?""

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!

Amen.

Psalms 84:1-7

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.



- **They encounter the world;**

Psalms 84:1-7

They pass through the Valley of Â Baca

People who hold out never engage the world. As pilgrims, our journey does not bypass the world but takes us through it. Ps 23 ;

Our journey does not end when we find Jesus, it is no longer a restless wandering but a journey filled with hope and joy. It is along that journey that we are salt and light to the world.

- **They change the world;**

they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

It matters what happens in the world. Until Jesus returns, the world's future is our future. God's people are called to effect/infect the world.

- **They find strength in the journey;**

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

Prov 17:3 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart.

We find strength in the journey. **Holding On** does not allow God's power to prevail and strengthen us. A clinched fist cannot receive a gift.

Ps 23 I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.

- **They are always prepared to move on;**

Mark 6:8-11 These were his instructions: ""Take nothing for the journey except a staff-- no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic.

Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.""

Â Christian pilgrims understand and are prepared to move. They tempted to hold on but the promise before them is greater than that which they see and they keep moving.

- **They don't travel alone;**

Elijah "I am the only one left."

""Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me""?

And what was God's answer to him? ""I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal."" So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

Rev 7:9-10; 13-17

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ""Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.""

Â Then one of the elders asked me, ""These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?""

I answered, ""Sir, you know.""

And he said, ""These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.



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"... they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Spiritual Milestones

Spiritual milestones are like historical markers. Historical markers are everywhere. Many are on roadsides to alert the traveler that a historical site is nearby or something of historical significance occurred near there. One source says there are more than 50,000 markers in the US. In many, if not most, cases the historical markers are in mundane or unremarkable places. I suppose that is one reason for the markers. In their absence there would be no indication of anything significant. In a similar way, our marking of milestones along our spiritual journey establishes the significance of events and places that otherwise would be ordinary. Without our testimony to the work of God in our lives, others may only see the ordinary and say “That’s just life” or “That’s the luck of the draw”.

A question that has challenged me is, how do I know what is a spiritual milestone and what is not? At this point most of my milestones have been identified in retrospect. As I have come to a deeper understanding of God and my relationship with him, I am able to look back and see with clarity His hand in my life. I did not recognize it at the time but because of the Holy Spirit’s transforming power I am coming to see things less from a human perspective and more from a spiritual perspective. When life is viewed from a human perspective we cannot see nor do we expect to see the hand of God in our lives. No matter how we see life, the reality is that God is sovereign. He is in control. God is at work in his creation.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matt 10:29).

Seeing life through the Spirit, I am not just aware of what God has done before. But, now knowing that God works in my life, I live with an expectation of His working; anxious and joyful about the exciting possibilities in store for me on this adventurous journey. As a result, I am more alert to God’s working as go about each day. I seek to find God’s presence in every circumstance. As I allow God’s Spirit to guide my life, my ability to discern God’s presence and working increases. The ability to discern God’s working in my life and in the world is not just retrospective it becomes contemporary. My witness is not just about the past, it is becoming a daily testimony to the glory of God.

I am sure that I will never be able to see all of God’s work in my life clearly in the present. The infinite mystery of God will never allow me to see or understand completely. My humanness will limit the work of the Spirit. I will not know fully until all things are made known in eternity.

Milestone - Love, Mercy, Forgiveness

Being a nine year old in Waverly, Tennessee in the 1950's was a great experience. The setting was perfect for an adventurous kid. Roaming the country side, exploring with few restrictions or fears, was a daily experience. The small town setting was idyllic in my memory.

There were opportunities of all kinds. In particular, I remember the small general store next to the post office, separated by an alley. It was a great place to browse. Reading the comic books and occasionally buying one. Soft drinks, especially NuGrape, were a special treat. The owner was tolerant of kids and the store was a warm and inviting place.

The lure of comic books and the scarcity of money were a toxic combination. I had, on numerous occasions, supported my addiction with money from the return of soft drink bottles for the five cent deposit. Unfortunately, the supply of bottles at my disposal was limited. The overwhelming desire for comic books generated, with the help of a friend, an elegant solution. The store owner, being a trusting type and short on storage space, stacked empty soft drink bottles in their wooden cases along the outside wall of the store in the alley next to the post office. To a comic book addicted nine year old, the opportunity was obvious. Thus began the regular and profitable process of retrieving bottles from the alley and selling them back to their owner. Because we were careful not be seen and judicious in the quantities of bottles returned at any one time, the operation continued without any complications.

My memory is not clear as to how long this enterprise continued. What I do remember is the day that I was sitting in the living room of our small house. Mother was there with me. She was quietly sewing. I recall thinking about her and what I had been doing. The sense of guilt was overwhelming; not so much out of fear but out the realization of how wrong I was and the disappointment it would bring to her and my father, not to mention God. I began to cry uncontrollably. I poured out my confession to my mother.

What happened in the moments and days that that followed would stay with



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me for the rest of my life. My mother, without sign of anger, embraced me and comforted me. I knew how disappointed she was but she did not condemn me, she only loved me. She did not offer to rationalize or minimize my wrong. Only when the affirmation of her love was assured did we talk about consequences. Later my father heard the story, accepted my confession (I am not sure that he didn't whip me, but if he did it was a relief) and took me to the store owner. When confession and restitution had been made we went home.

I have no remembrance of those events ever being discussed again by either my mother or father. There was mercy. Forgiveness was real. Love was unconditional. They cared more about me than the fact that I had wounded and embarrassed them. In that brief experience I gained a glimpse of God; for children are introduced to God, for good or ill, through their parents. That experience prepared me for the journey ahead.



Milestone- Little Things

As I have thought about spiritual milestones, I have concluded that such occasions are not always big, dramatic events. They may very well seem insignificant but as time passes their impact on our life becomes more and more apparent. There is one such occasion that comes to my mind.

It was in the 1970's during a visit to Nashville that I was invited by a friend to attend Wednesday evening church. His church was not a typical Church of Christ but that was no deterrent. It was a time of questions and curiosity in my life. I was expecting a class experience that would satisfy my curiosity and questions. What happened was completely foreign to my church experience.

As the congregation gathered, the minister asked all the men come with him and the women were directed to another place. We followed him out of the church building to a building near by. We were ushered into a room that accommodated us but the quarters were close. I didn't know anyone except my friend and had no idea what to expect. It certainly wasn't a usual classroom setting. We were seated on the floor. The lighting was dim.

The leader of the session began to talk and share his relationship with Jesus. He encouraged others to reflect on their own experiences and thoughts about their relationship with Jesus. Men began to speak up and talk about their lives in ways that I had not experienced. There was emotion and passion, confession and repentance, prayers and tears. I was immersed in the moment. I was touched deeply, but I did not speak out.

That experience would seem inconsequential to many Christians in this day and time. For me, it was a small moment that had a lasting impact. It was like a first romantic kiss ... awkward, a little repulsive, but oh so delicious ... a taste that would linger ...a glimpse of something mysterious and wonderful. It was discovery and the promise of adventure. I have remembered that event throughout the years and in that small moment; my eyes and heart were opened to wonderful possibilities of fellowship with Jesus and others who believe him. From then on, I could not be satisfied with less.

Milestone - Unexpected

A number of years ago I found myself drafted on short notice to teach a bible class. Not having a prepared lesson, I was struck by the thought that perhaps it would be a good to ask the class participants to share some spiritual milestones in their lives; hoping I and others would gain some helpful insights. This seemed to be a good idea because I had recently been contemplating my spiritual journey and was in the process of identifying what I considered to be spiritual milestones in my life. Spiritual milestones being those events or circumstances which reveal God's working in ones life. At the very least, it seemed to be an easy way to get through the class period without being prepared and would be encouraging to all of us.

What happened was very different than what I had expected. I introduced the question, with some brief explanation of spiritual milestones, and then opened the floor for responses. As I looked into the eyes of the class members there was nothing but blank stares. There were no responses. This was astounding to me. This group consisted of what could be described as the "core" of the church family. If there was a list of the "faithful", most of the class members would be on it.

Finally, most likely out of embarrassment for me, one of the most faithful spoke up. He spent several minutes sharing the occasion of his baptism as a young man. There was no other comment. Somehow I managed to struggle through the rest of the class.

I have thought a lot about that class. There are several possible explanations for an absence of responses. It may have been that I did not clearly define my request and they were confused and therefore unwilling to speak. There could have been any number of reasons related to the circumstances of the class or personalities etc. But I have concluded there was something much deeper and fundamental to our faith. At one level I believe there were some who simply believe God would not, can not or does not need to work in their lives. He has given us what we need and it is up to us to use what he has given and then he will judge us on how we did when we meet him in eternity. This is not a belief that they would admit if asked directly, but their lives betray them. Spiritual milestones, God working in their life, are not a part of their experience and therefore they had no basis for responding to my question. For them, what is most important are the rituals of religion and their compliance to God's rules.

On another level, I think there were many who, like myself, believe that God



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works in their lives, but they have not really stopped to think about their lives and identify those events and circumstances where God worked in wonderful and mysterious ways to guide us in our journey. I believe it is important that we take the time and energy to recount our lives and identify those milestones. Spiritual milestones are essential to our God story and our testimony to our families and to the world. Our faith will be strengthened as we see how wonderful and faithful God has been.

It is my intention to record my spiritual milestones so I will be reminded of God's faithfulness and they can become a testimony to others so God may be glorified.

MILESTONE- SCRIPTURE

We were visiting my in-laws in Abilene, Texas in the mid 1980's. On Sunday morning I decided to attend Sunday school at the University Church of Christ. For reasons I do not remember, Ann did not go with me. She probably was going with her parents or was coming to worship after Sunday school. I had no idea what classes were available or where they were meeting. I was late so I quietly slipped into a class in the large auditorium.

The auditorium seated 1000+ people and the class was very small, thirty or less as I remember. Being in the large auditorium the participants were seated at the very back and the teacher stood in a seat row ahead of them. I could not have planned a more unsuitable situation for a class setting.

I do not remember who the teacher was. I only recall that he was very capable and knowledgeable. The subject was the book of Psalms and he was teaching on chapter 73. The scripture was unfamiliar. What happen during that class was profound and continues to impact me some 20 years later and I expect it will continue to do so the rest of my life.

That particular time in my life was a period of great stress and anxiety for both my self and my family. I was feeling overwhelmed to the point of desperation. My faith was waning. I felt as if there was no place to turn. No one understood or could help. That was my state of mind as I listened to the words of the psalm.

*Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.*

*But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

*They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity ;
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.*



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They say, "How can God know?
Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been plagued;
I have been punished every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed your children.
When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.

Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.
How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes,
so when you arise, O Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies.

When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.

Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

There are really two distinct spiritual milestones associated with this occasion. The first, which I am sharing now, relates to scripture and how God speaks through his word. The second relates to the application of God's message in Psalms 73 to my life. That will be the subject of another time.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it



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judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

The words of the Hebrews 4:12-13 were familiar but only in an academic sense. I viewed reading scripture as an opportunity to glean information and occasionally experience some insight that would provide wisdom and/or practical advice or, more importantly, clarity about rules. All of those opportunities are embodied, more or less, in Psalms 73 but that morning there was something else.

The Hebrews passage became a reality for me. As the teacher spoke and I read the words they penetrate my soul. I was laid bare in the presence of God.

My cynical heart was revealed:

*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.*

Is the reality not plain? Just look around.

*For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills.*

Where is your justice God? I don't deserve this!

*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been plagued;
I have been punished every morning.*

I'm hemmed in. I cannot even speak of this.

*If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed your children.*

God answered me. "You want to know the truth? You want understand my justice? You dare to see yourself as you really are? Come into my presence."

*When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.*

The words of the psalmist were a mirror in which I saw my real self.

*When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.*

It is in the presence of God that my hope is found.

*Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.*



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*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

My respite and refuge will be found in God.
*But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.*

The experience that morning was beyond my usual intellectual encounter with the Word. The Spirit of God was working, living and active. The words of the page became a reality in my heart and soul. I was exposed and had no excuse or rationalization. I was truly penetrated to the depth of my being. Not only did I see the reality of myself; I understood the destiny of the evil that had invaded our lives. There was the peace of knowing God's justice mixed with the guilt and remorse for being such a "brute beast". The direction my journey was charted ... seek the sanctuary of God ... find his presence in my life. The strength I needed for the journey ahead was revealed ... God is my portion and strength forever.

My view of the Bible ... scripture ... the Word of God ... had changed. I have not looked at the Bible the same since that day. The infinite depth of God's word became more apparent as that single Psalm generated an intensive study and reflection that has continued for years. The understandings gained in that process expanded exponentially propelling me along in my spiritual journey. And, yet, still the revelations of those passages have not been exhausted.



Milestone- Significance

This excerpt from a poem written by Frank Tupper in his book *A Scandalous Providence* express beautifully the source of our significance:

*I stood alone on the wet, sandy shore
In the presence of the Sea.
Its waters extended endlessly,
Beyond the horizon
Touching infinity.*

*The sounds of waves rolling
And crashing against the shore
Roared like the majestic dawning of creation,
Deafening in its might.
Colors blurred into every shade
Of blue and black and green and white.*

*I tasted the salt in my mouth,
And breathed it into my life.
The light of the eastern sky broke through
Billowing clouds of cotton and blue,
Dark clouds receding, retreating before the light.
Towering black cliffs loomed massive behind me,
Laid along side one another
Like giant steeples of stone
Reaching up until lost in the mist
Of blanketing clouds above.*

*I stood in the awesome, infinite presence of the Sea,
Of ineffable Mystery.
And simultaneously I saw myself from above,
One speck on a vast, shining shore,
A shoreline stretching farther than the eye could see,
Lost in the distance to the embrace of the Sea.
And I felt significant.
I felt significant only because of my insignificance.
Yet I stood in the Presence of Ultimate Reality,
Of Another, of the Holy Other.
I felt acceptance and affirmation,
Security and peace.*

*I belonged to the Sea.
It had let me be
To become a valued entity.
It had named me,
To forget me now an impossibility.*

*God knew me.
God knew my name,
The journey of my life.
And God loved me.*

MILESTONE - MYSTIC

Sometimes it is not clear that an event or new/renewed understanding is a spiritual milestone such as I defined earlier. Where the circumstances are not so clear, I have decided to call the occasions "trail markers" in lieu of declaring a spiritual milestone. Perhaps further in the journey in time they will be declared spiritual milestone but at this time they are simply markers on the trees along the trail to point the way. Today I as I rode my bicycle, I encountered a trail marker. Probably a year or so ago or more, I shared with a bible class my ambition to become a mystic. Listening to Patrick Mead and Josh Graves' lesson to the Rochester Church of Christ, I was reminded of, and renewed in, that ambition.

Josh defined mystic as one who recognizes the presence of God in the mundane. A person who can sense the power and presence of God at work; who has the ability to see the real hand and power and presence of God. Someone who is so connected to the spiritual world that it changes how they live in the physical world. Using quotations from Brother Lawrence, the dramatic implications of seeking and living in the presence of God were almost overwhelming.

I walk before God simply, in faith, with humility, and with love. I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him.

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Only those can comprehend it who practice and experience it.

Please keep my recommendation in mind that you think of God often; by day, by night, in your business, and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you. Leave Him not alone. You would think it rude to leave a friend alone who came to visit you. Why, then, must God be neglected? Do not forget Him but think of Him often. Adore Him continually. Live and die with Him.

The Lord is not outside of you pouring down favors. The Lord is within you. See him there within and no where else. Let the Lord be the one. Let us begin earnestly to be devoted to Him. Let us cast everything else out of our heart. He wants to possess the heart alone. Beg this favor of Him.

Milestone - WOE TO ME!

The late 1960's and early 1970's were a special time. My career at Ford Motor Company was promising. My involvement at church was growing. I had been selected to be a deacon. An exciting and influential relationship developed between our family and the family of our new preacher. Anxious to be the Christian I believed I needed to be, thoughts of making a life change were on my mind. I was serious about serving God. My confidence was undaunted.

In those years Ford launched a unique initiative to hire what was described as "hard core unemployed" persons. In order to prepare salaried supervisors to manage and relate to them, special training sessions were developed. One segment was a problem solving exercise designed to illustrate how we view people and circumstances through our own lens and are often blinded to reality.

The problem was a simple story of one man selling his donkey to another man and then buying it back and reselling it several times. The question for us was: after the final transaction how much profit did the seller make? We were asked to individually solve the problem without using pen or paper. When the answers were given there was four different responses. I was very vocal in my confidence that I had the correct answer. The 30 +/- players were asked to form groups based on their common answers. The distribution among the groups was something like 13, 9, 7, and my group with 5. Each group was instructed to discuss among themselves how they decided on their answer. After a few minutes, everyone was given the opportunity to reconsider their answer and change groups if they wished. The distribution shifted, with the larger group gaining a couple of new members. My group remained confident in our answer, in part, because of my impassioned arguments and flawless logic.

In the next step of the process, each group was asked to send an envoy to another group to try and convince them to reconsider their answer and change to the envoy's group. There was considerable interaction and the groups' distribution shifted again. The larger group gained additional members. To my dismay, I lost one in my group. I remember wondering how so many could be so wrong and not be able to see it, despite the powerful logic and arguments I was able to present. The process continued by asking each group to have a representative work out their group's solution on the blackboard. I boldly illustrated the correct answer. After the others were finished, we were given the opportunity to change groups for the last time. Incredibly, everyone but myself and one other faithful joined the larger group. The two of us stood alone, defiant in our



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correctness. Personally, I was truly amazed at power of the exercise to illustrate how people can be blinded to the truth. It deeply gratifying to have the courage to stand on the truth in the face of the pressure of an overwhelming majority opinion.

To settle the disputed answers once and for all, the class leader called me and one of the majority group to the center of the room. He gave us money and a "donkey" and had us methodically work out the problem with the money and the donkey actually changing hands until the stated transactions were complete. As the seller, I was asked to count the money I had in my possession. I was completely confident and was preparing to celebrate. As I finished counting the money I could not believe my eyes. My answer was wrong!

I had never before nor have I since had such a feeling. In a those brief moments, the foundation of my self-confidence crumbled. If I could be wrong about this, what else could I be wrong about? I cannot minimize the impact of that experience. For me, it was an Isaiah experience akin to Isa 6:1-8 ... "WOE TO ME" . The implications were profound. The source of my confidence was stripped away, leaving me with a reality of uncertainty. Ever since that day, I have viewed life differently. My compass for the journey ahead had been changed. No longer could I depend solely on myself for truth and direction. Every circumstance would be seen in the light of that experience. It was not that I didn't know that truth is only found in God but it was that my life was not being directed by that knowledge.



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Milestone - FUNERAL

a beloved uncle

Billy R. Page

Billy Rudolph Page, born in Rogersville, Ala., on Dec. 12, 1923, passed away Sunday, June 25, 2006 at his home in Oliver surrounded by family and friends.

Visitation will be 6-8 p.m. Tuesday, June 27, 2006, at Rogersville Funeral Home, with funeral services at 1 p.m. Wednesday, June 28, at Oliver Church of Christ. Visitation at the church will be one hour before the service. Burial will be in Miller Cemetery.

He was preceded in death by his parents, William "Billy" Page and Nellie Thornton Page, and his sisters, Aurelia Ezell and Izora Skipworth.

Bill and his wife, Imogene Hamilton Page, had just celebrated their 60th anniversary May 10, 2006.

Bill is survived by three sons, David, of Bradenton, Fla., Jerry, of Rogersville, and Gary Don, of Athens, Ala.; grandchildren, Craig and Garrett, of Bradenton, Matthew and wife, Amy, of Cullman, Kelsey, of Rogersville, Christa and Andy, of Athens.

Bill was a faithful member of Oliver Church of Christ, where he served for many years as a deacon. He was a graduate of Lauderdale County High. As a proud member of the greatest generation, Bill served in the U.S. Navy during World War II aboard the USS Chester. Returning from the war meant beginning his college at Auburn. After he graduated with an agriculture degree, he worked for Barber Milk Co., in Birmingham. Finally, he returned home to Rogersville, where he coached and taught biology at LCHS and worked on a dairy farm. Later years saw him working for ABMA in Huntsville and continuing his studies at Athens State, where he earned a degree in mathematics and later worked for NASA as a mathematician until his retirement with the government. He then worked for Consolidated Systems Corp. for several years before he retired to become a cattle farmer. Billy and Imogene also became locally famous for the daylilies they began to raise as a hobby. They sold them and gave away many more. Daylilies from their gardens are spread throughout North Alabama as a living memorial to a couple who always knew if they were doing something that was fun, they would never have to work. Their doors and hearts were always open to any passers-by at their hilltop home in Oliver.

The sports teams at LCHS and Auburn never had a more devoted follower than Billy Page, who was with them as long as he was able to attend. His friends and family will forever miss that handsome shock of snowy hair and the twinkle in his eye.

Uncle Bill was my favorite uncle. He was always my favorite uncle. I had never really thought seriously about why he was my favorite until I was asked to "officiate" at the graveside service. In reading and reflecting on his life and observing and listening to the scores of mourners ... no ! mourners is not right, they were celebrators ... I believe the 131 Psalm (MSG) captured the essence of his attitude in life. He was a patient man, a theme repeated often as we reminisced.

God, I'm not trying to rule the roost,
I don't want to be king of the mountain.
I haven't meddled where I have no business
or fantasized grandiose plans.



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I've kept my feet on the ground,
I've cultivated a quiet heart.
Like a baby content in its mother's arms,
my soul is a baby content.
Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope.
Hope now; hope always!

What was it about Uncle Bill that made him my favorite Uncle? Certainly the attitude with which he approached life was a part, but it does not explain the depth of my feelings. As I thought about the sixty plus years of our relationship, I was struck by the minuscule amount of time we spent together. I have often regretted not being able to spend more time with him and my Aunt Imogene. Our times together were wonderful but they were brief, sporadic and seldom.

My musing about Uncle Bill and his funeral renewed thoughts about my own funeral. I have shared with Ann and others my request that the recording "Sweet Home Alabama" by Lynyrd Skynard be played. That request has encountered a considerable amount of resistance. Usually, when the subject comes up, there is a discussion, often with significant tension, about why would anyone would you want to play that song at their funeral. The reason is always the same. It is because the music and the words symbolize home for me. Particularly the refrain:

Sweet home Alabama
Where the skies are so blue
Sweet Home Alabama
Lord, I'm coming home to you
Here I come Alabama

It is really not about Alabama. It is about home. The memories of Alabama are glimpses of a home that I long for. The place that each of us longs for, our home with God. I believe there are occasions and circumstances in our lives where we experience a taste of what it is like to be with God. For me, *Sweet Home Alabama* is not so much a reminder of the past, but a symbol of what I look forward to.

In that regard, it became clearer why Uncle Bill was my favorite and why his life was special. My experiences with Uncle Bill were about home. When I hear "*Sweet Home Alabama*" I think of times with he and Aunt Imogene.

With those thoughts on my mind, I shared the following remarks at the graveside:

The day was a perfect summer day in North Alabama. Sunny and hot with warm breezes. It was as I remember them. From the gravesite, the rolling pastures of Uncle Bill and Aunt Imogene's farm framed the final scene of his life.

Reading:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all
comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...

[My soul finds rest] in God alone, my hope comes from
him.

He alone is my Rock and my Salvation: He is my
Fortress, I will not be shaken, my salvation and my



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honor. Depend upon God; He is my mighty Rock, my refuge.

[To all of you I say] trust in Him at all times, pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Praise be to the Lord, to God our savior, who daily bears our burdens.

... the Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Remarks:

I think most of you probably noticed the words “going home” on the inside of the casket lid.

It is somewhat ironic that I recently read a quote attributed to a dying character on a TV show in which he described what he thought dying is like.

“... death is like when you’re a child and you get sick and feverish. You go to bed at night sweating, shivering, feeling wretched enough to die. The next morning you awake, your fever is broken, and you are feeling much better. You feel secure, snug, and strong – and suddenly you realize why. You’re now in your parents’ bed. In the middle of the night some one came to get you to take you home.”

Those words could take our thoughts in several directions, but what I want you to understand is that my experiences with my Uncle Bill and Aunt Imogene ... coming to their house, being a part of their lives; even though less seldom than I had hoped, always made me feel secure, snug, and strong. It was like awaking in the warmth and comfort of your parent’s bed.

I want to share Psalms 84 (NLT) which came to mind as I thought about Uncle Bill:

The psalmist describes his longing for home with God:

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD Almighty.
I long, yes, I faint with longing
to enter the courts of the LORD.
With my whole being, body and soul,
I will shout joyfully to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home there,
and the swallow builds her nest
and raises her young--
at a place near your altar,
O LORD Almighty, my King and my God!

How happy are those who can live in your house,
always singing your praises.

I believe the verses from the psalmist that follow draw a portrait of Uncle Bill’s life:



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Happy are those who are strong in the LORD,
who set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

When they walk through the Valley of Weeping,
it will become a place of refreshing springs,
where pools of blessing collect after the rains!
They will continue to grow stronger,
and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.

O LORD God Almighty, hear my prayer.
Listen, O God of Israel.

I believe the demonstration of admiration and love shown Bill Page by the scores of people that expressed their condolences yesterday and today is because they, like myself, all drank from the refreshing springs and pools of blessing that Bill's life brought to a dry land in his pilgrimage home. Through our partaking of that refreshing water his life brought us, we have a glimpse of what life together with God is like.

We not only see a glimpse, we find strength for our own journey. Having tasted a sample of that rich food, I am determined to enjoy the great banquet with God and Bill and all the others before me.

Knowing Bill Page has deepened my resolve to live life in a way that I too will bring springs to the dry land as I pass through on my journey home. It is my hope that each you will also find such resolve for your life.

Prayer

Milestone- Transition

Resignation as Elder

March 19, 2006

For a long time, I believed that my life's ambition should be to achieve control, create stability and predictability, and provide safety and security for my family and me. And, therefore, any degree of success in life could be measured by the presence of those factors. God has taught me otherwise. I have learned that life is not about achieving control, stability, predictability, safety and security but is about surrendering to God's reign over my life.

Life is a journey. We will never arrive at "some particular place" that promises peace and safety, short of our promised home in eternity with God. Life as a journey is filled with transitions. Transition is not about just doing better what we have been doing but it is about beginning something we have never done before. Transition brings both an ending and a beginning. After much prayer and consternation and with the benefit of an extended time to reflect more deeply upon what it means to be God's person in this world, I have concluded it is time for a transition. For the past several years I have wrestled with understanding God's leading. I cannot say with clarity I know the pathway God has planned. I only know with certainty the destination He has promised. However, the ending is clear. After fifteen years as elder for the Okolona Church of Christ, my judgment is, this part of my journey is complete.

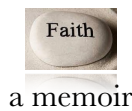
I cannot fully express the inner conflict this decision to resign as an elder has caused Ann and me. I will not tell you that I have received a message from God. I suspect that if there was one I wouldn't recognize it. I love Jesus and I want to learn to love him more deeply. The leading I feel in this is not one of certainty but of trust. God is in control. He is faithful and he will work in every circumstance for the good of all who love him and have been called to his purpose.

Although the ending is clear, the beginning that comes with this transition is not so clear. I must admit, that that reality is both fearful and exciting. Moving from the familiar is fraught with anxiety, despite any discomfort and/or difficulty that is presently experienced

As I shared this decision with a few people, there were two questions asked most frequently. The first was: Why? The second was: Are you planning to leave the Okolona church?

Let me answer the easy one first. Ann and I have no plans to leave Okolona. We love this church and you are our spiritual family.

The harder question is: Why?



I understand it is a natural response to speculate on possible reasons/causes for my decision. I cannot prevent speculation, but I want to help direct it in a way that is truthful and ultimately profitable to our spiritual well being as a community of God's people.

First, let me be very clear, my decision is not precipitated by a single event or issue i.e. some grievous sin in my life or an angry dispute with others or some doctrinal error. DO NOT fall prey to the temptation of gossip. I would rather direct any speculation to a thoughtful examination of the pathway that has led me to this point. Time will not permit me to retrace all the steps of my journey over the past decades but I will share this with you.

You will find a card in my bible dated Jan 4, 2003. What is recorded there is the product of an intensive personal search for God's direction culminated by several days of retreat with Ann in the Smokey Mountains. On one side you will find Psalms 37:3-8.

It was from that passage God revealed to me instructions for the journey ahead.

- Trust in the LORD and do good.
- Delight yourself in the LORD.
- Commit your way to the LORD
- Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him
- Refrain from anger and turn from wrath

Also, from that retreat experience came some spiritual commitments which I recorded on the other side of the card. They are:

- Continually and consistently seek the presence of God.
- Continue to identify and remove the "beam from my eye".
- Strive for balance between my inner focus and outreach. Be salt and light.
- Continue to pursue a deeper relationship with Ann.
- Strengthen spiritual disciplines in my life on a day-to-day basis by adopting a "Rule of Life".
- Develop a deeper understanding of spiritual leadership and model that understanding in my own leadership.

That retreat experience, joined with the journey before, carved out my pathway for the last three years. Any answer to why is embedded deeply in that experience and is not easily expressed. For that reason, I invite you to direct your speculation to that passage and the



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commitments I made in the hope that you will somehow be able to better understand what has brought me here.

More important than any decision I might make is that each of us put our trust and confidence in God alone. Consider the words of Psalms 73:

... I am always with you;

you hold me by my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel,

and afterward you will take me into glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart

and my portion forever.

I commend Bob, Darrell and Mayo to you as your shepherds. Their heart's desire is for us to do God's will as his church. My prayers on their behalf continue.

I want to close my remarks the lyrics from a song I heard recently and they express the thoughts of my heart in these days.

Give me one pure and holy passion

Give me one magnificent obsession

Give me one glorious ambition for my life

To know and follow hard after You

To grow as your disciple in your truth

This world is empty, pale, and poor

Compared to knowing you, my Lord

Lead me on and I will run after you.



Milestone - Myth of Certainty

"I am currently re-reading ""The Myth of Certainty"" by Daniel Taylor. I am sure that I posted the quote below in the past but it is worthy of repeating.

"The goal of faith is not to create a set of immutable, rationalized, precisely defined and defensible beliefs to preserve forever. It is to recover a relationship with God. He offers us a person and a relationship; we want rules and a format. He offers us security through risk; we want safety through certainty. He offers us unity and community; we want unanimity and institutions. And it does no good to point fingers because none of us desires too much light. All of us want God to behave Himself in our lives, to touch this area but leave that one alone, to empower us here but let us run things ourselves over there. Faith in God, then, is not a belief system to defend but a life to live out (though systematic thinking about our beliefs can help us decide how to live). Mistaking this active life of faith for an institutionally backed and culturally bound belief system is similar to reducing the Mona Lisa to paint-by-numbers. Anyone can see that the paint-by-numbers picture has a relationship to the original, but how foolish to think they are the same thing. This is not at all an argument against the church, whose role I take to be crucial. Rather, it is an argument for the personal, risky, never-completed nature of our relationship to God. My desire is for an open-eyed commitment to the life of faith, and the responsibilities it entails, that includes a sensitivity to the great tensions under which faith must live in the modern world. As a belief system, the Christian religion is subject to the many ills of all belief systems; as an encounter with God, it transforms individual lives and human history. God does not give us primarily a belief system; he gives us Himself, most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ, so that truth and meaning can be ours through a commitment to that love with which He first loved us. The risk is great, but the reward is infinite."



Catching the Wind

A men's retreat was a catalyst for re-thinking some things I have come to understand in the course of my journey.

- As Christ followers, it is God's desire that we be transformed. We are not re-made, but new creatures, born again, created in His likeness.
- We are, in fact, created anew, but, we are also in the process of being transformed each day. We are, each day, becoming what we already are.
- Transformation is a process that works from the inside out. Transformation changes hearts and minds and our lives are reflect those changes on the outside.
- Transformation is the work of God. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are transformed.
- I cannot accomplish transformation by my own power working from the outside in.
- An authentic transformed life can only be discerned through an examination of one's heart and motives. It is possible to have the appearance of transformation without inner transformation.

A nagging question in my mind (mostly because I am inclined to take charge) is how can I (see what I mean?) produce/facilitate this transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Another way to put it is: What must I do to be transformed? Because of my rationalistic mind-set, my answer to those questions seems to always loop back to working from the outside in. i.e. I'll establish a regimen of study, prayer, et al. Stop doing and so on.

In a sermon Sunday, the speaker used a metaphor that produced a glimmer of light on the subject. The metaphor was that of sailing. As he encouraged us to toward personal revival, he called us to unfurl our sails so they will catch the wind of the Spirit and our lives will be propelled as the wind directs. YES! I thought for a moment. But then I thought, what does unfurling my sails look like in my life. What must I do to unfurl my sail? Be careful or I'll be back in my "I'll just get it done mode."

I continue to ponder the question, "What is it that shapes me in such a way that I will catch the wind of the Spirit so that God directs and empowers my life?"

Religion

In the early years of our marriage, our religious experience was mostly characterized by regular church attendance. The demands of small children and irregular shift work impeded the kind of church involvement we had experienced growing up in our respective families.

Moving to Louisville in 1964 we joined (placed membership) the Okolona Church of Christ. Our pattern of regular church attendance and nominal involvement continued until the arrival of a new minister and his family. We were immediately drawn to them and they became our surrogate family. That influence, plus the encouragement of the educational minister, led to some teaching opportunities (my 2 years of Christian college education was a qualifying factor).

I experienced an emergence of religious fervor fueled, in part by the guilt of youthful indiscretions, abandonment of faithfulness (sins of omission and commission), mixed with a desire to be a good Christian. Also, there was the fear of going to hell.

As a result, I dedicated myself to correcting my life and trying to do everything possible to be a good Christian. Those days were exhilarating. I was a rising religious star.

During that time I was particularly convicted that Jesus calls us to help the poor and disadvantaged. I became aware of a need at the East End Boy's Club in downtown Louisville. They were in need of coaches for youth football on Saturdays. I signed up and was pleased to find an opportunity for ministry that was also fun and rewarding.

It was on a Saturday while coaching at East End Boy's Club that I experienced a memorable intersection of life and religion. I remember it with great clarity As I watched those young boys, images of my young, pregnant wife at home with our three energetic boys and no driver's license, or car for that matter, flooded over me. Their husband and father had abandoned his responsibilities to them so that he could satisfy his religious needs. The voice I heard was clear, "What a fool you are"!

That was the first time I realized the destructive potential of religion. I resigned from that volunteer opportunity and returned home to "coach" our young boys. I would like to say that event marked my transformation from religion to the pursuit of a relationship with Jesus, but it wasn't. Only years later would I understand the implications of religion to my spiritual journey.

Salvation

THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

If you stop to think about it, salvation is a big deal. It's not unusual for someone to celebrate their heavenly birthday, marking the occasion of their salvation. "Have you been saved?" "Are you saved?" are go to conversation starters for evangelists. Pretty much everyone would say they want to be saved. In our western Christian context, generally, that would mean being saved from eternal punishment in hell.

That's where my salvation story begins. I do not remember the exact date, but I was twelve years old and my family was living in Paducah, Kentucky. It was a Sunday morning worship service at the Broadway Church of Christ. The preacher was Brother H. A. Dixon. For reasons you might imagine for a twelve year old boy, I had been thinking a lot about my sinfulness and the prospects of hell should I die. As usual, the sermon concluded with an invitation to come forward and be baptized by immersion for the forgiveness of your sins and salvation from eternal punishment in hell and eternal life in heaven with God and Jesus. It was an uncomplicated and elegant solution to my angst. As the invitation song, probably "Just as I Am", was being sung a cappella by the congregation, I made my way from the balcony to the front of the auditorium. I was greeted by Bro. Dixon and, to my great surprise, my mother joined me to be baptized (that's another story for another time). I was properly baptized "I now baptize you In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of your sins" and completely immersed. I recall the elation and relief I felt being saved. At least I thought I was.

Salvation, as I soon came to understand and, for most of my life believed, was "YES, BUT ". I could confidently say "Yes, I am saved" because I was baptized. However, that confidence was quickly mitigated by, "BUT".

The list of "BUTS" was long: Consider a few of the "You are saved as long as ..."

- ...you are not living a sinful life.
- ...you have asked and received forgiveness for sins of both commission and omission since you last asked forgiveness
- ...you are a member of Christ's true church.
- ...you are faithfully attending church.
- ...partake of the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Those are just a few of a much longer list. Any thought that salvation meant eternal security, better known as "once saved, always saved", would be rejected immediately. I was never quite sure if that rejection came because of biblical/doctrinal understandings



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or because it was what the Baptists believed. I lean to the latter. The bottom line is, salvation was tenuous at best, always depending upon my continued measuring up. Rather than something received, salvation was a carrot on the end of a stick God continually dangled in front of me to assure my faithful obedience. Maybe that explains why I don't celebrate a "heavenly birthday".

As I stated at the onset, salvation is a big deal, a really big deal. How one understands their salvation or lack of it, shapes the whole landscape of their life, as it did for me.

This is not the end of the story. The occasion of my baptism was a memorable event that is the **Ebenezer** of my salvation. It began a spiritual journey that continues even today. The path from that day to today has been long, seldom straight and often difficult. My journey has brought from "YES, BUT" to "**YES**".

Endnote:

Curiosity about my "heavenly birthday" prompted me to contact Broadway Church of Christ in Paducah Kentucky to confirm the exact date of my baptism. A very helpful lady checked their baptismal records and informed me that I was baptized on November 23, **1952** ! I was not twelve years old! The story I remember as being 12 years old was not correct. In the final analysis, it makes no difference what year I was baptized. The essence of the story is correct, but I now can celebrate my "heavenly birthday" — November 23, 1952. :)

“YES,but” to “YES”

I described my salvation journey as a movement from “YES,but” to “YES”. In I hope to flesh out the space between “YES,but” and “YES”.

Before addressing the space between, let me say that both “YESes” are the same but very different. Each is a declaration that I am saved by the grace of God through Jesus the Christ. Perhaps that paradox is analogous to my marriage. At the conclusion of our vows 57 years ago; I could answer, Are you married? YES. Asked the that question today, my answer would be the same YES. I think you can understand how different the two “YES” are.

To fill the space between “YES,but” and “YES” it’s helpful to use the metaphor of “middle tint” Read this [post](#). The source document is available [HERE](#).

The landscape between “YES,but” and “YES” requires middle tint to assure an observer’s eyes are drawn to most important subject of the painting, salvation through Jesus Christ. Without middle tint any painting will be dull and flat, and lose its potential for dramatic impact.

The work of painting the expanse between my baptism and today has not been my mine but the hand of God working in my life. A work not yet complete.



LoadIng her brush with color from the palette of God’s word, the Holy Spirit began to slowly but surely, build the middle tint of my landscape. With each stroke, salvation came into sharper relief, creating a more beautiful and profound image. First came the startling hues of grace, followed by the deep shades of incarnation, simultaneously



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blended with the tertiary color of Jesus' life and teaching. Inevitably came the sharp hues of sanctification, soften by the reassuring tint of the Kingdom of God.

For me, the depths of salvation have not been plumbed but the transactional nature of salvation at my baptism has been transformed by God's work as we have walked together these 70+ years. The following thoughts of Jason Zahariades express well the result of my transformation.

Salvation is the process of restoration to what humans were created to be.

Rather than sin being the breaking of God's Law, the root of sin is the movement from being to non-being. Sin is the distortion of our humanity, of who we are supposed to be as God's image on earth. Rather than being truly human, sin makes us subhuman. So the problem of sin is much deadlier and sinister than mere guilt or disobedience. It is the warping, distortion and brokenness of who we are as human beings. It is the full corruption of my mind, heart, body, soul and relationships. In this light, I don't just need to be forgiven. I need to be healed. I don't just need assurance of admittance into heaven in the future. I need assurance that who I am in the present is being transformed out of my desperate and destructive subhuman existence and into the image and likeness of God as I was divinely intended to live.

So salvation isn't primarily about guilt and forgiveness. It's about brokenness and healing. It's about delusion and illumination. It's about distortion and transformation. It's about death and life in the here and now. As a follower of Jesus, I truly cannot say, "I am saved." I can only say, "I am being saved."

Jason Zahariades

The truth is that every theological system that allots to man some responsibility in the saving of his own soul inevitably ends up by making man his own savior.(Unknown)



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People of the Book

One of the phrases I remember growing up in church was ""We are a people of the Book."" Proudly proclaimed and worn as a badge of honor, a demonstration of its truthfulness was the ability to quote passages on demand in order to prove our correctness and defeat any who thought differently. As long as they were in agreement with our interpretation, we were ""united"". If there was not agreement the conclusion was that the other party just had it wrong and, of course, were not ""people of the book"". Perhaps, that is not so much the case today, but Eugene Peterson in ""Eat This Book"" describes an equally damaging perversion of what it means to be ""a people of the book"".

""Eat this book"" is my metaphor of choice for focusing attention on what is involved in reading our Holy Scriptures formatively, that is, in such a way that the Holy Spirit uses them to form Christ in us. We are not interested in knowing more but in becoming more.

The task is urgent. It is clear that we live in an age in which the authority of Scripture in our lives has been replaced by the authority of the self: we are encouraged on all sides to take charge of our lives and live our own experience as the authoritative text by which to live.

The alarming thing is how extensively this spirit has invaded the church. I more or less expect the unbaptized world to attempt to live anonymously. But not those of us who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.

I am not the only one to notice that we are in the odd and embarrassing position of being a church in which many among us believe ardently in the authority of the Bible but, instead of submitting to it, use it, apply it, take charge of it endlessly, using our own experience as the authority for how and where and when we will use it.

One of the most urgent tasks facing the Christian community today is to counter this self-sovereignty by reasserting what it means to live these Holy Scriptures from the inside out, instead of using them for our sincere and devout but still self-sovereign purposes."



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Wrath and Judgement

My thinking and beliefs are different today compared with previous years. I made a list while in Florida and will address each item over time on this blog. One item that I listed was the subject of salvation. I did not necessarily intend to start there but I was prompted by Jason Zahariades' post concerning his journey and its path toward Eastern Orthodoxy. I am excerpting a portion of his post because his evolving understandings of salvation parallel my own. You might enjoy reading the **entire post**.

Jason Zahariades first describes the judicial view of salvation which dominate my belief about salvation most of my life.

For most of my Christian life as a western Evangelical, I lived and operated under the judicial view of salvation that is common to western Christianity. In addition, I had fully embraced the reduced popular version that one hears in many witnessing opportunities. It goes something like this:

"God loves you and has created you for a wonderful purpose. However, humanity rebelled against God and therefore all people are born and live under the guilt of sin, compounded by their own disobedience. We are all guilty of breaking God's Law and because the wages of sin is death, every human being is condemned to die. But because God loves you so much, he sent his son to die on your behalf. On the cross, Jesus took upon himself the wrath and judgment reserved for you. So if you accept Jesus' gift simply by believing it in faith, you are forgiven of your of guilt and God now views you with Jesus' righteousness."

Or to reduce it further into how most western evangelicals think, salvation means we're forgiven of all of our sins and as a result, we will go to heaven when we die. This viewpoint focuses primarily on the individual and treats salvation as an event and a commodity regardless of the actual state of one's life.

Jason describes salvation as he came to understand it as a result of his theological reconstruction.

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Christ's crucifixion has conquered evil, destroyed death, reconciled creation, redeemed the human nature, and released God's forgiveness. In other words, Jesus has made God's salvation completely available to all people. But as St Paul exhorts the Philippians, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Salvation is something that is worked out progressively with God.

As is usually the case, I am much clearer about where I've come from than where I am going. Jason's understandings are deeper than I have delved but they reflect a direction in which my thinking is moving. I am confident that salvation is more than just having assurance of eternal life in heaven. What we believe about salvation has profound implications on our understanding of God and our relationship with him as well as how we live out our daily lives in the Kingdom of God.



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The First Half

Recently I was asked about my faith challenges at different stages of my life. What follows is a memoir of my faith struggle in the first part of my life.

The character of faith struggles depends upon our understanding of faith. In my heritage, faith that saved was trusting that God had graciously sent his son to die for me. I was saved because I had complied with the necessary commands for salvation, i.e. hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized. Once I was saved, the focus of my faith became assuring that I did not lose my salvation. I had faith that my salvation was secure as long as I did not sin or, if I did, ask God for forgiveness. Unforgiven sin was a deal breaker. Getting forgiveness was easy enough, assuming you didn't die before you could ask forgiveness.

Sin was a big deal. Sins of commission and sins of omission. Accordingly, my faith struggle became one of sin management. The struggle was two fold, on one hand there was the "don't imperative", and, on the other hand there was the "do imperative".

With the "don't imperative", my faith challenge was adhering to the "do not" commands of scripture. Because it was understood that keeping all those "do not" commands was not practical, an unwritten list evolved to help manage sin and maintain a Christian reputation. The list was contextual, its content and priorities varied according to cultural, geographic and theological realities.

Commonly, it would include: do not ...lie, cheat, steal, cuss, drink, chew, smoke, fornicate, masturbate, worship with an instrument, divorce, et al. Of course, there are many other "do not" commands in scripture, but the list needed to contain reasonably manageable sins. Also, many "do not" sins were internal, i.e. pride, envy and so on, and did not lend themselves to management and were less critical in maintaining outward appearance. Also, their private nature avoided the need for public confession and a plea for forgiveness. Though guilt was a constant companion, forgiveness was always handy.

Similarly, there was a "do" list. The do's are in the category of sins of omission, failure to do as commanded. Not unlike the "do not" list, the "do" list varied. The priority of obedience to God's commands was dictated by theology and religious tenets. In my heritage, that list might look something like: "Do": ...go to church, ...read the Bible, ...evangelize, ...pray, ...take communion, ...care for the needy, ...wear your Sunday best to church, ...be hospitable, et al.

The "do" list established criteria for inclusion. Compliance was not so much needed to maintain salvation as it was necessary for membership and fellowship in the local church. Of course baptism was prerequisite to any level of inclusion. Since it was believed that anyone who was not a member of our fellowship was going to hell, I suppose the do's were indirectly deal breakers.

Oddly, the "do" list do's were not lines in the sand. For instance, one could occasionally miss church and maintain their relationship but persistent or protracted absence would bring your faithfulness into question. At some point you would be declared "out of service" and public



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confession and repentance would be necessary for restoration. It was never exactly clear when one went “out of service”.

Understanding that my faith struggle in my first four +/- decades was primarily about sin management, what follows is a summary of how that played out.

- Because my steady girl friend was Presbyterian, we broke up after high school graduation. I wasn't willing to go to hell for her.
- Keenly aware of my sinful habits and friends, I chose to go to a Christian college 1000 miles away to learn to how to better manage my sin. (Also to play football and baseball)
- After two years of college and mismanagement of sin, Ann and I got engaged and returned home to get married and live in Alabama.
- After getting a job with Ford in Nashville and feeling the guilt of sin mismanagement we resolved our “out of service” status at a local church. A positive step toward improving sin management.
- After two years in Nashville, we moved to Louisville. I took a salaried job with Ford and we joined a local congregation. That congregation became our church home for the next 43 years. It was at this point I became serious about sin management.
- Because of the influence of the preacher who became my best friend I managed the “do” list with religious fervor. I began to achieve progress on some do's. Recruited to teach, I became a regular adult Sunday School teacher and was eventually appointed as a deacon. Some years later I was selected as an elder and served for 18 years.
- Despite some success with the “do” list, management of the “do not” sins was mostly a struggle, with mediocre success, at best. My failure was most apparent in my job as a supervisor. The contrast between the George at work and the George at church was a painful reminder of my mismanagement of “do not” sins.
- Understanding the ultimate peril of failure to manage my sin, I chose to intensify my management efforts and get my life under control. Having decided that my sin problem could not be resolved as long as I continued in my current job, I managed to return to college, get a degree and return to a new job.
- The decision to return to college with 4 children and a pregnant wife and no job was the pinnacle of my sin management efforts.
- Successfully completing my degree, moving back to Louisville, accepting a new job at Ford and returning to our home church, my faith (sin management) struggle continued.
- During the two years to complete my degree there were opportunities and relationships that planted seeds which would bear fruit years later.
- For more than a decade my faith challenge remained sin management. I became better at managing “do not” sins and my “faith” was being strengthened.



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- A turning point in my spiritual journey occurred when serious family issues exposed my sin management faith for what it was, nothing but a rule-keeping system that was alienating me from Christ and, of no value in the midst of unmanageable circumstances.
- The transformation that began at that time led me to understand the true meaning of faith and consequently redefined faith challenges for me.



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Faith challenges in the first half of life.

As I think about my early “faith challenges” it is hard to make sense of them knowing what I now know about faith. My faith was misguided, trusting God to reward my ability and willingness to learn and do what he commanded.

How could such a misguided faith result in so many so many positive outcomes?

Richard Rohr’s book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* has helped me begin to sort out that conundrum. Some insightful excerpts regarding the first half of life follow:

The first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it.

...in my opinion, this first-half-of-life task is no more than finding the starting gate. It is merely the warm-up act, not the full journey. It is the raft but not the shore. If you realize that there is a further journey, you might do the warm-up act quite differently, which would better prepare you for what follows. People at any age must know about the whole arc of their life and where it is tending and leading.

The first-half-of-life container, nevertheless, is constructed through impulse controls; traditions; group symbols; family loyalties; basic respect for authority; civil and church laws; and a sense of the goodness, value, and special importance of your country, ethnicity, and religion

Law and tradition seem to be necessary in any spiritual system both to reveal and to limit our basic egocentricity, and to make at least some community, family, and marriage possible.

Considering those ideas and my experience, I would suggest what I consider faith challenges for the first half:

- SIN

Although I described sin management as a challenge to my faith development, paradoxically sin management is essential to “keeping the raft afloat”, to use Rohr’s metaphor. Awareness/fear of the destructive nature of sin and the practical need to restrain it, can provide a life preserver that will keep one afloat through the early years.

Ideally, sin management would come through reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit rather than self-reliance. No matter what the underlying motivation, every effort must be made to restrain sin.

A practical implication relates to discipling people in their early years, is the need for clear and unequivocal insistence on morally upright lives. That requirement must not be



divorced from consistent spiritual guidance that leads to deeper understanding of the nature of sin and and faith that truly manages sin and rejects legalistic law keeping.

- MYOPIA

nearsightedness, lack of imagination, foresight, or intellectual insight.

One trait that gives sin a strategic advantage is myopia. The inability to see ultimate consequences of sin makes resistance less likely.

Today's culture is broadly characterized by impatience, a need for immediate gratification, short term gains, et al. The language of older people betrays the ubiquity of myopia: "If I had only known"... Didn't see that coming"... "if I could go back"... and so on. Probably the greatest frustration of senior adults is the refusal of young people to look ahead and listen to the voice of experience.

Like myself, many young adults live life like driving a car at breakneck speeds only paying attention the next 50 feet of road. As Rohr says "People at any age must know about the whole arc of their life and where it is tending and leading."

Spiritual guidance has potential to provide corrective lens for the myopia of youth but the hindsight of mature Christians is 20/20. Developing meaningful intergenerational relationships can go along way in mitigating myopia.

- DISENCHANTMENT

The first half of life is discovering the script...

In some recent writings, I contended that: "Living in a disenchanted age is the most significant challenge we face in seeking a relationship with God'. My spiritual heritage is a product of disenchantment and the "faith" of my memoir is its offspring.

Charles Taylor and my favored blogger Richard Beck have provide some understanding of the disenchanted age in which we live.

The default mode for the disenchanted age is reliance on human ability/reason and scientific laws as an ultimate source for answers to the problems of modernity. Utility, efficiency and production are our preeminent tools to achieve full potential as human beings. Inherently, disenchantment rejects the transcendent. Mystery, fantasy, spirituality, faith, divinity, magic, art, namely, enchantment, is rendered irrelevant. our existence in a disenchanted age is reduced to one dimension, removing depth and meaning and distorting the purpose of our lives. As Beck describes, "When creation is stripped of its holy, sacred and enchanted character ...it becomes—material. Raw, disenchanted material. Inert stuff. Piles of particles."

I believe disenchantment to be the most difficult faith challenge for several reasons.



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1. Disenchantment as defined above is in opposition to the very nature of a transcendent faith. *Inherently, disenchantment rejects the transcendent. Mystery, fantasy, spirituality, faith, divinity, magic, art, namely, enchantment, is rendered irrelevant.* As an example, a thoughtful examination of disenchantment will expose its inherent negative implications to prayer and illustrate its perniciousness.
2. Disenchantment is the air we breathe. We are so immersed we have very little objective awareness of its threat to our faith. If Rohr is correct that the first half of life is discovering the script, our script will be distorted by disenchantment and leave us ill prepared for the second half of life.
3. Ironically, the effects of disenchantment have created a vacuum of purpose, meaning and enchantment that provides unprecedented opportunity for the gospel. Accordingly, meeting the faith challenge of disenchantment will depend upon presenting the gospel in a way that fills that vacuum.

The Second Half

In the first half, my faith was misguided. Transition to the second half brought a deeper and more truthful understanding of faith.

A faith centered, not in my ability to effect my salvation through rule keeping, but a faith in a Trinitarian God, through whom all things were created and exist. Faithfulness is no longer measured by rule keeping, Faithfulness is now defined defined by love for God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind. And love for my neighbor as myself.

The following are some scripture passages prominent in my transition:

Isaiah 6:5 NIV

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Psalms 73:16-17 NIV

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

John 6:29 NIV

Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

Romans 3:20 NIV

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Romans 7:6 NIV

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Ephesians 2:8-10,13 NIV

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. [For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23 NIV

... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ...

2 Corinthians 3:3-6 NIV

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes

from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

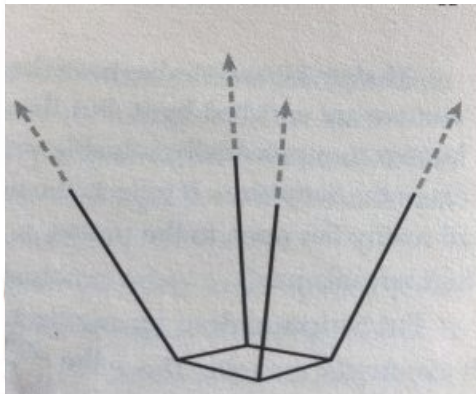
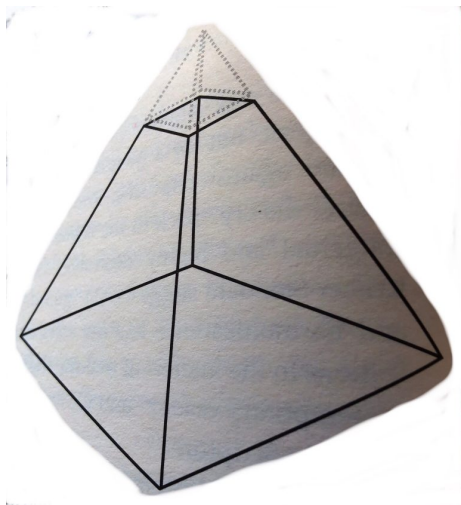
1 Timothy 4:10 NIV

That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

It is important to understand that transition into the second half is not a discrete event, but is a continual process extending to the end of life. Although my faith is distinctly different, I am fully aware that I have only begun to plumb the depth and breath of my relationship with the Infinite.

An understanding essential to faith development is illustrated by the following:

This image reflects my mindset in the first half. The solid lines represent the known. As knowledge increases, the unknown, represented by dotted lines, is reduced permitting greater control over my life. The implications to faith development are profound. Transcendence is squeezed out. *(Thanks Leonard Allen)*

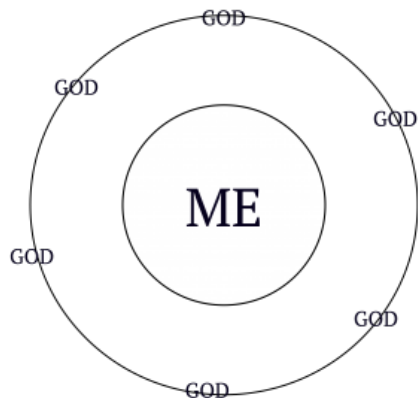


The second image illustrates my mindset in the second half. Rather than driving out the unknown, it is embraced. The more that is learned the more there is to be learned. Rather than reducing transcendence, it is enlarged. The immensity of that reality is overwhelming. *(Thanks Leonard Allen)*

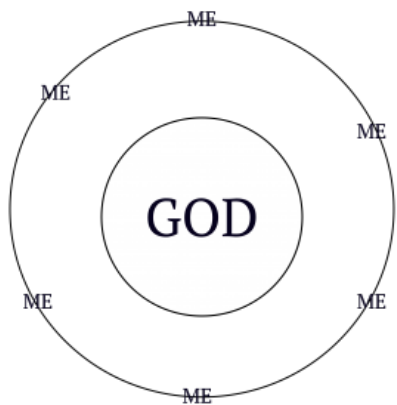
The following images depict my relationship to God in the first half and the second half. *(Thanks Pastor Paul)*



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First Half



Second Half

My faith in the first half was misguided, but the faith challenges of the first half are also challenges to my faith in the second half. Sin, myopia and disenchantment, each in their particular fashion, ultimately sabotage our efforts to become the beings we were created to be. Creatures created in the image of their creator.

Hopefully, the preceding has provided a second half framework that provides some insight into the challenges to my faith in the second half.

Second Half Faith Challenges

People look at you and think you're saints, but beneath the skin you're total frauds."

Matthew 23:28 MSG

The simplest way I can describe the difference between my faith in the first half and my faith in the second half is: The first half was DO, the second half is BE. However, that description is a caricature and fails to embrace the deep paradox of Christian faith, which is BE and DO.

That paradox is apparent in 2 Peter 1:2-9



- **Forgetting my sins are forgiven.**

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. 2Peter 1:2-9

Peter asserts , if the qualities that keep us from being ineffective and unproductive are missing, we are near-sighted and blind and have forgotten our sins are forgiven.

Forgetfulness is an affliction of our humanity. More obvious in my later years, memory has been a challenge throughout my life. Reasons for that are in dispute, but the problem is real. It seems to me that scripture is in some way God's acknowledgement of humanity's propensity to forget. Scripture tells stories of forgetting and continually admonishes readers to remember. Though it may seem a remote possibility that we could forget what God has done for us through the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, evidence to the contrary abounds, both in scripture and in our lives. A source of forgetfulness is distraction. Opportunities for distraction are endless in the modern age.

- **Failing to trust God/ Self-sufficiency**

A struggle that was waged and lost in the Garden of Eden is still relevant for me in the latter years of my faith journey.

The following quotes captures the essence of this challenge.

I fear, that more often than not, we yield to easily to what is doable and practical and popular. In that process we sacrifice the pursuit of our heart's desire to seek and know God. We find ourselves giving in to our doubts, settling for keeping a checklist of things we know we can do, or can soon learn how to do, instead of pursuing what matters most and living with the adventure and anxiety that pursuing God requires. [adapted from "The Answer to How? is Yes"]

...our faith is not in our "certainty" but in our "confidence," and the difference between those two terms is trust. Jerad Byas

Trusting God is not a priority when you believe that life's ambition should be: achieve control, create stability and predictability, and provide safety and security for your family and yourself. Any degree of success in life is measured by the presence of those factors. If it was to be, it was up to me.



Although God has taught me otherwise, The threat of self-sufficiency to my faith remains a constant companion. In the second half self-sufficiency resides not so much in accomplishment but in certainty. Certainty, not about my ability to achieve, but certainty about my rightness, the self-delusion of infallibility. Self-sufficiency based on achievement is easily refuted by failure. Self-sufficiency established on perceived infallibility is unyielding.

A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right , basically all the time, about basically everything : about our political and intellectual convictions , our religious and moral beliefs , our assessment of other people , our memories , our grasp of facts . As absurd as it sounds when we stop to think about it , our steady state seems to be one of unconsciously assuming that we are very close to omniscient.

Schulz, Kathryn. Being Wrong

self-sufficiency makes God experience impossible! Richard Beck

... it is ultimately wrongness , not rightness , that can teach us who we are. When we know who we are , we have no recourse but God. (i.e Psalm 73:16-17; Isa 6:1)

Augustine of Hippo, a fifth-century bishop and theologian, wrote, “The way to Christ is first through humility, second through humility, third through humility. If humility does not precede and accompany and follow every good work we do, if it is not before us to focus on, if it is not beside us to lean upon, if it is not behind us to fence us in, pride will wrench from our hand any good deed we do at the very moment we do it.

“In the struggle against your own weakness, humility is the greatest virtue. Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness. Humility is an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.” The Road to Character, David Brooks

- **Yielding to Sin**

Biblically, salvation isn't just about forgiveness, it's also about mortal weakness and incapacity. As the church fathers pointed out, God might forgive you, but that doesn't change the vulnerability of your mortal flesh to the forces of Sin and Death! Something has to change your very being if



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you want to be fully saved and liberated from Sin and Death. Richard Beck

As stated earlier :failure to manage sin is an uninterrupted thread that runs through the first half and second half. I have found no evidence that Paul's admonitions in Ephesians 4:22-32 are less relevant in the modern age or in the second half.

I have found, in the second half, there is an added dimension to my struggle with sin that was not comprehended in the first half. That struggle relates to Jesus' "...but I tell you..." statements in the sermon on the mount. Rohr describes it as an issue of integrity, *"...Integrity largely has to do with purifying our intentions and a growing honesty about our actual motives."*

I no longer have the shelter of doing good works. The presence of God's Holy Spirit in me does not allow me to be satisfied with right actions but demands integrity, doing the right thing for the right reason. If the first half's struggle with sin was a battle for my will, the second half's struggle with sin is a battle for my soul. In deed, something had to change...

It is a battle that can only be won because...His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

- **Disenchantment**

Disenchantment ...a skeptical stance toward robustly metaphysical and supernatural expressions, experiences, events, and beliefs within Christianity.

Please reference my comments on **disenchantment in part 1** that are even more applicable to the second half because of the nature of my second half faith.

Disenchanted, doubting Christians tend to be preoccupied with their own thoughts about faith, working hard to get it all sorted out in their minds, getting the answers to all their questions about faith and the bible. The buffered self's experience of faith isn't an outward posture of receptivity but thinking a lot. Questions about God rather than experience with God seem to dominate the faith experience.

All this seems to suggest that edging back toward enchantment may involve getting us out of our heads. Beck

Walter Brueggemann says, "The gospel is... a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. Partly, the gospel is simply an old habit among us,



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neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes.”

- **Grieving the Holy Spirit**

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

This sentence, mostly hidden in the midst of Paul’s admonitions in Ephesians 4, addresses the most terrifying reality of my existence as a Christ follower. It is my understanding that despite all that I believe to be true about God ...he loves me...he has forgiven me...saved me ... Christ lives in me... ad infinitum, there is the possibility I can willfully disregard all those realities and choose to go my own way. Oh, how God’s Spirit in me must grieve.

This is a mystery that I have not yet fathomed, but God’s grace remains.



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How God has worked in my life.

2008

Notes from a talk at Central Church of Christ Sarasota, FL. 2008

Time will not permit me to retrace all the steps of my journey over the past decades, but I will share this with you. We are on a never-ending journey. When I reach heaven, I won't suddenly "know God" and "know the whole story". We'll always be learning—even in heaven.

I believed, (until the past 5 or so years) that life was "getting things together". I lived to get:

Control – manage my work life, my family life, my Christianity

Stability – manage my finances, be stable in my work and get ahead

Predictability – God would be pleased with me.

If I achieved this, I would be successful "Financially, in my work life, in my family or home life, and in my religious life." I believed that I had to:

1. decide what I want out of life, and
2. decide how to get it done

If I did this, I was successful.

There are only two ways to look at life: Decide what you want and get it done

Or

Live each day in search of God

I went with the first philosophy. I believed it to be true even in my religious life—

"Decide what God wanted of you and get it done."

But I learned that it doesn't work that way.

You will find a card in my Bible dated Jan. 4, 2003. What is recorded there is the product of an intensive personal search for God's direction culminated by several days of retreat with Ann in the Smokey Mountains. On one side you will find Psalms 37:3-8:

Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this

He will make righteousness shine like the dawn,

the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.

Be still before the LORD; and wait patiently for him;

Do not fret when men succeed in their ways,

when they carry out their wicked schemes

Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.

It was from that passage God revealed to me instructions for the journey ahead.



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- Trust in the LORD and do good.
- Delight yourself in the LORD.
- Commit your way to the LORD.
- Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.
- Refrain from anger and turn from wrath.

Also, from that retreat experience came some spiritual commitments, which I recorded, on the other side of the card. They are:

- Continually and consistently seek the presence of God
- Continue to identify and remove the “beam from MY eye”
- Strive for balance between my inner focus and outreach. Be salt and light.
- Continue to pursue a deeper relationship with my spouse.
- Strengthen spiritual disciplines in my life on a day-to-day basis by adopting a “Rule of Life”—intentionality.
- Develop a deeper understanding of spiritual leadership and model that understanding in my own leadership.

That retreat experience, joined with the journey before, carved out my pathway for the last three years.

Now, we think of commitments in an odd way. We think we need to be “committed” as Christians.

I’ll commit to 30 minutes of prayer daily.

I’ll commit to an hour of Bible study daily.

I’ll commit to Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights.

I’ll commit to the spiritual disciplines.

If I achieve this, I’ll be successful. But in my life, this hasn’t worked. Are these things bad? No, of course not. But if we’re doing them to be “committed Christians” or to be “successful in God’s sight”, we’ve missed the boat. Who has given you that image for what God has called you to do?

A. W. Tozer said,

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.” (book – “Knowledge of the Holy”)

Why don’t we stop being committing Christians, and start being “submissive” Christians? Commitment still leaves ME in control. Jesus did not ask for commitment. He asked for



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surrender. That's what God asks of us. He wants our surrender to Him . . . not a commitment to activities. And when I think of surrender, I think militarily. If you surrender, you are stripped of everything. You are stripped naked!

If this tweaks your mind, you may think, "I can't", "I must", "I couldn't". But keep in mind that it's not a determination. It's a transformation. IF I stop trying to make it happen; IF I stop using **MY** will power (I'm still in control, aren't I?); IF I can relax and let God work; THEN, and only then, will it become a transformation. That's what submission is. That's what surrender is.

Even when "I determined" to do God's will (on my own power), God brought tremendous good into it. My life, up till then, wasn't negative. God was still working and using me. But after I came to realize to simply submit is when I really bloomed.

More important than any decision I might make it that each of us put our trust and confidence in God alone. Consider the words of Psalm 73:

. . . I am always with you;

you hold me by my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel,

and afterward you will make me into glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heat

and my portion forever.

I want to close my remarks with lyrics from a song I heard recently and they express the thoughts of my heart in these days:

Give me one pure and holy passion

Give me one magnificent obsession

Give me one glorious ambition for my life

To know and follow hard after You

To grow as your disciple in your truth

This world is empty, pale, and poor

Compared to knowing you, my LORD

Lead me on and I will run after you.

Letter to my Children

May 9, 2007

To my children: Carter, Clark, Scott, Melissa, & Tanya

Sunday April 22, 2007 was a special day for me. It was not so special in that it was pleasant or enjoyable. In fact, it was painful. It was an occasion when God enabled me to see myself. I think the passage from Hebrews 4 says it well:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The occasion could also be described as a "Nathan experience". You remember the prophet who came to King David in 2 Samuel 12.

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Let me explain. Sunday, a man came forward at church to confess and ask forgiveness for losing his temper with his adopted teenage son. I will not relate all the circumstances surrounding that family but I can say I was disappointed but not surprised that he had lost his temper. The son was not present, having returned to a military school in Texas.

I have had opportunities to talk with the father and his son over the past few years so I sought him out after church to express my appreciation for his response and talk with him about it. After expressing my appreciation, I commented that I was sorry that his son was not present to hear what had been expressed and how much it would mean to his son to hear what his father had expressed to the church. He acknowledged that would have been good. Then I asked if he had, in fact, asked for his son's forgiveness. His reply was, "I guess I hadn't thought about that. That is a really good idea". He turned to his wife saying, "Did you hear what George said. He had a really good point that I should ask ___ for his forgiveness". To which she replied, "Great idea. I'll get on the e-mail as soon as we get home". I was furious. I did not reveal my anger to them but tried to encourage them to follow up on the idea.

Later at lunch with Jerry Page and Kelsey, I told Jerry about the conversation. As I talked, my anger welled up again and I was completely overwhelmed with disgust for the parents and my heart was aching for the young man and how much he needs loving parents in a real family. It was at that point the Word of God penetrated my soul and spirit. Or maybe it was the voice of the prophet Nathan saying, "You are the man".



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My heart was opened and I saw clearly what a fool I was in my anger and disgust at those parents. The truth is, I am no different. What I saw in them I was unable to see and acknowledge in myself. My failings, unlike that father's momentary loss of temper, are much deeper and more profound. I have asked and I believe, received God's forgiveness. I have confessed my failings to my spiritual friends but, yet, I have never acknowledged them to you or asked your forgiveness.

In the past several years, my failings as a father have become clearer as my relationship with God has grown. Although there were occasions when I "lost my temper" or committed any of a dozen other wrongs and did not repent or apologize and certainly didn't ask your forgiveness, those are not the focus of this writing. The failing I grieve most is my failure as a spiritual leader in our family. Let me be clear. I am not talking failing as a religious leader; but as a spiritual leader.

I think I was reasonably competent in "training a child in the way he should go". The problem was my training was misdirected and misinformed. What I thought was spiritual leadership was really little more than indoctrination. Of which, the foremost objective was to be sure you knew the rules and then make sure you kept them. The message was clear. Learn the rules. Keep the rules. Then you will not only please God and earn his love; you could have the added benefit of pleasing your parents and earning their love. And by the way, if you worked at keeping the rules you could enjoy good things in life. God's blessings, and my blessing, would be showered on you.

It is not that I shouldn't have taught you the "rules". That is a necessary and important part of the responsibility of every parent. I always believed my primary responsibility was to lead you to a relationship with God. My mistake came in believing that I could fulfill that responsibility by teaching you the "rules". I have learned that that is not true. Just teaching the rules will not lead children to a relationship with God. What leads children to a relationship with God is not right rules but parents who know God and whose lives are shaped by that relationship. That is the core of the issue. I did not know God and, as a result, did not center my life and our relationship in God. Ultimately neither my life nor our relationship embodied the godly qualities that knowing God produces. Understandably, you were not provided the kind of experiences, relationships and spiritual insights that would have better prepared you for your own spiritual journey.

I realize that each of you are responsible for the paths you have chosen for your lives but I also know I could have better equipped you for the journey. I am sorry and ask you to forgive me.

Please do not think that I am despondent or depressed. Far from that, my life is filled with more peace and comfort than at any previous time. Any anxiety I feel is most often impatience with the progress of my journey and the temptation to be in control when I should be trusting God.

Neither should you should receive this letter as a condemnation or judgment on your life. It is my purpose to deal with the beam in my eye not any speck in your eye. It is my hope that as I share my failings with you I will enjoy the blessing that comes in receiving forgiveness. Also, I pray that with forgiveness will come the possibility of reconciliation and/or more meaningful and God-honoring relationships. My fondest dream is to be able to share your company as we continue our life journeys.

I love you and I thank God for our family. Each of you is uniquely special to me. It is my prayer that each day my love for you will grow to be more and more like the love that God has for all us ... infinite and unconditional.



Heading Out or Holding On

There is an old story about an Arkansas fisherman ... legendary for his success and secretive about his methods. The game warden, suspicious, insisted that he accompany him fishing, hoping to learn his secrets.

Fisherman and game warden in a boat, arrived at a prime fishing spot. The fisherman reached under his seat, pulled out a stick of dynamite, and tossed it into the water with a subsequent explosion. Fish floated to the surface and the fisherman began to gather his catch. The game warden, furious, began to protest and threaten to arrest him. The fisherman quietly retrieved another stick of dynamite, lit the fuse and handed it to the game warden and said, "Are you going to talk or are you going to fish?"

As I think about the times we live in and realize the magnitude, rapidity and epoch proportions of the changes that are occurring, I feel more and more like that game warden.

I believe we are a rare and unique point in the history of the world. We are in maelstrom of change that only occurs when mankind moves from one age to another. The change is immense and unprecedented. The emergence of the new age is like hurricane Mitch in October 1998. It stalled off the coast of Honduras and pumped 100" of rain. The resulting floods and landslides were estimated to have killed 10,000 people. Change is always constantly happening but what is happening now is like Hurricane Mitch. 100" of rain is not unusual for year but when the change comes all at once the landscape is completely altered. Maps that were previously used are no longer useful. Structures that use to serve become tourist attractions.



The Choluteca bridge is a 484 m. long bridge in Honduras in a region notorious for storms and hurricanes. The bridge, completed in 1998, was a modern marvel of



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engineering, designed to withstand powerful forces of nature. But as it turns out, in the same year that the bridge was commissioned for use, Honduras was hit by Hurricane Mitch, which caused considerable damage to the nation and its infrastructure.

Many other bridges were damaged, but the Choluteca bridge survived in near perfect condition. However, roads on either end of the bridge completely vanished, leaving no visible trace of their prior existence. More impressively, the Choluteca River (which is several hundred feet wide) had carved itself a new channel during the massive flooding caused by the hurricane. It no longer flowed beneath the bridge, which now spanned dry ground. The bridge quickly became known as “The Bridge to Nowhere.”

Change brings crisis. The word for crisis in Chinese means danger and opportunity. The Hebrew word for crisis is *mash-ber*, a word which is also used for birth stool, a seat upon which a woman in ancient times sat as she gave birth.

What we have before us is both great danger and great opportunity. The question is how will we respond?

I believe there are two basic strategies. The history of Christianity could be written in two volumes. One would feature the story of those who, answered the phone and when they got the message, hung up, got moving and headed out. The other would feature those who never hung up and just hold on.

Full disclosure.. the previous was the introduction to a sermon I preached on December 26, 2004. I stumbled on it looking through old files and was struck by its relevance to 2021. The imagery of Choluteca bridge is apt metaphor. I, like many, am feeling like “A bridge to nowhere”. Intact, but stripped of things that I have relied upon for meaning, purpose and direction.

Even more than 2004..

What we have before us is both great danger and great opportunity. The question is how will we respond?

In succeeding posts I will share my sermon thoughts about what it means to Hold On or Head Out. Sermon transcript is available upon request

Not remembering 2004 clearly, I was not sure what precipitated my sermon topic, perhaps it related to church and personal circumstances. However, researching 2004 I was surprised at the breath and depth of events that year. Here are a few:

- The **CIA admits** that there was **no imminent threat** from weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.



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- **Simultaneous explosions** on rush hour **trains** in **Madrid** kill 190 people. Five suspects blow themselves up.
- A World **Aid Report** tells of **5 million new cases** in 2004 and 3 million people died
- Japan is hit with multiple earthquakes and multiple typhoons causing major loss of life and major damage to the economy
- **Siege at a school** in Beslan, Northern Ossetia. At least 335 people (among which at least 32 of the approximately 40 hostage-takers) have been killed and at least 700 people have been injured.
- After striking Grenada, Jamaica and Cuba Hurricane Ivan strikes mainland US with winds in excess of 130MPH causing massive damage and loss of life.
- **Hurricane Jeanne** killed over 3,000, most in **Haiti**.
- First Same Sex Marriage Performed in Massachusetts
- The **strongest earthquake** in 40 years originates from the Indian Ocean close to Indonesia, measuring 9.3 on the Richter Scale. **Creating tsunami waves** that sweep across much of the coastlines of **Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia**. At least 290,000 people are confirmed to have died from South Asia to as far as South Africa.
- Janet Jackson's breast is briefly exposed by Justin Timberlake during the Super Bowl halftime show
- Facebook is launched as a social networking site only open to students from Harvard in February by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates and fellow students Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. It is expanded first to other colleges in the Boston area and other Ivy League Colleges
- Fox Hunting is outlawed in the UK

Heading Out or Holding On (2)



Reflecting on my sermon from 2004, I realized how relevant it is today. Although circumstances are different, 2004 and 2020 each have brought crisis into our lives. As my good friend reminded me:

...for CRISIS... the Chinese term for that has 2 characters...
– danger; – opportunity! (Thanks Eva)

In 2020/2021 crisis brings great danger and great opportunity. The question is how will we respond? In my experience, when crisis arises, personally or organizationally, our default is to **hold on**. To choose otherwise depends upon our ability to discern both danger and opportunity in our crisis.

To hold on, is a natural response ... necessary for survival. However, without any vision for opportunity, holding on paralyzes, delaying the enviable. Referencing my sermon notes this post will examine what I believe it means to **hold on** and some perils of choosing to do so..

In the twilight of my career at Ford, I attempted to mentor a promising young manager. My usual greeting was, “How are you doing?”. His repeated response was, “Surviving!” Without much success, I tried impress on him, surviving doesn’t bode well for climbing the corporate ladder. Perhaps we don’t think of our response to crisis as holding on as much as surviving. To hold on or survive is a difference without distinction. Neither bode well for the future. The following are outcomes of choosing to **hold on**... survive.

- **Denial.**– Emotional disbelief, “This can’t be happening”, can morph into irrational “This isn’t happening.” and, for some, becomes unassailable truth. In any case, denial assures one of two outcomes: destruction or irrelevance.



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Denial is like stopping your car on a busy freeway with traffic going 70 mph. For organizations, denial is a **Blockbuster** strategy.

- **Hunker Down** – A panic response to inherent danger. Seemingly, rational, in retrospect its flaws are revealed. Think of “Heads Up” when dangerous objects are descending, or “Hit the Deck” falling spread eagle on the ground making oneself a better target.

For organizations it is “circle the wagons”.

Biblically it is the one talent man. “... I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground.”

- **Avoidance**– Relocate and yearn for what was. A “Jonah” response. *“The word of the Lord came to Jonah [crisis]...’Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it ...’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.” ...’I’m out of here!’*

For those with nowhere to go, it is “sticking your head in the sand”.

Organizationally it is the urban church that relocates to the suburbs when faced with societal crisis.

- **Despair** – toss in the towel and admit defeat . Elijah: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”

“Whatever” ... “What’s the use?” ... “You can’t believe anyone.”...

Hopelessness is a child of failure to perceive opportunity in crisis.

In these times of unprecedented crisis, I have recognize these outcomes, to varying degrees, in both myself and others. This is troubling because I believe God does not want me to **Hold On** but, **Head Out**, responding creatively to crisis with its dangers and opportunities.



Heading Out or Holding On (3)



When encountering crisis, or navigating rushing rapids, **holding on** is not a viable option. As recognized in the [previous post](#), holding on is a natural instinct, avoiding immediate disaster but insufficient for ultimate survival. Our [amygdala induced](#) response to crisis overrides rational response. In a [previous post](#), I wrote about *dynamic stability*. I think the concept is helpful in trying to understand what it means to **head out**.

Dynamic Stability

When so many things are accelerating at once, it's easy to feel like you're in a kayak in rushing white water, being carried along by the current at a faster and faster clip. In such conditions, there is an almost irresistible temptation to do the instinctive thing—but the wrong thing: stick your paddle in the water to try to slow down.

“Why ‘Keep Your Paddle in the Water’ Is Bad Advice for Beginners.” Have you ever stopped to consider what the phrase “keep your paddle in the water” actually means? If you did you wouldn't ever recommend it to a beginner whitewater paddler. The paddlers and instructors who give this advice are well intended and what they are really expressing is: “Keep paddling to maintain your stability through rapids.” When beginners hear “keep your paddle in the water,” they end up doing a bad version of a rudder dragging their paddle in the water back by their stern while using their blade to steer. This is a really bad position to be in ... To enhance stability in rapids it's important to move as fast or faster than the current. Every time you rudder or drag your paddle in the water to steer you lose momentum and that makes you more vulnerable to flipping over.

The only way to thrive is by maintaining dynamic stability—[a] bike-riding trick ...But what is the [spiritual] equivalent of paddling as fast as the water or maintaining dynamic stability?

Kayaking rapids is an appropriate metaphor for our experience of chaos in 2020 and our immediate future.

Heading Out... responding faithfully and creatively to change, dangers and opportunities of chaos.

Another way to illustrate holding on and heading out in crisis is driving an automobile. A treacherous experience driving can occur when you drift to the side and your wheels suddenly drop off the pavement. The immediate, and sometimes fatal, reaction is to jerk the steering wheel hard left to get back on the road. [Hold on] . Survival depends on a resisting panic and using proper techniques to avoid disaster.

What is it that keeps us from succumbing to panic and reacting in dangerous ways, despite instruction and warnings?

Heading Out... is the equivalent of ...firmly grasp the wheel, do not hit the brakes, slow down and carefully return to the road...”

Although the idea of **Holding On** or **Heading Out** when faced with crisis, is applicable to everyone, my concern is for Christ followers.

How Christ followers respond to crisis is shaped by our view of faith.

Some, like myself early on, view faith as finite and bounded, something to be achieved and defended. Richard Rohr describes this view of faith well:

“If you surrender to the fear of uncertainty, life can become a set of insurance policies. Your short time on this earth becomes small and self-protective, a kind of circling of the wagons around what you can be sure of and what you think you can control—even God. It provides you with the illusion that you are in the driver’s seat, navigating on safe, small roads, and usually in a single, predetermined direction that can take you only where you have already been. For far too many people, no life journey is necessary because we think we already have all our answers at the beginning. ‘

For them, ...**holding on...** is the only option. There is no capacity to see opportunity, only danger.

Heading Out or Holding On – Dynamic Stability



If you are not familiar with the concept of dynamic stability you can read an excerpt [HERE](#) from Thomas Friedman’s book “*Thank You for Being Late*” which introduced the idea to me.

Previously I wrote: I have chosen to head out. Making that decision has not exempt me perils of the journey, ie rapids. Dynamic stability becomes relevant to those negotiating rapids or riding a bicycle.

Having failed as promised in my previous post, my next post will explore dynamic stability in more detail and what it looks like for me negotiating the turbulent waters of these days.

The events of 2020 and now 2021 have created a maelstrom in our lives. For many it has been like negotiating class 5 rapids. The past year has been exceptional, but reality is we often encounter rapids in our lives. The difference in the past year is we have been constantly fighting dangerous rapids with little or no relief. It is difficult to maintain stability in such circumstances. The lessons of dynamic stability can be helpful keeping one stable, assuring survival when difficult times are encountered.

No matter if you are kayaking rapids, riding a bicycle or following Jesus, holding on is not a viable option. To do so assures failure. Holding on is an intuitive response to fear. Kayaker, fearful of whitewater drags his paddle and is quickly overturned. The youngster learning to ride her two-wheel bike, propelled by a starting shove, fearfully drags her feet and falls. Life circumstances overwhelm a Christ follower, consumed by fear, he doubts and grasps his bootstraps.



Confronting fear is key to maintaining stability in dynamic, rapidly changing or unexpected circumstances. For kayakers and cyclers fear is overcome by training and confidence through experience. Understanding and employing counterintuitive principles of paddling and peddling to maintain momentum builds confidence. Ultimately their survival depends upon self-discipline.

Life's rapids are "*...a never-ending series of moral challenges and choices. And you don't get a moment off. There is no halftime or time-outs. Act or refuse to act, each decision determines your destiny, the moral arc of your life. The darkness is always close at hand, and we fight it off, hour by hour*" [Beck], self-discipline will not sustain us.

Life's challenges are a fearful reality. At this point, Christ followers should rightly proclaim the answer to fear lies beyond us, an infinite loving God whom we can trust to save us. Unfortunately, our disenchanted age renders God irrelevant, making Christ followers' proclamation nonsensical to the disenchanted.

Christian's proclamation is further diminished when Christ followers grab their bootstraps rather than trusting God with our fear. Grabbing our bootstraps, holding on, occurs when we co-opt prayer, spiritual disciplines, worship, pietistic actions as means to our own ends rather than tools to engage God. A biblical illustration, that comes to mind, is the people of Israel's fearful impatience which prompted them to worship a Golden calf (Ex.32). Doubting God's promises they chose to worship false gods.

Like it or not, living life is about navigating dynamic waters... from gentle ripples to raging whitewater, There is no turning back. We can never know for sure what we will encounter around the next bend in the river. The challenge is maintaining stability when we hit the whitewater. If faith is an abstraction, it will not suffice in times of crisis. Confronted by undeniable reality, we desperately grab for a life preserver, what we trust the most...ourselves. In doing so, our fears are confirmed, we cannot save ourselves.

Fear is the enemy of dynamic stability. Fear takes hold when reality strips away illusions of immortality, invincibility, infallibility and self-righteousness. Gut wrenching fear overwhelms when we realize we cannot save ourselves. This is the malaise of our secular society, God has been removed and all we have in His place is ourselves. Confronted with our inadequacy and God's absence, fear dominates our lives.

Sometimes [fear] can have no face at all. If it is successfully avoided, it leaves almost no trace of its presence. And so those of us who are good at avoiding our sources of fear may come to conclude that fear has no part in our story. But we are mistaken.

Fear—though not experienced—is still present and a source of bondage. ()*



a memoir

Maintaining stability when encountering life's dangerous whitewater depends on our response to fear. It is my belief that fear can only be overcome outside ourselves... through an infinite, transcendent God who created us and loves us.

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. 1 John 4:18 NKJV

Such belief does not, as Timothy Keller said when faced with a terminal cancer diagnosis, "...automatically provide solace in times of crisis. A belief in God and an afterlife does not become spontaneously comforting and existentially strengthening. Despite my rational, conscious acknowledgment that I would die someday, the shattering reality of a fatal diagnosis provoked a remarkably strong psychological denial of mortality. Instead of acting on Dylan Thomas's advice to "rage, rage against the dying of the light," I found myself thinking, What? No! I can't die. That happens to others, but not to me. When I said these outrageous words out loud, I realized that this delusion had been the actual operating principle of my heart.

Death is an abstraction to us, something technically true but unimaginable as a personal reality....our beliefs about God and an afterlife, if we have them, are often abstractions as well.

I realized that my beliefs would have to become just as real to my heart, or I wouldn't be able to get through the day. Theoretical ideas about God's love and the future resurrection had to become life-gripping truths, or be discarded as useless.

I know what my head says:

When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!

My comforter, my all in all—

Here in the love of Christ I stand.

The question is are they real to my heart?

Heading Out or Holding On (4)

DYNAMIC STABILITY



The “Heading Out or Holding On” subject has not been exhausted, but I am. I want to conclude with some general thoughts and observations about dynamic stability.

Dynamic stability is oxymoronic, paradoxical and counter-intuitive. I think Jesus might have liked the idea. Using metaphors is always risky, they are powerful teaching tools but ultimately break down under the scrutiny of disenchanted, either/or reasoning. As I have continued to think about dynamic stability, in particular...what is the [spiritual] equivalent of paddling as fast as the water or maintaining dynamic stability? Then the conflicting idea of anchors comes to mind. I recall much emphasis in my religious heritage about having a solid anchor...

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift or firm remain?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Stedfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.



a memoir

That song, deeply embedded in my soul, is the essence of **holding on**. I remember countless sermons on anchors, steadfastness, solid rock, et al. The objective of faith as I was taught was to grasp and hold on... firmly. As I remember those years, it occurred to me what a radical contrast the idea of heading out is compared to holding on. Holding on is clearly a biblical concept, as is Heading Out. Our inability to reconcile them reflects enlightenment thinking which requires either/or. I have come to understand the importance of embracing paradox...the ability to hold lightly apparently contradictory truths.

Allowing paradox to exist without trying to explain it away or simplify is a sign of a mature faith. It seems to me that a great deal of heretical thinking begins with a discomfort with tension and a need to simplify, clarify, and reduce complexity. Paradox, like harmony, elevates each distinct idea without calling for a compromise.

Jen Pollock Michel "Surprised by Paradox"

I am increasingly convinced choosing to hold on or head out is a critical juncture in one's spiritual journey.

I have chosen to head out. Making that decision has not exempt me perils of the journey, ie rapids. Dynamic stability becomes relevant to those negotiating rapids or riding a bicycle.



a memoir

Listen

We all want to be heard. It is central to the nature of our being, a sort of validation of our existence, for someone to pay attention to us.

And because of this, in some cases, it may be that the best way to defeat a really horrible idea in the mind of another is not to refuse to listen, or be the first to launch a pre-emptive attack to convince them otherwise, but first really to listen. And it may be that we also learn some things along the way we would not have known otherwise.

No guarantee of that, of course, but we may. And even if we learn nothing intellectually, we will undoubtedly grow in the virtue of patience.

It's a liberating experience, to be free to listen to and learn from people with whom one disagrees about deeply important matters. Hospitality, in other words, is not merely a gift to the recipient but to the giver.

Lee Camp



a memoir

Community

Jean Vanier:

Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egotism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective and sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realise how incapable we are of loving, how much we deny to others, how closed in on ourselves we are.



Christianity is...

N. T. Wright in *Simply Christian* challenged me this morning as he wrote about what Christianity is about. He first clarifies what Christianity is **not** about:

Christianity is not about a new moral teaching as though we were morally clueless and in need of some fresh or clearer guidelines. ... Christianity isn't about Jesus offering a wonderful moral example, as though our principal need was to see what a life of utter love and devotion to God and to other people would look like, so that we could try to copy it. ... Nor is Christianity about Jesus offering, demonstrating, or even accomplishing a new route by which people can ""go to heaven when they die."" ... Finally, Christianity isn't about giving the world fresh teaching about God himself though clearly, if the Christian claim is true, we do indeed learn a great deal about who God is by looking at Jesus. ...

After reading the above, I felt somewhat stripped bare. But, Wright offers a challenging and encouraging definition of what Christianity **is** about.

Christianity is all about the belief that the living God, in fulfillment of his promises and as the climax of the story of Israel, has accomplished all this ... the finding, the saving, the giving of new life in Jesus. He has done it. With Jesus, God's rescue operation has been put into effect once and for all. A great door has swung open in the cosmos which can never again be shut. It's the door to the prison where we've been kept chained up. We are offered freedom: freedom to experience God's rescue for ourselves, to go through the open door and explore the new world to which we now have access. In particular, we are all invited, summoned, actually, to discover, through following Jesus, that this new world is indeed a place of justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty, and that we are not only to enjoy it as such but to work at bringing it to birth on earth as in heaven.



a memoir

The challenge of Christianity

...the central challenge of Christianity: ...how do we put on the mind of Christ? How do we see through his eyes? How do we feel through his heart? How do we learn to respond to the world with that same wholeness and healing love? That's what Christian orthodoxy really is all about. It's not about right belief; it's about right practice.

Cynthia Bourgeault via Richard Rohr



Career Planning

At twenty years of age, newly married, with a baby on the way and working part-time for \$1.25 per hour, I was thinking more of short term survival than the future or a career path. I was not thinking of my life as a journey, certainly not a spiritual journey. In those circumstances I was living life like a teenaged driver, driving too fast on unfamiliar roads at night, only able see as far as the headlights allow. The only direction I had was, “keep her between the ditches”. Careening down the road, I took the first turn that came my way.

It was 56 years ago that I walked into the Ford Motor Company Nashville Glass Plant as a new employee. It was both exciting and scary. Getting to work at Ford was a blessing. The opportunity did not come not because I had been recruited for my skills and talents. Joe Clark, a good friend of Ann’s family worked there and had the influence to get me hired. He literally sneaked into the employment office past others waiting for an opportunity to go to work. Ann and I did not have two pennies to rub together. We were living with the Clark’s until we could get on our feet. I guess I couldn’t reach my bootstraps.

For the next 40+ years my life was pretty much defined by “I work at Ford’s”. My work experience was rewarding both materially and personally. I am thankful for the opportunity that came my way and it is good to be reminded that it was only because of the graciousness of others that it was possible.

Not all intersections are opportunities to decide which direction you will take. Sometimes they are a cattle chute. So much for career planning.



Moral Dilemmas

I recently read David Brooks' book "The Path to Character". The following is an excerpt in which Brooks addresses the idea of engaging moral dilemmas in today's society.

*For his 2011 book *Lost in Transition*, Christian Smith of Notre Dame studied the moral lives of American college students. He asked them to describe a moral dilemma they had recently faced. Two thirds of the young people either couldn't describe a moral problem or described problems that are not moral at all. For example, one said his most recent moral dilemma arose when he pulled in to a parking space and didn't have enough quarters for the meter.*

They didn't understand that a moral dilemma arises when two legitimate moral values clash. Their default position was that moral choices are just a question of what feels right inside, whether it arouses a comfortable emotion. One student uttered this typical response: "I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and wrong."

If you believe that the ultimate oracle is the True Self inside, then of course you become emotivist — you make moral judgments on the basis of the feelings that burble up. Of course you become a relativist. One True Self has no basis to judge or argue with another True Self. Of course you become an individualist, since the ultimate arbiter is the authentic self within and not any community standard or external horizon of significance without. Of course you lose contact with the moral vocabulary that is needed to think about these questions. Of course the inner life becomes more level — instead of inspiring peaks and despairing abysses, ethical decision making is just gentle rolling foothills, nothing to get too hepped up about.

As I reflected on that citation, I realized how much the last sentence characterized my state of mind as I engage the day to day moral dilemmas in my life. The implications run deep.

Depth of My Sin

I have a list of subjects that I intend to write about. Because of my most recent “blog slog” that list has continued to grow. Having finally forced myself to write something, I am faced with which subject to choose. I have chosen to write about “The Depth of My Sin”

The following is a true story.

I am a good neighbor. I love my neighbors. I try diligently to help them whenever possible. I am obedient to Jesus’ 2nd most important command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” I find significant righteousness in loving my neighbors.

Recently, loving my neighbor, as I often do, I had agreed to take my disabled friend and neighbor to his physical therapy appointment. Taking the time to interrupt my day, I arrive at his house to pick him up and was surprised to find that he was not at home. Puzzled, I called him on his cell phone to find out that he was already at the therapist, having gotten another ride. Obviously he had not let me know. What happened next is disturbing.

I was angry. How could he be so inconsiderate? The least he could have done was give me a call. I had put aside other things to help him. I immediately called on my latent, but highly skilled talents from my years as a manager at Ford Motor Company to teach (?) correct (?) discipline (?) so he would not do such again. My words were sharp and direct, I spoke truth about his lack of consideration and common curtesy. I was energized by exposing such unacceptable behavior.

His response was deep contrition and profuse apology. My parting thought, if not my words, was “don’t let it happen again”.

Only after I ended the call, did it occur to me how much I had shamed my neighbor and reinforced his perceptions of himself that he is a worthless, useless shell of man that has lost his dignity and purpose in life.

I am a good neighbor. I love my neighbors.

Not so much, I do good things for my neighbors, but do I truly love them?

Do you love your neighbors? Yes Lord!

Then wash their feet.

Do you love your neighbors? Yes Lord!

Then bind their wounds.

Do you love your neighbors? Yes Lord!

Then love them as I have loved you.

Lord help me for I am broken.



How It Happens

Last Sunday's sermon was based Revelation chapter 2 addressed the "Ephesus problem" – ***they had abandoned their first love***. The quote below was cited and it resonated deeply with me. It could very well be my own testimony as to "how it happens".

How does it happen, this loss of first first love? My friend Earl Palmer still understands the tragedy best. "The Ephesus problem" he writes, "happens quietly and by gradual imperceptible shifts of focus." Palmer goes on:

A man or woman is first united with the Christian church because of having discovered and believed in Jesus Christ and his love. After a few years of being a Christian, that person becomes leader in the church with very heavy responsibilities for the fellowship. But something happens along the way. That person – who, because of giftedness and hard work, may now stand at the vortex of church politics and decision making – experiences a subtle shift in style of life. That person is adrift as a disciple and find himself or herself motivated and nourished by the organization or by controversy or by ambition to hold power. The first love has been abandoned, and in its places the starchy, high-cholesterol diet of activity and church work that will never nourish the human soul.

Palmer the makes this profound insight:

The irony of this latter condition of 'the Ephesus syndrome' is that the Christian becomes totally preoccupied, fascinated with themes and goals that would have never won him her in the first place to have joined the church. Arguments over fine doctrinal points, distinctions of polity, exoteric giftedness, etc. How can it happen to us? It happens to marriages, It happens to human friendships. It happens to the life of discipleship, "You left your first love."



a memoir

Prayer as Conversation

Recently a class discussion centered on the idea of prayer being conversation with God. It was suggested that an understanding of prayer as conversation with God can not only have a profound impact on our prayer life, it can be a window through which we can assess our relationship with God. Just as the character of our conversation in human relationships betrays the health of the relationship, so it is with God. For example if conversations with friend or family never progress beyond the trivial and/or self centered yada... yada... yada; at best, the relationship will not grow and most likely will diminish over time. On the other hand, when conversations reflect mutual interest and concern, share inner feelings, fears and desires, it is a sign of a healthy relationship. As I think about this, I am grieved by the shallowness of some of my conversations with friends and family and what that indicates about the quality of our relationship. It is also true of my relationship with God as I think of the prayers I offer and their meagerness and superficialness. It is important to resist the temptation to think that the solution to having healthy relationships is simply start having meaningful conversations. That is not the case. What I am suggesting is that an assessment of the character of our conversations will help us to understand the health of our relationships, it is an occasion for truthfulness. It will force us to the question, "How can my relationship become healthier"? That is the real question. When we answer that question, meaningful conversations will prevail.



a memoir

Gum ball Machine Prayer

Despite all those who are denouncing the idea of prayers for the victims ... I will continue to pray for the victims and their families and for an end to this mindless violence, and I hope you will, too.

In fact, ... I would posit that the lack of thought and prayers is probably the single biggest factor in what is behind them. Mike Huckabee

When we treat prayer like a gumball machine (in goes the prayer; out comes the result), we rob ourselves of deeper relationship with God. We can also do real damage to others.

At its best, this kind of talk about prayer reduces God to Santa Claus: We ask, and if we are good—if we put the right coin in the machine—God gives. At its worst, this theology condemns those who suffer most deeply by judging them to be “not prayerful enough” or “not good enough” to deserve presents from the Santa-God.

Aside from the additional violence this theology of prayer does to those who are suffering, it also abdicates the praying person of any responsibility for acting in the world. What happens next is up to the Santa-God, and we play no part in bringing about God’s will on earth. It is laissez-faire free market capitalism come to reside in American theology—the invisible hand does the work, and our job is to sit back and watch it work.

Mike Huckabee is not the first person to suggest that prayer works like a gumball machine. He’s part of a tradition of American thinking about prayer that judges those who suffer and absolves the praying person of any responsibility to act. It has been thriving for decades.

But applying this theology to gun violence may be the single most dangerous abuse of prayer in our lifetimes. This is a case in which we simply can’t afford to pray and walk away. If we need more prayer, as Huckabee posits, then it must be the kind of prayer that is unceasing, the kind that seamlessly transitions into the daily work of bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/prayer-isn-t-gumball-machine>



a memoir

Authentic Witness

I'm reading *Dissident Discipleship*. The current chapter is about authentic witness. The following quotation challenges my thinking:

Authentic witness is not pretentious perfectionism, but transparent vulnerability. It seeks not to change others, but to offer the story of its own need for change and discovery in a way that opens dialogue. John Drane offers pungent commentary on this point: Christians love to correct other people. But an appropriate attitude for a renewed and faithful church will begin with the recognition that we can only challenge others to follow the way of Christ if we are continually hearing God's voice for ourselves, and allowing our own understandings to be changed in the process. We have something to share with others not because we are different, but because we are no different, and can become credible witnesses, not as we condemn others and dismiss what we regard as their inadequate spiritualities, but as we constantly listen to the gospel and appropriate its challenge in our own lives.



a memoir

Open Theism

" For a number of different reasons, questions about the sovereignty of God have come up lately. Has God got a plan (detailed) for my life and is my purpose to figure it out? Does everything happen for a purpose?, are a couple of examples. I have purchased Greg Boyd's *God of the Possible*. Ann and I are going to read through it together. I am somewhat familiar with the concept of open theism and hopefully we will get a clearer understanding of a sovereign God and how we relate to him as we read *God of the Possible*. For a number of different reasons, questions about the sovereignty of God had come up lately. Has God got a plan (detailed) for my life and is my purpose to figure it out? Does everything happen for a purpose?, are a couple of examples. I have purchased Greg Boyd's *God of the Possible*. Ann and I are going to read through it together. I am somewhat familiar with the concept of open theism and hopefully we will get a clearer understanding of a sovereign God and how we relate to him as we read *God of the Possible*. For a number of different reasons, questions about the sovereignty of God had come up lately. Has God got a plan (detailed) for my life and is my purpose to figure it out? Does everything happen for a purpose?, are a couple of examples. I have purchased Greg Boyd's *God of the Possible*. Ann and I are going to read through it together. I am somewhat familiar with the concept of open theism and hopefully we will get a clearer understanding of a sovereign God and how we relate to him as we read *God of the Possible*.



a memoir

Thinking About God

What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us." A.W. Tozer

I came across the above quotation several years ago in Tozer's book *The Knowledge of the Holy*. It has had a significant impact on my thinking and consequently the path that my journey has followed.

It was fairly easy to accept the validity of Tozer's statement. How we think of God shapes everything about us. It matters not whether we are Christian or Buddhist or whatever other faith, or agnostic or atheist, the statement is true of all of us. Having accepted Tozer's premise, it became clearer that the central purpose of my existence should be to understand and know God so that what comes into my mind when I think about Him is true. It is apparent to me that all contrast and conflicts in our beliefs or unbeliefs can be ultimately traced back to what we believe about God. The dilemma is how do we come to truly know God? This question opens Pandora's box and generates hundreds of questions and answers. I am currently reading *reJesus* by Frost and Hearst. In a discussion on the subject of thinking correctly about God, they cited this quote from Albert Nolan. I believe Nolan's insights are critical to moving us along the pathway to thinking correctly about God.

I have chosen this [the Christ-like God] approach because it enables us to avoid the perennial mistake of superimposing upon the life and personality of Jesus our preconceived ideas of what God is supposed to be like.

By his words and praxis, Jesus himself changed the content of the word "God". If we do not allow him to change our image of God, we will not be able to say that he is our Lord and our God. To choose him as our God is to make him the source of our information about divinity and to refuse to superimpose upon him our own ideas of divinity

This is the meaning of the traditional assertion that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus reveals God to us, God does not reveal Jesus to us. God is not the Word of Jesus, that is to say, our ideas about God cannot throw any light upon the life of Jesus. To argue from God to Jesus instead of arguing from Jesus to God is to put the cart before the horse. This, of course, is what many Christians have tried to do. It has generally led them into a series of meaningless speculations which only cloud the issue and which prevent Jesus from revealing God to us.



We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God: we must deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus. Thus, when we say that Jesus is divine, we do not wish to add anything to what we have been able to discover about him so far, nor do we wish to change anything that we have said about him. To say now suddenly that Jesus is divine does not change our understanding of Jesus: it changes our understanding of divinity. We are not only turning away from the gods of money, power, prestige or self: we are turning away from all the old images of a personal God in order to find our God in Jesus and what he stood for.

*This is not to say that we must abolish the Old Testament and reject the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It means that if we accept Jesus as divine, we must reinterpret the Old Testament from Jesus' point of view and try to understand the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the way in which Jesus did. We have seen what Jesus was like. If we now wish to treat him as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, but waits on us. If this is a true picture of God, then God is more truly human, more thoroughly humane than any human. God is what Schillebeeckx has called a *Deus humanissimus*, a supremely human God.*

I am convinced of the validity of Tozer's statement but it begs a number of questions. One question that I have been considering is how do I think about God? Or to put it another way, what is my worldview through which I interpret God?

In Frost and Hearst's **reJesus**, they briefly examine the implications of worldview on our understanding of Scripture and ultimately God. Consider the following:

Much of what gets in the way of a true and life-altering encounter with Jesus can be traced to the problem of worldview. ...

Worldview is effectively the lens through which we engage and thus interpret the world. This issue of worldview plays itself out rather strangely in the Western spiritual and theological tradition when it comes to the understanding of knowledge, or apprehension, of God. The Western church is largely influenced by the more speculative and philosophical worldview ushered in by the Hellenistic world.

*The problem is that our Scriptures are formed by a significantly different way of seeing things - the Hebraic, addressed at length in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, which surprised some readers. Why introduce Hebraic thinking into a book on the missional church? For us, though, it goes to the heart of why the*



Western church has moved so far off course. The church is operating out of a Hellenistic worldview that makes it difficult to appropriate all that the New Testament is saying. If this is the case in the area of ecclesiology, it is all the more important in the study of Christology.

To try to get to the essential difference between Hellenistic and Hebraic worldview, some writers have called Greek thinking step logic and Hebraic thinking block logic. The Hellenists used a tightly contained step logic whereby one would argue from premise to conclusion; each step in the process is linked tightly to the next in a coherent, rational, linear fashion. "The conclusion, however, was usually limited to one point of view - the human being's perception of reality." In contrast, Hebraic thinking tended to express concepts in self-contained units, or blocks, of thought. The blocks did not necessarily fit together in an obviously linear or harmonious pattern, particularly when one block represented a human perspective on truth and another the divine. "This way of thinking created a propensity for paradox, antinomy, or apparent contradiction, as one block stood in tension-and often illogical relation-to the other. Hence, polarity of thought or dialectic often characterized block thinking". This creates problems for us, trained as we are in Hellenistic approach to thinking, when we try to grasp Scripture. In reading the Bible, in recalibrating, we need to "undergo a kind or intellectual conversion" from the Hellenistic to the Hebraic mind.



Discipling Children

Isaac Keene always described the responsibility of Christian parents as being to disciple their children. This sounded strange when I heard it, but of course it is true. It says a lot that that I did not intuitively associate the idea of discipling with parental responsibility. I have thought of and described that responsibility mostly with words like teaching, instructing, disciplining, raising. It is not that teaching, instructing, disciplining and raising are not a part of the process of discipling our children, it is that they are only part of the process. My assumption was that if I could just get my children to do right everything else would fall into place. It was the same assumption that I applied to my responsibility as a Christian to ""make disciples"". In a recent post I reflected on the contrast that Tim Keller made between religion and gospel.

Religion says ""I obey therefore God accepts me"". Gospel says ""I am accepted by God therefore I obey"".

In thinking about those statements, it becomes clear that what I was about as a parent was more religion than gospel. My objective was to teach a system and in that I mostly ignored the importance and prominence of relationships. One might argue that that was not all bad. Didn't they learn to be responsible, self-sufficient, independent, good people? Of course. Religion is not all bad for the same reasons. But there is a vast difference in outcomes between religion and gospel. Jesus said the religion practiced by the Pharisees made their convert twice as fit for hell as themselves. The practice of religion rendered them unable to hear the gospel. An implication I see is that children parented in religion i.e. ""I obey therefore God accepts me."" are at risk for developing hearts which are unprepared to receive the gospel. Of course there are other influences in children's lives that may very well cultivate ""good soil hearts"". I am of the opinion that if I had to choose between a family who parents with ""religion"" and a family that has no religion but parents with love and acceptance, I would take the latter over the former. I believe children raised in a community of love and acceptance will more likely have hearts that are fertile ground and are capable of hearing the gospel. So what are parents like myself to do when they realize their efforts to raise their children, although done with an honest heart and the best of intentions, were not Godly? The answer for us is the same as the answer for parents who are beginning their families. The most important thing we can do is demonstrate the acceptance and love that God gives us in our lives and particularly in our relationships with our children. In relationships like those, hearts will be softened, ears will hear and eyes will see and the gospel will transform lives.



a memoir

Change

Why is it so hard to change? Even when the need is clear and compelling, change is most often avoided. In a recent lesson, Erwin McManus cited a study conducted on people who were told that in the absence of some change in their life style they were going to die prematurely. The study showed that only one person in seven made changes necessary to prolong their life. 15% ! I was startled by that statistic until I thought about my encounters with the need to make changes in my own life style. Why are we like that?

- Perhaps we don't believe what we have been told.
- Maybe we understand the risk but think we are the exception.
- We have decided our current life style is worth the risk.
- We think the discomfort of change is too great.

Maybe you can think of other reasons why we don't change. If the threat of death doesn't work ... More importantly, I would like to understand what enables the one of seven to make changes. For the most part, I think about change in the context of "before and after" i.e. TV's "The Biggest Loser" Perhaps a prequel to "The Biggest Loser" would be enlightening. "Why is it so hard to change?"

Even when the need is clear and compelling, change is most often avoided. In a recent lesson, Erwin McManus cited a study conducted on people who were told that in the absence of some change in their life style they were going to die prematurely. The study showed that only one person in seven made changes necessary to prolong their life. 15% ! I was startled by that statistic until I thought about my encounters with the need to make changes in my own life style. Why are we like that?



a memoir

Thank God it's Monday

Thank God it's Monday. OK, so I am retired and it is easy for me to say since I don't have to go to work. But, I must tell you I adopted that prayer long before I retired. At some point, I realized that ""Thank God it's Friday"" reflected an attitude toward work and the week and to life that I did not share. Of course weekends have their special opportunities but it is during the week that life is lived and experienced at its best and worst. Living for Friday betrays a more general attitude about our life that says we believe the best of life is somewhere ahead of us. We are pulled through life by a carrot on the end of the stick. It is an ""I can't wait until..."" philosophy. I can't wait until... school's out for summer ... I get my driver's license ... I get married, have a family ... start my career ... retire ... get to heaven (die?). I have come to realize how much that I was missing by wishing for the future rather than experiencing the present. That probably accounts for some of my lack of memory that I have written about. I attribute some of the ""I can't wait until..."" philosophy, at least for Christians, to a truncated view of salvation. If we only view salvation as going to heaven when we die, our view of life will be skewed. Somewhere along the line I began to understand that salvation is not just about ""pie in the sky"", it is present and real. We enjoy the reality of salvation here and now. Salvation is living under the reign of God here on earth as well as in eternity. That has profound implications for how I live and especially I how I view Monday. Posted Oct 2006"



a memoir

The End of Apologetics

Some time back, I posed a question in the Wednesday night men's class: ""What do we say to someone who does not believe they are lost or need God and their lives are, for the most part, satisfying""? We had quite a bit discussion, mostly it was suggested that it is Christians' responsibility to make sure non-Christians understand they are in jeopardy. Today as I read a section in ""How (Not) to Speak of God"" entitled *The End of Apologetics*, there were some interesting thoughts that hint at some answers to the question. I will paraphrase them briefly. The author asserts that the 20th century church reflected an obsession with apologetics (a term which refers to the formal justification or defense of doctrine). He says further, that legal terminology is often employed within the apologetic discourse so as to give the impression that Christianity can be proven beyond all reasonable doubt by a cold and objective analysis of the empirical evidence for its claims. The apologetic process employs ""power discourses"" to build an apologetic case via the use of either reason or miracle. In the former case, the rational and logical case is so compelling that it must be accepted by anyone who wishes to be rational. The latter builds an apologetic case through demonstration such that the other must believe. These ""power discourses"" attempt to present faith in such a way that rejection, if not impossible, is utterly irrational. The result being ""converts"" with no heart, having been compelled to bow their knees regardless of their motives or desires. The author suggests a different kind of discourse based on 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

1 And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul suggests a ""powerless discourse"" which refrains from resting his faith on wise words or the miraculous, instead endeavoring to create a space for the Spirit's power to arrive, a power that is not compelled by human might or miraculous wonder. Instead of closing thought down - by telling people what they ought to think - this discourse opens up thought. Unlike ""power discourses"" (which attempt to forcibly bring people to their knees), the discourse of Paul acts as an aroma. It is in this ""powerless discourse"", unlike a religious discourse that is a type of drink designed to satisfy our thirst for answers, that one experiences the teaching of Jesus which is salty, evoking thirst. In a world where people believe they are not hungry, we must not offer food but rather an aroma that helps them desire the food that we cannot provide. As I considered these thoughts, it becomes apparent that I need to think about what ""opening up space"" and ""aroma"" mean pragmatically. posted by George at 12/28/2006 09:02:00 AM

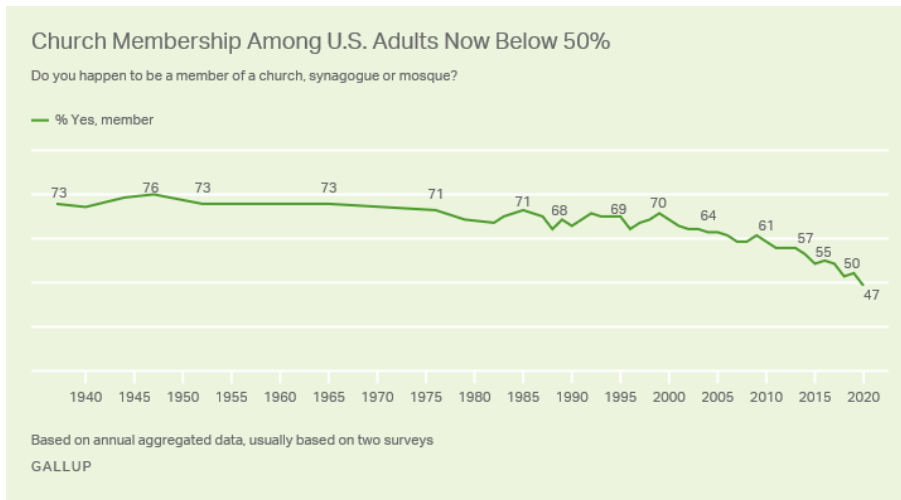


a memoir

Engaging the Gay Community

"I just finished reading Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community by Anrew Marin. It was an eye opener for me. Marin tackles tough questions that arise when Christians engage the subject of homosexuality. Some will be put off by this book. If they can get past the foreword by Brian McLaren they will need to exercise a significant amount of patience and openness to glean the harvest this book offers. I deeply appreciate the life of Andrew Marin. To me, his life represents a model for kingdom living. His principles and methods for engaging the gay community are an antidote to the shrill voices of fundamentalism and judgementalism that seem to dominate most conversations on the subject. For me, the book provides not only answers to how to engage the gay community, it also opened my eyes to, (as McLaren describes) ""the judgmental lifestyle"", the ""take-take-the-splinter-out if your-brother's-eye"" religiosity that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the mount that I continually struggle with. His call is to seek the voice of God in our lives. To that end he suggests: ""The way forward with the (gay) community is not a debate on the Bible's statements about same-sex sexual behavior but a discussion of how to have an intimate, real, conversational relationship with the Father and Judge."" What he posits for relating to the gay community is in reality what we should be employing as we encounter all the world which stands against God's reign in our lives."

Church



Most recently Gallup data on church attendance was startling and generated predictable and appropriate response from pulpits across the country.

Additionally, the recent death of Hans Kung reminded me of his influence on me through his book “The

Church”. You can read my post [HERE](#). I am re-reading his book and finding it still relevant 40+ years later.

Third, is the pandemic experience and its impact on church attendance. For over a year we have not attended a church service in person. We have been faithfully “attending” church on-line. Actually our “attendance” has increased over the past year, as we joined more than one church on-line each Sunday, praising, praying and taking communion. Thinking about that experience, I was reminded of a convicting question presented many years ago. A teacher, I don’t remember, asked, “If by some supernatural event, the Holy Spirit was removed from your life, what difference would it make?” ...a question still worth pondering.

In the last year we experienced a supernatural event that removed church, as we know it, from our lives. The question I am pondering is: ...what difference did it make?

The answer will differ for each person, but for me, the answer is troubling and curious... I do not perceive my faith has weakened...my prayer life has grown and deepened...I’m more aware of my sinfulness and God’s mercy and grace... I have engaged scripture and teaching that have challenged and changed me. Contrary to some people’s expectations, not going to church did not have the negative impact I would have expected.

I am not implying my positive experience over the last year was a result of not going to church, but apparently, not going to church did not impeded my spiritual growth. For



a memoir

that reason, I am re-examining my understanding of church. I have no idea to what end this will lead but you are welcome to walk with me.



a memoir

CHURCH OF CHRIST (Disenchanted church)

My church heritage is the Church of Christ (CoC). If you are unfamiliar with CoC, you can read a synopsis from Wikipedia [HERE](#) which will provide context.

*Members of the church of Christ do not conceive of themselves as a new church started near the beginning of the 19th century. Rather, the whole movement is designed to reproduce in contemporary times the church originally established on **Pentecost**, A.D. 33. The strength of the appeal lies in the restoration of Christ's original church.*

—Batsell Barrett Baxter

55 of 65 years my church experience have been in the Church of Christ. Nearly a decade ago we moved and began attending a Christian Missionary Alliance congregation. For that reason, my thoughts on disenchanted church will relate to a Church of Christ context. If you read the synopsis of the Church of Christ, it is clear that there are many unique and occasionally bizarre aspects of that fellowship. I would argue that there are unique/weird characteristics in most, if not all, Christian fellowships. It just depends on the lens through which they are viewed.

Although I do not have a thorough knowledge of other fellowships, I do believe the COC is uniquely different in its origin and can provide valuable insights into the influence of disenchantment on identity and beliefs.

The COC has its roots in the American Restoration movement that began in the late 18th century. That movement produced at least three distinct fellowships, Independent Christian Church, Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ.

Born in the midst of the enlightenment, which was shaping the cultural contours of the newly born United States, the Restoration movement was profoundly influenced by the burgeoning confidence in science and reason to achieve human progress. Rationalism, the idea that humans are capable of using their faculty of reason to gain knowledge, was a shift away from the prevailing idea that people needed to rely on scripture or church authorities for knowledge.

The religious landscape was fraught with division following centuries of wars in Europe over religious disagreement. There was a hunger for peace and unity. To that end, the Restoration movement was centered in the belief that peace and unity could be achieved through the restoration of the New Testament church. An idealized understanding of the New Testament church as depicted in the book of Acts became the vision of the movement.



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Evidence of success in applying enlightenment principles to achieve human progress abounded. Scientific progress in medicine, industry was solving/improving the condition of humanity in unprecedented fashion. The promise of the future was endless.

“The successful application of reason to any question depended on its correct application—on the development of a methodology of reasoning that would serve as its own guarantee of validity. Such a methodology was most spectacularly achieved in the sciences and mathematics, where the logics of and made possible the creation of a sweeping new cosmology.”

Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander were the most prominent personalities in the beginning of the COC. They were Presbyterians and proponents of rationalism. Deeply concerned about divisions and dissensions in Christian religion, they yearned for unity. To achieve the vision of a restored New Testament church, they believed the application of scientific methods and rationalism to understanding the Bible would result in agreement. The conclusions of logic and reason applied through the correct methodology could not be refuted. I would say it was on the basis of those premises (and others) that the COC became a disenchanted movement. An uncompromising reliance on an enlightened approach to scripture and the derived ecclesiology fashioned the DNA of the COC which remains, although much less, to this day.

The story of the COC is much more than can be related in this post. For the purpose of this writing, the COC uniquely demonstrates possible outcomes when Christians, or for that matter any human enterprise, surrenders to disenchantment. More on other enterprises in the next post.

Rather than recount the details of the COC and its unholy alliance with disenchantment, I will relate my personal faith journey in a disenchanted church.

The following descriptions are drawn from past decades and do not reflect the nature and character of my faith today.

My early understanding of God was primarily deistic. He was concerned but remote. Residing somewhere in the heavens. He (always he) hated sin and promised punishment (hell) for sinners. His qualities of mercy and grace were secondary to his judgement and wrath. Fear was the emotion I most often experienced when thinking about God. Throughout my spiritual journey, I have struggled with a subtle but nagging temptation toward deism.

My salvation became possible by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ that satisfied the wrath of God, provided I took the 5 steps necessary for salvation. Hear, Believe Repent, Confess, Be baptized. No more, no less. At the appropriate age of twelve (age of



a memoir

accountability), over whelmed by the terror of hell, I responded to the invitation song on Sunday morning and was baptized (immersed) for the remission of my sins.

I found salvation to be tenuous. It was contingent on continued sinlessness. There were sins of omission and sins of commission, any of, which were not repented of would negate one's salvation. Of course, after my baptism sin remained a constant companion. The remedy for such apostasy was to ask for God's forgiveness.

For private sins that was doable, just pray to God and ask for forgiveness and salvation was restored. Public sin was a bigger problem, its remedy required public confession for forgiveness. Public confession meant going to the front of the church and asking for the prayers of the congregation, usually during the invitation song at the conclusion of the sermon. If I died on the way home with unforgiven sins I faced eternal damnation in the fires of hell.

That created a significant problem.

Sin, for me, was regular and often public. The prospect of responding to the invitation Sunday after Sunday admitting sin was not an attractive proposition. I was quickly forced into a mental calculation of the risk of dying on the way home verses banking my sins for a more reasonable time frame, perhaps every six months or so. Of course, that schedule could be accelerated by revival services. Gospel Meetings (revival services) provided some cover because a lot of others responded to the impassioned pleas of gospel sermons. In any case, relief from fear was elusive, The demand for personal righteousness became exhausting.

How I experienced worship (church services) did not change after I was baptized. More than a century of bible study to understand and restore the New Testament church had resulted in absolute conclusions about the form and content of worship in the New Testament church. Any deviation from accepted norms (biblically approved) would result in apostasy. The challenge of worship for me was to understand and follow the rules. The basic rules of worship were as follows:

Sunday morning services were regarded as primary.

Sunday school preceding or following.

congregational a cappella singing only.

worship order:

prayer

3 songs

prayer

song

communion



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prayer
contribution
sermon
invitation
dismissal prayer

Deviation from the above order was acceptable within reasonable(?) bounds. Provided the revised order contained all the essential elements of New Testament worship, i.e. singing, praying, communion, giving preaching, invitation. All the elements of worship were essential, but communion was the most important. Missing communion was considered by some to carry the same risk as unforgiven sin.

Attendance at Sunday morning services was the hallmark of faithful Christians. Evening services were held every Sunday. Those services required the inclusion of all the essential elements. Interestingly, communion and contribution was often offered in an ad hoc setting for those unable to attend the morning services. Clearly, Sunday evening was second class.

Under pressure of performance my religious life evolved into a dichotomy that would prevail for decades. Religion was mostly confined to church and good moral conduct. The rest of my life was largely immune to religion with the exception of a desire to be a good person. There was not a red line between the two spheres and that created a constant tension between my “is” and “ought”. Of course, I could find relief from that tension by confession and repentance, but that was only temporary. As I came to learn, “sin is always crouching at the door”.

There was another method of absolution which prevailed in the COC and that I found personally attractive. Because our beliefs were based on the Bible they were unassailable. Any and everyone who disagreed was in error and destined to eternal hell. There could be no exceptions or deviations, within or without. Our theology was a balloon that if pierced at any point, would disintegrate and therefore had to be protected at all costs.

As a result, the emphasis of teaching and preaching was affirmation of our correctness and the error of dissenters. The only resolution was conversion to the truth, of which we were the sole possessors. We were the only true church and all others were doomed. The highest calling was to convict sinners they were lost outside the true church. To ignore that responsibility would put our salvation in jeopardy. “You can’t go to heaven without taking someone with you.”

I began to understand the advantages of legalism. Get one convert and I would be good to go. Take care of the really important sins and maintain outward piety, good to go.



a memoir

Follow the rules and embrace the correct doctrine and do not compromise your faith (correctness).

Doctrinal purity was the go to refuge. It was pretty clear that there were people all around who were better people, morally and other wise. That reality would have decimated our self-righteousness except for our belief that their doctrine was wrong. We could take solace in our doctrinal correctness, without regard to any comparative moral or ethical failures. Personal absolution from a contradictory life was found in the doctrinal error of those outside our tribe. Most often in the context of a eulogy: “He was such a great person and a good Methodist (et al). Too bad he was never baptized by immersion.” Mother Teresa was no exception. Of course, there was always some despicable person to whom we could compare but doctrinal error was the handiest.

All of the above and other characteristics and beliefs of COC shaped both its appearance and reputation. Most COC church buildings were easily identifiable by their plain and functional appearance. Typically, one story rectangular buildings with an occasional addition on the rear or side. Steeples were rare and if one appeared they were never adorned with a cross. There was minimal exterior signage. Some churches built annex buildings to house kitchen/eating facilities, necessary to accommodate prohibition of eating in the church building. Over the years as congregation sizes increased, appearances changed and restrictions were modified. For the faithful, it was easy to identify congregations that were headed down a slippery slope to apostasy.

The interior decoration style of COC church buildings could be described as anti-style. Biblical authorization infused with functionality, eliminated any icons, stained glass, crosses, and early on, air conditioning was eschewed. As decades passed, functionality gradually prevailed and urban/suburban churches began to become more “stylish”. The most enduring features of COC auditoriums (only later sanctuaries) was a baptismary prominently placed behind the pulpit and a communion table properly placed in front of the pulpit. Both locations were determined from doctrine. The only permissible signage in the auditorium was a letter board on which the song book numbers for the songs to be sung were listed along with the previous Sunday AM & PM worship attendance and contribution amount.

Worship decorum was important. No clapping, no spontaneous (out of order) speaking, no surprises, no deviation from the planned order of worship (in decency and order). There were prescribed, biblical precedents for administering communion (Lord’s Supper), formulaic prayers with endorsed and possibly required phrases, i.e. “...guard, guide and direct ...”, “..forgive our sins...”, “...guide the hands of the doctors...”, ...in the name of Jesus...”.



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Women were not permitted to speak in worship, except for singing. Men, baptized believers, who served communion were required to wear a coat and tie. Women were allowed to teach children and pray in Sunday school as long as there were no baptized males in the class. The typical attire for Sunday morning services was “Sunday best”, coat and ties for men, dresses for women, with gloves and hats optional. Women wearing pants and men with long hair was a serious violation of norms.

A cappella singing was a doctrinal centerpiece. Four part harmony sung with shape note hymnals was standard. Non-instrumental became one of the most frequent descriptions of COC churches. Absolutely no instruments were allowed in the church building, with the exception of a tuning fork. The use of instruments was a defining issue in the split of COC churches from the Independent Christian Churches and Disciples of Christ. I never understood how I was to deal with sacred hymns played by instruments away from church. Following the usual advice concerning gray areas, I adopted a better safe than sorry approach.

In my experience, the Holy Spirit was a no-show. The Holy Spirit quit working after the Bible was completed. Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, spirituality, charisma, et al, were not in my vocabulary. Ours was a bootstrap faith. All you needed to do was study the Bible and you would come to full understanding, of everything. However, there were approved commentaries and study guides written by accepted authors. Since we were adamantly non-denominational, it was never clear who approved who to be authorized or credible.

The non-denominational badge was worn with great pride. All denominations were apostate. Anytime there was some concern about a practice or different belief, the surest way to know if it was biblical or doctrinally correct was to check and see if any denomination approved or practiced it. If that was the case, you had your answer.

Being non-denominational (sectarian) had its advantages, namely being true to the restoration of the New Testament church. There were some distinct disadvantages that emerged with occasions of need to cooperate with other COC's. Without any governing entity to facilitate or arbitrate, when differences arose, conflicts were difficult to resolve. Consistent with the enlightenment approach in the Restoration Movement, the logical way to resolve conflict would be by debate. Where reason and logic prevailed and it was supposed, agreement would emerge. Debate proved to be as unsuccessful in achieving agreement as had been in restoring unity in the New Testament church. COC became known for its debates. Debates rivaled the popularity of Gospel Meetings. Debates were the weapon of choice, externally or internally.

Eventually, the perceived necessity of maintaining each church's autonomy would result in unresolved conflict and “disfellowship”. Disfellowship meaning a declaration that the



a memoir

other church was no longer a “true” church. This recent quote from Richard Rohr regarding Christianity in general, captures the essence of the COC.

As a rule, Christians were more interested in the superiority of our own group or nation than we were in the wholeness of creation. Our view of reality was largely imperial, patriarchal, and dualistic. Things were seen as either for us or against us, and we were either winners or losers, totally good or totally bad—such a small self and its personal salvation remained Christianity’s overwhelming preoccupation up to now. This is surely how our religion became so focused on obedience and conformity, instead of on love in any practical or expanding sense.

Richard Rohr

There is much more that I could related regarding the COC, but this post has extend well beyond my original intention. I believe what I have shared is sufficient to illustrate the impact of disenchantment on the American Restoration Movement and the COC in particular. The commendable notion of bringing unity to a divided Christianity by restoring the New Testament church was thwarted by the belief that it could be accomplished through ration, reason and science. Enchantment was discarded, leaving a one dimensional material realm. Religion, spirituality and scripture became the proverbial square peg, only useful to the extent that it could be forced into the round hole of disenchantment. What resulted was not unity, but sectarianism, conflict within and without.

My up bringing in a disenchanted COC resulted in a faith based upon correct doctrine, self reliance and justification by works. Legalism shaped my life and relationships for many years, and, more importantly my understanding of and relationship with God. By God’s grace, my spiritual journey has been redirected and I now live with confidence in God’s love.

As a final point, my COC experience was not without some positive aspects. Emphasis on scripture and the value of study has served me well. The demands for obedience restrained me in circumstances of temptation. Absent the chaffing yoke of legalism, I fear I would have simply acquiesced to a mundane, shallow disenchanted life devoid of enchantment.

“All this is to simply say that meaning, purpose and significance is harder in a disenchanted age. And we feel a deep dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. “Richard Beck

Church - Restoration

What looks like a serious crisis may mark the moment of new life; what looks a sinister threat may in reality be a great opportunity.

Han Kung —THE CHURCH

The restoration plea is an earnest entreaty to bring back the church of our Lord into its original state. A plea to restore assumes that an original existed and was lost. The restoration plea assumes a pattern existed and could and should be restored.

G K Wallace (church of Christ evangelist)

My church history came in a **Restoration Movement** context. A movement that sought to restore the whole Christian church based on visible patterns set forth in the New Testament; its momentum came from a conviction that the Church of that day, divided and contentious, was no longer the New Testament church. Unity and peace could only be achieved by restoring the one true Church.

Aspirations of the Restoration Movement, though commendable, were misguided and ultimately failed to build unity or restore an idealized New Testament Church in Acts.

Today's angst about church is similar, in many ways, to Alexander Campbell's 18th/19th century days. The opening words of his *Declaration and Address* are eerily familiar:

FROM the series of events which have taken place in the churches for many years past, especially in this Western country, as well as from what we know in general of the present state of things in the Christian world, we are persuaded that it is high time for us not only to think, but also to act...

Alexander Campbell — Declaration and Address 1809

As I wrote earlier, I share an opinion that the church is headed in the wrong direction. Hopefully, that conclusion has been reached by thoughtful examination of proper criterion as suggested by Kung.

If leadership becomes convinced the church is headed in the wrong direction, what should they do? Any answer will be formulated around perceptions of "wrong direction".

If the measure of church health is attendance and growth, Gallup's report on church membership decline, most likely, will be met with "turn around" strategies — doubling down on what has worked in the past, blaming culture influence and expounding on the need to get back to "the basics".

In my past, the meeting would have concluded with either, plans for an extended Gospel Meeting, or in later years, a new class or conference on church growth. In the most



desperate circumstances there would be a change in Preacher / Pastor. Of course, no elders would resign or be fired.

Little or no consideration is given to the possibility that the existing church had become misdirected. As Kung points out: *“All too easily the Church can become the prisoner of the image it has made for itself at one particular period in history.”* The restoration movement became a prisoner of the image of the church in the book of Acts, most specifically, Acts 2:38 -47

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

From that, an abstract and idealistic ecclesiology developed which described an ideal rather than the real church. As Kung observed, such an ecclesiology might attract unthinking admirers, but it would fail to move, even repulse, a thoughtful critic.

Kung continued: *“Only a realistic and concrete view of the church, as opposed to an idealistic and abstract one, will enable us to point out to the critic who only sees the negative side of the Church that the faults, whether real or imagined, do not touch the most profound and essential in the Church.”*

In my limited view and experience, contemporary efforts to restore, renew, renovate, et al, are centered in idealistic and abstract, rather than realistic and concrete views of the church. Like the Restoration Movement and similar movements in church history, relying on idealistic and abstract ecclesiology they are destined to fail.

A troubling questions to be addressed: “What make me think I can grasp the vital fundamental dimensions of the Church?”

Kung’s declaration is even more troubling. “Only the believing Christian can do that.”



a memoir

Church - History

It is important that we know where we come from, because if you do not know where you come from, then you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are, you don't know where you're going. And if you don't know where you're going, you're probably going wrong.

— Terry Pratchett

Perhaps somewhere, there is someone who dwells among unicorns that does not have preconceived notions about church. If you are that rare creature, you should wait for my next post. For me, I need to unravel my church history to understand how it shapes my perceptions and expectations about church. At this point, with regard to church, I'm not sure where I am and I don't know where I am going. As Pratchett posits, it is important to know where you come from.

“Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come in.”

Alan Alda

Choosing to believe my windows are crystal clear, I resist challenges to my assumptions. My adopted mantra...“I could be wrong” prompts me to forge ahead. Church history in this post refers to personal experience with church rather than 2000 years of Church History. Most people have a church history, all of which differ in some way; but none of us can escape the influence of our personal experience of church. Perhaps, as you walk with me through my church history, you will recall you own and recognize ways in which your perceptions and expectations about church have been shaped and together we can see where we should go.

I have no memory of life without church. There was the church Dad and I attended— church of Christ— and the church Mother attended— The Methodist Church. I have no recollection of animosity between them, although I can't imagine there wasn't. As a youngster, it was clear churches differed, some were right and others were not. The church of Christ was the former. There was only one true church— the church of Christ — all others were not the true church.

Members of the church of Christ do not conceive of themselves as a new church started near the beginning of the 19th century. Rather, the whole movement is designed to reproduce in contemporary times the church originally established on Pentecost, A.D. 33. The strength of the appeal lies in the restoration of Christ's original church.

—Batsell Barrett Baxter



I wrote in some detail about my experience in the church of Christ in an earlier post, you can read it [HERE](#). I learned early, the best way to know what you shouldn't be doing was to look at what other churches (non-church of Christ) were doing. Such logic about church is clearly irrational and I reject it intellectually, but I cannot help but wonder if it doesn't reside somewhere in the depths of my assumptions about church. explaining my tendency to be critical and wary.

I learned church was a place. Not any place, but a building —not any building but a building that reflected the nature and character of the church we believed it was established on the day of Pentecost AD 33. You could tell if it was the correct building because the cornerstone would be engraved —“*Established AD 33*” . Memorials to good stewardship and proper doctrine and ecclesiology , buildings were sparse, devoid of decorations, including a cross on an occasional steeple. Interiors were consistent with the absence of icons, banners or crucifix. The only semblance of an altar would be a communion table —“Do this in remembrance of Me”— flanked by the pulpit beneath a baptistery.

Ornate and extravagant church buildings were evidence of departure from the New Testament church and delineated “in” from “out”.

Church was where religion happened. There were certain things that could and couldn't be done at church — within the church building and particularly in the auditorium (not the sanctuary). Everything changed when I went to church— clothes, language, demeanor, music. It was confusing to observe activity regularly condemned in preaching and teaching to somehow be allowed, if not permissible, as long as it wasn't “in church”. Unwittingly, my life was being shaped into two discrete realities, sacred and secular.

Church was home. I felt welcomed and loved. There was fellowship — koinonia —the preacher called it. My religious identity was church of Christ. We were a special people, Campbellites — a derisive appellation, worn proudly because it affirmed our righteous sectarianism. To put it another way, we were a tribe — *families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect* — our tribalism was most evident in our assertion that members of the church of Christ were the only ones going to heaven. It was home.

The above are just a few examples of my church history. There is much more for me to reflect on, including theology, doctrine, hermeneutics, ecclesiology, to understand my underlying assumptions about church. These are biases about church. Despite the fact that my view of church has changed dramatically over the course of my spiritual journey, biases from my church history will resist and/or filter new or different understandings about church.

This exercises requires self-awareness and self examination, both rare commodities.



a memoir

...even though most people believe they are self-aware, self-awareness is a truly rare quality: We estimate that only 10%–15% of the people we studied actually fit the criteria. *

It is my contention that any effort to re-examine church, absent a clear understanding of our mostly hidden but powerfully influential biases about church, will produce little more than confirmation of those biases. If you are inclined to walk with me on this trek, I encourage you to examine your church history — know where you have been and where you are —so we can see where we should go.



a memoir

Intersections



a memoir

Intersections - Thin Places

In the midst of life, we “practice the presence of God” by listening and speaking to him in every circumstance. Spiritual formation happens through a life of contemplation. In the midst of our daily activities, we ponder and meditate on God’s words and works. We talk to him in prayer. We listen, we question, we complain. We give thanks, make requests, and express our doubts. We study, analyze, and consider how to apply his teachings. We walk or sit silently with him and enjoy his presence. For a believer the veil between this world and the “heavenly places” is thin and there is constant interaction between the two realms.

iMonk

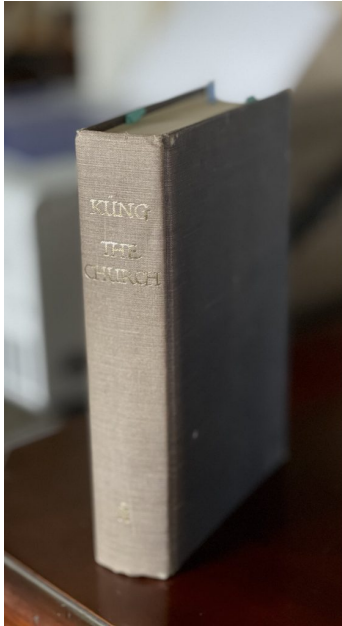
Front Porch

It is Saturday morning and a beautiful morning it is. I'm sitting on our front porch which has become my favorite spot to read and enjoy the mornings. I have found the front porch provides a wonderful view of the world around me and gives regular opportunity to engage people. I wouldn't suggest that front porches are THE answer to building community but I think if everyone had a porch and used it our world would be a very different and better place.



a memoir

Intersections – Strange Bedfellows



strange bedfellows –

A pair of people, things, or groups connected in a certain situation or activity but extremely different in overall characteristics, opinions, ideologies, lifestyles, behaviors, etc.



As I reflect on my life's journey, various intersections along the way come to mind. My ambition was for a straight and narrow path. but, that's not how life goes.

Meet my old friend Hans Kung.

I was surprised to learn of the passing of Catholic theologian Hans Kung. I was grieved as he and I were strange bedfellows. You can read about his amazing life and career [HERE](#).

I found the following quotes reminiscent of my engagement with Kung.

Truth-seeking was the chosen task to which Küng brought his insatiable probing and

unquenchable intellect.

... the audience with Paul VI confronted him vividly with the question: For whom was he doing theology? Already in late 1965, Küng understood: “My theology obviously isn’t for the pope (and his followers), who clearly doesn’t want my theology as it is.” On that very day Küng resolved he would do theology “for my fellow human beings ... for those people who may need my theology.”

I list Kung’s “The Church” as one of the most influential books in the development of my ecclesiology, ultimately, a key factor shaping my spiritual journey. To understand how ironic that is and just how strange a bedfellow he was, I need to share the providential nature of our relationship.

For those familiar with my religious heritage in the Church of Christ, you will understand the weirdness of a Catholic theologian being a bedfellow, very strange indeed. In my early experience Catholics were to be avoided (except attractive girls), strange Friday fish eating, beer drinking, rhythm method weirdos, not to mention their seemingly pagan worship practices, eating and drinking the real body and blood of Christ and those inexplicably long masses. If there was anything to be learned from Catholics, it was what not to do.

Those preconceptions remained in my subconscious even after a personal spiritual revival prompted me to return to college after a ten year absence. One of the early courses I took was “Church of Christ” taught by **Dr. Everett Ferguson, PhD, a distinguished scholar**. The class was eye-opening, to say the least. I still have my handwritten notes. Most surprising was the assigned reading of “The Church” by Catholic theologian Hans Kung. I still remember being shocked by Kung’s bold analysis and critiques of the Church. It began to dawn on me that although “the Church” he was referring to was the Roman Catholic church, the issues he was addressing were echoes of my concerns with the “Church of Christ”, my church. Being in the beginning of my struggle with the incongruity of my church experience and what I was coming to understand from scripture, Kung was a game changer. What a shock to discover your religious heritage’s ecclesiology was closer to Catholicism than the New Testament church which we thought we had restored.

The book I purchased for the class was a paperback edition, worn and marked up, I lost it somewhere along the line. A decade or more later, my ecclesiastical angst re-emerged, unable to locate my book, I purchased the book pictured above. Because *The Church* is out of print I was pleased to get a used copy and it remains a useful reference, seemingly more relevant than ever.



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Perusing some bookmarks and faded highlights, here are excerpts I thought worth sharing:

The problem of God is more important than the problem of the Church; but the latter often stand in the way of the former.

There is no doubt that the message of Jesus has had, if not a destructive, at least a disturbing effect on the Church in any age, challenging it, rousing it, goading it into new life; in short, it has always been a “stumbling block”.

The Church is not the kingdom of God, but it looks towards the kingdom of God, waits for it, or rather makes a pilgrimage towards it and is its herald, proclaiming it to the world.

The Church on its pilgrimage is not deserted or forgotten by God; it is not wandering totally in the dark. Even though it is not the kingdom of God which is to come, it is already under the reign of God which has begun; though looking forward to the final victory of the reign of God, it can look back to the decisive victory: in Jesus the Christ; while still wandering in the shadow of death, it has the resurrection not only ahead of it, but its decisive form behind it; in Jesus the risen Kyrios.

...by baptism in the spirit received in faith all believers are consecrated as priests.

Christians do not stand on the threshold of the temple like impure people begging for grace, in fear and trembling, through the priest as a holy middleman. They themselves stand in the very midst of the holy temple of God, as holy priests chosen by God, able to communicate directly with God.

The Church confronts this ambivalent world with an ultimate freedom; it must not bury itself in the world nor flee from it, it must not abandon itself to the world nor be hostile to it, but it must approve while it denies, and deny while it approves, resisting it while it devotes itself to it and devoting itself to it while it resists it.

The Church does not wish to remain isolated. It wishes to be a vanguard. As a vanguard of mankind the people of God journeys on its way- but where is it going? Once again the question arises: has the Church a future?

Although my encounter with him was a minuscule ripple on the far edges of his influence, I am indebted to Hans Kung. Important as the ecclesiastical understandings I gained from him are, perhaps, the more important lesson came from the realization of how small and sectarian my world was. He was a gateway to an adventure that continues to this day.

Seeking God's presence can produce some very strange bedfellows.

Intersections – Internet Monk



This post continues a series entitled intersections. As I reflect on my life's journey, various intersections along the way come to mind. My ambition was for a straight and narrow path. but, that's not how life goes.

December 21, 2020

INTERNET
MONK

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At the end of this month, Internet monk will shutdown its blog. I first became acquainted with Michael Spencer aka Internet Monk about 13-14 years ago. I don't remember how I discovered him, perhaps it was a God thing. Over the years I read his blog posts and listened to his podcasts. Michael described himself as "*a postevangelical reformation Christian in search of a Jesus-shaped spirituality*." The tag line for his blog was "*Dispatches from the post-evangelical wilderness*". He was very influential in my thinking. My spiritual journey was following a similar path. He died as a result of a brain tumor in 2010. Friends took up the Internet Monk banner and continued to post, extending his legacy until now. I am thankful for Michael and those who continued to challenge and encourage me in my own search for a Jesus-shaped spirituality. It is my understanding that the [Internet Monk archives](#) will continue to be available.





a memoir

It was Michael's 2009 opinion piece in the Christian Science Monitor entitled "The Coming Evangelical Collapse" that brought him to prominence. His prophetic words are echoing through the evangelical wilderness today and are a fitting conclusion to the Internet Monk. The article follows below and is worthy of your consideration:

The coming evangelical collapse

An anti-Christian chapter in Western history is about to begin. But out of the ruins, a new vitality and integrity will rise.

March 10, 2009

Oneida, Ky.

We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity. This breakdown will follow the deterioration of the mainline Protestant world and it will fundamentally alter the religious and cultural environment in the West.

Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants. (Between 25 and 35 percent of Americans today are Evangelicals.) In the "Protestant" 20th century, Evangelicals flourished. But they will soon be living in a very secular and religiously antagonistic 21st century.

This collapse will herald the arrival of an anti-Christian chapter of the post-Christian West. Intolerance of Christianity will rise to levels many of us have not believed possible in our lifetimes, and public policy will become hostile toward evangelical Christianity, seeing it as the opponent of the common good.

Millions of Evangelicals will quit. Thousands of ministries will end. Christian media will be reduced, if not eliminated. Many Christian schools will go into rapid decline. I'm convinced the grace and mission of God will reach to the ends of the earth. But the end of evangelicalism as we know it is close.

Why is this going to happen?

1. Evangelicals have identified their movement with the culture war and with political conservatism. This will prove to be a very costly mistake. Evangelicals will increasingly be seen as a threat to cultural progress. Public leaders will consider us bad for **America**, bad for education, bad for children, and bad for society.

The evangelical investment in moral, social, and political issues has depleted our resources and exposed our weaknesses. Being against gay marriage and being rhetorically pro-life will not make up for the fact that massive majorities of Evangelicals can't articulate the Gospel with any coherence. *We fell for the trap of believing in a cause more than a faith.*



2. We Evangelicals have failed to pass on to our young people an orthodox form of faith that can take root and survive the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars we've spent on youth ministers, Christian music, publishing, and media has produced a culture of young Christians who know next to nothing about their own faith except how they feel about it. Our young people have deep beliefs about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey scripture, the essentials of theology, or the experience of spiritual discipline and community. Coming generations of Christians are going to be monumentally ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures.

3. There are three kinds of evangelical churches today: consumer-driven megachurches, dying churches, and new churches whose future is fragile. Denominations will shrink, even vanish, while fewer and fewer evangelical churches will survive and thrive.

4. Despite some very successful developments in the past 25 years, Christian education has not produced a product that can withstand the rising tide of secularism. Evangelicalism has used its educational system primarily to staff its own needs and talk to itself.

5. The confrontation between cultural secularism and the faith at the core of evangelical efforts to "do good" is rapidly approaching. We will soon see that the good Evangelicals want to do will be viewed as bad by so many, and much of that work will not be done. Look for ministries to take on a less and less distinctively Christian face in order to survive.

6. Even in areas where Evangelicals imagine themselves strong (like the Bible Belt), we will find a great inability to pass on to our children a vital evangelical confidence in the Bible and the importance of the faith.

7. The money will dry up.

What will be left?

- Expect evangelicalism to look more like the pragmatic, therapeutic, church-growth oriented megachurches that have defined success. Emphasis will shift from doctrine to relevance, motivation, and personal success – resulting in churches further compromised and weakened in their ability to pass on the faith.

- Two of the beneficiaries will be the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. Evangelicals have been entering these churches in recent decades and that trend will continue, with more efforts aimed at the "conversion" of Evangelicals to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

- A small band will work hard to rescue the movement from its demise through theological renewal. This is an attractive, innovative, and tireless community with



outstanding media, publishing, and leadership development. Nonetheless, I believe the coming evangelical collapse will not result in a second reformation, though it may result in benefits for many churches and the beginnings of new churches.

- The emerging church will largely vanish from the evangelical landscape, becoming part of the small segment of progressive mainline Protestants that remain true to the liberal vision.

- Aggressively evangelistic fundamentalist churches will begin to disappear.

- Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity will become the majority report in evangelicalism. Can this community withstand heresy, relativism, and confusion? To do so, it must make a priority of biblical authority, responsible leadership, and a reemergence of orthodoxy.

- Evangelicalism needs a “rescue mission” from the world Christian community. It is time for missionaries to come to America from [Asia](#) and [Africa](#). Will they come? Will they be able to bring to our culture a more vital form of Christianity?

- Expect a fragmented response to the culture war. Some Evangelicals will work to create their own countercultures, rather than try to change the culture at large. Some will continue to see conservatism and Christianity through one lens and will engage the culture war much as before – a status quo the media will be all too happy to perpetuate. A significant number, however, may give up political engagement for a discipleship of deeper impact.

Is all of this a bad thing?

Evangelicalism doesn’t need a bailout. Much of it needs a funeral. But what about what remains?

[Internet Monk Archives](#) - Is it a good thing that denominations are going to become largely irrelevant? Only if the networks that replace them are able to marshal resources, training, and vision to the mission field and into the planting and equipping of churches.

Is it a good thing that many marginal believers will depart? Possibly, if churches begin and continue the work of renewing serious church membership. We must change the conversation from the maintenance of traditional churches to developing new and culturally appropriate ones.

The ascendancy of Charismatic-Pentecostal-influenced worship around the world can be a major positive for the evangelical movement if reformation can reach those churches and if it is joined with the calling, training, and mentoring of leaders. If American churches come under more of the influence of the movement of the Holy Spirit in Africa and Asia, this will be a good thing.



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Will the evangelicalizing of Catholic and Orthodox communions be a good development? One can hope for greater unity and appreciation, but the history of these developments seems to be much more about a renewed vigor to “evangelize” Protestantism in the name of unity.

Will the coming collapse get Evangelicals past the pragmatism and shallowness that has brought about the loss of substance and power? Probably not. The purveyors of the evangelical circus will be in fine form, selling their wares as the promised solution to every church’s problems. I expect the landscape of megachurch vacuity to be around for a very long time.

Will it shake lose the prosperity Gospel from its parasitical place on the evangelical body of Christ? Evidence from similar periods is not encouraging. American Christians seldom seem to be able to separate their theology from an overall idea of personal affluence and success.

The loss of their political clout may impel many Evangelicals to reconsider the wisdom of trying to create a “godly society.” That doesn’t mean they’ll focus solely on saving souls, but the increasing concern will be how to keep secularism out of church, not stop it altogether. The integrity of the church as a countercultural movement with a message of “empire subversion” will increasingly replace a message of cultural and political entitlement.

Despite all of these challenges, it is impossible not to be hopeful. As one commenter has already said, “Christianity loves a crumbling empire.”

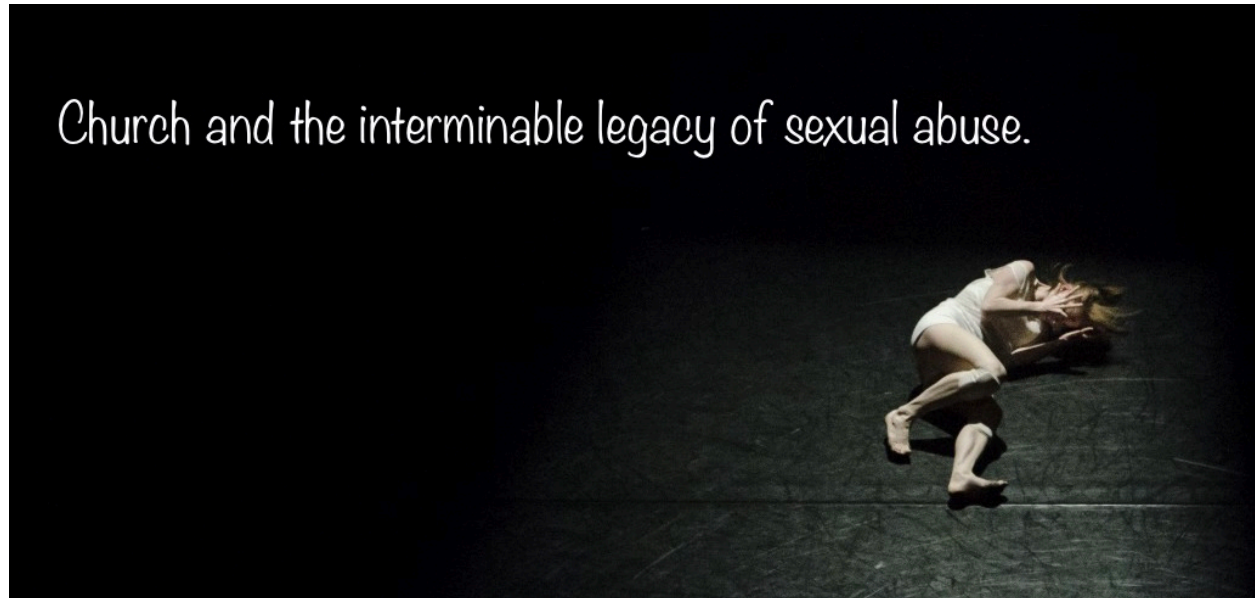
We can rejoice that in the ruins, new forms of Christian vitality and ministry will be born. I expect to see a vital and growing house church movement. This cannot help but be good for an evangelicalism that has made buildings, numbers, and paid staff its drugs for half a century.

We need new evangelicalism that learns from the past and listens more carefully to what God says about being His people in the midst of a powerful, idolatrous culture.

I’m not a prophet. My view of evangelicalism is not authoritative or infallible. I am certainly wrong in some of these predictions. But is there anyone who is observing evangelicalism in these times who does not sense that the future of our movement holds many dangers and much potential?

Church - A Stained Beauty

They will live in safety and no one will make them afraid.”
Ezekiel 34:28b NIV



This post is the first in a series about sexual abuse in the church. Abuse in the church can take many forms, the focus of these posts is sexual abuse. As a witness and a victim of the collateral damage sexual abuse inflicts wherever it is present, I am compelled to shine light on a dark truth that stains the Body of Christ.

These posts are coincidental to the current series of sermons at my church entitled “A Stained Beauty”, based on **John Stumbo’s book “A Stained Beauty”**. While “A Stained Beauty” does not address sexual abuse directly, its premise that the church is vulnerable and stained provides good opportunity to examine the interminable legacy of sexual abuse in the church.

Like many Christians today, I believe the church is headed in the wrong direction. For that reason, I applaud the challenge of “A Stained Beauty”. I love the Body of Christ and am convinced of its centrality and essentiality in the Kingdom of God. Assuming the church is headed in the wrong direction, a vital question is: “... by what criterion are we to judge that the church is now headed in the wrong direction?” Stains revealed by Stumbo are important and helpful criterion.

I suggest the presence of sexual abuse is the clearest and most compelling evidence that the church is headed in the wrong direction; negating the Church’s witness in the world. Recognizing the reality of sexual abuse in the church inherently necessitates



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examination of one's theology, ecclesiology, understandings of sin, gospel, salvation, redemption, forgiveness. Most likely a reason sexual abuse is not a topic of conversation in most churches.

An equally important question is, "How do we know the Church is headed in the right direction?" John Stumbo in his conclusion says,

"...when the church gets it right—and she often does—there are fewer lonely, hungry, thirsty, sick, abused, marginalized, forgotten people in this world. More of everything that makes life better becomes available from our neighborhoods to the nations and to the nations that have come to our neighborhoods, when the church does church well."

...The Church is headed in the right direction when, whatever the age in which it lives, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is its criterion, the Gospel which Christ proclaimed and to which the church and the apostles witnessed. The church did not come about of itself. God himself called it into being as the Ecclesia, the body of those who answered the call, and this he did in the world, from among mankind. - Hans Kung – THE CHURCH

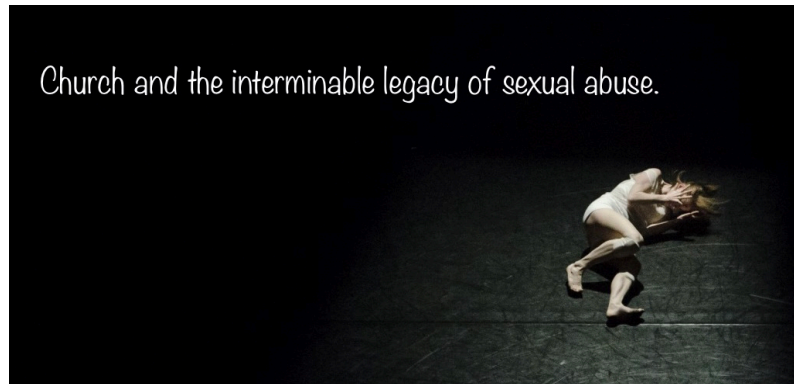
The presence and prevalence of sexual abuse in the church is an unambiguous indication of the direction the church is headed. Grappling with sexual abuse in the church may well prove to be a catalyst for a much need course correction.

Sexual abuse in the church and in other contexts has been painful part of my life for decades. This series does not reflect direct knowledge of sexual abuse in my current church, but I have little confidence that there isn't or hasn't been in the past. There no reason to think any church is exempt. The legacy of sexual abuse is interminable. It is my hope that truth will bring freedom and healing.

What looks like a serious crisis may mark the moment of new life; what looks a sinister threat may in reality be a great opportunity.

Hans Kung —THE CHURCH

A Stained Beauty - Sexual Abuse



Previously I introduced what I believe is a stain on the beauty of the church —sexual abuse. I characterized sexual abuse as present and prevalent in the church. Understanding how that assertion is, at the very least, debatable and for many unacceptable disinformation; this post provides some information to support my conclusion.

Both my critique and Stunbo's, are swimming upstream against an abstract and idealistic image of the church that prevails in western Christianity. An image disconnected from the Body of Christ but none the less sacred; highly resistant to question or critique, and protected at all costs. Understanding how those images differ is critical to addressing tsexual abuse in the church and will be examined in future posts.

I am aware exposing the presence of sexual abuse will not in itself create positive change... change requires examination of the theological and cultural reasons that enable abuse to thrive and victims to be ignored and/or diminished in churches. To begin that process, a painful look at factual information is necessary. That being said, what follows is an attempt to provide some credible evidence that sexual abuse has been and continues to be present and prevalent in the church—all churches.

Oh yeah, that's the Catholic Church.

Non-Catholic Christians hearing stories of sexual abuse in the church are often inclined to respond with with sympathy assuming sexual abuse is a Catholic Church problem, offering thanks that their church is not like that. Echoing the rich man's prayer, "Thank God, I'm not like..." we discount the possibility of a beam in our own eye.

I am of the opinion the Catholic Church scandal should have been a red flag for all churches. At the very least, their experience should be an opportunity for understanding the nature of sexual abuse in the church.



The depth and breath of sexual abuse as well as the coverup and corruption that accompanied it is staggering.

In 2021, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reported 4,228 child sexual abuse allegations. These allegations were filed by 3,924 abuse survivors from July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020. The incidents involved more than 2,700 individual clergy members from across the country.

<https://www.abuselawsuit.com/church-sex-abuse/>

The Boston Globe's series on **Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church** was the subject of an award winning film, "**Spotlight**." If you have not seen the film, I highly recommend it.

Wikipedia provides an **in-depth article** that is more comprehensive and reaches worldwide. The information is difficult to read and produces an impulse to say— "*that couldn't happen in our church.*"

Some critics have stated that the oversaturation of Church sex abuse stories has led to the perception that the Catholic Church is more rife with pedophilia than in reality. A *The Wall Street Journal*-NBC News poll found that 64 percent of those queried thought Catholic priests "frequently" abused children; however, there is no data that indicates that priests commit abuse more often than the general population of males.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_sexual_abuse_cases

That fact is not particularly comforting, but the following is more disturbing:

A report which Christian Ministry Resources (CMR) released in 2002 stated that contrary to popular opinion, **there are more allegations of child sexual abuse in Protestant congregations than there are in Catholic ones**, and that sexual violence is most often committed by volunteers rather than by priests.

OH, NO! It's not just the Catholic Church!

Church of Christ

My personal experience with sexual abuse in the church predates the Catholic Church scandal. In the early 90's I learned a former preacher at our congregation was a sexual predator. In wake of that revelation and some coincidental events, the subject of sexual abuse in Churches of Christ became public. See: <https://michaelhanegan.com/blog/silentcofc-its-past-time-to-have-this-conversation?format=amp>

Southern Baptist

20 years, 700 victims- Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reforms – Houston Chronicle

...since 1998, roughly 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have faced allegations of sexual misconduct, the newspapers found. That includes those who were convicted, credibly accused and successfully sued, and those who confessed or



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resigned. More of them worked in Texas than in any other state.

They left behind more than 700 victims, many of them shunned by their churches, left to themselves to rebuild their lives. Some were urged to forgive their abusers or to get abortions.

About 220 offenders have been convicted or took plea deals, and dozens of cases are pending. They were pastors. Ministers. Youth pastors. Sunday school teachers. Deacons. Church volunteers.

Read the entire Houston Chronicle Series [HERE](#)

Christian and Missionary Alliance

Ravi Zacharias was best known for the apologetics ministry that bears his name, but he spent his 46-year career licensed as a national evangelist with the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA). The denomination has now revoked the ordination of its highest-profile minister after its own limited investigation confirmed a “pattern of predatory behavior.” <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-cma-investigation-revoke-ordination.html>

Lori Anne Thompson, a victim of Zacharias has a [website](#) devoted to the problem of sexual abuse in the church and is a helpful resource.

ET AL –

So many Christian churches in the United States do so much good — nourishing the soul, comforting the sick, providing services, counseling congregants, teaching Jesus’s example, and even working to fight sexual abuse and harassment. But like in any community of faith, there is also sin — often silenced, ignored and denied — and it is much more common than many want to believe. It has often led to failures by evangelicals to report sexual abuse, respond appropriately to victims and change the institutional cultures that enabled the abuse in the first place.

[The Epidemic of denial about sexual abuse in the evangelical Church- The Washington Post](#)

I am not aware of any church exempt from the problem of sexual abuse. What is presented is only a small sample of information available about sexual abuse in the church. If you have taken the time to dive deeper, I am sure it has been overwhelming and discouraging, all the more reason the problem must be acknowledged and addressed. What is needed is individual and institutional courage, a courage Lori Anne Thompson describes as as rare as sexual abuse is ubiquitous. [Clergy Sexual Abuse as a Betrayal Trauma: Institutional Betrayal & a Call for Courageous Response](#)

“It is isolating and heartbreaking to sit in a church service where sexual abuse is being minimized,” Denhollander says. “The damage done [by abuse] is so deep and so devastating, and a survivor so desperately needs



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refuge and security. The question an abuse survivor is asking is ‘Am I safe?’ and ‘Do I matter?’ And when those in authority mishandle this conversation, it sends a message of no to both questions.”

[The Epidemic of denial about sexual abuse in the evangelical Church- The Washington Post](#)

Yes, there is an epidemic. (No masks required, just remove the blinders)

Intersections – Grief



Within eyesight of four score years, I consider myself to be acquainted with grief. I have experienced the loss of my parents, grandparent, uncles and aunts, cousins, in-laws and numerous friends including the unexpected loss of my best friend. Additionally, over the years I have had occasion to minister to others in their grief.

In each of those circumstances grief was present. Expressions of grief from the bereaved varied widely but always produced feelings of sympathy and sorrow on my part. Years of experience both as a bereaved and as a comforter, left me with cautious confidence that I was qualified to deal with grief.

Then, on December 10, 2018, we received a call from our daughter Melissa to tell us her oldest son Ryan had taken his own life. At that moment, grief I had been acquainted with was overshadowed by an alien grief. A soul penetrating pain that came with that news stripped away superficial consolations my previous experiences with grief had taught me. There was no comfort adequate for the moment, not even God. “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

In the succeeding days, that alien grief took up residence. I recognized its presence in our daughter and son-in-law and their remaining children. It gripped my wife Ann tenaciously, leaving her inconsolable. It was pervasive.

The memorial service, with beautiful eulogies and sincere prayers and expressions of love and concern by several hundred friends and family revealed an unsettling paradox. Words and embraces were welcomed, appropriate and appreciated but insufficient to penetrate to the depth where alien grief had taken up residence.

Hopeful of some mystical elixir that would heal my grief, I attended church the following Sunday. What I encountered in worship was revealing. I did not experience comfort. The



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songs and music were offensive. The atmosphere of jubilation was hollow. Instead of feeling the embrace of community, I felt very alone and isolated.

In the weeks and months since, as I have thought about those experiences and others, I have some observations, in no particular order:

- Not all grief is the same and not all people grieve the same.
- Consolation offered to the bereaved is expected and appropriate but should never be considered sufficient .
- Consolation should leave room for and welcome lament.
- Grief is not something you get past, it is something you have to learn to live with.
- When lament is repressed, healing is deferred.
- I will never see grief in the way I did before.
- Faith in God cannot be measured by a response in the moments of grief, but can be seen by how one learns to live with grief and minister to other's grief.
- It is in the midst of grief that authenticity, repentance, redemption and love find opportunity.

I am sure this is not a final word on grief for you or me.

Intersections- Lament



As I reflect on my life's journey, various intersections along the way come to mind. My ambition was for a straight and narrow path. but, that's not how life goes.

In the months that have followed our grandson's suicide, the subject of lament has dominated much of my thinking. It is reasonable to anticipate an encounter with lament in the midst of such a tragedy. Our grief was saturated with expressions of lament at a depth we had never experienced before. However, my primary motive for continued inquiry comes not so much from experiencing lament, but, the absence of lament.

In a post entitled "**Intersections – Grief**", I wrote this paragraph:

Hopeful of some mystical elixir that would heal my grief, I attended church the following Sunday. What I encountered in worship was revealing. I did not experience comfort. The songs and music were offensive. The atmosphere of jubilation was hollow. Instead of feeling the embrace of community, I felt very alone and isolated.

I was deeply disappointed. I needed and hoped to receive solace, but departed with unrequited grief. The worship presentation was not unusual in any discernible way. An ordinary Sunday morning worship experience became inexplicably alien. As always, I was nagged by the question, why?

Perhaps, grief had impacted the chords of my heart in such a way that what had previously been harmonious was suddenly discordant. Certainly the tragic and unexpected circumstances of our grief was unprecedented for us. What I have come to conclude is, that, in fact, that Sunday worship was ordinary. It was worship as expected, even more than expected, required. What became apparent that morning was the prevalence of a culture of celebration. My grief filtered out, what would have, on any



other Sunday, been an encouraging, affirming experience. I was left with silence. There was no place for lament that my soul desperately needed.

Those who live in celebration “are concerned with questions of proper management and joyous celebration.” Instead of deliverance, they seek constancy and sustainability. “The well-off do not expect their faith to begin in a cry, but rather, in a song. They do not expect or need intrusion, but they rejoice in stability [and the] durability of a world and social order that have been beneficial to them.” Praise is the language of celebration. Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times

My initial response was to minimize the issue and rationalize the absence of lament. However, as I began to read and study on the subject of lament, I found I was not alone in my concern. Numerous writings by scholars and theologians over centuries of Christian history have grappled with lament and its role in the faith of the individual and community.

Richard Beck, writing in reference to Emmanuel Kant’s views on lament presents a challenging critique of lament in Christian culture:

If you live with a view of God that guarantees that your faith and virtue will be rewarded then, for Kant, your faith is simply self-interest. Again, virtue cannot exist for Kant if the outcome is guaranteed. If reward and eternal bliss are sure bets, well, can you really be praised for taking a non-existent risk?

This is really a profound critique of much of what is happening in Christian culture. For example, many have lamented (no pun intended) the excessive praise-orientation in much of popular Christian worship. Much of Christianity is triumphalistic. Health and wealth visions of the gospel are also very popular. By being a Christian we can get Our Best Life Now! We often see these trends as symptoms of superficiality. But Kant’s critique hits harder. It is not just that these forms of Christianity are emotionally shallow. Kant shows that these praise-dominated faith systems are void of all authenticity. For when the links between virtue and happiness are fully in hand faith demands nothing of us. Religion reduces to expressions of human self-interest and selfish calculation. Kant calls this idolatry.

The flip side of the equation is that true authenticity is found in a faith full of lament. It’s not just that lament is emotionally “deeper” or more “real” than the emotions of praise. Rather, lament is expressed in the face of evil, in a world where the links between virtue and happiness have broken



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down. Thus, to have faith or to act with virtue in a world of lament calls upon something more than self-interest. Faith and virtue have no guarantees in the experience of lament. Thus, for Kant, only faith and virtue expressed from lament are truly authentic.

Thinking about the assertion “true authenticity is found in a faith full of lament”, I would suggest that what the worship I experienced that Sunday morning was at its core, inauthentic. My conclusion is not a judgement based on the motives or hearts of the participants. Rather, it comes from the reality that many, if not most, of the hearts of those present on any given Sunday are broken or wounded and need to voice their complaint to a God who cares. To the extent that is true, worship without lament will be inauthentic.

If you dwell excessively in the world of Psalm 1 and never live in the world of lament can you be living an authentic Christian life?

I feel if I have only touched the tip of the lament iceberg .

Intersections - Friends

How happy, how carefree, how joyful you are if you have a friend with whom you may talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans. And what is more delightful than so to unite spirit to spirit and so to make one out of two that there is neither fear of boasting nor dread of suspicion? A friend's correction does not cause pain, and a friend's praise is not considered flattery.

twelfth-century Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)

There have been numerous friends over the course of my journey. Their presence profoundly shaped my life and the trajectory of my journey. There are too many to mention, but what follows are three that come to mind.

Charles and Phyllis Trevathan

Charles and Phyllis Trevathan and their three daughters entered our life around 1974 when they came to our church. Charles and I connected immediately and became friends, my best friend. We served together as elders in our church. Our families bonded.

Charles was the most intelligent and thoughtful person I had ever met. He challenged me in ways that made me curious and stimulated growth as a person.

Charles' friendship saved our family from complete disintegration, a story worthy of another writing. His untimely death in 2004 was devastating. The funeral was memorable. Quotes from eulogies

Doug Brown, PhD

He was the first adult I knew well who had a wide-angle view of the world, who respected all the complex textures of the world, who relished being in the world. We spent hours and hours together, many in the basement of his home, in heated debate about the great ideas and events that have driven the formation of western civilization. Greek philosophers, Wisdom Literature, the Prophets of Israel, Augustine, the Enlightenment, classical composers, Romanticist poets, the World Wars, Gandhi, Broadway musicals, the Civil Rights Movement, jazz, Vietnam, The New York Times . . . -- it was as if I had two degree programs going simultaneously.



Tanya Crockett DNP

Charles valued the individual. He tried to change the world one person at a time and he did. Charles had an amazing way to open your mind to enable you to see your potential and value. His radar was constantly looking for people with broken hearts and broken spirits, and it was almost always right on target. What the world would chew up and spit out, Charles would gently go and pick up. He looked at them much as a potter would look at his clay. He saw that with a little work, time, and guidance they could be something beautiful. He had a way of getting in your mind and making you think differently. He often told me we were combat buddies. During difficult times, he would remind me that he signed up for the war not just the battle. He and I won our war!

Chester Jenkins

"Yesterday, my friend Chester Jenkins was buried. He was a fixture in our life for 40+ years. I mostly remember him as an elder in our church. He was a patient and gracious man. I know because I tried his patience and graciousness in my younger years. He was the leader on whom I vented my frustrations with our church. He always listened and heard what I had to say. He was firm in his beliefs but open to understanding. In looking back, I wouldn't have put up with me if I had been Chester. I had the opportunity to serve with him as an elder for a short while and I gained a deeper appreciation for him as we mutually shared some of the burdens that I had placed on him in previous years. I know that his passion for the church and deep sense of responsibility weighed heavily upon him and took its toll on him over the years. He was an honorable man and I am a better person for having known him. His wife Margaret is also a dear friend and I pray for her comfort and life in Chester's absence. Thank you God for fellow travelers that lift us up and encourage us on our journey."

Bonnie and Roy Shake

When our family moved to Abilene in 1972 so that I could return to school at ACU, one of the first persons we met were Roy and Bonnie Shake. Living just a few doors down the street, they were a blessing to us. I suppose I could describe them as chaordic (someone I heard or read coined that word - chaos/order). For the two years we were there we enjoyed their love and hospitality. Bonnie was a special friend to Ann. There are a lot of people that we meet briefly along the way, and of those there are only a few that are special. Despite our brief encounter, our experience with Bonnie and Roy is



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permanently imprinted on our souls. As I recently read *A Testimony of Devotion*, I thought of Bonnie.

When we are drowned in the overwhelming seas of the love of God, we find ourselves in a new and particular relation to a few of our fellows. The relation is so surprising and so rich that we despair of finding a word glorious enough and weighty enough to describe it. The word *Fellowship* is discovered, but the word is pale and thin in comparison with the rich volume and luminous bulk and warmth of the experience which it would designate. ***For a new kind of life-sharing and of love has arisen of which we had had only dim hints before.***

Thank you Bonnie and Roy.

Bonnie Lou Sargent Shake
Abilene

Bonnie Lou Sargent Shake, 71, departed this life for one with the redeemed on Saturday, May 30, 2009 in Abilene, Texas.

She was born Feb. 3, 1938 in Madison, Wisconsin to Fred and Ila Sargent where she attended school and graduated from West High. On June 7, 1957, she married the love of her life Roy Eugene Shake . In time they moved to Texas where she attended Abilene Christian University and raised six children. Bonnie's life revolved around people, and she found her calling in rearing children, operating a home day care, mentoring young mothers, and teaching special needs students at Thomas, Woodson, and Bonham elementary schools. The Shakes were also beloved foster parents to more than 100 children through Christian Homes of Abilene. Although small in physical stature, Bonnie was a giant in service to many people. This joyful, selfless and faithful woman of God was an active member at the South 11th and Willis Church of Christ and was well known for her hospitality and home made rolls.

She is preceded in death by her parents and survived by her husband Roy, one brother Dale Sargent, her children Roger and wife Susan, Dan and wife Deonna, Linda Allen and husband Kevin, Gary and wife Lisa, Tim and wife Shelley, daughter Misti and eleven grandchildren (who will greatly miss ""Memaw""). In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made in honor of Bonnie Shake to benefit Sam's Place, a home for deaf orphans in Kenya, Africa. These may be mailed to the South 11th and Willis Church of Christ, 3309 S. 11th St., Abilene, TX 79605



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Further Reflections on Lament

My understanding of lament:

In my words: lament is the natural, intuitive response of all humans to the reality of the brokenness in our world as seen and/or experienced in their lives. I would describe brokenness as anything that is wrong, perceived or otherwise. (I realize ‘wrong’ is relative but whether or not it is a legitimate wrong, there will be lament.)

To press the point, if you meet someone who has no capacity to lament, they would be labeled a sociopath. In contrast, I would describe any person who has the capacity to lament as a genuine human being. There is a broader conversation needed about when, where, what, how lament is demonstrated in a wholesome human being. Or in our case, a wholesome Christian. At this point, my conclusion is that lament is a universal human emotional response to real or perceived wrong.

Accepting my conclusion, I would say that for anyone to deny, suppress, ignore or denigrate lament would make them inauthentic and I would not want them as a friend.

I’m looking for a friend who can weep over the death of a friend “Jesus wept”, and cry out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me”.

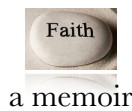
Here is a quote from *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*,
It was helpful to me.

...Shalom, therefore, does not eschew or diminish the role of the other or the reality of a suffering world. Instead, it embraces the suffering other as an instrumental aspect of well-being. Shalom requires lament.

Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament.

Why would God expect lament to be a part of our worship?

I do not understand worship so much as a command but, rather an innate response of creature to creator, an encounter with Yahweh, i.e. Isaiah 6



I believe God expects our worship to be authentic, “...true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth...”. Therefore, I suggest that God expects us to be truthful in our worship and to the extent we exclude lament from our worship, (corporate and otherwise) we are inauthentic, I.e untruthful.

If God expects us to trust Him completely, how must he feel when we are reluctant or refuse to lament over real pain and suffering but freely complain about inconveniences? I would not presume to be God, but I might feel like a vending machine. It seems to me lament may be the purest expression of faith. Trusting when there are no answers. Where do we take those questions if not to God?

As a witness of our faith to the world, what could be a more powerful testimony than a people who in their worship make known a God that cares deeply about the pain and suffering that we all have in common, and to whom we are willing to take our unanswerable questions and keep rejoicing?

I resist efforts make lament “a part of our worship” because I suspect characterizing lament as a particular form of worship (ironically, it may be) would lend to the temptation to manage the worship experience i.e. “now we will pause for lament”... “next month’s prayer session will be devoted to lament” and so on. In effect, rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

I struggle with conceptualizing what the inclusion of lament would look like in corporate worship or corporate prayer. For that reason, I would encourage us to think about our corporate worship as more like a symphony , an expression of all the various “instruments” in a beautiful harmonious composition, rather than a cacophony.

Reimagining worship may be like designing a new automobile. It begins with a usually impractical artist’s conception which is then subjected to rigorous design review and modification by all stakeholders which eventually results in a product that not only honors the artist’s concept but also can be manufactured and used for its intended purpose.

In any case, this is a Pandora’s box and if you open it, the consequences could be serious. For good or ill.



More on Lament

I have written some earlier on lament. I was prompted by our grandson's suicide and our subsequent struggle with grief. Lament has been on mind ever since and is now becoming more acute as we approach the one year anniversary (Dec 10) of Ryan's death.

Recently, there have been two encounters which I think worthy of another post. The first was attendance at the Wilmore Anglican Church. My first Anglican worship experience, I was pleased and encouraged by a liturgy that recognized and provided space for lament. I have struggled with conceptualizing how such expressions can fit into my usual evangelical worship experience. I believe we can learn from the Anglicans. I wondered, as I listened to the prayers of the people, what that kind of opportunity would have meant for us in our grief as we worshipped the Sunday after Ryan's death.

The second encounter came in my reading of Richard Beck's recently released book: **Trains, Jesus, and Murder: The Gospel according to Johnny Cash**. I am enjoying the read and intend to post more about it later. But, particular to this post, Beck had some thoughts on lament that I find helpful and profoundly insightful. The following are excerpts from a longer commentary in the chapter "San Quentin"

We get to the good news of Easter Sunday only after crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Lament isn't a failure or lack of faith. Lament is an act of bold, trusting faith in the midst of pain, suffering, and confusion. In fact, if we ignore lament, if we avoid giving voice to despair and rage, the gospel loses its ability to speak honestly, realistically, and truthfully. Without lament, faith grows naïve and superficial—a happy, fake, glossy façade we paint over the pain and confusion. In addition, lament is the cry of the oppressed, a song of resistance. When we avoid lament, we are marginalizing the voices crying out in pain around the world.

In sum, lament is the shadow of the gospel, the moon to the gospel's sun. The bright hope of the gospel creates sharp, dark outlines of contrast around all that is unjust and broken. Lament is that gap separating the new heavens and the new earth from the shattered world we find around us. In pointing toward that gap, we are not failing or denying the gospel; instead, we are praying with tears and raw, cracked voices, "May your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

The Costly Loss of Lament



The title of this post is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann's essay "The Costly Loss of Lament" (1986). If you are interested in reading it you can download it [HERE](#). (ALERT, it is not a tweet!)

Lament has been and continues to be a subject of deep interest to me.

Experiencing a pandemic which has spawned financial and political crises, followed by social upheaval has not lessen my interest in lament, in fact, it has increased it.

Hopefully, this post will make clear why that is so.

Motivation for this post also comes via Christian responses to those events.

There are three parts to this post, 1) Citations from Brueggemann's essay, 2) A story from our foster parenting days, and 3) Thoughts on loss of lament

The Costly Loss of Lament

As implied, Brueggemann's premise is that lament has been lost. He asserts that loss is because lament Psalms are no longer a part of life and liturgy in the faith community. His comments are worthy of serious study. For the purposes of this posts, I accept his premise, and will share some quotes regarding losses incurred when lament is absent.

Lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.

What happens when the speech forms [lament] ...have been silenced and eliminated? The answer, I believe, is that a theological monopoly is re-enforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome is to re-enforce and consolidate the political- economic monopoly of the status quo. That is, the removal of lament from life and liturgy is not disinterested and, I suggest, only partly unintentional.

One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being.



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The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.

Where the lament is absent, the normal mode of the theodicy question is forfeited. When the lament form is censured, justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate. Instead we learn to settle for questions of ‘meaning?’, and we reduce the issues to resolutions of love. But the categories of meaning and love do not touch the public systemic questions about which biblical faith is relentlessly concerned. A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise.

...it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne (which is a conclusion drawn through liturgic use), they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.

Psalm (39) characteristically brings to speech the cry of a troubled earth (v. 12). Where the cry is not voiced, heaven is not moved and history is not initiated. And then the end is hopelessness. Where the cry is seriously voiced, heaven may answer and earth may have a new chance. The new resolve in heaven and the new possibility on earth depend on the initiation of protest.

It makes one wonder about the price of our civility, that this chance in our faith has largely been lost because the lament Psalms have been dropped out of the functioning canon.

David



This is David (not his real name), one of several children we fostered in the late '70's and early 80's. David lived with us the longest of any of our foster children. He came to us after being removed from his family by CPS. The picture is how I remember David when he came to our home. He was always smiling and seemed to be a happy child.

Not long after he arrived, he fell and bumped his head. It was a nasty bump and we immediately reacted to comfort and console him, expecting him to wail and cry. We were shocked when David showed no reaction, looked at us and smiled. Perplexed, we had no understanding or experience to call on. We later learned David's parents did not permit him to cry and punished him when he did so, whether hungry, injured or otherwise. He learned that smiling was good and crying was bad.

Living with a "normal" family gradually conditioned him to react in a more normal fashion. He never became a normal spontaneous kind of child. I will never forget the time he returned from a family visit. His demeanor has markedly different than when left for the visit. Trying to connect with him and reassure him, he remained stoic.

Finally, a light flickered in his eyes and he looked at me and said, "I love you". I'll never forget that moment.

Eventually adopted by a family at church, we have been able to see him grow into an adult. There is much more to his story. His life has been extremely difficult but he just keeps smiling, never forgetting the lessons his parents taught him.

Thoughts on the loss of Lament

Brueggemann's essay written in 1986 asserts lament has been lost as apart of Christian faith and worship. He attributes that loss to a failure to use the lament psalms as they were intended. I trust his assessment of faith and worship at the time he wrote. In 20+ years since, I believe lament, as a part of faith and worship, continued to diminished and been lost in some spheres of western Christianity. While there are some segments where lament remains an integral part of faith and worship, the locus of loss appears to be



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Evangelical Christianity and related groups on the margin of evangelicalism.

While not diminishing the the role of lament Psalms, or lack there of, in the loss of lament, I believe loss of lament has been accelerated by a proliferation of..

“churches [that] have been turned into celebration centers so that prayers of anguish, lament, and anger are not given space. Without realizing it, we bottle up our anger and fears, put on a happy face, and try to clap our hands like those around us.” (JD Walt)

No matter why lament has been lost, Brueggemann’s analysis of the cost of that loss rings true today.

Despite Brueggemann’s states *“Lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.”*

Pandemic, economic and racial strife have combined to create *“dysfunction and injustice at an unacceptable level.”* Tragically, lament has been absent in much of Evangelical Christianity.

I perceive lament to be a leading indicator of churches who lean into social justice. Conversely, churches who are silent or reluctant to speak out against injustice have little or no room for lament.

I believe there are many “David’s” in churches today. People disabused of any notion lament is a part a healthy relationship with God. No matter what happens, they just keep smiling.

Brueggemann’s statement: *“The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility”*. deserves critical examination.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22)

...It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what’s happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope...

N. T. Wright



Pew Notes

*"My fractured foot and the cold weather has provided me with plenty of time to do some things I have been wanting to do. Over the years I have made it my routine to journal quotes, quips, thoughts during sermons or lessons. As a read over my entries for 2011, I was impressed by the quality of the content. It seemed a shame to just write stuff down and never share it. So I created a new blog to post my notes. I am calling it **"Pew Notes"***

Building a shrine

While reading "'Here Comes Everybody'", I came across an illustration that I believe is more useful as a parable. Think about it.

The Ise Shrine, a Shinto shrine in Ise, Japan, has occupied its current site for over thirteen hundred years. Despite its, advanced age, however, UNESCO, the UN cultural agency, refused to list the shrine in its list of historic places. Why? Because the shrine is made out of wood, never a material prized for millennium-scale structural integrity, and so it can't be thirteen hundred years old. The Imbe priests who keep the shrine know that too, but they have a solution. They periodically tear the shrine to the ground, and then, using wood cut from the same forest that the original was built from, they rebuild the shrine to the same plan, on an adjacent spot. They do this every couple of decades and have done it sixty-one times in a row. (The next rebuilding will be in 2013.) Because the purpose of the shrine is in part to delineate the difference between sacred and ordinary space, from their point of view they have a thirteen-hundred-year old shrine, built out of renewable materials. This argument didn't wash with UNESCO; the places they list enjoy the solidity of edifice, not of process. A wrecked castle that has stood unused for five hundred years makes the cut; a shrine that is rebuilt once a generation for a thousand years doesn't.

From Eugene Peterson "'The Way of Jesus'" chapter 4." "

The great, great granddaddy of all sins is the denial of sin, the refusal to admit sin.

Such refusal is odd because as G. K. Chesterton once observed, sin is the only empirically verifiable item in the entire Christian/Jewish belief system. No one has seen God at any time, but we see sin with our own eyes all the time. And yet denial is commonplace. Praying with David, who knew a great deal about sin, we soon learn that the remedy for sin is not the extermination of sin,Â not long training in not-sinning, not a rigorous



program conditioning us in a pavlovian revulsion to sin. The only effective remedy for sin is the forgiveness of sin - and only God can forgive sin. Sin and the effects of sin are not simply matters of the spirit or misdirections of the will or disobedient acts. The whole person is involved. There is no inner and outer matters in sin. We can no more live a sinless life than we can plant potatoes without getting our hands dirty. Neither do we have to go around all day with dirty hands. There are washbasins well-supplied with soap in our homes and workplaces - and baptismal fonts and baptisteries in our sanctuaries. The way, the only way to deal with sin is through washing, a primary metaphor for forgiveness. And connecting with God's forgiveness, like washing, requires frequency.

GOD WORK

I recently read *God Work* by Randy Harris. Randy has been a favorite speaker of mine for many years. I found his 7 question test designed to assess progress toward becoming a fully devoted disciple of Christ particularly helpful and challenging.

Number 1 - ""How has my life been simplified?"

Number 2 - ""Who are the people from whom I get nothing and who have come into my home lately?"

Number 3 - ""For what and whom do I pray?"

Number 4 - ""How has my speech been affected?"

Number 5 - ""How are you doing with your desires?"

Number 6 - ""What's happened to my relationships?"

Number 7 - "Have I become increasingly indifferent to circumstances?"

Biblical Interpretation

"I just finished reading *Inspiration and Incarnation* by Peter Enns. It was a challenging book but worthy of my time. I will continue to contemplate his theses. I found the following quotes on biblical interpretation to be personally timely and insightful.

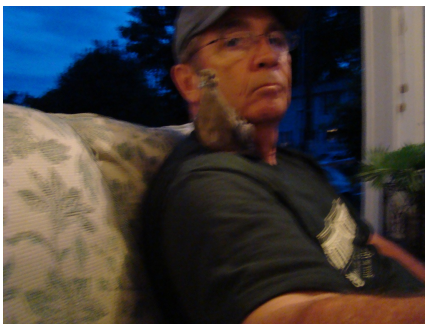
Perhaps we should think of biblical interpretation more as a path to walk than a fortress to be defended. Of course there are times when defense is necessary, but the ... task of biblical interpretation should not be defined by such. ... The burden of ""getting it right"" can sometimes be discouraging and hinder effective ministry. I would rather think of biblical interpretation as a path we walk, a pilgrimage we take, whereby the longer we walk and take in the surrounding scenes, the more people we stop and converse with along the way, the richer our interpretation will be. Such a journey is not



always smooth. At times what is involved is a certain degree of risk and creativity: we may need to leave the main path from time to time to explore less traveled but promising tracks as we attempt to understand scripture, we move further along the path. At the end of the path is not simply gaining of knowledge about the text, but God himself who speaks to us therein. The goal toward which the path is leading is that which set us on the path to begin with: our having been claimed by God as coheirs with the crucified and risen Christ. The reality of the crucified and risen Christ is both the beginning and the end of Christian biblical interpretation. It is always an option, I suppose, to halt the journey and stand still, or perhaps turn around and walk back a few hundred yards, so as to stand at a safe distance from what lies ahead. we should continue the journey, however, not because we are sure of the footing, but be cause we have faith in God who placed us our journey to begin with.

The Dove

A few evenings ago, Mark, our neighbor across the street was working on his van when a dove flew down and lit on the van. Despite efforts to shoo him away, the dove persisted in staying around. I was sitting on my front porch working on the laptop. Finally Mark was able encourage the dove to leave, at which point it flew over to our porch and lit on my laptop. He stayed there briefly and then jumped on my shoulder and walked all around me. He was obviously a young bird who was learning to fly. He seemed very content to be around us. I called the Crocketts and Tanya and the kids came to see Dilbert (as he was later named by Meredith). He took up with Meredith and sat on her arm for sometime. Eventually Daniel came over to see the spectacle. He gently took Dilbert and they returned home with him so our local cats would not eat him. At their house, Meredith converted their screened patio into a huge bird cage complete with perches, water, food and other essentials. Dilbert was in the lap of luxury and appeared to understand it. Yesterday he was released and flew away. Reportedly he has been spotted hanging around the Crockett's home.





Small Group Wisdom

Our small group met this evening. Good discussion about marriage relationships. It is obvious that we are seeking to have good marriages and it is a struggle. As we discussed the various strategies we use to help us through transitions and the ebb and flow of our lives, it occurred to me that we most often think only in our particular context. For example, we may resolve an issue by finding time for our self by getting away or working on our hobby etc. These are not bad ideas and maybe effective but they are only available to people who have life circumstances that permit such opportunities. If our thinking is limited to a particular context, then what about those whose circumstances have no room for such solutions. What does the family whose lives are consumed from daylight to dark with just surviving do? If we are to really be salt and light to the world, don't our coping strategies have to be able to transcend every circumstance? If not, we will only have something to offer those who live in our context. And if that is true then the only possibility for us to be salt and light is to first bring those who do not enjoy our circumstances up to our standard so we can be salt and light to them. Does that sound familiar? So what are the coping strategies that transcend all of life's circumstance and enable us to be salt and light? And by the way, are not the contextual solutions inherent with choosing what our life should look like and then doing everything we can to accomplish it?

I am still thinking about Isaac's comment. In part he said: ""Quit looking for the solution and find the opportunity in the problem itself."" Could it be that the precise reason for these problems is the opportunity to bear witness to God's sufficiency amidst the problem? Could it be that the answer is: there is no coping strategy. Could it be that the call of Christ is not to solve the problem, but to suffer it? Perhaps the call is not to the end, but to the journey....

Sanctification

Pastor Steve has encouraged each of us to select a word for 2010 that will help us focus on our relationship with God and encourage our spiritual formation. I had the opportunity to teach a couple of classes at the church we attend while in Florida. The subject of the class was sanctification. I had not spent any appreciable time in the study of sanctification before. Although my preparation was limited, I was deeply impressed by what I learned. For that reason I have chosen sanctification as my word for 2010. One understanding that came to me in the course of my study was that sanctification is not a concept we capture and domesticate. It is a reality that takes us captive and to which we submit.



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As I embrace the reality of sanctification, it is clear from the beginning that a proper understanding of sanctification is center in our understanding of the Gospel. Consider the following quote from "The Everyday Gospel"

"I once assumed the gospel was simply what non-Christians must believe in order to be saved, while afterward we advance to deeper theological waters. But I've come to realize that the gospel isn't the first step in a stairway of truths, but more like the hub in a wheel of truth. As Tim Keller explains it, the gospel isn't simply the ABCs of Christianity, but the A-through-Z. In other words, once God rescues sinners, his plan isn't to steer them beyond the gospel, but to move them more deeply into it. After meditating on Paul's words, a friend told me that all our problems in life stem from our failure to apply the gospel. This means I can't really move forward unless I learn more thoroughly the gospel's content and how to apply it to all of life. Real change does not and cannot come independently of the gospel. God intends his Good News in Christ to mold and shape us at every point and in every way. It increasingly defines the way we think, feel, and live."

Fear of Uncertainty

I was reading through some notes I have saved and came across this quote from Richard Rohr. If you surrender to the fear of uncertainty, life can become a set of insurance policies. Your short time on this earth becomes small and self-protective, a kind of circling of the wagons around what you can be sure of and what you think you can control even God. It provides you with the illusion that you are in the driver's seat, navigating on safe, small roads, and usually in a single, predetermined direction that can take you only where you have already been. For far too many people, no life journey is unnecessary because we think we already have all our answers at the beginning. The church says, the Bible says, etc.
(Richard, Rohr, The Naked Now)"



REALITY

There are few occasions when you have clarity. You are able to get a glimpse of reality. Shaken out of your peaceful slumber of denial or perhaps wishful thinking, you find reality is not very pleasant. It is like a glaring light that vanquishes all the shadows and reveals your flaws. The disappointment is deep and the pain is acute. The natural reaction is to reshape the experience and cast shadows of ration and reason across the landscape. As Jack Nicholson would tell us: ""You can't handle the truth."" Those occasions can become a crucible in which the dross of our lives is brought to the surface and presents the opportunity to remove impurities and bring integrity to our lives. What is it that enables us to remove the dross? Why not just seek the coolness of the shadows and enjoy the peaceful respite from reality and wait for His return?

Centering

"I have been taking pottery lessons for the past 8-9 weeks. There is a lot to learn and I am enjoying the experience. I have created some pieces that I am reasonably pleased with. In addition to the pleasure of the experience, working the clay is an opportunity to learn some interesting lessons. When you throw clay on the wheel, the first and most difficult step is to center the clay on the wheel. If you do not get the lump of clay centered you will not be able to shape and work the clay properly. I really struggle with centering. Part of the problem is that centering is not achieved by simply following the teacher's instructions, it requires a sense of feel and understanding that comes through the whole experience. You might say a relationship with the clay develops. The clay is no longer independent but becomes compliant, yielding to the will of the firm hand of the potter. It is only when all the vibration and resistance of the clay has diminished that the clay is centered and then can be shaped to the will of the potter. Those who know me well will probably understand why I have such a hard time with centering."



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Resisting Love

People with a will to love sometimes resist receiving love. They will not open their hands and lives to the love given by others. Maybe they do not believe themselves worthy of love, or maybe they like to be the strong one without needs who stoops to help others. To have a will to love without a will to BE loved is like living with half a heart. Those who desire to love this person can become deeply confused. What *seems to be* the will to love begins to look more like the will to be in control, or the will to be at the top. Receiving love is a humble human task. *I have seen that to be human, every person must learn to willingly receive what they have not earned.* (emphasis mine)

Marilyn Elliott

There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; That is curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; That is vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; That is love. author unknown

A Dream - Isaac Keene

I had a dream once. I dreamed it every day month after month for years. Daily. It was a godly dream. About mission work in Africa, even. And about ten years ago, that dream began to slip away. It broke me, you know. I still haven't completely let go. But this week, again, I mourned for that dream. I cried out from places in my heart that I hadn't felt in a long, long time. And I told God just what I felt about it. Not because He's been unfaithful to me, but because I don't understand. And God bless me if I never understand. I think the angry broken raw hurt of an honest plea is as sweet a prayer to God as any. I wrestled with Him the other night. And I woke up with my hip a little out of joint, but more persuaded than ever that He is God. I still don't have any answers, but I'm convinced that He does. And the more I know he has the answers, the less I feel the need to know them.

Original Quote?

I want to think this quote was original to me but I would not swear to it. In any case, it does not change the truth I believe it speaks.

"If God had been described as a mother instead of a father, we could probably better understand the sacrificial love that is expressed in the offering of Jesus Christ."



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Clarity

There are few occasions when you have clarity. You are able to get a glimpse of reality. Shaken out of your peaceful slumber of denial or perhaps wishful thinking, you find reality is not very pleasant. It is like a glaring light that vanquishes all the shadows and reveals your flaws. The disappointment is deep and the pain is acute. The natural reaction is to reshape the experience and cast shadows of ration and reason across the landscape. As Jack Nicholson would tell us: “You can’t handle the truth.” Those occasions can become a crucible in which the dross of our lives is brought to the surface and presents the opportunity to remove impurities and bring integrity to our lives. What is it that enables us to remove the dross? Why not just seek the coolness of the shadows and enjoy the peaceful respite from reality and wait for His return?

Posted August 2006

Christian Values



I anticipate this post to be the first of several on the subject of Christian values. The subject, Christian values, has been on my “to blog subjects” for the last few months. My interest has been tweaked as of late by the Coronavirus pandemic and the varied responses of Christian churches and individual Christians. It appears to me, based on the wide range of responses, there is a significant diversity with regard to Christian values. The continuum of responses to orders to discontinue worship service meetings and practice social distancing, range from outright defiance to agreement and cooperation; all of which I presume to be based on Christian values. It seems there is some cognitive dissonance, on Christian values among Christians. when it comes to pandemics.

Understanding and applying Christian values is not just a current problem, I would suggest it has been a struggle for every serious Christian for the past two thousand years. However, the character of the struggle has evolved over the centuries, particularly for western Christianity. The advent of a secular age, led by the enlightenment produced profound cultural shifts; not the least of which included, relativism, rationalism, individualism which dismantled our ancestors values, direction, purpose, significance and meaning. It is my premise that, cut loose from those anchors of an enchanted world, we have found new anchors upon which establish we our (Christian) values. As a result, I have lost confidence in the mantra “Christian Values”.

My personal objective is to better understand spiritual values grounded in a relationship with God through faith in Christ. I do not see this as a discrete project, but an opportunity for continued self-examination, repentance and realignment, extending through the course of my journey. Facing the prospect of values I hold dear and guide my life and decisions being misguided, is not a pleasant idea.

In the short run, I plan to share some questions and insights I have and will encounter in future posts. Once again, this subject is above my pay grade. I know there are readers with better understanding and knowledge. Feel free to help. I’d be glad to provide for guest posts.

The challenge of Christian Values



The good ole days. I sometimes long for the those days when Christian values were clear concise and unequivocal.

“Don’t Smoke, Drink, Dance, and Chew or Date Girls Who Do.”

Well, at least I didn’t chew and never dated a girl who did.

I was very struck by a list values I came across. It might be good exercise to eliminate any non-Christian values and then print out a card to carry with you and remind you of the values you should hold firmly.

Abundance	Decisiveness	Kindness	Proactivity
Acceptance	Dedication	Knowledge	Professionalism
Accountability	Dependability	Leadership	Punctuality
Achievement	Diversity	Learning	Recognition
Advancement	Empathy	Love	Relationships
Adventure	Encouragement	Loyalty	Reliability
Advocacy	Enthusiasm	Making a	Resilience
Ambition	Ethics	Difference	Resourcefulness
Appreciation	Excellence	Mindfulness	Responsibility
Attractiveness	Expressiveness	Motivation	Responsiveness
Autonomy	Fairness	Optimism	Security
Balance	Family	Open-Mindedness	Self-Control
Being the Best	Friendships	Originality	Selflessness
Benevolence	Flexibility	Passion	Simplicity
Boldness	Freedom	Performance	Stability
Brilliance	Fun	Personal	Success
Calmness	Generosity	Development	Teamwork
Caring	Grace	Proactive	Thankfulness
Challenge	Growth	Professionalism	Thoughtfulness
Charity	Flexibility	Quality	Traditionalism
Cheerfulness	Happiness	Recognition	Trustworthiness
Cleverness	Health	Risk Taking	Understanding
Community	Honesty	Safety	Uniqueness
Commitment	Humility	Security	Usefulness
Compassion	Humor	Service	Versatility
Cooperation	Inclusiveness	Spirituality	Vision
Collaboration	Independence	Stability	Warmth
Consistency	Individuality	Peace	Wealth
Contribution	Innovation	Perfection	Well-Being
Creativity	Inspiration	Playfulness	Wisdom
Credibility	Intelligence	Popularity	Zeal
Curiosity	Intuition	Power	
Daring	Joy	Preparedness	



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These make “Don’t Smoke, Drink, Dance, and Chew or Date Girls Who Do.” an attractive option.

Back in December, two articles prompted me to think more about Christian Values: The first was in Christianity Today written by editor Mark Galli entitled “**Trump Should Be Removed from Office**” His argument was based on Trump’s “grossly immoral behavior”. “That he should be removed, we believe, is not a matter of partisan loyalties but loyalty to the Creator of the Ten Commandments.”

The second article written by Jentenze Franklin entitled “**Why I still stand by 45**” was also an argument based on Christian Values.

“If you have the courage, you stand with the leader who stands for the very things you would hope a president would stand for—the sanctity of life, religious freedom for private citizens and business owners, conservative federal judges, standing with the nation of Israel, and a better tomorrow for those living in poverty, especially in our largest cities—the very values and policies you pray to God your president will push forward and stand on. And he has stood up for every single one. Those ARE Christian values. ...

Is your disdain for the man greater than the policies and values that matter most to our faith? “

See what I mean by cognitive dissonance? At a minimum those articles illustrate a need for clarity regarding Christian values. Of course, the problem is, both wrote from unambiguous understandings. Similarly, each of us believe our political, moral positions and religious are anchored in Christian values. For that reason, we all need to examine our “Christian Values”.

Imagine how the cultural landscape would change if Christians were clear and united in their values. Sadly, the world is confused about “Christian Values” because we are. ...given the view Christians have of culture—it’s about godless ideas and values—the way to change the culture is to 1) create a populist revolution focused on values, or 2) get Christians into positions of political power so that Christian values can become the law of the land.

But all this, according to Hunter, is based upon a flawed view of culture and, as a consequence, these Christian efforts “to change the world” have had both ironic and tragic consequences.

James Davison Hunter <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0199730806/deyorestandre-20>

Christian Values (?)



Experiencing cognitive dissonance after reading articles such as those cited in my earlier, my first inclination was to provide proper definition of Christian Values and relieve my, and your dissonance. Fortunately, it occurred to me, those authors were doing the same in their respective articles.

What makes me think I have better understanding of Christian Values than people obviously more qualified than me?

In all likelihood, I, like them, am certain my understanding is correct and therefore have an implicit responsibility to defend those (my) values and challenge any deviation. Ergo, our divisive culture.

Feeling foolish, I have abandoned the idea of defining Christian Values, at least for now. Instead, I want to probe some thoughts and ideas about values to stimulate our thinking and hopefully move toward greater clarity about Christian Values.

Your values are the things that you believe are important in the way you live and work. They (should) determine your priorities, and, deep down, they're probably the measures you use to tell if your life is turning out the way you want it to. When the things that you do and the way you behave match your values, life is usually good – you're satisfied and content. But when these don't align with your personal values, that's when things feel... wrong. This can be a real source of unhappiness.

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_85.htm

I propose the first step (of course there is a plan) in moving toward greater clarity comes at a personal level. Step (1) Conduct a complete and thorough self-examination to determine my real values . Since all of us are irrationally wedded to our beliefs and derived values, any reasoned attempts to come to a truthful understanding of our values



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will be futile; unless there is some transcendent existential intervention. i.e. Moses and the burning bush...David and Nathan...Isaiah in the temple...Saul on the Road to Damascus... Peter again and again. et al.

Some think the Coronavirus pandemic is divine existential intervention, regardless, it is a significant transcendent existential experience which provides an opportunity for an examination of our values.

Admittedly, the depth and breath of the pandemic varies widely. But, even for those of us in our privileged confines are being forced to think about what we value.

This pandemic may not be a Damascus road, but we shouldn't let a crisis go waste.

To that end, I am making an intentional effort to gain better clarity about what my true values are.

That is a daunting task but it pales with the thought that I might discover my values are misplaced and need to be changed. Sorry, that's premature, one step at a time .

In case you're having trouble getting started, here is a thought starter:

Did you rush out to buy toilet paper, a lot of toilet paper??

Christian Values – Step 1



Earlier I suggested a two step approach in assessing Christian Values. Step 1 was: “Conduct a complete and thorough self-examination to determine my real values .” In the intervening three months, I have continued to ponder and examine my values. Although far from complete and through, the exercise has been exasperating and enlightening.

In the beginning, I naively assumed clarity about (my) Christian values. It did not take long to run aground. A previous post included a [list of 100+ values](#). I suggested examining them and eliminating the non-Christian values and put them on card to carry with you. Conducting that exercise, I found only a handful that I would eliminate as non-Christian and most of those were debatable. Interestingly, each value examined closely could produce a neat Biblical Sunday School lesson.

(I’m thinking about writing “100 Values for the Christian Life” or a daily devotional entitled “Christian for a Day”)

It occurs to me “Christian Values” are, perhaps a unique product of a post-Christian age. Dominated by individualism and relativism esteeming choice, we create a super market of values to satisfy our consumeristic desires.

Examining my “real” values:

[the things that I believe are important in the way I live and work, determine my priorities, and, deep down, are the measures I use to tell if my life is turning out the way I want it to]

I found the list of values to be a handy reference. Essentially, I thought of values I hoped would be the content of my eulogy.

Weirdly, the Boy Scout pledge from my youth came to mind:



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*On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the **Scout** Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight*

*“A **Scout** is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”*

That would sound pretty good at my funeral: “George did his duty to God and country, helped people, stayed fit (not) and morally straight. He was a nice guy trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

My grieving family and friends are tearful, but in their mind they saying “Yeah, he was a nice guy but...”

I really don’t want to be cancelled at my funeral.

Here some conclusions from Step 1:

- I have good values.
- I may be a better Boy Scout than a Christ follower.
- I have chosen values that I feel best fit my definition of Christian.
- In that regard, I have chosen to eat the fruit of the forbidden ” Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” (*This idea is explored in Greg Boyd’s book “**Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgement to God’s love**”*)

Here are some thoughts I’m pondering.

- Choosing to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil results in and alienation from God.
- Only the fruit of “The Tree of Life” produces eternal life.
- Perhaps values I hold are more akin to Aaron’s Golden Calf, idols created from God’s good gifts I have chosen to worship rather than trust God.
- Values are derived from the fruit we eat.

Christian Values Step 2



Step 2. How do my values align with “Christian Values”?

In the process of assessing my values, I encountered a problem. The term “Christian Values” is problematic. As evidenced earlier, “Christian Values” are not the same for all Christians. There is no general consensus on “Christian Values” in American Christianity. Sadly, non-Christians have to interpret confusing messages of “Christian Values” and much is being lost in translation. Christians’ witness in the world is being sullied.

Values are derived from what we believe and trust. I have concluded dissonance regarding “Christian Values” in American Christianity reflects the influence of a secular ethos that holds values, like truth, are discerned from within ourselves. As Christians, influenced by that ethos, we become arbiters of values for ourselves and others, all the while believing them to be Christian. To the extent our values are derived from within, they are the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. With some exceptions, values espoused as Christian are little more than Golden Calves, well intentioned but blasphemous idols, created out of distrust in God. Essentially trusting our understanding and judgement over God’s. The implications are profound.



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Realizing I am not exempt from that secular spirit, assessment of how my values align with “Christian Values” is clear... they align very well. Given my conclusion about “Christian Values”, that is not good news. My values are self-derived, I believe they are good and standards by which to judge others. However, fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is susceptible to evil.

Accordingly, I am revising Step 2. to “How do my values align with values of the Tree of Life?”

The Christian Value – Agape



This concludes the Christian Values series. I am certain I have not exhausted the subject, but I am frazzled. What began as musings about public dissonance of “Christian Values”, produced an unanticipated examination of my own values. That exercise produced some troubling conclusions which continue to plague me and will, hopefully, prove to be transformative.

I am thankful for my coincidental (?) encounter with Greg Boyd’s book “**Repenting of Religion – Turning from Judgement to the Love of God**”. He introduced perspectives that were challenging and convicting.

A brief summary of my understandings and thoughts.

Definition –

“Christian” values are what you believe. They determine the way you live and work. They determine your priorities, they’re the measures you use to tell if your life is Christian. When the things you do and the way you behave don’t align with your values, you are not being Christian.

[adapted from https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_85.]

To no one’s surprise , arguments Christians’ make for the validity and credibility of their positions are based on “Christian Values”. “Christian Values” are the water we swim in, unfortunately, the water is murky. There is little consensus among Christians on a definition of “Christian Values”. I often find myself at odds with other Christians about values.

Absent clarity regarding “Christian Values”, opponents use that ambiguity to prove their case, for example, intolerance and bigotry are alleged to be “Christian Values”.

Source

Values are derived, When values conflict, they inherently indicate different origins. When “Christian Values” conflict their source is open to question and they become illegitimate and counter-productive.

As indicated in an earlier post, I believe “Christian Values”, as generally espoused today, are increasingly derived from within. Accepting Satan’s lies and consuming the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we believe we are god and able to determine what’s best without God. Self-delusion keeps us from recognizing any incompatibility of self-derived values with God-derived values. By definition, there is only one source of values for Christians..Christ.

The solution is obvious... just follow Christ. Fortunately, Christ was unambiguous about following him:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:36-40 NIV

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Matthew 16:24 NIV

The apostle Paul was equally unambiguous about values of Christ followers:

“I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned —but if I have no love, this does me no good.”

“Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13b GNT

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Galatians 5:6b NIV

Love is the sovereign Christian value. Its source is God...God is love. Its meaning and manifestation for humanity are demonstrated in Jesus, God come in flesh. Love is fruit



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of the Spirit.

Whatever is declared as “Christian Values”, to be authentic, must be derived from love as revealed and demonstrated by God. There is no other source for “Christian Values”.

Love as Christians understand it is distinctly different from what most people think of as love. When John wrote “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,” he illuminated the sacrificial character of divine love. This is the mark of agape. It is entirely selfless. If one could love others without judging them, asking anything of them, or thinking of one’s own needs, one would meet the Christian standard. Obviously, no one can. Many of us can meet the requirements of friendship or erotic love, but agape is beyond us all. It is not a love toward which we are naturally inclined or for which we have natural capacities. Yet it is not something exclusively divine, like omnipotence, which human beings would be presumptuous to emulate. In fact, it is demanded of us. Agape is the core of Christian morality.¹

Nourished from consuming fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and perceiving myself to be God, I have confidently chosen good values. Values which confirm my goodness and validate my judgement of others. Going my own way, separated from God I am unable to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life.

Any goodness is empty and meaningless and subject to evil without agape. As Tinder noted above, agape is beyond us all.

This excursion into “Christian Values” has exposed me to how deeply I grieve the Holy Spirit, choosing goodness on my own instead of receiving her gift of love.

Being praised as a good person is no longer a source of pride, but an occasion for self-examination.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.

Mark 10:18

¹ Can We Be Good Without God? On the political meaning of Christianity Glenn Tinder

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1989/12/can-we-be-good-without-god/306721/>

schadenfreude



The German word “schadenfreude” means experiencing satisfaction from someone else’s misfortune.

During a year and a half pandemic coupled with a cultural environment in which differences of opinion morphed into hardened ideologies. Incapable of hearing other voices and clothed in our respective rightness, we justify whatever means we chose to resist and combat the evils being foisted upon us. I cannot recall any period in my life (with the exception of Alabama- Auburn loyalties) that resulted in such division, even hatred.

As Thomas Paine famously said, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” In-deed that is the case, particularly for Christ followers. We are in living in a crucible that tests our faith to its depths.

The “trying ” of my soul has revealed a disturbing presence of “schadenfreude —”experiencing satisfaction from someone else’s misfortune.” Several have recently written about the prevalence of schadenfreude. You can read some –[HERE](#) , [HERE](#) , [HERE](#).

My encounter with schadenfreude is not overt but subtle. It has occurred in reflection on circumstances of those experiencing misfortune as a result of decisions contrary to my opinions/beliefs. In moments of honest introspection, I realize that I experience pleasant satisfaction of others’ misfortune. The fact that I am restrained from expressing my satisfaction publicly is encouraging, but the truth is plain, there’s within me an undeniable schadenfreude impulse.

This realization is troubling. As a Christ follower, I believe “schadenfreude” is not a fruit of the Holy Spirit nor does it reflect the mind of Christ. Its presence reveals sin which thrives in the shadows of my soul. A sin which cannot be absolved by sin management



i.e. restraint in speaking or acting out. Overcoming “schadenfreude” requires the transcendent power of God.

Celebration of other’s misfortune is not unusual, in fact, for most of us it comes easily and is consistent with our highly competitive and individualistic culture. Opponents’ demise is the desired outcome. Victory, even if it comes as result of our opponents bad luck, is always occasion for celebration, a fulfillment of our wishes (or prayers?) that they— “get what they deserve” et al. The opportunity to be proved right and to say, or, at a minimum, think “I told you so” is delicious. Dramatic polarization in our society has elevated “schadenfreude” to normal.

...yes, the environment in which Christians exist, never perfect, is much more hostile now than it was.

But it’s also the case that Christians are an equally dangerous adversary to ourselves. Far too many of us have little to no sense of our own failings, and our own collaboration with the world. Rod Dreher

When you start mocking instead of persuading, you signal that you now view someone as an enemy to be defeated, rather than a person to be persuaded...the key to all sin against another is to first dehumanize them...then label them...you have to convince yourself that the other no longer possesses the image of God and God wants them gone as well...we’re all getting too good at this...

Phoenix Preacher

The presence of Schadenfreude reveals sin that is deeper “than “missing the mark” — moral failure — a mistake. It isn’t a mistake. It is a power that can reign and rule my mind and body, forcing you me obey, having dominion over me; a false god to whom I give idolatrous allegiance. Defying sin management, schadenfreude’s antidote is found in Romans 6: “...present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” [Adapted from Richard Beck’s post]

If these thoughts haven’t caused you to rethink any impulse to celebrate the misfortune of others, and you are convinced that justice should prevail. then consider this passage from proverbs:

Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble do not let your heart rejoice, or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them.

(Proverbs 24:17-18).

