

LIVING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

TONY KRIZ

A CONVERSATION
ABOUT TOUGH TOPICS,
FAITH AND THE
JESUS WAY.



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Introduction

If I Could Change One Thing

As I travel the country and speak at locations as diverse as Southern Baptist Chapels, interfaith conferences and Yale University, I am regularly asked what I would like to change about the religious dialogue in the world today.

My answer will probably surprise you.

I would remove the terms “Believer” and “Non-Believer” from the vocabulary of religious people.

You know that feeling you get in your stomach when someone calls all poor people “lazy” or use a racial slur... well that is a glimpse into how I feel when I hear someone refer to non-Christians as “non-believers.”

I am indebted to a woman named Jean who once unapologetically confronted me on the term “un-believer.” “How dare you!” she admonished. “Just because someone does not believe the same way that you do, how dare you invalidate them by calling them belief-less. Every person has beliefs... important beliefs... beliefs that shape them, inform them... make sense out of the world and you walk around condemning them as un-believers. You should be ashamed.”

That was over a decade ago and I have not stopped thinking about her words.

She was right.

Growing up in the Christian church, I was taught that terms like “un-believer” were humane alternatives to borderline curses like “heathen,” “damned” or “pagan” (although actual Pagans don’t mind the term at all.) And maybe they were right. Maybe there was a time that a term like “un-believer” (or its indirect equivalent, using “believer” as synonymous to “Christian”) had a place in civil discourse.

But no more!

I wish there was a tool that would root out, like a weed, from the tongues of religious people the terms “unbeliever” and “believer.”

And if I am being completely honest, I am mostly talking about Christians here. That is because the Christian church is my religious family. I think we all feel more responsibility for our own family and more open to letting other “families” govern themselves.

My Christian sisters and brothers, please begin to relegate these spiritually dismissive terms to the same mental recycling bin as racial, gender and classist slurs.

When we deem (and communicate) that another’s beliefs are important and valued, it does not mean that we necessarily agree with them. However, it certainly communicates love and understanding and it has a real power to de-constipate the spiritual dialogue to be found in all sacred friendships (And what could be more sacred than friendship, be it with a childhood companion or the person next to you on the bus?)

Now it is time for a quick disclaimer for those who are looking for the “comment” button to take me to task. I am not saying that all beliefs are equally true. That would be foolish. Many beliefs cannot exist side by side in the same universe (theism and atheism cannot both be true) and many other (even most) beliefs, I would naturally question as a Trinitarian, Bible-loving, Christocentric Theist. That being true, I still do not want to invalidate those other beliefs with terms like “un-believer.”

When someone shares their beliefs, no matter how divergent from your own, they are giving you one of their most costly treasures. They are offering their affections, their dreams, their values, and their hope for the world and for their family. They are giving you the fragile and precious scaffolding of their life and asking you to treat it as such.

Can we do that?

Even Jesus offered uncanny validation to the spiritually divergent. Of the Roman Centurion he said, “No where in all Israel have I witnessed such faith” and to the Canaanite woman he said, “Your faith is great.”

.....

These stumbling thoughts are a doorway into what this e-book is all about. It is an attempt to critique the spiritual dialogue in our culture today. Some people call it “third-way thinking” or “depolarizing” the discussion. What I hope it represents is a more compassionate, more Christ-like conversation.

Another thing you will find in these pages is a lot of confession by me. My weaknesses, prejudices and failings will be on regular display. It is not necessarily fun for me, but unfortunately (or fortunately) I feel

spiritually compelled to share with such honesty. I hope you find it refreshing. I hope it even releases some fresh confession in your own life.

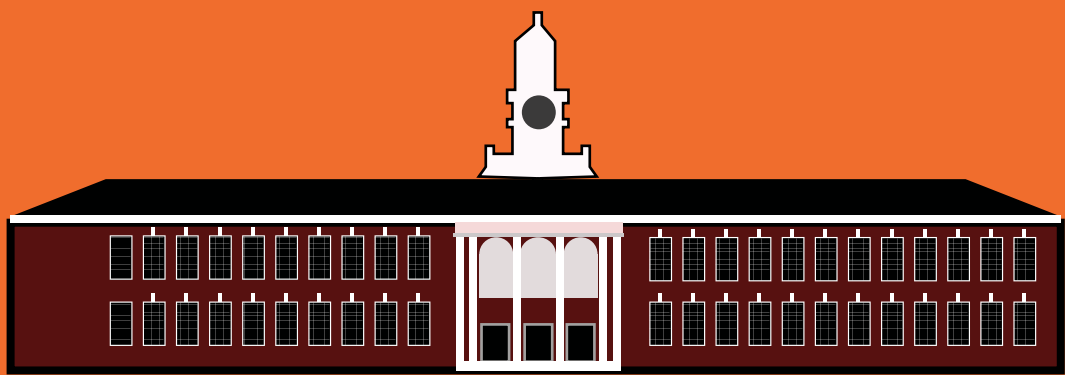
Remember, it is nice to share your confessions inside your private journal, but it has even more transformative power when you share them with others.

And, as long as you are in the sharing mood, could you point a few friends to this free e-book so they can enjoy it as well.

Enjoy.

Let the epiphanies come.

Blessings of a



Post-Christian Culture

Blessings of a Post-Christian Culture

Not long ago, I was sitting at the boardroom table of the Portland, Oregon, mayor's office. This was the office of Sam Adams, the gay mayor who made history when he was elected to the highest office of a large American city. We were there to discuss church-city partnerships.

We had just come from spending the day at inner-city Roosevelt High School. The school's campus had been transformed through its partnership with a large suburban church. The partnership included food, clothing, mentoring, sports, and beautification programs. As of today, there are 250 such church-school partnerships all around the city of Portland. Some churches even have offices inside public school buildings. Infiltration, intrusion, incarnation—call it what you will.

But that is just the beginning. The churches of Portland have linked arms with their city to affect change in the realms of homelessness, human trafficking, hunger, and healthcare. Churches have also become a sort of assisting superintendent of the Portland foster care system, remodeling DHS offices, providing supplies and training and signing up their parishioners in record numbers all through a church initiative called Embrace Oregon.

As I sat at that meeting, I marveled again over how such a partnership was possible. How did these Portland churches manage to vault over the church-state divide?

I marveled again over how such a partnership was possible. How did these Portland churches manage to vault over the church-state divide? Around the boardroom table sat evangelical leaders like Kevin Palau, of the Palau Evangelistic Association, prominent members of Portland's government, and philanthropist emissaries from all around North America who had come to witness stories like the one at Roosevelt High School.

How could this happen here?

After 45 minutes of monologues about the many programs in Portland, the floor was opened for questions. At first the visitors were silent. Then a finely dressed man from South Carolina cleared his throat.

"How has this happened?" he asked. He paused, looking for a polite way to express his confusion. "How could these things happen in a city like this?"

His question made perfect sense. We were at the epicenter of America's "least-Christian city," and he was from one of the most-Christian regions of the country.

How is it possible in a place like this?

Kevin Palau commended the South Carolinian for his question and looked to the mayoral staff for an answer. They spoke for some time about the unique generosity of Portland's government as the basis for this unprecedented partnership. They spoke of the historical openness, egalitarian freedom, and "liberal-spirit" of Oregon as the foundation for such activism.

Minority gains

Then Kevin looked at me. "Tony, as a member of the church in Portland, I wonder if you could address this man's question."

I looked around the table and said something like this:

"There is no single factor that causes a beautiful partnership like the one we are nurturing here in Portland. But there is one important reality we shouldn't overlook: the opportunity provided by Post-Christendom."

You can just imagine the confused looks all around the table, on the faces of the religious and secular alike.

"Portland is a post-Christian city, one of the first that North America has ever known. This is a sociological term. It means Christians make up a minority population in the city. And a minority culture is by definition non-threatening.

For most all of U.S. history, Christians have been the majority, and a majority population has power. Often the majority is perceived as a bully. A majority culture does not need to do anything mean to be perceived as a bully, it just happens. We have seen the same phenomenon with cultural, class, and political dynamics. Whoever has the numbers has the power and is therefore perceived as a threat; and a threat releases a flood of anxiety into a system, a system like a city.

But here today, Christians are a minority group. So the historical anxiety that most cities experience around issues of church and state is evaporating, and it is having a profound impact on both the Portland church and the Portland government. The church here can no longer define the terms of engagement, she can no longer claim to have it "figured out," and she is realizing she might just need help from some new friends. The government has realized that the church is not a threat (even in a city as liberal as Portland) and so there is significantly less risk in partnering to solve our shared concerns, even if that help comes from Christians."

The meeting ended soon after and there were handshakes and well wishes all around.

As I walked through the wide City Hall doors and into the colonnade, the man from South Carolina grabbed my arm, “Can I ask you something? Are you saying that the only hope we have in my town, to get into the schools and to partner with the city, is to wait for our town to become post-Christian?”

“No,” I answered, “what I was saying was not prescription for any other city. It was an attempt to explain my own. But we don’t need to be so afraid of post-Christendom. God is eternally creative and there are opportunities for engagement. We just need to have the courage to join God’s creative imagination.

“It would be a mistake for you to just wait for post-Christendom to come to your town—and you wouldn’t want that anyway. But it may be good for you to think more about relieving the anxiety between the church and your city. Being in the minority is only one cure for anxiety. You must find another.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Well, that is for you to discover, but here are a couple of thoughts to get the wheels turning. Anxiety in any system or in any relationship is quickly curbed by acts of shocking humility or generosity. Is there a way you could shock your city? What if the churches took out a full-page advertisement in the paper, asking for forgiveness for historical arrogance (or whatever you as a church wish to confess) and commit to support the city afresh? Even better, what if the churches contributed one month’s tithe, across the board, to cure one problem in your city?

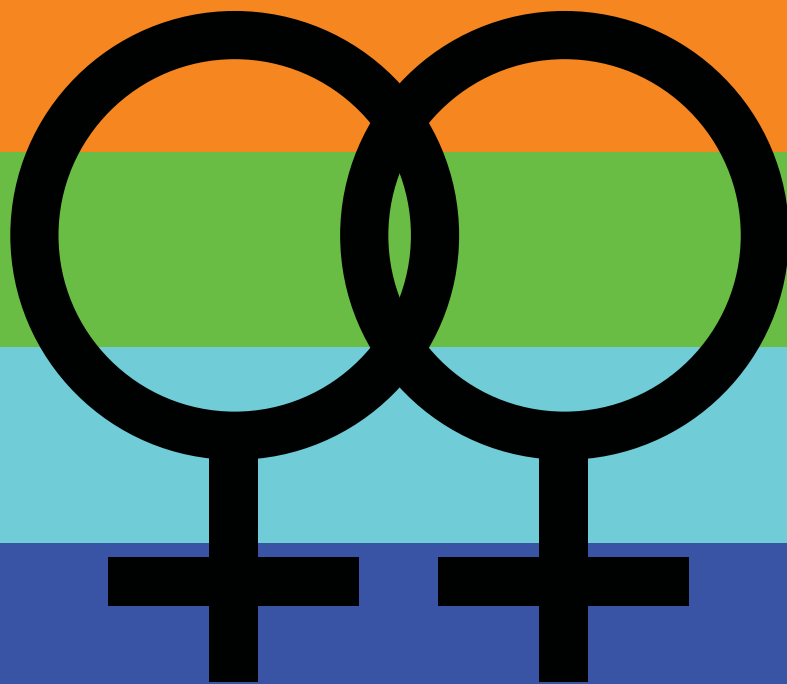
“I am just brainstorming here, but now you get to take what you have seen here, go home and do the real work of prophetic imagination.

“I hope you get into the schools. And then I hope the churches in your town find a way to transform issues of homelessness, incarceration, orphans, widows, foster kids, healthcare, immigrants, the elderly, and whatever else you can imagine.”

What about your context? What are some ways you might alleviate anxiety between your church and community? It might take some creativity and hard work. Erasing suspicion and building trust always does. But trust me, the partnerships that develop will be more than worth it.

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Gay Marriage and



Christian Volatility

Gay Marriage and Christian Volatility

Agitated is the word that comes to mind when I think of the current debate about Gay Marriage. Agitation is everywhere, and it takes on a particularly volatile form within many church circles.

There is a lot being written right now about gay marriage. The vast majority of that writing is about which side of the issue has the moral high ground. What is not being written about is why this particular issue has induced such an explosive, emotional response.

On one hand, the church is an activist organization. This is true from its beginning: from building hospitals to big-tent revivals, from overthrowing dictators to nailing 95 Theses, from Billy Graham crusades to, well ... the Crusades. The church is an organism with an activist's heart desperately looking for the next war to wage.

Is gay marriage simply the issue du jour?

Partly. But I believe the emotional drama indicates it is more than just the most available issue of the day. It is explosive. Why is that so? One important piece of this incongruent agitation is that it takes two emotionally charged issues—homosexuality and the institution of marriage, each volatile in its own right—and ...

Let me see if I can paint a picture.

Have you ever heard of a binary chemical weapon? In the movies, a binary chemical weapon is a complicated bomb that houses two separate cylinders, each containing a volatile compound. It is an effective movie plotline because when the compounds mix, the resulting mixture is exponentially more powerful than either compound alone. For the audience, the expectation of these two compounds mixing creates a uniquely anxious experience.

Homosexuality and marriage are, at least for the church, two such volatile compounds. We fear what will happen when the chemicals mix.

Volatile compound #1: Homosexuality

If we rank moral and theological issues on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being highest, homosexuality is valued as a “10 issue” by the church. (Award-winning filmmaker Dan Merchant humorously expressed this fact in this YouTube short.)

But is homosexuality really a “10”? And why has it reached such a charged status recently? Well, I think it’s because of how it relates to the Bible and to our church life.

Bible

Christians take great pride (as they should) in taking their beliefs and moral priorities from the pages of the Bible. The problem is, as far as the Bible is concerned, homosexuality is valued as a “3 issue,” not a “10.”

When looking at the moral teachings of Jesus in the gospels, homosexuality receives zero airtime. Zero. Jesus is silent on the issue. Either Jesus never felt it was a great enough priority to discuss, or his followers, who wrote the gospels, never felt it was important enough to quote. Either way, the gospels give it the same priority as Egyptian Interior Decoration: no comment.

Beyond the gospels the Bible is tepid at best as far as prioritizing homosexuality. (I am not talking about interpretation here, only the objective volume of writing.) There are a couple of verses about it in Leviticus. Paul makes brief comments in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy. A handful of verses. Some people add a few other passages as anecdotal or illustrative, but even so, the total actual passages covering the topic represent a minuscule amount of the moral teaching of the Bible.

This total volume is far less than biblical hot-issues like paying taxes, how to treat a slave, or the proper construction of a tabernacle. More significantly, homosexuality is buried in obscurity under the hundreds, if not thousands, of verses dedicated to the indisputable “level 10 issues” of the Bible: prayer, caring for the poor, loving your neighbor, or proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Again, I want to be very clear. I am not talking about the application of these passages: for instance do they refer to sexual orientation? Homosexual relationships? Specific erotic acts? I am also not making a moral commentary one way or another; I am only commenting on how much the Bible talks about it.

Church life

And yet, in so many religious circles today, this “3 issue” (according to the Bible) is treated like a “10.” Why is that?

At this point, I am only talking about homosexuality broadly, not gay marriage. However, sexual orientation, left to itself, is a very emotionally charged issue. I want to explore some of the emotions behind it.

Disassociating: There is something in us that wants to keep distance from certain human expressions. It is a strong and repulsing sort of disassociation. It happens in many realms. My friend David wants nothing to do with the Los Angeles Lakers. There is literally nothing good that can come from that NBA team. To suggest otherwise (“they are a shrewdly run organization,” “Kobe Bryant is a talented athlete”) will receive nothing but the most charged counter-argument from David. A similar thing can be said about Linda and her feelings about Barack Obama. Nothing good can be said. Or my friend Andrew and his feelings about the “1 percent” (he was a demonstrator with the “99 percent” during the Occupy Wall Street campaign).

All of these are a form of dissociating. It is ironic that we disassociate from certain things as a way of defining ourselves. The stronger the disassociation, the more it means to our self-identity.

I am learning to be attentive to these charged disassociations in my own life.

As groups, we also build these disassociation dynamics. Homosexuality has been judged particularly harshly by the church in recent years. It is a “we are not them” validation issue. Just like the Los Angeles Lakers, Barack Obama, and the “1 percent,” homosexuals have been identified as the “other.” And just like the examples above, its rejection is powerful because it provides a validating form of self-identification: “We are not them.”

This is only possible because of the illusion that homosexuality exists “out there” and not inside the church’s walls. Which explains why we would never use the same rhetorically charged language for other issues. We certainly would not want to call religious arrogance a “perversion,” gossip an “abomination,” or consumerism the “western plague” (the way we called AIDS “the gay plague”). Those stones would fall too often back inside our sacred house. So we have built an illusion that homosexuality only exists “out there” and is thus a defilement that helps maintain our false validation. This also explains why the social punishment is so severe when a conservative Christian hero is discovered to be gay.

Valuation Incongruence: In addition to this “us versus them” dynamic, the church is also haunted by the fact that this dissociative relationship is incongruent with the biblical witness, “10 value” versus a “3 value.” When a person or an organization is required to protect this incongruent position it creates profound anxiety. Deep down, we feel the precariousness of our situation. The church is working to protect the perception that a kitty cat is a lion, when it is actually only a kitty cat.

Volatile compound #2: Marriage

Marriage is also a high-priority issue among us religious folk. We have conferences, sermons, whole ministries about it, and more books on the topic than we could read in a lifetime. For many, it is also a “10 issue,” because of the same two reasons that homosexuality is so explosive: the Bible and church life.

Bible

Does the Bible agree that “marriage” is a “near-10 issue”?

This time, Jesus did provide some teaching on the topic. Mostly his comments were about divorce (Matt. 5, 19, Mark 10, Luke 16). His most impactful teaching about marriage was to declare it non-normative to the human experience. Jesus taught that there is no marriage in heaven (Matt. 22, Mark 12, Luke 17). If we believe in the afterlife, which I do, then according to Jesus, marriage is a temporary reality for us. It will only be experienced in this brief life “under the sun,” and it is not a lasting part of our eternal story. I am not stating that marriage is not important. But we need to remember the ways that Jesus spoke about it.

The Bible is filled with married people, to be sure. They are everywhere: Old Testament, New Testament, all over. However, we need to acknowledge the fact that the Bible may only be stating that marriage is a ubiquitous human reality, much like eating food regularly or sleeping in shelters, two human realities that we desire for all humans. It is also important to note that the Bible often treats marriage with a moral whimsy. People got married for almost any reason (without moral commentary): they get married because of winning a beauty contest (Esther), because the woman watered camels (Isaac), and because the first 699 wives were not enough (Solomon).

Okay, let’s bring some balance to this. I have focused on some contrasting themes in the biblical narrative, simply to counter the absolutist status that we often award marriage. The truth is, marriage is very important in Scripture. There is no more defining argument that can be made than the fact that Jesus utilizes the metaphor of the wedding feast to define the beginning of our eternal celebration (Rev. 19, Matt. 22, and Luke 14).

I have no desire to marginalize marriage. Not at all, only to state plainly that the Bible treats marriage both with profundity and, at times, with temperance and whimsy.

Church life

We, the church, treat marriage as an issue of utmost importance. Marriage is as emotionally charged as any issue in the church.

Ironically, it is very similar to homosexuality, in regards to identity. It is the opposite side of the same coin. As opposed to being a disassociating issue, it is an associative issue.

“Marriage is our issue,” declares the church.

I am not sure when this was decided, but it is clear that the church believes it is the gatekeeper for marriage. When it comes to weddings, we borrow divine authority (“in the sight of God and these witnesses, I now pronounce you ...”), we host the ceremonies in our buildings, and we even pass judgment on who is “ready” to get married and who is not. That is an awful lot of power to wield.

We call it the “institution of marriage” as if it is a large stone building, a place where we, the church, get to guard the front door. But is it really our building to control? Marriage is practiced by every culture of the world and is revered in most every belief system. In reality, a couple can be wed by a pastor, a Mullah, or a rabbi; for that matter it can also be officiated by a judge, a court clerk, or if you are far enough off-shore, a ship’s captain. The church is not the only doorway into the institution of marriage; it has more entrances than a shopping mall.

Yet we treat marriage like it is “ours.” Be it illusion or reality, it is very intoxicating to be a gatekeeper, and that is a power structure that is not easy to give up.

The explosive: Gay marriage

So this brings us to our issue of the day: gay marriage. I’m not trying to make a judgment on whether gay marriage should be supported or rejected by Christians. I just want to share why I think this issue is so emotionally charged.

Let’s imagine the issue of gay marriage as a chemical experiment. Two powerful and agitated “chemicals” have been poured together. We are the first generation to face this chemical mixture (at least in its modern form). Both of these two elements are volatile enough by themselves, but when mixed together they result in an exponentially powerful compound. Two “10-issues” mixed together. Two issues of incongruent valuation mixed together. A dissociative issue and an associative issue mixed together.

You can see why such a concoction would have the potential to explode. Now add to this mixture a pinch of ignorance (since we are the first generation to really have to deal with this issue in its modern form), a dash of political polarization, and bake the whole thing in a 24-hour news cycle. We can expect fireworks.

But what would happen if we responded differently?

In the late 70s and early 80s, I was just a boy. It was at this time that the AIDS epidemic began to spread in America. I remember the fear. I remember the agitation.

At that time the church community chose to use its extensive power, platform, and influence to condemn the outbreak. We called it the gay-plague. We separated ourselves from it and judged—when we could have loved.

I believe that most of us Christians wish we could go back 30-plus years and use that same power and platform as an influence to love. We could have started hospices, given to medical research, and fought to stand with the infected—“for I was sick and you visited me” (Matt. 25:36). Regardless of our moral beliefs, we could have embraced that moment to stand with the homosexual community in love. We missed it. That was a God-opportunity that we can never get back.

Today we have another chance.

I don't claim to know the course for these uncharted waters, but can we restrain the rhetoric? Can we temper the judgment? Can we assuage the agitation? While we maintain our moral positions, wherever that line may be drawn for each of us, and take this moment, this unique moment, to tell the nation and the world, in whatever way we can: “We love you.”

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Pro-Death and



Finger Pointing

Pro-Death, and Pointing Fingers

Pro-Death, and Pointing Fingers
Pro-life. I guess you could say that I was born “pro-life,” the son of parents who were both Conservative Baptists and Republicans.

And now, more than forty years later, it is natural for me to prioritize life. I love life and I think life is something we should want to root for in all its forms: communities, forests, endangered critters, oceans, my next door neighbor, my neighbor across the globe, the marginalized, the soldier and civilian, the poor and the rich, the forgotten and the famous, the sick and the healthy, the hungry and the fed ... the list goes on and on.

Some would say that I am muddying the issue when I pull the camera back so far that “pro-life” suddenly encompasses all things and covers issues on all points of the political/theological map. Part of me wishes we could be “pro-all-life,” but that might be asking too much.

Finger-point-sins and shared-sins

In our society “pro-life” refers by and large to one thing: pregnancy and birth rights. Specifically, abortion is one of the most dramatic issues in society’s moral (sin) debate. For me it falls in a category that I would call: “Finger-point-sins” (more on that in a moment).

First, I want to describe another category. The vast majority of sins I simply call “shared-sins.” They are the common sort of temptations that I for one face everyday. They are the sort of sins that I need to handle with care, because harsh judgment of one of these shared-sins might come back and bite me in the backside. You see, I believe I am in ever-present danger of slipping down the road toward a shared-sin. These transgressions include: greed, pride, lust, religious hubris, ignoring the poor, gossip, hoarding wealth, idolatry, legalism, dishonoring parents, covetousness, lying, racism, unrighteous anger, judgmentalism, malice. Truth be told, I have been tempted toward many of these sins already today.

Let me try and explain why I think abortion is treated differently, like a “finger-point-sin.” Unlike our list above, it is the sort of sin that I have zero fear that I might unexpectedly commit. I have no fear that I might slip into the act, the way that I might find myself slipping into envy, judgment, pride, or greed. Thus, it creates an odd form of freedom where I can vocally and dramatically denounce the sin of abortion with no fear that my denouncement will ever come back to bite me. It is one of the great examples of an us/them divide.

A finger-point-sin therefore carries great power. I can simultaneously “stand for righteousness” and all the while make an unspoken case for my own spiritual significance. Church history and modern society is replete with these us/them issues; the common denominator is that each idea leaves a percentage of society outcast, while the rest of us, at least in regards to that particular issue, escape free and clean.

Different fingers

Jesus seemed to come at such things from a distinctly different perspective.

On the schoolyard growing up we were taught to be careful with finger pointing. I remember adults telling us, “Every time you point your finger at someone else, three more fingers will point right back at you.” (Try it for yourself, those darn adults were right.)

Jesus seemed a little schoolyard in his approach. He lived in a world full of more than a few us/them issues and finger-point-sins. And yet his encouragements were strange and surprisingly shared:

“Don’t look at the speck in your brother’s/sister’s eye when there is a log in your own” (Matthew 7:3).

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder (finger-point-sin) shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry (shared-sin) with his brother shall be guilty before the court” (Matthew 5:21-22).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ (finger-point-sin); but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her (shared-sin) has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

“Let the one who is without sin among you, be the first to throw a stone” (John 10:7).

Jesus’ encouragements are for self-examination first. Jesus invited his people to look at the shared struggles that we all face and even to have the courage to examine our own souls and name the sin that is there.

In light of that, I wonder if we need to start by talking about death. And in response to the words of Jesus, I want to take a few minutes to put my finger-pointing away and instead ...

I repent that I support, create, and defend a culture of death. I am, in fact, pro-death:

My repentance

- I repent of the things I have done and of the things I have left undone:
- I repent that I live a pro-death lifestyle.
- I repent of the ways I have killed by harboring hatred in my heart (Matthew 5:21-22).
- I repent of the ways I have hoarded money while people across my city and across the world die daily of hunger.
- I repent of my whining over the cost of health care with little thought of the millions who die of curable diseases every day.
- I repent that I revel in the death portrayed on movie, TV, and computer screens.
- I repent of my patterns of consumerism that contribute both to the death of forests, oceans, and food-supplies, and lead to the mass-destruction of communities across the world.
- I repent that I have participated in a society that hides the elderly away in institutions to die alone; all the while I am spared the inconvenience of watching their slow death.
- I repent of anytime I have found satisfaction in a thought like: That person got what was coming to them.
- I repent of the ways that I cheer for “our” soldiers and give little thought to the untold numbers that die on the other side of the battle lines.
- I repent of the ways that I contribute to a society where some women feel so lost and alone, and believe that killing their unborn is their only choice.
- I repent that our churches are perceived as unwelcoming and judgmental so those with needs for community and assistance do not feel free to come or simply ask for help.
- I repent that I ignore systemic patterns of death (killings, addictions, unwanted pregnancies, etc.) among poor, marginalized, or oppressed ethnic/cultural communities.
- I repent of anytime I have secretly celebrated a particular person’s (or group of people’s) destiny to hell/judgment.
- I repent of any acrimonious delight I have found in someone’s sentence to prison (living-death) or their execution.
- I repent that I benefit from a society where diseases have been

celebrated as just (e.g. HIV-AIDS) and disasters are called “God’s judgment” (Hurricane Katrina and the French Quarter.)

- I repent of the ways I fund slavery (living-death) by ignorantly purchasing everyday commodities (<http://slaveryfootprint.org/>).
- I repent of the ways that I wistfully keep my dollars (and vote for my nation’s dollars) away from aiding the very real needs around the world: clean water, hygiene, access to medicine, access to nutritious food, and genocide fueled by debt and injustice.
- I repent that I perpetuate a living-death when I turn my head from my outdoor-dwelling neighbors or worse ... when I don’t notice them at all.
- I repent of the ways that I aid death by not giving my time, talents, or money to services that help pregnant mothers along their pregnancy path (or support men and women generally along life’s path).
- I repent that I do not help foster an interconnected neighborhood, and so my neighbors feel alone, desperate and with no one to ask for help.
- I repent of all the times I have pointed an accusation at another’s participation in death while ignoring my daily death contributions.
- I repent that everyday I ignore Jesus’ exhortation: “Let the one who is without sin, throw the first stone.”

Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

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It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/august-online-only/pro-death.html?paging=off>

Drinking to



Remember

Drinking to Remember

Alcohol consumption isn't a simple yes or no issue.

I have been thinking about alcohol lately.

A couple of months ago, I was writing an article for a national magazine. Their readership is located primarily in the American South. It was a great project, and I thoroughly enjoyed the process and the editorial staff. I think we were all delighted by how the assignment was turning out. Delighted that is, right up until the end.

After a couple of months of work and revision on the article, a higher-up in the organization got involved with the project. He or she seemed to like the like the article. But the higher-up got a hold of my recent book, *Neighbors and Wise Men*. After one look, the article was cancelled.

The reason? The book's cover has a picture of a bar. This picture is appropriate since much of the book is about redemptive conversations I've had in a local Portland pub. The editorial staff assured their boss that the book makes no defense of alcohol consumption as a practice, but that didn't matter. My article was killed. They could not be associated with a book that features a picture of a drinking establishment.

Divisive drinking

I have no ill will toward this organization. The editors that I worked with were kind, generous, creative, and professional. If they called again, I would happily work with them again. And they allowed me to retain my work and even paid me for my time.

But my story illustrates how divisive the issue of alcohol still is in many corners of the church. Parts of the divide are along denominational or generational lines. There is also a regional element to the debate. My friend Mark said, "I wonder what would change if the American South's main crops included grapes and hops, instead of tobacco. Would there be a change in the pulpit rhetoric about alcohol?"

I responded, "I wonder if the American West didn't specialize in the wine and beer industries, if we would have become so cavalier about our alcohol usage."

Economics and morality are often linked—but that is a topic for another day.

I grew up in a religiously conservative church/community. There was a high demand placed on us for moral purity that included avoiding PG13 movies and secular rock-n-roll. We were also taught that alcohol was bad.

And so often that is the extent of our theology of wine: “Alcohol is bad!” We reduce it to a good or bad, moral or immoral issue. As a result our faith-family is often left with only one reason to consider alcohol: rebellion. If it is only bad, then under what circumstances would they choose to imbibe? The answer: moments of anger, rebellion, defiance, pain, sorrow, or depression.

So, here is my attempt to start a conversation about alcohol. This is not an argument for abstinence or an encouragement to drink. It is an attempt to simply raise the debate from dogma to discussion. It’s far from exhaustive. There will be no behavioral emphasis here, aside from the brief observation that wanton and meaningless drunkenness is clearly destructive (Prov. 23:20, Is. 5:11, Gal. 5:19-21).

Unique impact

Wine has a unique impact on humans. (Talk about stating the obvious.)

Virtually every culture of the world stumbles over fermentation. It is as ubiquitous as musical instruments, feast days, and ceremonial clothing. These cultures soon build an industry around their fermented beverage and integrate it into their societal mores. Humans have made alcohol out of almost anything. Grapes, hops, barley, potatoes, rice, corn, you name it. (It is only a matter of time until someone figures out how to make alcohol out of bacon ... and society will never be the same.)

Throughout the Bible people drink. And that drinking has an impact. Alcohol affects us. The first sip is a tingling sensation and a soothingly warm belly. Large quantities lead to various forms of intoxication. Noah drank until he passed out (Genesis 9). Lot’s daughters intended to get their father drunk (Gen. 19). David knew what he was doing when he got Uriah drunk (2 Sam. 11). And it is the other-worldly impact of drinking wine that inspires Paul to use intoxication as a comparison for the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives (Eph. 5:18).

My guess is that when the guests at the Wedding of Cana said, “Wow! They saved the best wine for last,” that they were not referring to a children’s beverage.

I will never forget sitting in David Needham’s Old Testament class, at my conservative seminary. When we began to discuss Isaiah, Professor Needham paused at an unusual passage.

The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine.

And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the Lord has spoken.

And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." Isaiah 25:6-9 (NASB)

And this is what happened next (at least as close as I remember it.)

After reading the words, Professor Needham put down his Bible and stared out over our heads. His eyes continued to drift up and up until they were seemingly transfixed on heaven. His face glowed in euphoric light. As he spoke, it was almost as if we were not even present in the room. Then he spoke. His words went something like this:

"I will never forget the first time I tasted wine. Even now I can feel the sensation as the glorious drink danced with my tongue and flowed down my throat. I had never felt anything like it before: the warmth, the tingling. It was the most unique and enchanting experience. When I read Isaiah, I understand what he is doing. He offers us a picture of heaven, the euphoria and beauty, the uniqueness, and unforgettability—it is an experiential vision of heaven. When Isaiah searches for something on earth, from which to describe the unseen, he chose wine and I understand why."

Drink to remember

We drink wine to remember, not to forget.

I live in a drinking city. Portland is known for our beer. Portland often ranks as the number one beer city in the world, awarded names like "Beervana" and "Beertopia." For many, beer is not a beverage, it is a lifestyle. Alcohol, in its varying forms, seems to accompany almost any event and out here that often includes church gatherings.

So here is my question for you, "Did God intend alcohol to be an any time, any event companion?" Whether you're a teetotaler or someone who regularly imbibes, what did you think God intended?

There are many uses of wine in the Bible: medicinal (1Tim. 5:23, Luke 10:34), ceremonial (The Drink Offering), and for preservation (wine does not spoil like grape juice so simple kinds of wine were common). In spite of these other uses, I am concerned here with occasions that are paralleled in our culture today.

Looking through my New Testament, wine is specifically stated as being drunk in only a handful of scenes. There is the Wedding of Cana (John 2) and I think it's safe to assume it is also present at all wedding feasts (Matt. 22 and Rev. 19). And wine is present at the Lord's Supper. Those appearances are remarkably few. I read that to indicate a direct relationship between the significance of the event and the presence of wine. There is a logical congruence in this. Decent wine takes a ton of time and effort to prepare, ferment and store. It seems to me that there is a godly congruence between the labor and resources necessary and something's intended occasional use. Think "killing the fatted calf."

People drink alcohol for many reasons. Too many drink to forget.

Alcohol can be used to medicate and to numb the soul. Too many hope for a pause, to forget their many pains: heart pains, soul pains, relational pains, hopelessness, and loss. Yet the Bible doesn't support these uses.

In the divisive church climate around alcohol, I don't know if you choose to drink or not. But either way, the best theology of wine is that it is a metaphor of joy and heaven. It was not created to be a tool of personal and interpersonal destruction (teetotalers and imbibers can certainly agree on that.)

Alcohol was created to help commemorate the significant moments of life. My theology is simple: God gave us wine to remember, not to forget.

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For I Was a Stranger

CAUTION



For I Was a Stranger, and You . . .

. . . And you what?

I was a missionary for many years.

Often, missionaries find writing newsletters home to be one of the more difficult parts of their life. It can be hard to find topics that will interest and inspire your supporters.

I never had that problem.

I was raised in a wonderful Conservative Baptist Church in Oregon. I love my childhood church. They were consistently supportive of me, and my church's membership funded a large majority of my ten plus years of missionary service.

They always loved my newsletters home. I worked in several "difficult access" countries: religiously difficult, politically difficult, and economically difficult.

I wrote stories about the risks we took to fulfill our missionary calling. In many locations we had to find creative ways to get in and out of countries just to fulfill our work.

In one country, we were labeled "false believers." The government would never give us a religious visa as missionaries, so we lived as "tourists." To do this, we had to leave the country every couple of months and reenter by another border crossing in order to live as perpetual tourists. If creative, we could keep up this ploy for years.

In another country, missionaries had to invent other reasons for living there. Some took the status of "student." Student visas were not highly scrutinized, and even though we often "forgot" to enroll in classes, we felt justified because we were in fact "students of the culture."

Many times I performed old fashioned smuggling of Christian materials. We found wonderfully creative ways to move large stacks of papers across hostile borders. The spaces behind the paneling of a car door, for instance, can hold a surprising amount of books and materials.

One time, one of my missionary friends lost her documentation while we were traveling. She lost it in a particularly ill-fated location, a forgotten corner of the world where it was nearly impossible to get documents replaced. After much praying and scheming we devised a plan. First we chose a poorly staffed border crossing, over a little used mountain pass. We intentionally crammed our entire party, nearly a dozen people, into a single, fairly small vehicle. Our friend was placed

in the back row, in the center. The plan, to hand the bored and power-intoxicated border guards our entire stack of passports and hope that in the process of matching foreigners to documents, they might lose count. (Don't all Americans look alike?) It was a sweat-inducing and prayer-triggering thirty minutes of scrutiny. Then, at the very moment it seemed our ruse would be discovered, there was a sharp shout from the dilapidated security house. When the security force returned, agitated and confused, they simply abandoned the head-count and hastily waved our team through. That was one of our closer calls.

I have stolen across a country at war on a train. This country considered the USA to be a devil. I have endured interrogations, bailed friends out of jail and executed plans to avoid secret police, all to ensure that our missionary work could continue.

Like I said, the adventures were many and the newsletters were easy to write.

Back home in Oregon, my church seemed so proud of me. They praised me for my faith. They praised me for my courage. They found my stories inspiring. They cheered for every hurdle we overcame. They supported every creative solution to our political and legal problems.

How about you? Did you find yourself cheering when you read these stories, like my church back home? Do you find yourself supporting such acts of creativity and courage?

If so, then you have just cheered for an undocumented worker. You have just supported someone who sneaks across borders in order to do a job that only exists on the other side. You have just embraced the courage of someone who breaks the law because they believe in a better world that can be attained only by ignoring the laws of the land they have entered.

For I was a stranger ...

We need to be careful how we wield the categories of "illegal." When the church partakes in illegal practices we often defend it, champion it and advocate for it. When others partake in very similar illegal practices we use a broad brush to paint them as wrong.

Regardless of your political position on U.S. immigration policy we can all strive to use godly language about our neighbors. Words are important. Words have deep meaning, theological meaning. When we refer to a person as "illegal," that is an identity statement. It is a theological statement. I believe sentences like—"We have to stop those illegals from crossing the border"—sorrows the heart of God. A behavior can be illegal, but not a person. A person is a spiritual entity, a beloved creation of God. People cannot be "illegal" in their identity. People are beautiful. They are eternally valuable. Let's treat them as such

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It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/may-online-only/for-i-was-stranger-and-you.html?paging=off>

On the Other Side of



Christmas

On the Other Side of Christmas

I have been meditating this week on the “other side” of Christmas.

When our foremothers and forefathers of the Christian faith designed the holy calendar, they made some Peasant_Mary_192pxopulent choices when it came to Christmas. Think about it. There are four weeks dedicated to Advent leading up to Christmas day. Then, like an offensive linemen at an all-you-can-eat dessert bar, they dedicated 12 more days of meditation ending in the Feast of Epiphany on January 6th.

Why would they devote two of the largest swaths of calendar real estate to the Nativity story?

Certainly it is partially because the Incarnation, the God-With-Us reality is simply that important. In our modern busyness, most don't even acknowledge anymore that the Emmanuel reflection does not end on December 25th. They intended it to stick with us. A 12 day divine afterglow.

That still doesn't answer the question, “Why two seasons, back to back... first Advent and then 12 Days of Christmas?”

Here is my thought this year. It is not a comprehensive thought, but it is where my meditation has led me.

The 4 weeks of Advent are very hopeful, joy-filled and peace-proclaiming, just as the candles remind us. It is time of Angels, heavenly voices, supernatural encounters, and miraculous pregnancies. That is some pretty inspirational stuff. Sure there is that “no room at the end” downer, but besides that, it is the stuff of Sunday school pageants (come to think of it...)

But what about after that?

What about after... the shepherds are back on the hillside, the angels have dispersed and the divine-conversations have ended?

What was left on the days after Christmas?

This is the part that we don't often talk about. These are the parts that get forgotten in our Nativity plays.

Maybe, instead of Lords a-Leaping and Golden Rings, the 12 days of Christmas were set aside for us to remember what happened on the other side of Christmas.

On the other side of Christmas there is a peasant family with an illegitimate child trying to reenter a judgmental culture. How many friends would they lose? How many whispers and glances would they need to endure? Would Mary be treated like a prostitute when she went to the market? How much work would go to other carpenters whom clients now “suddenly prefer”?

On the other side of Christmas there is a coming genocide like a foul stank in the air (Matthew 2:16-18). A whole generation wiped from the unwritten history books... an entire nation of inconsolable mothers, wailing in the night... Power exerting unbelievable violence over a marginalized people group.

On the other side of Christmas there is a refugee family running from that power and violence. Did they have more than the clothes on their backs? Leaving the only land they had ever known, the land of their forefathers and foremothers... crossing to a foreign land, just hoping that some new government would accept them, protect them. The exhaustion, fear and fragility they must have felt.

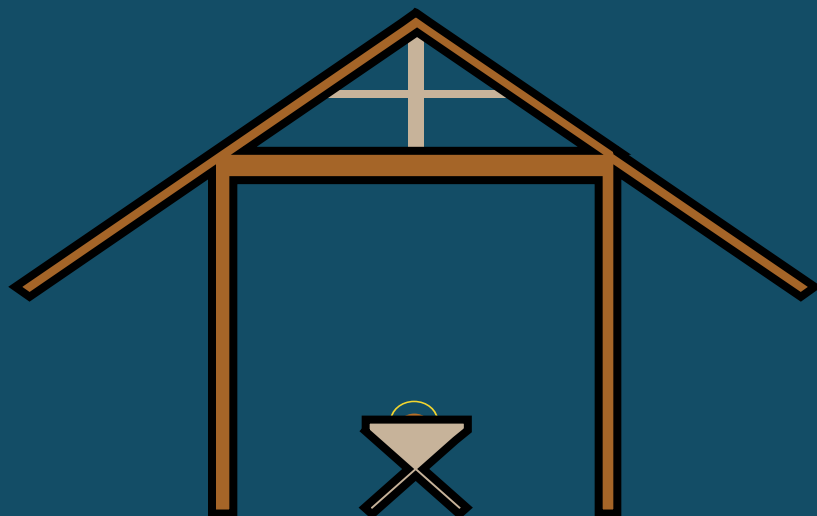
The Christmas story is not all about stars, angels and miracles. It is also about marginalization, violence and refugees.

Maybe this is what the 12 days are asking us to remember.

Maybe we are also supposed to notice that the 21st century is not that different from the 1st.

Original article was published by Tony Kriz
It can be found at: <http://tonykriz.com/on-the-other-side-of-christmas/>

Shepherds Vs. Magi:



Dynamics of Privilege

Shepherds Vs. Magi: Dynamics of Privilege within the Nativity Story

The Magi knew better than to show up empty handed.

Advent has become one of my favorite times of year, but that was not always so.

When I was a child Advent meant little more than a chance to open little doors in a Hallmark calendar to find wax-flavored chocolates behind. That was then.

Today, it is a season of intentional family spiritual conversation.

It is also a deeply theologically meditative experience as our community ponders the implications of a God who would ask us to join the eternal story by choosing to become a helpless creature in our story.

The Nativity story itself provides layered narratives of justice, provision, oppression and the inverted economy of God's kingdom.

It is of great significance that both poor (shepherds) and rich (Magi) were invited into the story of Jesus' birth. It is important that God orchestrated it that way and that God's people chose to record and remember...

Rich and poor. Poor and rich.

All Are Invited In

It is nose-on-your-face obvious that God has a special place for the poor in the eternal story. Jesus claimed that helping the hurting and marginalized was the same as helping Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-40). In Luke's Gospel it states frankly, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). If these passages are not convincing enough for you, consider Mary's prayer (The Magnificat) upon hearing that she would mother the Messiah (Luke 1:51-53):

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

It is no wonder that the shepherds were given a star-spangled invitation to the manger. And yet, the Nativity is not populated with the poor alone. Wealthy Wise Men from the East also find their way to the babe's bedside.

A Reflection on Privilege Dynamics from the Nativity Story

Time

Privilege manifests itself in different ways throughout the Nativity story. For instance, the shepherds were stuck with a mind-bending encounter. Their introduction to Jesus is instantaneous, overwhelming and immediate. It is quite possible that the entire shepherd narrative takes place in just a few short hours: angels, announcement, invitation, walk into town... and then back to the hillside where their work cannot wait (sheep don't take a night off.)

Not so for the Magi. There is no conceivable way that their story took only a few hours. Quite on the contrary, it is hard to imagine it lasting shorter than a few months. Try to imagine it: they had to prepare for their significant trip; they had to travel from a place so far it is only known as "the east" and after finding Jesus, they had to journey back "by another route" (Matthew 2:12). Didn't they have jobs to attend to? Didn't they have bills to pay? Who can partake a fanciful, multi-month quest? Apparently the Wise Men can. Their privilege allows them to do so.

The Magi story required a freedom of schedule that perhaps the shepherds simply could not afford. This is one way privilege takes action.

Knowledge and Access

How did the shepherds come to the knowledge of the Messiah born? While childhood Torah studies may have softened the soil of their souls, the bulk of the knowledge was as subtle as a freight train. It was a marching band in the sky... a nuclear blast of blessing... a miracle. This is how God chose to speak to them, blunt and immediate.... not so with the Magi.

In the Wise Men story, we are told of no explosion in the sky, no angelic chorus. Instead, they were required to utilize a very different treasure of opportunity. They must have had access to a whole library of sacred documents to study in order to unravel the arrival of a distant king. They had to have had a knowledge of astronomy and calendars that enabled them to calculate a coming that seemingly alluded everyone else, including Jewish scholars. Sure there was a twinkle in the sky to guide them, but that was not enough. Thank goodness that they had the sort of access to power that allowed them to stroll up to King Herod's palace and ask for directions. Lingered studies, libraries of knowledge and access to power... these are the often unspoken benefits of privilege.

Treasure

I am not going to cheapen this point with heavy-handed words.

Let me state this as plainly as possible...

Both poor and rich were welcome inside the Nativity story...

But the rich had the good sense not to show up empty-handed.

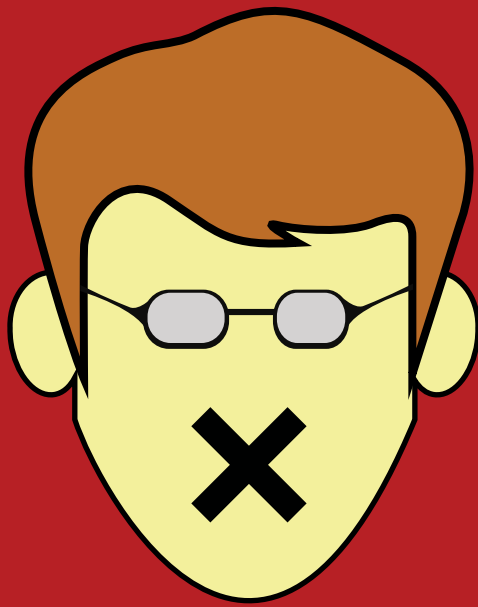
Conclusion

What is the quality of your wealth and privilege? Do you have the ability to cross great distances? Do you have access to education others could only dream of? Do you have the ability to knock on doors of power (or email, or call)?

It is good to show up with a smile and a blessing the way the shepherds did, but the Magi knew that they had the capacity to give more... and so, they knew not to show up empty handed. How about you?

Original article was published by Tony Kriz
It can be found at: <http://tonykriz.com/shepherds-vs-magi-dynamics-of-privilege-within-the-nativity-story/>

Seven Lies



Christians Tell

Seven Lies Christians Tell

We mean well, but is the truth really on our lips when we evangelize?

I walked into the filled college lecture hall. The room seats about 200. The seats are terraced up to the two-doored exits at the auditorium's rear. I took my place alone on the floor of the semicircle, eight foot white boards and smart-screens behind me.

I stare around the room, trying to make eye contact with every person present. This is a breakout session at a conference on the "missional life." For this session, I have been asked to speak on evangelism, or as I prefer to call it, "Cross-Spiritual Communication" or, "How to talk about your faith without being a total jerk."

Once everyone is settled in, they realize that this is not going to be a typical evangelism seminar. I ask the room a question, "How do we Christians lie ... How do we lie when evangelizing?"

At first the room is still and silent. It always starts silent when I ask this question. And then, once the question sinks in, hands dart up all over the room ... the thoughts and ideas jump from the seats more quickly than we can even collect them. It feels like most people have never considered the question before, and then, as they ponder it for the first time, the epiphanies naturally flow. It is like pure discovery in action.

You want to know what is most enlightening about this phenomenon for me? I have witnessed this exact same scene more than twenty times before. Every time I ask this question to a mixed room of informed churchgoers, the room does not stay silent for more than a pregnant moment. Never, not once has a room been baffled or confused by the question. The look in people's eyes is never, "I don't think we lie." Instead, at least after that first momentary pause, it is not if we lie, it is instead, how many different ways we lie. And, as each person shares around the room, most all the other heads nod along in agreement.

Another fascinating thing that occurs is the lovely exhale of peace and freedom that follows an honest and thoughtful exchange about such matters ... it is like we have always known such things to be true deep down inside, but we have never been given permission to just say the thoughts aloud.

I want to encourage an exhale of peace and freedom here. I am going to take a few minutes to simply start the conversation. Here is a short list, in no particular order, of seven of the ways that I am aware that I and others have lied (and still do) when we practice cross-spiritual communication. I hope that you will add your own thoughts in the comments below. Maybe we will get to share a classroom of epiphanies together right here in Leadership Journal.

1. We lie when we claim we are more confident than we really are. The culture of pretending within Christianity seems almost at an epidemic level. Many of us feel the need to hide our doubts and questions. We feel compelled to act like our faith life is totally satisfying, when in fact it often feels limited, dry, cold or numb. I think we also believe that our “witness” will be less powerful if we reveal a less than “perfect” religious experience. The funny thing is that the opposite is often true. Non-Christians are often drawn to stories of an authentic and even struggling faith.

2. We lie when we claim that unexplainable things are in fact explainable. God is transcendent and beyond even the shadowy wisps of imagination in our finite minds. The Trinity, for instance, is not as simple as a metaphor of water (ice, water, steam) or an egg (shell, white, yoke). Sometimes I think we would be better off if we just said, “These ideas are so beyond me that if God did reveal them to me, I am pretty sure my brain would explode.”

3. We lie when we don’t acknowledge our doubts within the drama of faith. This is similar to number one above but just on a more detailed level. When another person challenges us with a difficult theological/philosophical issue, sometimes it is best to just admit that those questions are very challenging and even emotionally taxing on the soul (I think people like to know that our faith is so important to us that it does impact our soul-state in both encouraging and difficult ways.) Difficult questions for me include: What is the destiny of people with no access to the true and loving message of Christ’s gospel? Where did evil come from? Why did God put this whole human story into motion when it has caused so much pain?

4. We lie when we pretend like the Bible doesn’t say some really nasty things when in fact it does. For instance, God commands genocide. He just does ... at least from a clear and honest reading of the Bible. There is also a verse that says, “Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks (Psalms 137:9).” If we want the Bible to be our document, we need to own the whole thing. (The same thing can be said for the atrocities in the story of the church, past and present.)

5. We lie when we claim we understand other beliefs, faiths and world views. We need to stop saying things like, “I understand Islam,” or, “I know what a Muslim thinks/believes.” Do you want someone saying that they understand your faith experience because they once lived in a Greek Orthodox neighborhood? Do you think a Muslim would accurately understand your beliefs because they read a book about Christianity (particularly one written by Muslim scholars)? Belief systems are extremely diverse (heck, in Christianity there are hundreds of Protestant denominations alone, before we even talk about Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, Palestinian, just to scratch the surface). Other religions are just as diverse. Further more, faith experience can be as specific as a neighborhood, family or individual.

6. We lie when we claim that all of our beliefs are a “10”. This one is probably going to frustrate some people, but we are disingenuous when we claim all of our dogmas with equal veracity. To put it another way, on a scale of one to ten, not all Christian beliefs are a “10.” Do I believe in the historicity of a floating zoo? Yes I do. Do I hold to the specific details of that historic event with the same “lay my life on the line” conviction as I do the historical death on a cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? No, I do not. The details of the zoo are not a 10 for me. Jesus is a 10.

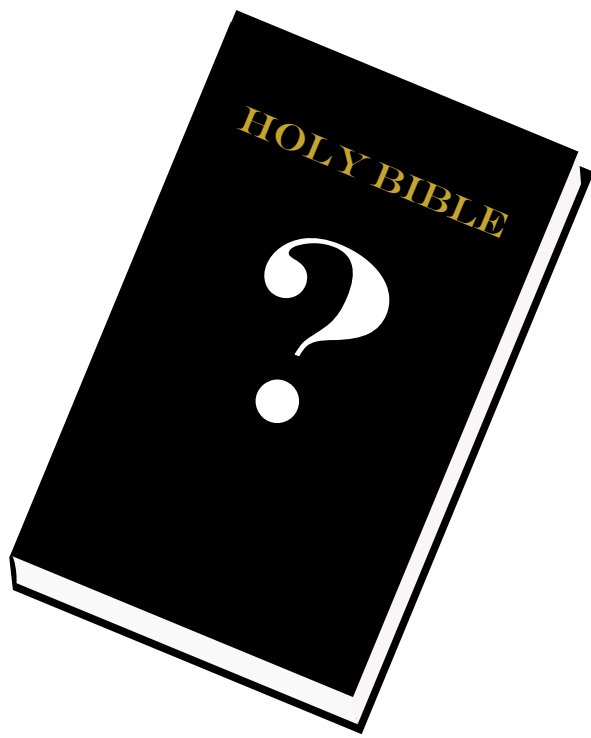
7. Finally, and most importantly, we lie (insidious and barbaric lying) when we pretend like we really, really, really love the other person when in fact we don’t. We do not love people when we dismiss their story (including their hopes, values, beliefs and convictions). We do not love people when we do not empathically listen to them, as opposed to spending that time formulating a counter-argument. We do not love others when we reduce them to labels, caricatures, or opponents. If we love, then we will find them shockingly beautiful and fascinating creations. We will find their stories riveting. We will radiate affection. Humans know deep down when they are or are not truly loved.

I would like to close with a different sort of lie. This is not a way that I lie, but instead a way that I was lied to. I was lied to by religious people. They told me that cross-spiritual communication is dangerous. It is dangerous because when I do it, there is a strong possibility that it will divide and the other person will become my enemy.

Well, in my experience sharing my faith around the world and in my post-Christian city, if we can share honestly, authentically and with humility, division does not happen. Instead, Friendship Happens.

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That Mysterious



Gospel

That Mysterious Gospel

Studying Acts changed my view of sharing the good news.

Okay, for starters, the gospel of the New Testament was meant to be proclaimed ... verbally proclaimed.

I know, I know. The movement today is about engaging issues of injustice and “practicing” the gospel in the neighborhood, in society, and in the world. And while St. Francis’s famous words, “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary use words,” has its merits, that still doesn’t change one fact. You cannot honestly read the New Testament and not believe that when those early church leaders talked about the “gospel,” they intended it to be proclaimed. Proclaimed in the world. Proclaimed with words. Proclaimed to non-Christians. That is simply an honest (and fairly indisputable) truth.

But what is this gospel—the one we are to verbally proclaim?

The gospel proclaimed

Not long ago I was sitting with some young activist Bible scholars. It was a think-tank of sorts. We were discussing this very question, the content of the gospel-proclaimed. The conversation started like this: “So, what is the gospel-proclaimed that you were most influenced by? Or what was the original form of the gospel you were given?”

One man quickly piped up with a well-memorized path through a single letter of the Apostle Paul, stopping every few chapters on pre-selected verses. After a dozen or so verses, with a playful gleam in his eye, he proclaimed, “That is the gospel-proclaimed.”

After that, one lady explained a similar story with many of the same verses, only she used a picture of two cliffs and a bridge to illustrate her gospel-proclaimed.

This conversation went on for a while. Then I said, “Isn’t it interesting that when asked about the gospel-proclaimed, we automatically go primarily to the letters of Paul? There is only one problem. Those letters are Christians talking to Christians.”

That observation landed with a thud in the middle of the room. It was clear—even though the observation was an example of Biblical Interpretation 101, none of us had ever really considered the context of our most formative examples of the gospel-proclaimed.

Even in my personal beloved first “gospel,” if I flip through its tiny pages, I find six verses from the letters of the New Testament (Christians

talking to Christians) and four verses from John (which is kind of pre-gospel, at least pre-Cross, pre-Resurrection, pre-Ascension, and pre-Pentecost).

So I suggested to our think-tank circle, “It seems to me that it would be helpful, in understanding the gospel-proclaimed, if we study examples of Christians actually talking to non-Christians ... or is that just crazy talk?”

The group agreed. And we opened to the only book in the Bible that really meets that criterion: the book of Acts.

We counted 13 gospel-proclamations in the book of Acts. A gospel-proclamation is simply any time a Christian was persuasively presenting the Christian message to a non-Christian(s). We divvied up those 13 gospel-proclaimed presentations among ourselves, then attempted to identify what was communicated in each presentation, and then compiled our discoveries.

Here is some of what we discovered:

Seven Essential Observations about the Gospel-Proclaimed

1. Story-telling is highly valued. Be it a retelling of the story of the nation of Israel (in at least six presentations) or the use of a story of personal transformation (in six other presentations), the value of story-telling is one of the most consistent elements.
2. “Exclusivity” or the idea that “Jesus is the only way” is not an important element in these gospel proclamations. In fact, only one gospel presentation (Acts 4:8-12) includes a statement of exclusivity. (I am not saying the exclusivity of Jesus is not an important doctrine of the early church, I am merely saying that these church-leaders did not prioritize it within their messages to non-Christians, but chose to save those dialogues for their Christian-to-Christian teachings.)
3. Quoting the Bible is not necessary. Context is key. While a presentation before Jews inevitably included quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, an audience of Greeks was offered no Bible quotes, but instead secular references from philosophy, poetry, and even other faiths (Acts 17:21-31).
4. Sin is mentioned only in about half the presentations, though there are some allusions to sin in others, using terms such as “ignorance.” Equally interesting, only five times is there a direct call for the listener to repent.

5. The cross is detailed in only five of the presentations, but the resurrection is mentioned in eight of the thirteen. It is worth noting that neither the death nor resurrection of Jesus is mentioned in five of those gospel-proclaimed presentations.

6. The actual word “Jesus” or “Christ” does not appear in three of the testimonies. In one presentation, Paul just says, “a man” (Acts 17:31).

7. There is almost no detail that can be traced through all thirteen gospel-proclaimed presentations: Not faith, not baptism, not Holy Spirit, not forgiveness, not judgment, not healing, and as already mentioned, not even sin, repentance, cross, resurrection, or even “Jesus.”

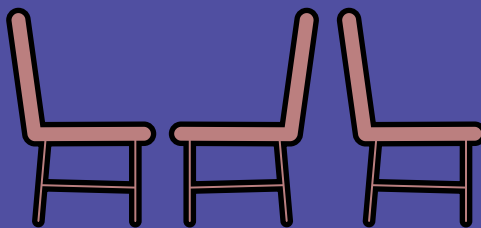
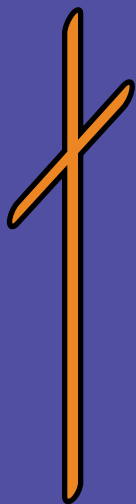
So, what are we to conclude from this journey through the book of Acts? Well, there is probably much to be gleaned. Here are a few thoughts:

- The gospel-proclaimed is wild, difficult to cage in pithy propositions, and is still in many ways ... mysterious.
- Story-telling and use of creative metaphor is timeless and an important key to the gospel-proclaimed.
- We need to be careful with statements of what the “absolutely necessary” elements of the gospel-proclaimed actually are. I am sure the early apostles had their own pet-doctrines of the faith, but they chose each gospel-proclaimed based upon their love of the audience/context.
- As much as we love to stick exclusivity claims (“Jesus is the only way”) in our gospel presentations, that may in fact not be the best (or most biblical) time to have that conversation.

Author’s Note: For anyone wanting to research the Book of Acts personally, here are the 13 examples of the gospel-proclaimed that we identified: Acts 2:14-41, 3:11-26, 4:8-12, 7:2-53, 8:29-39, 9:17-19, 10:34-43, 13:10-41, 16:29-34, 17:21-31, 22:2-21, 24:10-21, and 26:1-23. Care to share your findings in the comments?

Original article was published by Christianity Today
It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/september-online-only/that-mysterious-gospel.html?paging=off>

Beyond Answer Man



Beyond Answer Man

What happens when eternal questions fill the room?

I was raised in the Christian church. It is one of the great gifts of my life. The church is still my home.

As a boy I was persuaded a magical membrane encompassed a Christian church. As you passed through the membrane, it marked you with an essential truth. You were one of the God-people. Those who chose to reside outside the membrane could not claim this eternal privilege. I was taught to take great pride, seasoned with gratitude, that I existed among those inside the church.

I continue to serve in the church. My eyes continue to take in the sounds, the faces, the symbols. The chairs are arranged so that everyone is facing the altar of Christ. Every body is pointed at the One from whom we all receive life. The very shape of the sanctuary reinforces the membrane belief. Those outside shuffle to and fro, oriented every which way, toward the things of this world. But for those inside, our bodies are our compass, pointed at the cross.

There is only one problem.

While my body is oriented toward the altar, my soul so often is not. Many Sundays, when my eyes shift from the external—the stage, sermon, and sacraments—to the internal, I must admit that my heart is not on Christ.

I wonder what would happen if we re-arranged the chairs of the church to reflect the congregants' true heart longings. How many chairs would still face the cross? How many would face some other place, a place far away? How interesting it would be to see the seating arranged according to the actual state of our hearts.

Then I wonder, what if we applied the same experiment to those beyond the membrane, giving a chair to every person in my neighborhood? How many would have chairs pointed at least partly toward the cross? Their conscious selves may not know that the gospel is the answer, but their longings would betray their desire for it. These people are the ones the Bible might call "the stranger."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused. ... Then he said to his servants, 'The banquet is ready. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the [strangers] they could find" (Matt. 22:2-3, 8-10).

How might that begin to look in today's church?

Being dazzled

I live in a delightful neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Portland has gained quite a reputation. It has often been called the least-churched city in North America. Whatever the reputation, my little faith community and I knew that we wanted to understand our neighbors better. We wanted to understand their lives of faith.

So, we decided to ask them. It was only a beginning, but we compiled a survey and interviewed 200 of our neighbors. We interviewed folks in coffee houses and schoolyards, at bus stops and in parks, on front porches and at street corners.

We asked about their perceptions of religion and their perceptions of themselves as religious/spiritual beings. It was fascinating. To our surprise everyone was more than willing to help us out. (It's amazing how responsive people can be when we religious folk humbly ask for help.)

We asked, "What, if any, spiritual tradition do you currently claim or practice?"

We could not have predicted the responses.

One quarter of the respondents claimed one version of Christianity or another: Catholic, Presbyterian, etc. Another smattering represented a potpourri of other traditions: Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian, atheist, etc.

Now, here is the amazing part. More than half the respondents (people we were inconveniencing with our appeal for help) told us a story. Yes, not a label, a story! Their story was about their process of adopting a very individualized belief system, one that could not fit into any publicly recognized category.

Half! One hundred people gave us a story and in sharing it, gave us a piece of their life.

As a religious person, I am aware of my tendency to define people by which side of the "church membrane" they stand. The world is made up of two teams: Christians and everyone else. And if I am honest, I find myself wanting to dismiss those on the other team.

However, if we go back to the "chairs experiment," I really have no idea of the ultimate direction another person's life is heading.

To love someone is to be captivated by their story. That includes their experiences, yes, but also their beliefs, convictions, and hopes for themselves and the world.

If I love someone, I find her or him to be fascinating. Like a grandmother listening to her seven-year-old grandson talk about his personal zoo of stuffed animals. Like two lovers, lying on a lawn, faces inches apart, sharing dreams. Like best friends reunited after years apart.

Are we dazzled by our neighbors' stories, full of their beliefs, hopes, wounds, and experiences? Are they captivating to us? Do we see them as eternally valuable and their perspectives a profound gift?

Our 200 surveys was only a start. We wanted to collect more stories, longer stories, deeper stories. We increased our volunteerism in local schools, neighborhood associations, and non-profits in order to meet our neighbors on "neutral turf."

We also started a Sunday evening sacred meal in my dining room. For the last six years, we have hosted a weekly meal for any of our neighbors to attend. The meal includes good food and sacred readings from the Bible and historical prayers. Ten to eighteen people come each week. We have had Buddhists, ex-Christians, atheists, and searchers. It has been a table of beloved "strangers." We sit and listen to each other's sacred stories. Everyone knows there will be Jesus-words shared and prayed, but somehow that is part of the attraction.

Think in questions

I spent a few wonderful years as a volunteer chaplain at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Some of the stories from my Reed years were chronicled in Donald Miller's book, *Blue Like Jazz*.

Reed is a unique place. Princeton Review annually declares Reed College among the least religious colleges in America. It is the sort of place some pastors use in sermon illustrations, in the same way that they talk about North Korea. Some churches send small teams to Reed on spiritual safari to observe the wild pagans in their natural habitat.

But I assure you that what I experienced was quite the opposite. It was one of the great garden spots in my Christian story. It is true that most Reedies want nothing to do with organized religion, but I found them to be one of the most challenging (and encouraging) communities with whom to cultivate my faith.

When I first arrived, there were only a few students on campus who were willing to identify with the historical Jesus-faith. I wanted to find some ways to be an effective spiritual presence on campus, so I sought their advice.

Reed is built on a classical learning model. All the students study the

great works of Western civilization, which includes the Bible. In fact Reedies read the Bible more than most Christians I know. I wanted to help them do more than treat it as just a historical document. I wanted them to believe it.

So I asked the students how best to proceed. I suggested a Bible study. I suggested a lecture series of great Christian scholars. I thought we could bring some answers. You see, I was stuck. I could only think in religious declarations.

Then those few Jesus-students shared with me some wisdom. They said, “Tony, if you want to move these students, stop talking in answers and start talking in questions. Trust the power of questions. Trust the power of God’s Spirit to show up when eternal questions are filling the room.”

So that is what we did. Every Thursday evening we would gather students, ask a question, and let the power of conversation, tickled by God’s Spirit, fill the room. Our questions went like this: What is God like? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be spiritually whole? Why is the world so screwed up? Why are we so screwed up? Why was Jesus such an influential person in human history? What is the meaning of the cross? What is the meaning of the resurrection? What does spiritual conversion look like? What does it mean to be good?

Our Thursday evening group started with just a handful of us. It was a place where every opinion was heard. Every person was a full participant in the process of discovery. We Jesus-folk would also share our ideas, inspired by the Scriptures. In just a few months the group grew to dozens. Some became inspired by Jesus. We all began to follow him in fresh ways.

Today, when I sit in a Portland coffeehouse, the topic of faith inevitably comes up. I honestly can’t help it. My unchurched and spiritually independent neighbors might notice what I am reading or ask me what I am thinking about. When they do, I try to answer them in questions. “This book is causing me to ask, ‘what is God like?’” Or “I’m thinking about why do I struggle so much to be a good person?” Or “Lately I’m inspired by the question, Does Jesus still have a place in our modern globalized world?”

That is when the conversation takes off. You see ...

Religious declarations draw a line in the sand; questions open up relationship.

Religious declarations set up a monologue; questions reveal a desire for dialogue.

Religious declarations put people at odds; questions create camaraderie.

Religious declarations catalyze debate; questions catalyze exchange.

Religious declarations say, “I have arrived”; questions say, “I always have more to learn; I am on a journey.”

Chocolate Cake or Sunsets?

As a boy, I was taught it was essential to “share my faith.” But what does “share” mean? Words are like bowls, filled with meaning. Often the bowl contains an influential metaphor.

For me, in those formative years, the major metaphor was this: Sharing my faith is like sharing a chocolate cake. Chocolate cake is something that everybody wants. Who doesn’t like chocolate cake? As a Christian, I was one of the lucky ones. I had been entrusted with this wonderful thing. I get to enjoy the cake for sure, but if I was a loving Jesus-person, I would always look for opportunities to share my cake with others.

It had been given to me (and to others who believed like I do). It was our possession. If other people wanted some, they had to come to us to get it. And cake only travels one direction: one person is the distributor and the other is the receiver. In “sharing,” the other person has the opportunity to receive my stories, my beliefs, my insights ... my cake.

While the cake metaphor is commendable, it also has many limitations.

It’s a condescending exchange. It treats the gospel as a commodity. The cake metaphor assumes that one person has fully arrived and the other has nothing. It ignores the fact that I am also fighting to turn my chair toward the cross of Christ everyday.

Is there is another metaphor? A different way to think about “sharing”?

What if “sharing faith” is not like sharing a chocolate cake but more like sharing a sunset?

Imagine two people standing on a cliff over the Pacific Ocean, watching the sun slowly slip down the sky and dip into the distant water. When you share a sunset, you stand shoulder-to-shoulder, not face-to-face. Sharing a sunset draws people together.

When you share a sunset, both people are caught up in the beauty, the grandeur, the inspiration. When you share a sunset, everyone has equal opportunity to contribute thoughts. It is a remarkably shared experience.

One of those present may have more specifics to share about sunsets.

One of the people may have studied and therefore has unique insights into photo-physics, atmospheric density, and the relationship of celestial objects. But the other person, even if they haven't studied, may have unique perspectives on the creative power of color or the hope that beauty evokes.

Shoulder-to-shoulder the experience grows. Both are learners. Both are contributors.

The conversation has no set course. It takes on a life of its own as these two neighbors consider the awe of this everyday miracle, this mystery. Sometimes the best way to share is just to sit in silence. Sometimes it releases a sadness since clouds hide the sky. Often though, a truly shared exchange will produce unexpected laughter, profoundness, or even transformation.

Ultimately, no one owns a sunset. It releases awe. A sunset is clearly not painted by mere humans. It is not the product of our limited world. It leaves everyone wanting more.

It is something to be shared.

Our world is full of cliff tops to share with your neighbors. There are centers of common-good where people come inspired by meaning (volunteering at local schools, non-profits, or community centers). There are lingering spaces in every town (coffee shops, pubs, or parks). And there is always the opportunity to invite people to spaces of story exchange, like your dining room table.

The people we are with sense when we are truly dazzled by their stories. They will be inspired to hear that we are also souls on a journey. They will feel truly invited if we learn to talk in questions and not just religious declarations.

We will be amazed by how much our faith is nurtured by these shared

encounters.

Tips for hosting a question-based ministry:

- Choose unloaded questions that encourage exploration. “Do you believe in God?” is a limited question. “What is God like?” is far more provocative and inviting.
- It is helpful if a core group is fully committed to open exchange. If everyone is allowed to share freely, then the Jesus-folk among you can also give their opinions about their faith.
- Set up a few guidelines before discussion begins to help facilitation, like: “Every opinion will be heard. Criticism is discouraged. Questions are for the purpose of understanding.”
- No criticism of non-Christian ideas. Trust God’s Spirit to anchor the truth in people’s hearts when it is shared (John 16:7-15).
- End each meeting with a three- to five-minute historical illustration inspired by that week’s question, for instance: a piece of religious art, a teaching of Jesus, or an ancient church spiritual practice.

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Then the Gamgly



Men Come Along

Then the Gangly Men Come Along

A story of pizza, phones, and personhood.

People are everywhere. You know what I mean? I can't seem to get away from them. Take downtown Portland for instance. Downtown Portland is full of them. It is like walking through an anthill or living inside a pinball machine. Bodies everywhere.

Most of the bodies don't even know I am there. They are content with the companionship of their agenda or their handheld mobile device, so I return the favor.

Okay, here's the deal. I don't even remember his name. Truth be told, I don't think I ever took the time to learn his name. This is just the beginning of my sickness... I mean... well, more on that later.

I was downtown. It was maybe 8:30pm on a Thursday evening. I had managed to find street parking (score!) just a few blocks away from Jake's Grill on Tenth Street (not to be confused with Jake's Famous Crawfish, which is up on Twelfth). I was hurrying to meet my friend Wilson.

It was a lovely evening, warm, and the streets were hopping. I was on my cell phone chatting with an old roommate from college named James. We hadn't spoken in years and we were getting caught up. I passed the culinary school and came to the corner just across from Jake's. The grill is situated on the Northwest corner of the old Governor Hotel, a beautiful landmark just ten blocks from the Willamette River. As I strode onto the sidewalk, I could see Wilson through the window. I waved with my free hand and prepared to enter the brass and glass doorway.

Before I could reach the handle a tall figure suddenly blocked my path. He was a few inches taller than me with scraggly blonde hair and a soiled red flannel. His hand was extended and his eyes were pleading.

"Hold on a second," I said to James.

"What do you want?" I asked tersely but politely to the gangly man.

"Do you have a dollar?" he replied.

"A what?"

"A dollar."

"What do you want a dollar for?"

"I'm hungry."

He said it matter-of-factly. Then he paused. I watched his mental gears

turn. I just waited; both James (still sitting on the other end of the handset) and I sat silently. Finally he continued, “There is a place up on Eleventh that sells pizza by the slice. Good pizza. And I am hungry.”

“(Hold on a minute James), okay, let me get this straight, you are looking for money for food?”

“Yessss.”

“And you can get a slice of pizza for just a dollar?”

“Well, no... no, you can’t.”

“What can you get a slice for?”

“Ummmm, three dollars and fifty cents.”

“So do you need one dollar or do you need three dollars and fifty cents?”

He looked genuinely puzzled, not because he didn’t understand, but maybe because he had never been interrogated like this before. “Well, I guess I need three dollars and fifty cents.”

“Okay then,” I said, “let me see if I have the change.” Using my one free hand, I scratched through my wallet and front pocket and soon handed the man three one-dollar bills and two quarters.

As I placed the money in his hand, his eyes were wide as pepperoni slices. He balled the money in his fist, flashed a full smile, and turned to clunk back up the sidewalk.

Poor James, he had just sat through the whole thing. I am sure it was quite a drama to hear through the handset. Unfortunately, the drama was not over.

As James and I tried to restore our dialogue, I once again heard the sound of the gangly man’s boots, but they were not headed away from me... they were headed directly for me, at me with intention. He had “target lock.”

With a single motion he rose up in front of me and swung his right arm around. He struck me with force on the left shoulder, the same arm, by the way, that held my mobile phone against my ear. His face was intense but his eyes were kind. I know now that his intent was gratitude, not assault. All the same...

The blow sent my phone sailing through the air. It crashed to the sidewalk some eight feet away. Plastic-formed and electro-fancy pieces cracked and bounced in separate directions. And then the sound...

Like the cry of the humpback whale came the gangly man's voice from behind me. I spun to see him: body limp, jaw hung and clinched knuckles dug into the rubbery centers of his cheeks. "What have I done?! What have I done?" His eyes now fixed on the phone pieces scattered on the sidewalk. He couldn't stop wailing. People stopped and gawked.

Then, in a moment for which I could not have predicted, nor could I take credit. I bent down at the waist. I got low enough so I could look up into the gangly man's face and somehow snag his gaze. "Look at me. Look at me!"

Finally, he snapped from his horror and looked at me.

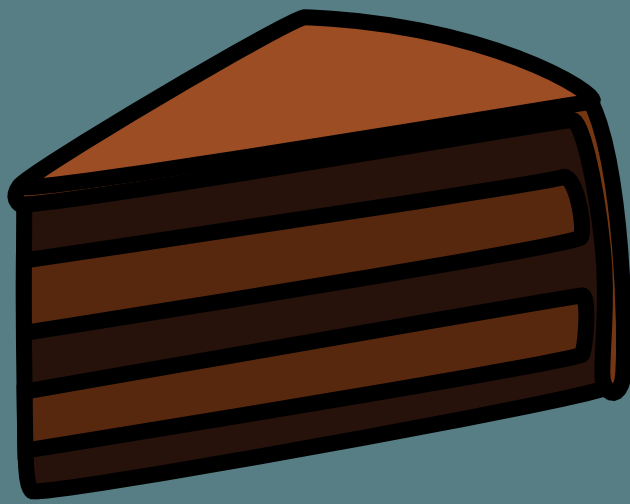
"Look at me. You are a person. Do you hear me? That is a phone, just a phone. You are a person. You are a person."

Most days I walk around in a trance. In my trance I divide the humans that I pass into two categories. A few are filed away as "people" but if I am honest, most are dismissed as "objects." They are of no more consequence than a lamppost or a mailbox, mere obstacles of inconvenience.

Then the gangly men come along. The gangly men are the conduits of God's grace. They rescue me from my trance. They remind me that the world is full of persons. C.S Lewis said, "You have never talked to a mere human," reminding us not to miss the transcendence of every soul we cross. The gangly men also remind me that I am not just an object. I am a person. They help me believe it and then, act in kind.

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Strangers and



Membranes

Strangers and Membranes

I am a lifelong churchgoer. It is one of the great privileges of my life. As a boy I was taught that there was a magical membrane encompassing a Christian church. As one passed through the membrane it marked the traveler with an essential truth. They were one of the God-people. Those that chose to reside outside the membrane could not claim this eternal privilege. I was taught to take great pride, seasoned with gratitude, that I existed amongst those inside the church.

I attend church still. My eyes continue to take in the surround: the sounds, the faces, the symbols. The chairs are arranged so that every soul is facing the altar of Christ. Every body is pointed at the One from whom we all receive life. The very shape of the sanctuary reinforces the membrane belief. Those outside shuffle to and fro, oriented every which way, toward the things of this world. But not those inside, our bodies are our compass, pointed at the cross.

There is only one problem.

While my body is oriented toward the altar, my soul so often is not. Many, many Sundays, when my eyes journey from the external—the stage, sermon and sacraments—to the internal, I am compelled to admit that my heart is not for Christ.

I wonder what would happen if we rearranged the chairs of the church to reflect the congregants' true heart longings. How many chairs would still face the cross? How many would instead face some other place, a place far away? It would be interesting, wouldn't it... to see the sanctuary's geography according to the actual state of people's hearts?

Then I wonder, what if we removed the membrane? What if we applied the same experiment to those beyond the walls, giving a chair to every person in my neighborhood? How many would have chairs pointed toward the cross? Their conscious selves may not know that the gospel is the answer, but their longings would betray their desire for it. These people are the ones the Bible might call "the stranger."

The stranger residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself..." -Leviticus 19:34

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come... Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready... So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people (strangers) they could find..." -Matthew 22:2-3, 8-10

Being Dazzled

*Every neighborhood is a symphony
and each neighbor contributes to its composition.*

I live in a delightful neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Portland has gained quite a reputation. It has often been called the least-churched city in North America. A Huffington Post article recently called it America's "least Christian" city. Whatever the reputation, my little faith community and I knew that we wanted to understand our neighbors better. We wanted to understand them as people of faith.

So, we decided to ask them. It was only a beginning but we compiled a formal survey and interviewed two hundred of our neighbors. We interviewed folks in coffee houses and schoolyards, at bus stops and in parks, on front porches and at street corners. We wanted to ask about their perceptions of religion and their perceptions of themselves as religious/spiritual beings. It was fascinating. And to our surprise everyone was more than willing to help us out (It is amazing how responsive people can be when we religious folk humbly ask for help.)

One question we asked was:

"What, if any, spiritual tradition do you currently claim or practice?"

We could not have predicted the responses.

One quarter of respondents claimed one version of Christianity or another (Catholic, Presbyterian, etc.). Another smattering represented a potpourri of other traditions: Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian, Atheist, etc. Now, here is the amazing part. More than half the respondents (people we were inconveniencing with our appeal for help) told us a story. Yes, not a label, but a story. Their story was about their process of adopting a very individualized belief system, one that could not fit into any publically recognized category. Half!

One hundred people gave us a story and in sharing it, gave us a piece of their life.

As a religious person, I am aware of my tendency to want to define people by which side of the "church membrane" they stand. The world is made up of two teams: Christians and everyone else. And if I am honest, I find myself wanting to dismiss those on the other team.

However, if we go back to the "chairs experiment" above, I really have no idea at the ultimate direction of another person's life.

To love someone is to be captivated by their story. A person's story is full of their experiences, yes, but also it contains their beliefs, convictions and hopes for themselves and the world.

If I love someone I will find her or him to be fascinating. Like a grandmother listening to her seven-year-old grandson tell her about his personal zoo of stuffed animals. Like two lovers, lying on a lawn, faces inches apart, sharing dreams. Like best friends reunited after years apart.

Are we dazzled by the other? Is their story (full of their beliefs, hopes, wounds and experiences) captivating to us? Do we see the other as eternally valuable and their perspectives as a profound gift?

Like I said, two hundred surveys was only a start. Our faith-family wanted to collect more stories, longer stories, deeper stories. We increased our volunteerism in local schools, neighborhood associations and non-profits in order to meet our neighbors on “neutral turf.”

We also started a Sunday evening sacred meal in my dining room. For the last six years we have hosted a weekly sacred meal for any of our “neighbors” to attend. The meal includes good food and sacred readings from the Bible and historical prayers. Surprisingly ten to eighteen people come each week. We have had Buddhists, ex-Christians, Atheists, and searchers. It has been a table of beloved “strangers.” Everyone knows there will be Jesus-words shared and prayed, but somehow that is part of the attraction.

We sit and listen to each other’s sacred stories.

Think in questions. Talk in questions.

I spent a few wonderful years as a volunteer chaplain at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Some of the stories from my Reed years were chronicled in Donald Miller’s bestselling book, *Blue Like Jazz*.

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It is important at this time to assure you that what I experienced was quite the opposite. It was one of the great garden spots in my Christian story. It is true that most Reedies want nothing to do with organized religion, but I found them to be one of the most challenging (and encouraging) communities with whom to cultivate my faith.

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Our Thursday evening group started with just a handful of us. It was a place where every opinion was heard. Every person was a full participant in the process of discovery. We Jesus-folk would also share our ideas, inspired by the Scriptures. In just a few months the group grew to dozens. Students became inspired by Jesus. In tangible ways we all began to follow Him in fresh ways.

Here are a few tips when hosting a question-based ministry:

- Choose unloaded questions that encourage exploration. “Do you believe in God?” is a limited question. “What is god like?” is far more provocative and inviting.
- It is helpful if a core group is fully committed to open exchange. If everyone is allowed to share freely then the Jesus-folk among you can also give their unqualified opinions about their faith.
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Today, when I sit in a Portland coffeehouse, the topic of faith inevitably comes up. I honestly can’t help it. My unchurched and spiritually independent neighbors might notice what I am reading or ask me what I am thinking about. When they do, I try to answer them in questions. “This book is causing me to ask, ‘what is God like?’” “I am thinking about, Why do I struggle so much to be a good person?” “Lately I am inspired by the question, ‘Does Jesus still have a place in our modern globalized world?’”

That is when the conversation takes off. You see...

Religious declarations draw a line in the sand... questions open up relationship.

Religious declarations set up a monologue... questions reveal a desire for dialogue.

Religious declarations put people at odds... questions create camaraderie.

Religious declarations catalyze debate... questions catalyze

Religious declarations say, “I have arrived”... questions say, “I always have more to learn; I am on journey.”

Chocolate Cake and Sunsets

I was raised in the Christian church. It is one of the great gifts of my life. The church is still my home.

As a boy, I was taught that it was essential to “Share my faith.” But what does the word “share” mean? Words are like bowls, filled with meaning. Often the bowl contains an influential metaphor.

For me, in those formative years, the major metaphor that appeared was this: Sharing my faith is like sharing a chocolate cake. Follow me for a moment...

Chocolate cake is this wonderful tasting thing that everybody wants. Who doesn't like chocolate cake? As a Christian, I was one of the lucky ones. I had been entrusted with this wonderful thing. I get to enjoy the cake for sure, but if I was a loving Jesus-person I would always look for opportunities to share my cake with others.

The cake was mine. It had been given to me (and to others who believed like I do.) It was our possession. If other people wanted some, they had to come to us to get it. And cake only travels one direction: one person is the distributor and the other is the receiver. In "sharing" the other person has the opportunity to receive my stories, my beliefs, my insights... my cake.

In many ways, the cake metaphor is commendable. But it also has many limitations.

The cake metaphor is a condescending exchange. The cake metaphor treats the gospel as a commodity. The cake metaphor assumes that one person has fully arrived and the other has nothing. It causes me to forget that I am also fighting to turn my chair toward the cross of Christ everyday.

Is it possible there is another metaphor? Is there a different way to think about "sharing"?

What if "sharing faith" is not so much like sharing a chocolate cake? What if sharing faith is more like sharing a sunset?

Sharing a sunset is a very different way of imagining. Imagine two people standing on a cliff over the Pacific Ocean, watching the sun slowly slip down the sky and dip into the distant water. When you share a sunset you must stand shoulder- to-shoulder, not face-to- face. Sharing a sunset draws people together. When you share a sunset, both people are caught up in the beauty, the grandeur and the inspiration. When you share a sunset everyone present has equal opportunity to contribute. Anyone may have thoughts. It is a remarkably shared experience.

It is important to note that one of the people present may have more specifics to share about sunsets. One of the people may have studied and therefore has unique insights into photo-physics, atmospheric density and the relationship of celestial objects. But the other person, even if they haven't studied, may have unique perspectives on the creative power of color or the hope that beauty evokes. Shoulder-to- shoulder the experience grows. Both are learners. Both are contributors.

The conversation has no set course. It takes on a life of its own as these two neighbors get lost in the awe of this everyday miracle, this mystery. Sometimes the best way to share is just to sit in silence. Sometimes it releases a sadness since clouds hide the sky. Often though, a truly shared

exchange will produce unexpected laughter, profoundness or even transformation.

Ultimately, no one owns a sunset. It releases awe. A sunset is clearly not painted by mere humans. It is not the product of our limited world. It leaves everyone wanting more.

It is something to be shared.

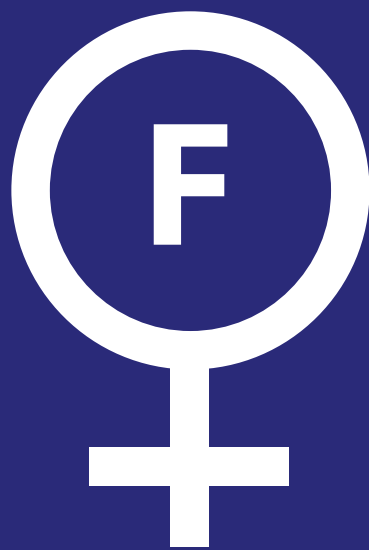
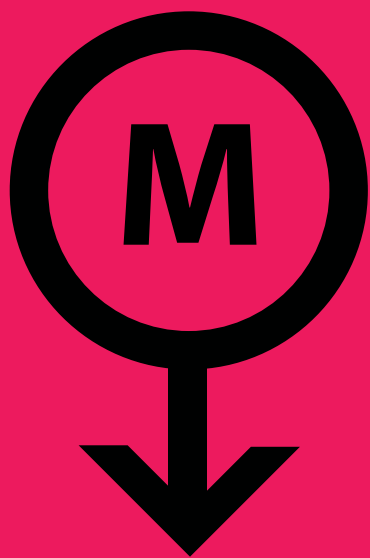
Our world is full of cliff tops to share with your neighbors. There are centers of common-good where people come inspired by meaning (volunteering at local schools, non-profits or community centers.) There are lingering spaces in every town (coffee shops, pubs or parks.) And there is always the opportunity to invite people to spaces of story exchange, like your dining room table.

The people we are with will sense when we are truly dazzled by their stories. They will be inspired to hear that we are also souls on a journey. They will feel truly invited if we learn to talk in questions and not just religious declarations.

And I believe that we will be amazed by how much our faith is nurtured by these shared encounters.

They who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of Your signs; You make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy. Psalms 65:8 (NASB)

Polarized



Polarized

On deeply felt issues, why are we so quick to leap to extremes?

My friend John was recently in a conversation about gender roles. Specifically, the theological positions on power, responsibility and opportunity for women and men. The age old question is, “Did God intend one gender to carry more authority and responsibility and therefore intend the highest power opportunities in the church to that gender (usually the one with the Y chromosome)?”

John’s companion was interesting and articulate. John enjoyed hearing this person’s views on almost any topic because they mix thoughtful processing with passionate expression—truly a laudable combination. It was immediately clear that John and his friend differed in their positions on this important issue.

His friend said “My belief is simple. I am an egalitarian. I believe in total and equal access to all roles, offices and stations of spiritual power for both genders. My belief boils down to this: It is a justice issue. Deep down I believe in equality ... we know this to be true in the realms of voting, idea generation, intellect, activism, moral fortitude and business acumen. Deep down I feel strongly that God created the genders as equals. I also feel that equality requires equal access to all seats of power, even those inside the church.”

John responded. “How can you let men off the hook that way? We have a responsibility epidemic in our culture today. We must take a stand for better fathers, better husbands and more committed church leaders. Men need to stop playing video games and engage. We need to be calling men to more responsibility not less.

How can you support the wimpification of men?”

Either/or, neither/nor

On the issue of gender roles, you may agree with either John or his friend. Perhaps you don’t agree with either of them. But I hope it illustrates the false dichotomies that sometimes exist around religious issues.

John’s reaction was based on a correlation that is not necessarily true. To him, to be egalitarian (believing that all roles in the church are open to both genders) means also having lower expectations of men. Which, of course, is not true. The actual opposite of being an egalitarian is to believe that there are certain spiritual stations (like being an elder or a pastor) that are not available to woman.

The ironic thing about this story is that John is one of the most obnoxious people I know in criticizing the passivity and laziness in our culture, particularly among young male adults. My friend lives in Portland, Oregon, which was described as “the place where young people go to retire.” He hates that phrase mostly because he knows it is often true. I have heard him call out men in his life who he finds to be particularly adolescent.

Why do we do this? Why do we create false dichotomies around religious issues? On some level, I imagine we have come by the practice honestly. Often debates are framed with related, but not correlated, ideas fused together as if they were inseparable. To extend the illustration of gender roles, I have seen pastors defend complementarian positions with data about how irresponsible young men have become. But who doesn’t support young guys “manning up?” Parents want their sons to be more responsible. Churches want strength and commitment from this often absent part of their congregations. Who doesn’t want men to grow up, engage, commit, lead ... heck, just show up?

But one can be an egalitarian and desire all those same things for young men too. It’s a false opposition. You see what I mean?

Some time ago, I bumped into an old friend who I hadn’t seen for a long time. I have known him for almost twenty years. We met on the mission field when I was a young evangelist. Those were great days. We both worked for an organization that was a global leader in proclamational evangelism.

During our conversation, my old, lovely friend lamented that I had abandoned my commitment to evangelism. I was shocked. What?

I wanted to scream, “What are you talking about?!” I felt like I had been wrongfully judged. I wanted to pull out my resume which includes extensive work as a professor of evangelism at several seminaries. I wanted to justify myself ... but I chose not to, at least not right away. Instead, I began to carefully ask questions to try and figure out where this opinion of me had come from. Really I just wanted my old friend to talk, so I could understand.

After about five minutes of careful questions the connection became clear. My old friend had been following my writings from afar (including my many columns here on Leadership Journal). He noted that I had spilt much ink exploring the ideas of spiritual listening and social justice. My friend felt that my commitment to those topics, often seen as “liberal,” must mean that I had abandoned my commitment to gospel proclamation, that somehow those two passions cannot exist in the same person.

False dichotomy.

A plaque on the door

Why do we do this? It is as if a belief is like a plaque on a door. We assume too often that if someone adheres to a particular belief then they necessarily adhere to a whole room of assumptions on the door's other side.

The Lord knows that I myself have done this. I've been the one to assume, to cast the reflex judgment. I am sure that this happens in many realms of life, but we see it all the time in the realm of faith. Here are a few other examples that are admittedly a bit extreme in order to make a point:

- If one does not take the first chapters of Genesis as literal history, then that person must not believe the Bible is truly authoritative.
- If one self-defines as a political conservative then they must not be socially compassionate.
- If one is pro-mother then they could never also be pro-fetus.
- If one is a pacifist they must be anti-soldier ... OR if one believes in a strong military, they must be pro-war.
- If one believes that we can learn much spiritually from the writing of Mohammed and Buddha then they must be soft on the absolute centrality and uniqueness of Jesus.

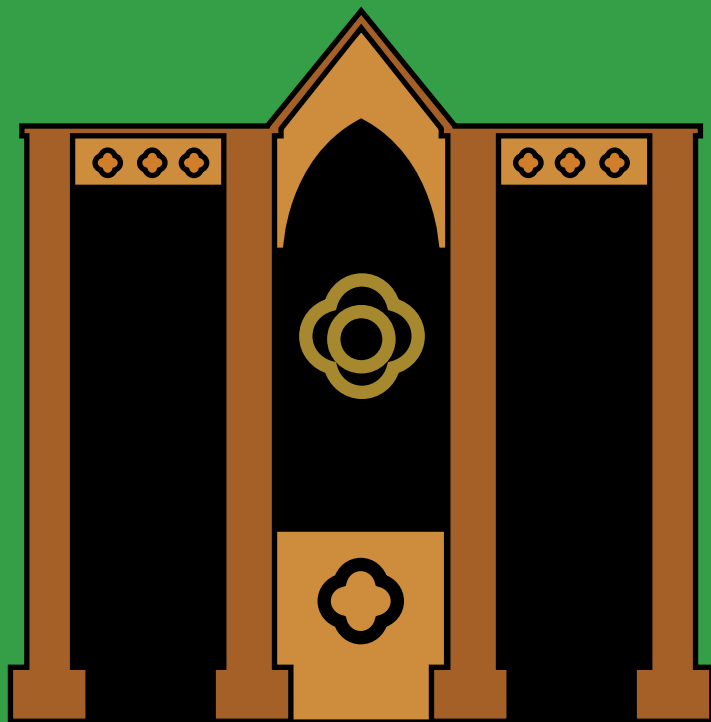
So here is my suggestion. Let's not do that. When we come across someone who expresses a theological or doctrinal position—the sort of statement that could easily fit on a small plaque on the door, let's take a moment to suspend assumptions. Even though we may have had hundreds of experiences that we believe determine what is on that door's other side, let's wait.

You see, if we can take a few minutes to explore deeper into the other person's beliefs, we may be surprised at the fresh nuances we may discover.

What if, instead of just skimming the plaque on the door, we decided to knock? When we emphasize understanding over assumption, we may be surprised at how much sense a different opinion can make.

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It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/january-online-only/polarized.html?paging=off>

Reed College



Confession Booth

Reed College Confession Booth... A Full Confession

A decade ago, Donald Miller wrote our story... he wrote about a Confession Booth at Reed College. When Don wrote it, the entire story consisted of only a few paragraphs and it started a social movement that no one could have predicted.

Over the years I have been asked many times to write a more full telling of that beloved story. This is the first time I have had the courage to print it.

Enjoy...

My phone rang in my pocket. I couldn't answer because of the four foot by eight foot piece of plywood I had precariously balanced on my hip. I was about two thirds of the way across the panoramic lawn in front of Reed's main campus. The college is encircled by a wide lawn mote, broadly separating the castle-like buildings from the surrounding neighborhoods.

I carefully eased the wood to the ground and pulled the phone from my pocket. "Hello?" I said, short of breath and relieved to put down the awkward board. My eyes looked up around, taking in the cascading trees and historic buildings all around.

"Please hold for Lars Larson" came a voice from the other end, quick and business-like. I held, standing alone in the middle of a field, thirty-two square feet piece of plywood leaning against my hip.

I was more than surprised by the call. Lars Larson is quite a fixture in Portland. I imagine every city has a Lars. He is the conservative radio talk show personality, tackling all issues political and social within Portland, the U.S. and the world. He is witty and sharply opinionated. He knows, just like the innumerable national talk-show pundits, that you need to maintain poignant and polarizing positions to maintain a loyal following.

After a few minutes of holding-music, Lars came on. "Hello, Tony? This is Lars Larson." He punctuated his words when he spoke. He gave an extra burst when he said "this" and with each "Lars." It sounded like this, "THIS is LARS LARSON."

"Tony, I only have a few moments. We are on a commercial break. I understand that you are cooking something up at Reed College this weekend. Can you tell me about it in just a couple of sentences."

“Well, I can try,” I said. “At this point we are building a confession booth in the middle of the campus. Our hope is that students will visit the booth and when they come in we are going to confess our sins and the sins of the Christian Church.”

“And then what?” He asked.

“Well...” Before I could respond, Lars interrupted. “Whoops, we are back on the air, I will be back in six minutes.” Just like that I was alone again, just me, my piece of wood and easy-listening music through the headset.

Sure enough, exactly six minutes later Lars was back. “Hey, sorry to keep you waiting... Let’s see, I love the creativity, building a confession booth and all that. Now the real question is how are you going to turn the tables on those liberal Reed folks?” He punctuated “liberal” when he said it.

“I’m sorry, ‘turn the tables’?”

He jumped right in, “You know, what is your plan. Are you going to then tell them that they need to deal with their sin as well? Are you going to help them repent? What’s your plan?”

“That is not really the point,” I said, a little sheepishly.

“Then what IS the POINT?”

“I guess the point is for us to repent. The point is that as Christians, it may be time for us to deal with our dirty closets. I guess the point is to beg for forgiveness.”

“I see...” his voice trailed off. Then over his shoulder, he shouted, “This one is a dead-end. No story here.” Then back to me, “Tony, thank you for your time. I appreciate you taking a moment to chat with me. “

I said, “Sorry you didn’t find what you were looking for.”

He said, “Don’t worry about it.” I don’t think either of us meant it.

Before hanging up Lars said, “I would encourage you to figure out what exactly it is you are doing.”

The line went silent and I was once again alone. I leaned over and heaved the heavy board back up. I adjusted it for balance. Walking was clumsy and I still had a good hundred yards to go. The weight of the board mirrored the feeling in my heart.

What the hell were we doing? What had I gotten myself into?

Two weeks before we had been sitting around one of the long tables in the student commons, next to the ceiling high windows that overlooked the forested creek running through the center of campus.

I was still fairly new to campus and most days felt like a wide-eyed freshman. There were just six of us. Don and I, along with some of the students who we had learned to lean upon and even submitted ourselves to: Nadine, Penny, Ivan and Mitch. There is something strangely comforting in knowing I was the dumbest person at the table.

We had gathered to talk about the last month of school. Specifically, we were bantering about Renn Faire. Renn Faire probably needs a bit of an explanation. Short for “Renaissance Faire,” it is a playful and celebrative weekend at the end of each school year. It is a rockus release, climaxing the long climb up one of America’s most academically stringent schedules. Work well done: senior theses are complete, final projects turned in, and the tens of thousands of read pages can be returned to the bookshelf, the library or the used bookstore. Reed students study harder than any other students I have ever witnessed. They also play hard. And Renn Faire provides a delicious playground.

Reed celebrates its commitment to self-discovery and personal experimentation. This belief fills the classroom and it fuels the small conference learning style across campus. While the extent of this experimentation is left to each student’s imagination, there is little doubt that students are released to try all things in their enlightenment quest. Though I have never heard the faculty or administration directly encourage any specifics, the message seems clear. For instance, Renn Faire includes an onsite clinic, with staff specially trained to help students come down off bad-trips. Often these students come from a large central lounge where the windows are blacked out and into the darkness are arranged couched stations with psychedelic art and screens filled with images in slow motion. I have seen a lot of crazy stuff in my life, but I was not prepared for all this weekend had to offer.

“Do we want to participate as a group with Renn Faire?”

The table sat uncharacteristically silent.

“Can we imagine a way to fully participate in Renn Faire and still be true to our identity as a Christian fellowship?”

The thoughts came slowly. We all agreed that this was a complicated conversation. We also knew that if we did add something to this festival of experience, it needed to be something legit.

Topics like this start awkwardly. We brainstormed about Renaissance times and how differently the church functioned back then. We

brainstormed several truly bad ideas (many of which, admittedly, were contributed by me) such as processional, sprinkling blessings and even burning martyrs on the stake.

Eventually, and I honestly don't remember who it was, someone suggested that we build a confession-booth on campus. Immediately our energy increased. We couldn't help but wonder how our fellow expressive, creative and courageous Reed students would respond if they were offered a chance to confess their sins. Would they embrace it? Or would it reek of religion and judgment? Would it be just another well-intentioned misstep by the Christian church, like so many things they have experienced before? Would it just push them further away from Jesus?

The confession drama was easy for us to imagine. One of us (probably me) would dress up as ancient clergy. We could walk through the campus, ringing cowbells, calling out for all to hear, "Confessions heard now. Come confess your sins." And while our student-friends were bluntly not willing to play the role of priest, they were willing to help direct students towards the freestanding booth (and provide security... more on that later.)

After talking about it for some time, we began hesitantly leaning toward consensus. Ivan was holding out. He knew he would be volunteering in the clinic all weekend. He was also a wise and cautious fellow at heart.

That was when I said it. It was an idea that had been percolating for a few days, ever since talking to my buddy Kurt about Christian arrogance.

I am pretty sure they were my words. They sounded exactly like my voice. They seemed to be coming out of my mouth. I felt like a spectator watching the drama unfold, "We won't ask them to confess to us. We will confess our sins to them."

The idea quivered in the middle of the table like an anxious puppy. We all stared at it. Then we looked carefully at one another. No one spoke. Every one of us knew. This was a God-idea. This is something we had to do.

.....

The Friday of Renn Faire arrived. It was early afternoon. I was happy to provide mindless labor while the students led the work. Mitch had recruited a couple of friends and had the construction well in order. He had built a barn the summer before and was thrilled to have a hammer in his hand again.

Mitch had chosen a nice spot, just off the main courtyard, next to a path,

under a couple of White Birch and a Norway Maple. We didn't have the only construction project in the works. Not far away a humungous pile of wood was being assembled.

"What is going on over there?" I asked one of Mitch's friends.

"They are building a ship and across from it a tower. They are going to battle, everything from water balloons to Roman Candles. It'll be epic. On Sunday they will torch the whole thing to the ground. The flames will be... immortal."

"Burn it down?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. Everything that can be burned will be burned sometime during the weekend."

It was at this moment that I realized I would be spending the weekend sealed inside a plywood box.

Then he smiled at me as if to say, "I hope you know what you are getting yourself into."

The booth was really taking shape and I must admit, I was quite impressed. Mitch had thought of everything. There was a slant to the roof in case it rained. Inside there were small shelves for candles. A chest high wall divided the two chambers and a simple curtain had been rigged to complete the confession booth aura. Golden fleurs-de-lis adorned the exterior and the booth was encircled with torches.

It was an inspiring accomplishment... an infuriatingly inspiring accomplishment. Each creative flourish made it more and more difficult for me to concoct a plan to cancel the entire idea. I might just hate these people.

Dark inevitably came. The torches were lit. Bells began to ring. My wife draped me in the burlap monks' robes she had made. It fit loose and scratchy. There was a rope belt and a canopy-hood that, when pulled up, surrounded my head and hid my face. I felt like a character from a Monty Python sketch.

My student-friends were excited to begin. A couple of them had cowbells to ring. We all wondered if anyone would enter the booth... or would it all be ignored; a glorious failure?

I took my place inside. The "priest side" of the booth had a plywood door with a heavy latch we could seal from the inside. The other side had a curtain. I latched the door and sat on the stool inside. I leaned back against the far corner, the hood over my head. Candlelight danced about. My chest was filled with both the heart-pounding nausea like when you are about to break up with someone, and the gut twisting

anxiety you feel right before you have to give a public speech. For now my goal was simply to not throw up.

I didn't have to wait for long. The first student pulled the curtain back and peaked into the candle lit cabinet. He sat down and I hoped the cowl hid the fear in my eyes. He was wearing a multi-colored shirt with wide vertical stripes. It draped low and open in the front. His hair was just long enough to pull out of the way and hook behind his ear. He just sat, not saying a word. His eyes were collecting every flame-lit detail.

I pulled back the hood and began. "Welcome to the confession booth." I was having to remind myself to breathe between each sentence. "This is where confessions are heard. If it is okay with you I would like to begin."

He didn't move. He just stared at me. There was a slight tilt to his head. This was when it occurred to me that I didn't really know what I was going to say next. Don and I had discussed some general thoughts, but I had not prepared any specifics.

"I am a Christian. Would you please forgive us?" I thought, that sounds weird, but I couldn't stop now. "Would you please forgive us for the Crusades? Will you forgive us for the Inquisition?"

Suddenly my words took off with a life all their own, "Would you forgive us for abusing kids placed under our care? Will you please, please forgive us for the role we played in slavery and racism in the US and around the world? Forgive us for wars waged in God's name? Will you forgive us for the ways we communicate judgment, arrogance and hatred every single day?" The words poured out.

My brain actually felt hot. My new friend just continued to stare. I think he was making space, allowing me to finish. I started to open my mouth again... that's when I said something Don and I hadn't discussed, "Would you please forgive me?" For the first time I broke eye contact and lowered my eyes. "Would you forgive me because I claim to be a follower of Jesus, but my life looks nothing like his? Jesus stood for love, generosity and care for others. Mine doesn't. I am selfish, distracted and dismissive all the time. Will you please forgive me?"

Until that moment, it had not occurred to me how much of a fraud I was. I walk around that beautiful campus claiming to be a representative of Jesus and yet...

Silence hung between us.

"Well," he finally began, "that is the most fucking beautiful thing I have ever heard in my entire life."

I couldn't stop my smile. Plus, I didn't know fucking was a word.

Then he did something that I had not prepared for... He forgave me.

His words were simple, "I forgive you. I forgive you for all of it." His voice was soft and his eyes locked on mine. He did not cheapen the moment with excuses or justifications. He did not try to rescue me by telling me most those things happened before I was even born. He did not play any of those games that are so commonplace in human exchange. He simply absolved me of my sin.

The power of words... the power of forgiveness is an intoxicating thing.

Over the weekend dozens of students slipped in and then out of our booth, each surprised and expectant. Some stayed for just a few minutes. Most lingered as long as half an hour. Without exception, each one offered us the gift of forgiveness. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. It is a great irony that there is nothing in life that I dread more than begging someone to forgive me, and every time I succumb to the dread, I rob myself of one of life's great treasures.

"Will you please forgive me?"

.....

I daydream about heaven sometimes. I try to imagine what we are going to do with all that time. What will our life be like? What will fill our days?

I have had a thought lately about one way to spend the first couple of millennia. What if Jesus took me by the hand and introduced me around. With each friend, be they an old friend or new, Jesus would give each person space to share with me anything I had done to hurt, abuse, dismiss or use them. I imagine the list of people would number in the millions. I believe that with Jesus there, I would feel only hope and expectation. There would be no guilt; he is so good at carrying that. There would of course be many that I had known through my life. With the security of heaven, these known-friends could clearly share their hurts without guile or manipulation. I imagine Jesus would also want me to meet those I had affected but never met. Like the slave girl who made the eight dollar t-shirt I bought at Wal-Mart. Not just her, he would also give me the solemn gift of talking to the members of the family she had been stolen away from. He would lead me to the daughter she would have long after my t-shirt had been thrown in a landfill. He would introduce me to my neighbors who live outside, homeless folk that I had inhumanly ignored again and again. I would meet the people I had "communicated with" from adjacent cars in rush hour traffic. I would meet the women I had leered at. I would meet those impacted by every system of injustice I perpetuate with my choices and spending. Jesus would put faces to the collateral damage of my life of privilege.

And with each humanizing conversation, fully validating, I would get to ask them to forgive me. And time and time again, a million times over, I would get to hear those euphoric words, “I forgive you. I forgive you for all of it.”

It is funny... freedom comes from confession.

Almost without exception, every Reed student who entered the confession booth responded to our honesty with like sincerity and surprise.

Eventually, the conversation would turn to free-flowing exchange. With freedom so heavy in the tight space, the students would often share about their pain: addictions, abuse, regrets, shame. More often than not we would also talk about Jesus. It sounds like a cliché, but there truly seemed to be three of us crammed inside that plywood box.

The love of Jesus for every person is not a sales pitch... it is not about religious leveraging... and it is not about my team versus the other. The love of Jesus is for all people... it is unto all people... and, much to my surprise, it may just show up through the words of ANY person.

An ancient prayer says:

May Jesus be in the heart of each to whom you speak...

May He be in the mouth of each who speaks unto you.

Original article was published by Tony Kriz

It can be found at: <http://tonykriz.com/reed-college-confession-booth-a-full-confession/>

You've Done It



Unto Me

... You've Done It Unto Me

What if the eyes of the naked were
the eyes of Jesus?

I recently taught a class on a Theology of Evangelism at a local conservative seminary. It was a most enjoyable class (and one of my favorite topics) full of significant young Christian leaders. My belief is that when we lovingly proclaim the gospel of Jesus that most often, friendship happens.

As a gift to the students, I asked Kevin Palau to come to class and contribute his significant perspective to our conversation. Kevin was fantastic!

If you don't know, Kevin is the son of renowned evangelist, Luis Palau and he is the current president of the Palau Evangelistic Association. Among his many ministry accomplishments, he has been instrumental, if not unprecedented, in his work to build partnerships between civic/city governments and church communities.

Kevin sat relaxed in front of my class, as if we were all lounging in his living room. He is almost giddy when he talks about the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus and the work of the Palau organization over the decades and especially today.

Then he shared about his work with the City of Portland and specifically the Mayor's office. "We just went in and told the mayor that we wanted to help. We, the evangelical church, have an incredible network of thousands and thousands of people who want to love this city. We have time, expertise and manpower. How can we help?"

According to Kevin, the Mayor and his staff were thankful and inspired by the invitation. Even Kevin was amazed by how much, over time, the city invited the faith community into partnership.

After a time of brainstorming about the most glaring needs in the city of Portland (again this was a City government generated list), seven areas of need were presented:

"Hunger, homelessness, healthcare, poorly financed public schools, foster care, human trafficking, and the environment"

With Kevin's words still floating in the middle of the room, I thought of Jesus' transformational commentary on the Kingdom in Matthew 25:

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was **hungry**, and you gave Me something to eat;
I was **thirsty**, and you gave Me something to drink;
I was a **stranger**, and you invited Me in;
(I was) **naked**, and you clothed Me;
I was **sick**, and you visited Me;
I was in **prison**, and you came to Me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when?”

The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

(Matthew 25:34-37,40 NASB, format and bold mine)

Let’s line those two lists up:

Jesus’ Words	City of Portland’s Expressed Needs
Hungry/Thirsty	Hunger Public Schools (most often in Portland’s poorest neighborhoods). Learn More Environment (global food/clean water)
Stranger	Homelessness Foster Care
Naked	Human Trafficking (sex industry)
Sick	Healthcare
Prison	Foster Care and Poor Public Schools are often populated with children of prisoners

The City of Portland, which Huffington Post just listed as America’s Least Christian City, not only opened its doors to partnering with evangelical churches, but when they asked for help, they unknowingly asked us to fulfill Jesus’ invitation to participate in the Kingdom of God. They basically asked us to be the church.

Kevin went on to say that thousands and thousands of Portland churchgoers are today experiencing participation with God’s Kingdom like they never have before. And we have the City of Portland to thank for generously opening their doors to partnership.

Maybe Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 are as much about befriending our culture as they are about personal holiness.

Poor theology

Ten years ago, I was a young theology student. Unexpectedly, my friend Steve Mitchell invited me to a small dinner party. He told me that Tony Campolo would be attending. Now, there are many mixed opinions about this Activist-Theologian, but I must admit that I was a bit star-struck by the thought of spending an evening at a dinner table with Dr. Campolo. My youth pastor first introduced to his expectorating sermons as a boy and I have never forgotten his early impression on my life.

As we sat around the classic wooden table, Dr. Campolo waxed eloquent about our place in the world as the people of God. He soon turned the conversation to the topic of the poor. I sat at the far side of the table from him, just thankful for the delicious food and the rich company.

“What is your theology of the poor?” Dr. Campolo blurted out. His always dramatic tone jumped up a quantum level. “What! What is your theology of the poor?”

He had removed his glasses and he was scanning the table through squinting eyes. “You!” He thrust his glasses across the table, directly at me. “You, young theologian, what is your theology of the poor? What does your seminary teach you?”

Oh nuts! The whole table of more than a dozen people stared at me and I scanned back and forth around the rectangular space as my mind scrambled desperately for a reasonably thoughtful answer.

How about you? How would you have answered the question? What is your theology of the poor?

After an excruciating silence, I admitted to the table my ignorance, “I don’t know.”

Dr. Campolo smiled at me reassuringly. He seemed genuinely encouraged by my willingness to admit my blindness. I believe he saw it as courage, even though to me it felt like shame.

“Our theology of the poor is simple,” Dr. Campolo shared. “We find it in the words of Jesus. When we look into the eyes of the poor,” he paused with his hand outstretched, “When we look into the eyes of the poor, we look into the face of Jesus. It is as simple as that. What did Jesus say? Do we believe his words? ‘For as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.’”

Naked Jesus

I want to end this article with a unusual application for your consideration.

When Jesus made his famous list in Matthew 25, it always seemed fairly straightforward to me. “Hungry and Thirsty” referred to those without access to sustainable nutrition and clean water. “Sick” referred to the infirmed both in our local health systems and victims of health/environmental epidemics around the world. “Prison” refers to those incarcerated in our prison system. “Stranger” referred to the one ‘who is different’ and the immigrant, most epitomized in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

What about the “naked?” For most of my life, I just assumed that “naked” was simply a synonym for the poor (and that may very well be much of what Jesus meant.) However, the “poor” are fairly well covered in Jesus’ other categories: hungry, thirsty, etc.. What if Jesus also had something else in mind?

I imagine Jesus, as he made his list of societal pain, that as he spoke, his thoughts wandered through the streets of the Roman World. He thought of hungry urchins, desperate lepers, exhausted foreigners, and dissenters destined to prisons and to Roman crosses. What else did he see? He also saw temple prostitutes and sex slaves (also one of Jesus’ closest followers may have been a prostitute.) Who were the “naked” of the Roman World? Who are the “naked” of our society today? In many ways they are the victims of human trafficking and the sex industry, these are the same people who populate our world’s brothels, strip clubs and pornographic websites.

I know that I am not going to get any “feel good” awards for ending my article this way, but this is a specific implication that I believe we need to consider.

When Dr. Campolo talked about a theology of the poor, he said “When you look into the eyes of the poor, you are looking into the eyes of Jesus” and he justified it by simply taking Jesus’ words literally (something that every conservative Bible scholar tries to do): “As much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

I ask you, what are the implications when we apply Dr. Campolo’s words to the “naked” in our society? What are the implications when we walk down the neon-lit streets of our cities? What are the implications when we sit on a strip club barstool? AND what are the implications when we click on an exploitative website?

“When we look into the eyes of the _____, we look into the eyes of Jesus.”

“For as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

Original article was published by Christianity Today

It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/july-online-only/youve-done-it-unto-me.html?paging=off>

Staged Authenticity

I have no idea
what I'm doing,
I am just so blessed
and know God takes
care of all my needs!

Staged Authenticity

You'll lose your hearers if "honest" communication becomes cliché.

“Authenticity” has become a buzzword. It has become a mandatory addition to any version of Christian Conference Buzzword Bingo. (A game utilizing bingo style cards with overused words de jour in each bingo-space. Who can be first to score 5 in a row and declare “BINGO?”)

Thirteen years ago, I attended a national pastors' conference. At the time I was helping with an emergent-style church plant and I was sent to plunder as many growth strategies as possible. I remember that “authenticity” was all the rage at the conference. Regularly we were told that the future of preaching required a new commitment to vulnerable communication. There were even break-out sessions that taught techniques of authentic communication—and at the time these seminars made perfect sense.

Much has happened in the last thirteen years. Culture has shifted significantly and so has religious rhetorical style. You could rightly say that authenticity—and even stunning vulnerability—have become normative in many Christian books, at conferences, and from Sunday pulpits. Pastors are admitting their unanswered questions. National speakers are operating from their brokenness. And courageous writers are opening their spiritual closets full of addictions, abuse, doubt, and shame.

But today, I want to try to do the unacceptable. I want to take a few moments to critique authenticity. More specifically, I want to start a conversation about speaking styles and techniques.

I know, I know, how can someone critique another person's expressed humility or passion? Well, I believe that we can (though at the same time I acknowledge the inherent danger in such a practice).

It is important to point out that I am not going to critique another's heart motivation when speaking (for the most part). What I want to do is ask some questions about the exchange of vulnerability. I want to suggest that true authenticity is a relational act. It is not enough for one person to intend to be honest and open; their words must also be received as honest and open. Much like love-languages within a marriage relationship, it is important to consider not only the ways that I like to communicate love, it is equally important for me to consider what ways best communicate love to my spouse. (For instance, I might like to give gifts but she may place greater value on quality time.) It is the same with the communication of authenticity, which you could say is a love language as well. Isn't it?

Our culture today has a very adept authenticity-antenna. This antenna exists because the rising generation is desperate for truthful honesty in a world which is otherwise virtual, shrink-wrapped, automated, plastic, and polarizing. Couple that with the fact that religious communication is not given the benefit of the doubt as it was in generations past. This leads to a culture that is parched for authenticity and yet ever-critical of religious techniques.

You can see how this can be a rhetorical challenge.

Recently, I have had the chance to visit several large-stage Christian conferences. These conferences would be considered pretty cutting edge. They utilize well-known Christian voices and focus on important contemporary issues. I was surprised to recognize several rhetorical styles, intended to illustrate authenticity, which may not be as effective today as they once were.

Again, I have no desire to question people's hearts. In fact I believe that most leaders believe they love their audience through both their words and through their speaking styles. However, like the marriage illustration above, I am not sure their authenticity-techniques are effecting the next generation as well as they hoped.

To start the conversation, here are a few of the styles I witnessed:

Super-Sincerity

This is when a speaker saturates their lecture with doe-eyes, pursed lips, long pauses, and often a particularly breathy speaking tone. This style can make for great pillow-talk, but when it happens from the podium it can feel syrupy in the ears of much of our culture. The real tragedy (since I assume that these speakers are in fact sincere people) is that this style can actually have the opposite of the intended impact. To many, it can feel like emotional manipulation.

Power Speaking

If Super Sincerity persuades through empathic appeal, Power Speaking utilizes constant dramatic emphasis. Each phrase (sometimes every word) comes at the listener with such strength that they lose any sense of a narrative arc. IT IS THE RHETORICAL EQUIVALENT OF WRITING IN ALL CAPS. IT CAN BE TRYING. IT CAN BE OVERWHELMING. IT CAN FEEL LIKE BEING YELLED AT.

I heard a speaker recently, who had outstanding things to say, but delivered every line punctuated with piercing passion. If every line is forcibly important than no line is. Where is the build-up? Where is the subtlety? Where is the dramatic rise and fall? The person with an authenticity antenna can feel riddled by this style, when they may instead want to be wooed.

Resume Dropping

Most all of us do this. It is hard not to try to slip our accomplishments, successes, stunning stories, and fame-encounters into everyday conversations with friends and co-workers. However, when resume accomplishments are slipped into a spiritual speech, it can seriously undermine the speaker's authenticity and credibility.

I recently heard a famous Christian speaker who gave a great talk that included stories of failure and doubt ... and yet all along the way he would unnecessarily slip into the sermon famous people he knows, initiatives he has begun, and the size of his followership. The authenticity-antenna interprets this as self-serving. Many of us employ this, but from the pulpit it can erode credibility.

The “Vulnerable Straw-Man”

Many religious leaders desire to model vulnerability in order to connect with their audience. However they struggle, like all of us do, with a desire to be perceived as impressive, enlightened, and having their junk all figured out. To accomplish these two seemingly mutually exclusive goals, some choose a technique I call the Vulnerable Straw-Man. They choose to share an issue they struggled with long ago, or a mistake they made somewhere in their distant past. This issue can be illustrated with great passion and regret ... but the secret is to choose something for which the speaker has now fully recovered from, defeated, and corrected.

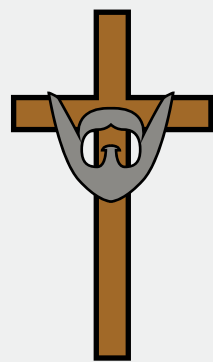
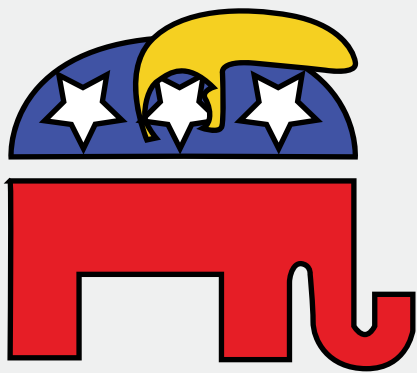
Mission accomplished: vulnerability and spiritual arrival. The only problem is that many authenticity-antennas now pick up on these “vulnerable without being truly vulnerable” techniques and may dismiss the speaker's otherwise important message.

Okay, so that should get the conversation going. Again this article is about styles and techniques, not about content. The assumption is (and my observations have been) that folks have great hearts and important messages, but any communications teacher will tell you that how you say something is just as important as what you say.

Also, a culture of authenticity requires that I acknowledge that I utilize all of the above techniques (and many more) ... and, if I am honest, my motivations for doing so are rarely pure.

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It can be found at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/march-online-only/staged-authenticity.html?paging=off>

Angry Pastor,



Angry Politician

Angry Pastor, Angry Politician

Maintaining Personal Myth Through Irrational Loyalty

For years we were baffled by the “Angry Pastor” phenomena. Little did we know, it may have been a foreshadow of an emerging national mania.

Angry Pastor

Three years ago I was asked to write an article on the neo-authoritarian pastor phenomena in the American church. The purpose was not to deride those often-angry hip mega-pastors, but to try and explain the attraction, specifically their gravitational pull on young, urban, educated adults in progressive cities like Seattle.

The article was published by Christianity Today’s Leadership Journal. It was not my best work but if you want to read it in its entirety, you can find it at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/september-online-only/authority-issues.html?paging=off>

Over the last decade plus, many of us have been baffled by the angry-pastor way of church. Authoritarianism is generally hard for me to swallow in any form, but when that tyrannical ethos is laced with misogyny and hate-rhetoric, it becomes almost impossible to imagine why so many are drawn in, like a moth to a bug-zapper.

When I say “drawn in,” I am talking about many of my dear, dear friends. The Christianity Today article follows my friend Derek, who I have known, loved, respected and walked with over a decade and a half. Derek is razor shrewd and yet, in a desperation to “save” his faith, he traded his critical mind for a pastor who would unwaveringly tell him what to believe.

In the article, I postulate that these urban hipsters and professionals, did not have a community problem, an ecclesial problem or even a theological problem... what they had was an epistemological problem:

I believe that so much of this is happening because young evangelicals are exhausted. They are wearied by a church that claims intellectual supremacy and yet delivers lazy logic, sectarian divisions, and a paradigmatic shelf-life of about 50 years (the approximate time it takes a denomination or emotionally charged religious movement to die).

Religion gave smart people, like Derek, an epistemological vessel that could no longer hold their faith. And to many, it felt like they were left with only two options:

One: reject religion completely and thus lose the metanarrative around which they had structured their lives.

Or Two: sacrifice the most precious thing they have left, their freedom (at least their freedom to think) and give their unswerving allegiance to an autocrat who would tell them what to believe and how to believe it... even if it meant enduring an endless barrage of misogyny, ridicule and hate-rhetoric.

Strangely, they were putting their faith in a pastor.... To embody a faith that they, deep inside, were no longer sure was true.

I would try to talk to these friends about the abusive language/systems they were accepting from their angry-pastor but they refused to hear it. Like a middle-schooler in love with the class-bully, their moral objectivity was gone.

If you listened closely enough, you could almost hear their soul crying out, "I am tired of a world where I can't know what is true, I will give up my freedom and my values if someone will just tell me what to believe."

So, this brings us to the second half of today's discussion: Angry Politician.

It has been three years since that article was written and today we have a similar (and from my perspective equally baffling) circumstance in American politics.

Untold millions are flocking to candidates that unashamedly berate their constituency and flaunt hate language (anti-woman, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, etc.) and all the while, these millions hypnotically vote their approval time and time again, "Thank you, sir. May I have another." (It is also worth noting that evangelicals might be the most influential block of votes potentially sending Angry Politician to Washington.)

Why? Why has such a wave of support been mobilized?

I am afraid that deep inside, many believe they have only two options.

One: they would have to reject the myth of America they were given, a myth that has come to define them, a myth that insists that their citizenship makes them the ultimate winners, and a myth that promises prosperity and dominance over the rest of the world.

Or Two: Accept a living, breathing, walking promise that the myth is still true. Accept a person who proves the myth worked and it might just work for them as well... even if that means they have to simultaneously kill so much of what makes the American story great: Plurality, freedom of religious expression (even for Muslims), a homeland for the immigrant, equality for all regardless of gender, class or culture (Galatians 3:28) and so on.

Strangely, they are putting your faith in a politician.... To embody a myth that they, deep inside, are no longer sure is true.

How is this possible? How has a group of citizens, if they had been surveyed just 5 years ago, and asked if they would support this particular Angry Politician for president, they would have shot milk out of their nose in hysterical denial.

And yet here we are.

Like Derek and church, I believe that many of my fellow Americans are desperate. And so, they are willing to give up much of what is most precious to them: their autonomy, their kindness, their generosity and hospitality. Why?

Just like church, the promises of the American story no longer holds water, no longer holds hope. And like the tyrannies that pepper human history, they are now willing to stomach abusive speech, endless hyperbole and minority scapegoating to have someone who promises to have all the answers; someone who promises to always win, someone who “proves” the myth.

.....

Ironically (an irony you will soon see), I was asked to finish that now 3-year old article with some epistemological hope. If not absolute submission to an autocrat (wherein we summarily swallow values and solutions that we would otherwise reject), then where might we find the sensation of “truth” again?

The vision I offered was surprisingly found in the story of the church.

The church functioned in the very center of God’s will at two points: at her beginning and at her end. The church’s beginning is clear, an unprecedented festival of supernatural multiculturalism:

Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs ... (Acts 2:9-11).

And the church’s ending is clear as well:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... (Revelation 7:9)

I know that my blindness is most insidious when I surround myself with people who are just like me: spend like me, read like me, vote like me, worship like me, etc. If I surround myself with people just like me, we will probably all have the same blind spots. We will tend to adopt self-serving beliefs. That is one danger of a ghettoized religion built on affinity structures or a ghettoized society that hides behind high walls. However, in the company of the other, there is real hope that my prejudices and arrogances might come to light.

What greater indication of transcendent truth than when diverse voices collaborate: Global South and Global North, rich and poor, urban and rural, marginalized and mainstream.

This vision of hope, rooted in the story of the church and reaffirmed time and again throughout human history, is under specific attack from our autocrat de jour, who promises to wall away diverse voices from our already fragile society.

What say you?

Original article was published by Tony Kriz
It can be found at: <http://tonykriz.com/angry-pastor-angry-politician/>

Tax Exemption

1040



A series of horizontal bars of varying lengths, some solid gray and some white with gray outlines, arranged in a vertical column. The bars are of different widths and are separated by small gaps. The top bar is the longest, followed by a shorter one, then a medium-length one, and so on, with the bottom bar being the shortest.

Should churches give up their tax exemption?

Childhood food security. Education and literacy. Basic health care. These are issues where there are no two sides. Everyone agrees that these issues are among the highest priorities in our society today.

What we disagree on is simple: Who is going to pay to cure one or more of these significant twenty-first-century societal wounds?

As a Christian, I have a humble suggestion. Let us, the American Church, step up and foot the bill, through giving back our tax-exempt status and earmarking those funds for issues like childhood hunger and health care.

Imagine the societal transformation we would witness if the Church offered the equivalent of our tax exception to cure one or more of society's core issues. These plights (almost exclusively against the poor) have always been the work of Jesus' people (as well as other peoples of faith): healing, feeding and teaching.

The Church (and religion more broadly) is too often known for judgment, division, and being self-serving. Imagine the potential change of perception and the subsequent social capital that would follow one of the largest voluntary acts of generosity in human history.

Sociologists tell us that Portland is among the first Post-Christian cities in North America. How does a minority community get noticed? A peasant rabbi from little-regarded Nazareth did it by eradicating whole regions of disease (Luke 4:38-40) and satisfying all who were hungry (Luke 9:12-17). Do you think that same rabbi would ask any less of us today?

You may be asking: Why would the church return their annual tax-gift instead of keeping that money in-house? First of all, these issues are so insidious and so widespread that it is hard to imagine the church (with all of its denominations and sects) creating the sort of coordinated and far reaching system necessary to heal across urban and rural communities, across regions and across race, class and culture.

Even Jesus was not opposed to trusting the deeply-flawed government of his day with money: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21).

But more importantly, I am concerned for the twenty-first-century Church's credibility and autonomy.

Before I explain what I mean, allow me a brief illustration. If you are watching the political debates, regardless of your party loyalty, there is a fair argument being made about the relationship of large campaign contributions and a candidate's credibility on certain issues (banking regulation and environmental issues to name two). It begs the question; can a candidate be trusted to stand up to special interests from which they have received millions of dollars?

Well, the American Church receives what adds up to billions of dollars in tax exemptions every year.

In the current handshake relationship between Church and government, can the church really be trusted to stand up when the moment calls, both today and in the unpredictable future?

For over 2,000 years the Church has been a revolutionary and activist movement. How can she be trusted to be the revolutionary voice she must be when she is funded by the government through tax exemptions? How can she speak freely when her economic viability is ever at risk of being taken away? How can she speak out against racism, prejudice and hatred, against unimaginable economic inequity against hunger, sickness and the violent death to our youngest citizens when she is sucking on the teat of the Fatherland?

This act of extreme voluntary generosity would force churches to radically reassess their finances. The impact would be significant. The Church's innumerable and often strategically placed properties would need to diversify their uses and revenue streams. Pastors may need to become bi-vocational and therefore work alongside their unchurched neighbors. Parishioners may need to vastly increase their investment and participation in their spiritual communities and neighborhoods.

Some will say I am betraying my spiritual family by suggesting that the Church voluntarily offer the equivalent of her annual tax-gift to eradicate one or more of these issues from our country. But consider the potential result:

- millions of people cared for
- a radical sacrifice that transforms society
- an unparalleled act in harmony with the example of Jesus
- an increase in the Church's credibility and freedom to be a revolutionary voice in culture
- a diversified use of church properties
- a less sequestered clergy
- and an activated volunteer-core of church parishioners

That doesn't sound all bad.

Original article was published by The Oregonian
It can be found at: http://www.oregonlive.com/faith/2016/04/tony_kriz_tax_exemption.html

Part Two

Option Two: Keep Tax Exemption & Draw Parish Boundaries

Over the weekend the Oregonian published an article in which I suggest that the American Christian Church should consider giving back her tax exemption to heal one of society's great wounds, like child hunger or health care. I wrote a follow up to that article [here](#).

The suggestion stirred some great discussion (2000 shares and over 500 comments on Oregonian site, hundreds more on social media.) Most people feel passionately that trusting the government with more money would be a mistake. So, I offer this alternative (warning, you aren't going to like it any more):

The vast majority of critical comments insist that partnering with government is a non-starter. They are also equally convinced that the church is already doing a much better job of curing societal ills (even though there is only isolated and anecdotal evidence offered.)

I am basically demanding that this conversation begins with a comprehensive strategy of generosity and humility to cure one or more of society's ills, like child hunger or lack of access to healthcare, issues that are plaguing the poor.

Why comprehensive? Because, like my friend Ken Loyd says, when we pray "Give us this day our daily bread", the prayer makes absolutely no sense until we define who the US is in that prayer. And from a Jesus-gospel perspective the US must include our neighbor and Jesus is rather inconvenient in insisting that our "neighbor" is the stranger, the foreigner and the discarded person in need of care and medical assistance.

So, if you want to keep the tax money in the pockets of churches, if you reject partnering with government's nation-wide structure and if we embrace Jesus' call to impact all people (John 3:16, John 13:34-35, Matthew 25:34-40) then I offer this simple suggestion:

Draw static church parish boundaries. Each church is responsible for one unambiguous, non-theoretical chunk of the American map.

And that chunk of map, be it 10 square blocks or half a rural county, one church, one integrated community of Jesus dedicated servants are RESPONSIBLE for that space.

- Every empty child's tummy, that Church is responsible
- Every isolated elderly person, that Church is responsible
- Every scared and unresourced immigrant, that Church is responsible
- Every act of violence, that Church is responsible
- Every sick or hurting person, that Church is responsible
- Every kid struggling to read, that Church is responsible
- Every home that can't afford heat, that Church is responsible
- Every rusted pipe carrying undrinkable water, that Church is responsible
- Every ex-con struggling to reintegrate, that Church is responsible
- Every single parent raising young children, that Church is responsible
- Every abuse of power, violence against citizenry, act of economic injustice, caste displacement, developer bullying or preferential distribution of opportunities...

That Church is Responsible

One of the immediate objections will be that congregations are not defined by a fixed geography, so why should the church's mission field? To that I say, maybe it is time to rethink church congregational formation. Maybe it is time to make congregational identity just as unambiguous and non-theoretical as a parish understanding of mission.

Another objection will be the inequity of parish responsibility across the country. In some locations, churches will be left with only half a block (places with churches on every corner), while in my beloved Portland, churches will be responsible for dozens and dozens of square blocks. Well, that conundrum will significantly redefine how we do mission in America. Cross country-church partnership and resource redistribution will become paramount to meeting the national need. This will have both geographic and rich/poor church applications.

Finally and most foundational, many will reject this idea out of hand because it is just too impractical, too difficult and too inconvenient.

Now, if, when you imagine a parish orientation for churches, if you cannot see how such an organizational structure would massively and comprehensively provide for the forgotten, the hungry, the marginalized and the voiceless in this country, than I look forward to hearing about your alternative strategy in the comments below.

However, if you reject this concept out of hand because you think it is too impractical, too difficult and too inconvenient, then shame on you. I don't even want to know you. The work of God, the love of neighbor... to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly... these have never been easy or convenient.

But these are how the world gets changed.

Original article was published by Tony Kriz

It can be found at: <http://tonykriz.com/option-two-keep-tax-exemption-draw-parish-boundaries/>

Part Three

Church, Give Back Tax Exemption: Missing the Point

Over the weekend the Oregonian published an article in which I suggest that the American Christian Church should consider giving back her tax exemption to heal one of society's great wounds, like child hunger or health care.

As of this morning, oregonlive.com has received over 500 comments on the article and over 1800 shares on social media. Apparently, I touched a nerve... and it was a particularly raw nerve at that.

Reading through those comments has been a most enjoyable process. I love people being people.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the comments missed the point of the article. Shocker!

Here is a short excerpt:

For over 2,000 years the Church has been a revolutionary and activist movement. How can she be trusted to be the revolutionary voice she must be when she is funded by the government through tax exemptions? How can she speak freely when her economic viability is ever at risk of being taken away? How can she speak out against racism, prejudice and hatred, against unimaginable economic inequity against hunger, sickness and the violent death to our youngest citizens when she is sucking on the teat of the Fatherland?

This act of extreme voluntary generosity would force churches to radically reassess their finances. The impact would be significant. The Church's innumerable and often strategically placed properties would need to diversify their uses and revenue streams. Pastors may need to become bi-vocational and therefore work alongside their unchurched neighbors. Parishioners may need to vastly increase their investment and participation in their spiritual communities and neighborhoods.

Comments fixated on my apparently profane suggestion that the church give up a portion of her precious (Oh, My Precious) financial security and the dubious nature of the American taxation system.

I actually believe that a careful reassessment of the church's relationship to the State is a debate the church should take very seriously. Also, the people of God should be ever aware of the complicated relationship of the gospel to money (if I remember correctly, there are 38 passages in the Gospels where Jesus addresses money/taxes, which is more than "sin", "forgiveness" or even his pending crucification.)

“You cannot serve both God and Money”

-Jesus

However, I wrote the article for different reasons. The tax question was almost a Trojan Horse to encourage a conversation about the Church's IDENTITY, not her ECONOMY.

The three main points of the article, seemed to completely allude many readers:

1. A call for the Church to return to her calling to **be a healing force in the world**. To deemphasize the focus on salaries, facilities and programs and heed the deafening cry of the hungry, the sick and the poor. To enter into the radical lifestyle of our Peasant Messiah, who did not have a home and yet eradicated whole regions of disease (Luke 4:38-40) and stopped to satisfy all who were hungry (Luke 9:12-17.)

2. An appeal to the Church to seriously consider **her relevancy in the conversation of society** today. We are not even in the conversation anymore and most Christians don't even realize it. And by the way, the Church of Rome is kicking our ass down the street and back again (God bless Pope Francis). The American Church has been reduced (or has reduced herself) to a marginalized sub-culture. There are only two ways for a marginalized group to get noticed: Violence or Radical Love/Generosity/Humility. I vote for LOVE.

3. Finally, to soberly weigh the social, emotional, psychological, imaginative and activist impact of the Church taking such a sizable financial contribution from the government year after year after year. Conservatives deride the impact of becoming a welfare society, but isn't the church on a sort of welfare system? And whether or not you think America is a unjust society today in need of **the Church's uncompromised prophetic voice**, the day will come (if it hasn't already) when she will need to take up the mantle of John the Baptist, Bonhoeffer and Tutu. Are we willing to speak when we must... come what may?

I look forward to your comments.

Fragile Kingdom



The Fragile Kingdom

Don't marvel that the church falls apart. Marvel that it holds together at all.

I once heard it said that the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world that he does not exist.

The fiftieth anniversary of C.S. Lewis's death (November 22, 2013) has sent me back to Lewis's classic work *The Screwtape Letters*. In this hellish drama, he alludes to this same devilish idea when the book's senior demon, Uncle Screwtape, informs his nephew Wormwood that demonic hiddenness is indisputable hell-policy (Chapter VI). "That question, at least for the present phase of the struggle, has been answered for us by the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves."

While only a fool would contradict the patron saint of latter twentieth-century Protestantism, I think the devil has a much more devious trick than mere demonic disappearance.

The hard work of deeper risk

Recently I sat in a circle of men who have been meeting together for over twenty years. It is a diverse group, as diverse as any I have ever witnessed. Looking around the circle, there are rich men and poor men. Young men and old men. Black men and white men and native men. Like I said ... diverse.

I have been a member of this circle for about eight years. They have been my weekly, often daily, companions in the life of faith. These are passionate men. Honest men. They are wise men and fools ... often at the same time. They are full of intuition and integrity ... along with vanity and violence. It is as spiritually nurturing as any community I have ever sat amongst in my four-plus decades of life.

This group exists for many reasons. Ultimately it exists to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. Essential to that work is the reconciling responsibility of God's people. This reconciling work requires that white men learn to live alongside black men (and vice versa, though the first is much more difficult because white men have often had little experience living in the black world, while the reverse is as commonplace as climbing out of bed in the morning). This reconciling work requires that poor men have a voice in confronting rich men (and vice versa, but again this typically goes in one direction).

On this particular day, we were sitting in our circle, already deep into the endurance work of personal (and interpersonal) transformation. In an unexpected act of group chronicling, we began a list of names on the whiteboard. The list began twenty years in the past and tracked up until the present. The list grew and grew. In the end there were maybe three dozen names on the board. What was the common denominator? These were all men who had once been among us and now were gone ... often long gone.

This was not a list of those who had moved away from the area. No, they were still around the city. Most of them, we still encounter time and again in other contexts, but no longer in our struggling circle of reconciling faith.

“What led to their departure?” we asked. “Why have these men gone?”

The next hour was spent in storytelling. Those who still had contact with the “old” friends shared the stories of their loss. It was a time of remembering. It was a time of sadness. Most important, it was a time of confession.

“When we look at this list,” one of our most outspoken brothers declared, “if we do not confess our participation in their leaving ... if I don’t confess my responsibility in causing them to leave, then I am lost.”

As we told the stories of exit, several common themes surfaced. The most undeniable commonality was risk; these men had attempted deeper reconciling risk. Time and again, the men listed had chosen to risk with another member(s) of the group. Sometimes it was a business venture. Other times it was a deeper form of shared life. Whatever the reason, the members took what felt like deep personal risks to take the reconciling (shared life) message of the circle to a deeper level ... often deeper than they ever had before.

The result? They discovered that deeper work was just too hard. It was simply too difficult to fight through to the redemptive ending, so each deeper partnership ended prematurely. The friendship was severed. And in time, both men’s place in the circle was lost.

How is this possible? How is it possible that when a person, striving to be righteous, risks the deeper reconciling work of the gospel, their faith ends up being undermined and profound fellowship is lost?

How is it possible? It is possible because the actual gospel of Jesus is just too hard.

Finitely fragile

What is the greatest trick the devil ever pulled? It is not in an elaborate game of demonic hide and seek. The greatest trick is accomplished anytime he uses the gospel of Jesus to split God's people apart. It happens anytime he snickers that the gospel is wielded as a tool of spiritual destruction. When he celebrates that people of Jesus-faith would even attempt to actually practice the gospel in anything but a self-serving, periodic, casual, and consumptive way.

Maybe this is why Uncle Screwtape hardly flinches when his nephew's "patient" converts to Christianity (Chapter II). Screwtape also knows that the gospel is just too hard.

And that may be exactly the way it is supposed to be. The work of the kingdom of God is fragile, as fragile as a snow crystal. It is as fragile as it is powerful, necessary, and eternal.

It is fragile because no human can do it, no matter how sincere. It requires the actual work and presence of Christ to survive. It is finitely fragile because it relies upon God's eternal power to hold course. Isn't that exactly the way it is supposed to be?

"He (Christ) is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church ... " Colossians 1:17-18a
Maybe we shouldn't be asking ourselves, "How is it possible that faith communities fall apart?" Maybe we should be asking, "What hope is there that these communities could ever hold together?" The hope is as simple as it is elusive. Our hope is in the abiding presence of Jesus.

Jesus plus nothing.

It was Uncle Screwtape who wisely instructed his nephew in Chapter XXV, "What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in a state of mind I call 'Christianity And.'" You know—Christianity and _____. Fill in the blank. Christianity and my particular slice of theological emphasis? Christianity and our influential pastor? Christianity and a particular political stance? Christianity and a financial philosophy? Christianity and a health/dietary program? Christianity and ...

The gospel of the kingdom is so fragile that even two of our strongest examples of Christian faith had a hard time holding it together. Peter ran away from his "circle" after personally witnessing the Lord (John 21:1-3). Paul seemed unable to maintain fellowship with Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:36-39). And Paul and Peter even struggled to remain reconciled to one another (Gal. 2:11-14), as it seemed Peter believed in Christianity AND "the works of the Law" (Gal. 2:16).

The challenge of risking around the gospel of Jesus (like the steps of reconciling integration in my diverse circle of men) is as old as Christianity. In the end, maybe we should be less suspicious of communities that exist in perpetual fragility and shift our suspicion to those that appear indisputably secure.

Lord Jesus, forgive us. Guide us. Help us.

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Where Does a Christian



Belong on Halloween

Where Does a Christian Belong on Halloween?

Faithful participation in our communities is a powerful church value.

Halloween. Who would have thought that a national costume party would be such a complicated endeavor and an unexpected opportunity for Christians?

I have a friend named Jason. He was an under-pastor at a fairly large, successful church in the Midwest. A couple of autumns ago, Jason's boss pulled him aside and asked him to represent the pastoral team at the church's Harvest Party (a sacred replacement for the pagan Halloween).

Jason was a natural choice for the festive responsibility. He was popular in the church. Everyone knew and liked him. He had young children, so his "official" responsibilities could be easily harmonized with his family duties. You would think that Jason would have jumped at the opportunity, but it didn't sit right with him.

The problem wasn't the event. Not at all. It was both an appropriate and enjoyable opportunity as a young pastor. The thing that needled him was the thought of leaving his neighborhood on the one night of the year when his neighbors came to his house unsolicited, knocked on his door and, even if just for a moment, acted like neighbors.

Jason understood the church's reason for a "Harvest Party." Halloween was about zombies, ghouls, and witches, things that celebrate darkness and evil. Are those things appropriate for children? On the other hand, who could argue with the theme of "harvest"? Even Jesus told stories about harvesting ... like the one about the wheat and tares, which tells of eternal judgment and damnation ... which is clearly a children's story ... wait a minute. Where was I? Oh yes, Jason.

Jason wondered, "As a person of faith, is it my calling to be the chief religious person on my block (focused on religious events and ceremonies) or is it my calling to be with my neighbors in a faithful way?"

This is a false dichotomy of course, but you get the point.

The Sacred Secular

As a sacred person, am I called to avoid "pagan" or "secular" events, or is it my responsibility to bring my sacredness to them?

Certainly the prophet Daniel would have something to say about this. He was only a boy when he was taken to Babylon. While there, he fully participated in society and was able to study and understand magic and astrology better than his Babylonian teachers (Daniel 1:18-20). But apparently, all in the service of God. He was a faithful participant in the most pagan of societies.

Recently I sat with a group of wonderful folks from The Parish Collective (a group committed to expressing Christianity through integrated neighborhoods). We studied the story of Tabitha from Acts 9. Dr. Dwight Friesen of The Seattle School was leading our discussion.

The story of Tabitha—called “Dorcas” by her pagan neighbors—is a lovely story of healing, hope, and neighborly participation. One of the things that really shocked us was how beloved Tabitha was by her Greek (pagan) neighbors. The widows who lived all around her wept uncontrollably over Tabitha’s death. This sorrow was not the product of a fleeting or momentary relationship. The story says that the widows displayed the evidence of Tabitha’s long and serving presence with them (Acts 9:39). She had practiced “faithful participation.” Keep in mind that this faithful participation among pagans was before Peter’s vision that took him to Cornelius’ home. In this vision God clarified to Peter that the Gentiles were truly part of God’s gospel commission. Peter’s vision happens in the next chapter, Acts 10, and one must wonder if the profound example of Tabitha had prepared Peter’s heart for his change of theology.

The love and devotion between Tabitha and her neighbors had been built over thousands of unexceptional everyday encounters. I imagine her passing her neighbors along the street, greeting them in the market, and lingering together in shaded conversations away from the hot sun. It probably also involved more than a few funerals (her neighbors were widows living in a military town). Most of it was probably pretty unglamorous stuff. They were daily, often anonymous encounters of kingdom-love. Tabitha was a beacon of faithful participation.

Faithful participation happens when we coach little league, attend neighborhood association meetings or volunteer at the local school. Faithful participation happens when we choose to plant our garden in the front yard instead of the backyard, so that our weekends can be spent greeting our neighbors passing by (and distributing the always ‘more than you asked for’ zucchini crop). Faithful participation happens when we choose to spend an unstructured Saturday morning in the neighborhood coffeehouse or an evening on the front porch, instead of hiding away in the TV room. It is found in the daily, often anonymous encounters of kingdom-love.

Faithful participation might also mean attending more than a few

funerals along the way.

What Jason Did

Pastor Jason decided that even though the Harvest Festival was important, the opportunity to be at home greeting his neighbors was more important. He explained his heart to his boss and was graciously released from his church responsibilities that October 31 evening.

Jason went home and (armed with a heaping bowl of sweets) spent the evening in his entryway. Every time there was a knock, he opened the door with a grin and a greeting. He knew a few of the children's names and complimented them on their creative costumes.

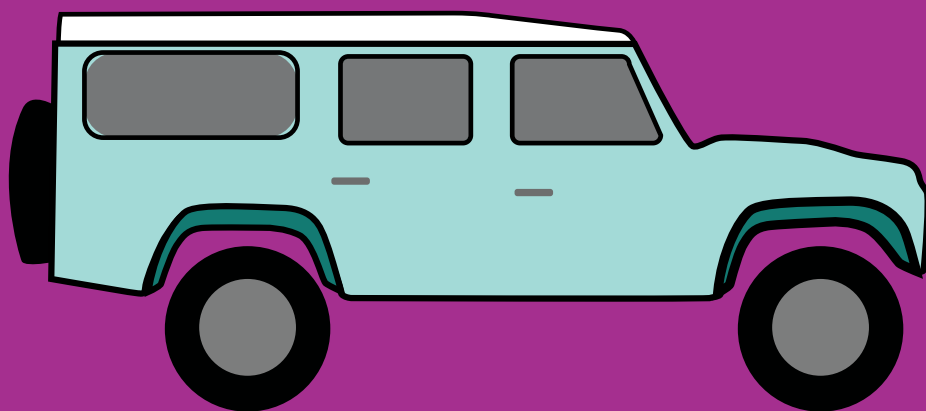
His real joy was found in the parent chaperones. Some names he knew and so many he didn't. He saw the couple who live two blocks over who love to work their garden. In his five years in the neighborhood, though he had greeted them many times, he had never asked them their names: "Bill and Jenny." He made a mental note and promised himself he wouldn't forget. He met the man who owns the neighborhood grocery store and even got a smile out of the grumpy president of the local PTA. All the while, he was adding to his mental map the names and faces of his neighborhood.

All through the evening Jason marveled, not only was he participating with his neighbors during a pagan holiday, but the holiday itself was actually funneling his neighbors to his front door.

He thought, "If that isn't just like God, I don't know what is."

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A Moment to



Think About Me

A Moment to Think About Me

Reflecting on the way to church.

I am tired of loving others. It is exhausting.
I am tired of “love thy neighbor.”

I am tired of “these three: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.”

What about me? What about a little me-love?

When I imagine me-love, I imagine a place that is all about me. This place would start with a chair, perfectly molded to my body. A chair so me-oriented that it adjusts and lumbar supports. I could sit in my me-chair for hours on end in perfect comfort.

My me-love-chair would come with remotes. But these remotes would never get lost (that pisses me off). I would not even have to lean forward to grab these remotes off the coffee table. In my me-chair, the remotes would all be built-in. I would never have to move.

In my me-chair, everything around would be all about me. The stereo system would be programmed to all my me-songs and me-stations. The surround of speakers would all be modulated and pointed directly at me.

In my me-chair I could control access. My remotes would include the ability to lock the door, so I could keep others out or allow them access to my me-space. Not just anyone should be allowed to a space about me.

My me-chair of course is climate controlled, but it is more than just temperature. Any space can have a thermostat. No, in my me-space I would be able to control more than the temperature. I would also have God-like powers to control the very weather. I could summon the wind with the push of a button. My me-chair is so powerful I can summon the sun to shine on my head. Now that is quite a trick.

It would not be enough to merely control comfort, entertainment, access and climate ... my me-chair would also have to control space and distance. I can fix that. To my me-chair, I will attach four wheels, a drive train, engine and gas tank, so I can take my me-chair wherever I want to go.

My me-chair of course is also known as a “car.”

It is an amazing invention that is all about me.

All about me

Who do all these other people think that they are? How can they possibly do what they do?

It is no wonder that I get so upset when the others, those outside my me-space, don't give me the me-love. Don't those folks realize that this space is all about me? The chair says it is all about me. The stereo sings it is all about me. The power windows, the sunroof, the cup holders; they are all about me. The climate controls say it is all about me. Even the steering wheel submits to my every desire.

So why don't these other fools act the same way? They have an agenda that is not about me. They cut me off. They drive the wrong speed. They get in my way. They live in violent dissonance to my perfect me-space.

Inside it is all about me.

Outside it is about, what? Someone else. That just can't be. So what do I do? I lash out when the me-bubble is prodded, just like a me-addict does. I scream the very me-thoughts I feel inside. I use me-fueled gestures to express my me-dissonance, to show my me-anger.

After all, I deserve this me-place that is all about me. When will these others start to realize that?

Morphing my identity

There is one more secret that I want to share. It is a magical secret, almost never spoken about. There is an even greater power in my me-love me-space. It has the power to transform. What does it transform? Well, ME, of course. You will not find this power in any manual or handbook. They do not advertise it on the dealership website. But it is the most powerful perk.

My car is also an Identity Transmopher. That's right! It can transform my identity to be whatever I want to project. You don't believe it is so? Let me show you how it works.

Let's say that I go to church in another neighborhood. Before I arrive, I want to transmorph into a certain type of person. The solution is simple. I climb inside my transmorphing machine and let it do its magic. As the streets and intersections and strip-malls fly by, my transmopher does its transmorphing work.

By the time I arrive at the church doors, I have become exactly what I want these people to see. I am all “Hey Brother” and “God bless you” and “How do you do?” And the brilliance is that, thanks to the transmorpher’s magic, these people know no different. How could they? They don’t see me at work. They’ve never heard me yell at my kids on a Saturday afternoon. They don’t see me at the sports bar on Monday night. They don’t know how I spend my money, manipulate my family, or my web-browser history. These are not my neighbors. They are far away, nowhere near my everyday life.

For all they know, I am always “Hey Brother” and “God bless you” and “How do you do?”

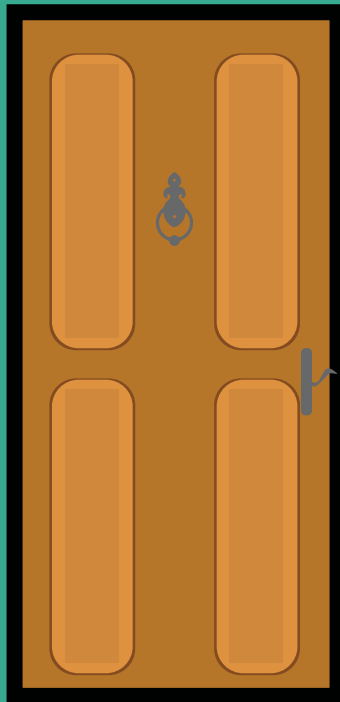
Walking to church could never do what the transmorpher does.

That is the ultimate power of the me-centered transmorphing machine.

It is all about me.

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Why Wouldn't I



Why Wouldn't I?

A haunting question that burns bright at Advent.

Ring.

My friend Mark says, “There are some people who just get the call. That is just the way it is.”

Ring.

I picked it up. It was Peter. “Hey Tony, do you still have people stay with you?”

My family has lived communally for over a decade. It is not a particularly fancy organizational structure. If someone comes across our path (or appears on our doorstep), we offer them room ... if there is room to spare, that is. Most come for “just a few days ... until I get settled,” but more often than not stay longer. For as long as two years sometimes: people on the last rations of their faith, folks in life transition, people escaping violence, lovely friends, failed missionaries full of hurt, post-Christians ... and many become uncles and aunties to our boys.

Peter continued: “There is this young woman I have known since she was a girl ... she has had a hard run the last few years. She is getting her life together. She has a baby. She is looking for a safe environment with a room. Can I send her your way?”

Before I go any further, let me assure you that I was already not having a good morning, having already had a stout argument with my wife. More true to the point, I had not had a very good month—recently laid off from my teaching job, worried about money, and of course, wrestling my ever-present faith-angst.

I told Pete, “No.”

Pete had called on the wrong morning. It didn't matter that a couple we had met on the streets of our neighborhood (two-year housemates) had moved out just two days before and their room was empty; I didn't want to help. I was so deep in my funk that it didn't even occur to me that, smack in the middle of Advent, I just told a young woman with child that there was “no room at the inn.”

Two days before Peter's call, I taught my last class at a local college, a place I had grown to love. It was a preaching class—when his number was called, Nick stood to deliver his final sermon. Nick is an undergraduate, still finding his way around behind a pulpit. However there was one moment in his sermon that I won't soon forget.

Nick was talking about people in need that he passes every day:
“They may need a pair of shoes, or lunch, or maybe just a friendly conversation. It seems like when I notice a need, I have been programmed to ask myself, ‘Why would I help this person?’ I am starting to think that I should instead ask, ‘Why wouldn’t I?’”

I don’t think Nick realized his moment of preaching genius. It was one of those moments where eternity seemed to sink immediately into the soul.

Throughout the week, Nick’s phrase echoed inside my heart: Why wouldn’t I? Why wouldn’t I? Why wouldn’t I?

I found myself thinking about Jesus. When Jesus had a chance to touch a leper, he didn’t ask, “Why would I?” Jesus thought, Why wouldn’t I?

When he learned the Samaritan’s woman’s village was near by, he said, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“If someone asks for my cloak ... Why wouldn’t I?”

“If someone asks me to walk a mile ... Why wouldn’t I?”

This very morning I was reading the Annunciation story in Luke 1, when Gabriel appears to Mary.

Reading it today again, I had this thought for the first time: When Gabriel told Mary that she would bear the Messiah, did she count the implications of his words? Did she catalog the unending pains, shames, challenges, inconveniences, mockings, and messes that his words would set in motion? Or did she simply say, “Yes.”

Did she intuitively know that it was not her responsibility to count the second domino ... or the third ... or the fourteen thousandth? Did she somehow know that that first domino was more than enough eternity for that day?

And Mary said, “Yes.”

Why wouldn’t I?

Many hours after Peter’s phone call, I returned home from a long afternoon of meetings. Having put Pete’s request behind me, I helped my boys set the table, we enjoyed a nice family meal, and I went to the kitchen to wash dishes.

Even with the water going, I could hear my wife, Aimee, in the dining room helping the boys with their homework. Hardly realizing what I was doing, I called to her and she came and stood at the end of the counter while I washed.

“I didn’t tell you,” I said, “Peter called me this morning. He knows a young woman who is looking for a place for her and her baby.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. Don’t worry, I told Peter that we are too tired for that sort of thing right now. I told him we have other priorities. He understood.” I paused. “I already gave him our final answer, so you don’t have to worry about it ... I just wanted you to know.”

Then I went back to the dishes.

Aimee didn’t move.

After about twenty seconds she said, “Tony ...”

“Yeah?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

I have no memory of her ever using that particular phrase before, and we’ve been married almost fifteen years.

So in the spirit of Mary, Advent is our time for saying “yes” ... and not worrying about domino two, or domino fourteen thousand.

This Advent I am trying to ask, Why wouldn’t I?

Why wouldn’t I make room at our “inn” for someone needing shelter?

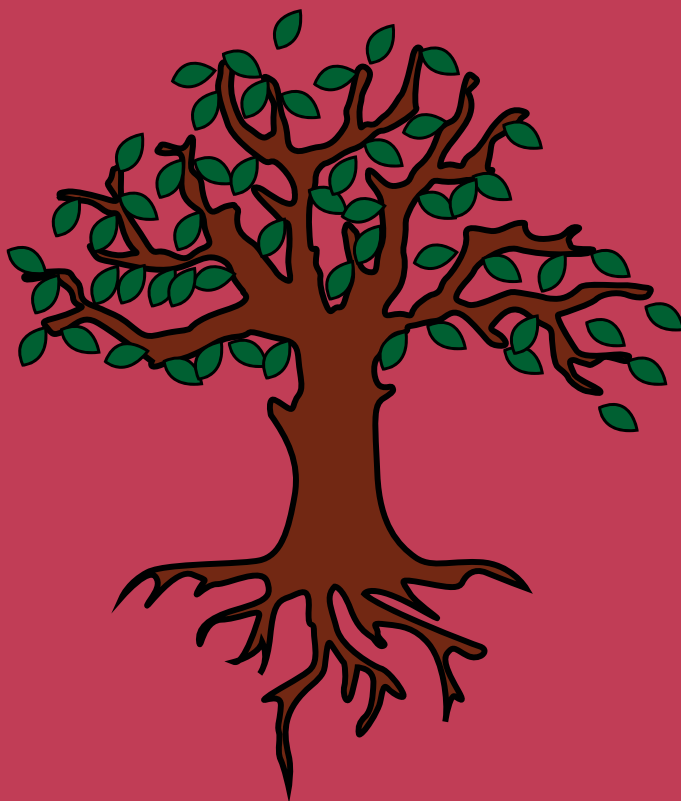
Why wouldn’t I lend my voice to the marginalized of our world—the victims of classism, racism, and injustice? “I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people.”

Why wouldn’t I embrace the foreigner, the traveler, or the person of vastly divergent beliefs (like the Magi in Jesus’ time)?

How about you? Why wouldn’t you?

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Bounded Place,



Rooted People

Bounded Place, Rooted People

My longing for college life is more than nostalgia.

I'm pleased to feature this piece from good friend (and real-life neighbor) Tony Kriz. For more from Tony, read one of his many pieces for Leadership Journal. For more on this topic, be sure to catch "Planting the New Parish," and "Mary, Martha, and Slow Church." - Paul

I miss my university years.

It has been twenty-two years since I graduated from college. I went to a state school in a medium-sized Oregon farm town. For me, it was a fantastic experience and my four years there were among the most meaningful of my life.

I cannot deny the fondness I feel. Is it just nostalgia? Maybe ... in part. But when I sit now and reflect back more than two decades there are several formative realities of my university years that seem hard to come by in my modern urban world. And I am not alone. I have heard many others express similar feelings, though it is often hard to put language to this sense of lack.

Here is an attempt to define what made my college days feel significant and formative:

I was connected.

My state-school's world was only about fifteen-blocks by fifteen-blocks in size, if you took into consideration all the school facilities, living quarters, basic businesses, recreation, employment opportunities, and locations of leisure.

In such a bounded world, it was an amazing feeling (I didn't even know how good I had it) to get up in the morning and walk down the sidewalks and paths and almost constantly have someone to greet. Chance conversations were the norm. Unexpected encounters were simply a part of walking out my door.

If only life could be like that today.

I knew.

My school was decent sized. There were over fifteen thousand undergrads, and on top of that there were graduate students, faculty, staff, and "normal" neighbors, but still, there seemed to be connectedness everywhere. If you pointed at a dormitory or a fraternity house, odds were that I considered one or more people inside to be friends. Like I said, I didn't know everybody but odds are that I knew somebody who knew almost anybody... and that is something pretty

magical.

I believe this came from a few factors. One was simply the fact that my world was small. I didn't spend much time in my car, transporting from one isolated place to the next. It was also because my world was simple (boy oh boy, do I miss simple) so simple that abrupt transitions were all but unnecessary.

I was known.

It wasn't just that I knew people's names; relationships seemed fairly intentional back then (I don't want to be overly idyllic, since we were immature nineteen-year-olds, but still.) Not only did we strive to know each other's stories, we were also fairly interconnected through overlapping communities. If I was hurting, successful, stressed, sad, inspired or exhausted, you could bet that a web of people knew about it.

Pain was shared.

I can remember that a young man committed suicide my sophomore year. I didn't know him personally. A few of my friends knew him. Know him or not though, everyone was talking about it. Sitting in class there was a mournful buzz.

I also remember the day that Congress was voting whether or not to enter the first Gulf War (Desert Storm). We were all pretty upset about it. A spontaneous prayer vigil was convened that evening in the Student Center to beg God for wisdom and mercy. It was just a word-of-mouth thing. Hundreds showed up: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Atheists. Most of us wanted to pray. All of us wanted to be together.

Celebration was shared.

There was a sense that we were for one another. It didn't matter if you played for the basketball team or the Tiddilywink club, if there was an important game, we showed up, clothed in our obnoxious collegiate enthusiasm. If you were defending your graduate thesis, we tried to come. If you were performing a three-song set at the local coffee shop on a Monday evening we filled the place. If you were displaying your architecture final, we wanted to cheer you on.

That was the way we lived. Maybe it was the product of post-adolescent camaraderie, but as I feel back across the years, I believe it is more than that. It feels like we had found something particularly... human.

If only life could be like that again.

People and place

I miss the fifteen-block by fifteen-block universe that my university provided me. It was one of my most formative times. It was one of my most integrated times. It was one of my most activist times. I find a growing number of people who miss similar seasons. As a result, I think many of us feel adrift.

It is therefore not surprising to find some great thinking today around a return to a bounded locality, the sort of locality that a university experience can represent, admittedly in a quasi-manufactured and only seasonal way.

On this theme, the first works that come to mind are two books released this last month: *The New Parish* (Dwight Friesen, Tim Soerens, and Paul Sparks) and *Slow Church* (John Pattison and Chris Smith), both from IVP. Both illustrate, inspire, and instruct on the power of a world made smaller. I am squinting to believe their claims that such a life is possible, even now, despite being in my forties, with a family of five, three jobs, and a comet-storm of expectations.

“The life of worship ... encompasses the whole of your collective lives together... as a way of being faithfully present to the relationships in your context. The holistic life of worship is an everyday posture ... in the parish.”
- *The New Parish*, p. 85.

“We are bound one to another, but a culture built on speed wants to fling us out from the center like a centrifuge. Thus, to commit ourselves to cultivating goodness through practices of nearness and stability, and to conversationally develop shared traditions, is to take a stand against alienation. It is a way of crafting a new, shared story for the community...”
- *Slow Church*, p. 43.

In light of these thoughts, I went to the Portland Public Schools website and looked at the district boundaries for my sons' elementary school. Guess what I found? It is about fifteen-blocks by eighteen-blocks in size, only slightly larger than my state university world. Then, as I traced my finger along the roads and byways of that district, I found all sorts of living spaces, education spaces, employment spaces, recreation spaces, business spaces, leisure spaces, and dozens of opportunities to volunteer.

So my family and some of our neighbors are trying to think more in terms of a bounded locality. We are starting to check our integration-quotient: Are we connected in our particular place? Do we know and are we known? Are we sharing in the pain and celebration of our uniquely

rooted time and location?

The main difference between our life now and life in university may simply be a loss of bounded intentionality.

As a result, this week we are going to the going-out-of-business party of a long-standing local café, owned by our neighbor only two blocks away. We are also looking forward to helping with the opening of a new wine bar located three-blocks away and owned by neighbors just around the corner. Last week, a family we don't know well had a hospice van parked out front, and since we knew the couple across the street, we were able learn what happened and offer help. And finally, a young girl was murdered this week and silently and tearfully we are standing with our neighbors in sorrow.

These things are not necessarily easy, but they are important and they are meaningful. Our bounded locality is connecting us and giving context to our faith.

It reminds me of a quote by St. Anthony who was asked: "What must one do in order to please God?"

The old man replied, "Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes, whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved."

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Can a Muslim Be



God's Voice to Me?

“Can a Muslim Be God’s Voice to Me?”

Rethinking the ways we hear from God.

I once lived with a Muslim family for two years. It was extremely challenging, but not in the ways I expected it would be.

I lived with the Muslim family in their house near the center square of the capital city of Albania. There were nine of us in a relatively small space. Added to the cramped conditions was the fact that running water flowed only a few hours a day, electricity was intermittent, and food variety was limited. But I found none of this too difficult, even though Albania (Muslim, Balkan, post-Communist, poor, Mediterranean) could not have been more jarring to my affluent, American, “white,” Baptist upbringing.

What I found most challenging was this: They loved me. They loved me not only in a pat-you-on-the-back landlord sort of way. My Muslim family loved me like a son, which included caring for me as their spiritual responsibility.

This took particular force in the person of my hunched and humming Albanian grandmother. She was the first face I saw each morning, and at night she would lovingly touch my shoulder and say “sweet sleep.” She also pastored me. She encouraged me when I was low, blessed me as I went about my work (which, by the way, was Christian missionary work) and she told me about God’s love for me. She challenged my Christian training and my American pragmatism. She was a dawdling, superstitious Muslim. How could I allow her to be God’s voice in my life?

Tough questions

What am I to do? Seriously.

How do I understand all the folks who cross my path and don’t fit my theological categories? As a devout Christian, what am I supposed to do with the non-Christians I have known who are kinder than most Christians, purer than most Christians, and seemingly more connected to God than most Christians? Even more troubling, what am I to do with religious outsiders who are spiritually wise and speak that wisdom into my life? Am I allowed to accept their wisdom or am I required to sit in perpetual suspicion?

I recently had a conversation with Bob. Bob is a very learned and highly regarded scholar and advocate for Christianity. I was telling him about my Albanian grandmother, as well as several other folks in whom I’ve encountered love and wisdom that don’t belong to my faith. Bob was troubled by my words. He asked me repeatedly, “How can you claim that God can speak through anyone and still hold to our Christian dogma?” (I am not exaggerating his word usage; he really did say “dogma.” I didn’t think anybody even said “dogma” anymore.)

Regardless of his word choice, Bob was asking an important question. It is a question that has followed me for most of my adult life. Bob feared that my stories (full of Muslims, Atheists, and drunkards) was dangerous and the product of weak faith.

So, what am I to do? What am I to do with my Albanian grandmother? What am I to believe regarding my wise and spiritually insightful (even faith-filled) agnostic neighbor or my lovely Buddhist housemate or the tipsy advisor sitting next to me at the local pub?

With any question truly worth asking (and I believe these questions are of the highest significance), there are a few foundational things I feel I need to ask myself.

What do I believe about God?

For this, I may need to go back to a Sunday school question: Just how “omni” is God anyway? From my earliest days, I was taught that God is omniscient (all-powerful) and omnipresent (in all places) but is God also “omni-creative?” Is God limited (finite) in God’s capacity to creatively communicate?

When we think about the Transcendent, we need to decide just how transcendent that being is. Whether we view the transcendent as a person (the way that theists do) or if we think of the Transcendent as a “force” like most of my neighbors in Portland do, we need to process whether or not that Being is limited in its creative capacity.

Jesus said that God spoke through lilies and sparrows. The Psalmist says that God cries out through rocks. Once God even spoke through an ass.

So I have to decide for myself, Is God creatively restrained or infinite?

What do I believe about the “other?”

This one is a little trickier for me.

Can anyone be my spiritual teacher?

When I was young, I believed that I had one of two choices when it comes to understanding people as spiritual beings. Option one said that the world is filled by two teams: Christians and non-Christians. The Christians spoke for God and everyone else could not. Option two was to believe that everyone could know spiritual truth. But if that was true, I also had to believe that what one believed didn’t matter and everyone was spiritually the same, regardless of beliefs. I had only two options.

Today, I believe in spiritual identity. I believe that that identity is more than just subjective. The Bible, for instance, uses redeemed and unredeemed categories and links those categories to a person's destiny.

That being said, I wonder if I have conflated my belief about spiritual identity with my belief about spiritual capacity. To put that another way, maybe I should separate the conversations about identity (whether a person is a Christian or a non-Christian) and capacity (whether or not someone is able to express truth, righteousness and moral goodness.)

In a similar vein, maybe one does not have to be a Christian to recognize and express the ways of God. And if that is true, anyone has the potential to be my spiritual teacher.

What have I witnessed in Jesus?

It only takes a cursory overview to see that Jesus made identity statements that divided people. He referred to nations as "sheep" and "goats" (Matthew 25). He said to some, "you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me (John 10:26-27)."

However, when I observe some of Jesus behaviors, the question of spiritual capacity becomes a bit more complicated. Jesus repeatedly surprises me in his response to the person who is religiously "other."

In Jesus first sermon, found in Luke 4, Jesus pulls from biblical history. From the hundreds of people Jesus could have chosen, Jesus' first sermon spotlighted two religious "outsiders" as spiritual heroes: a widow of Sidon and a leper from Syria. Interesting. Jesus also composed many fictional short stories. In one of his most famous, The Good Samaritan, Jesus fabricates his story around a spiritual outsider, a Samaritan, a person that his audience had been trained to distrust simply because of who they were (just like I had been trained to distrust my Albanian grandmother.)

Jesus rarely has complimentary words to say about the faith of the religious teachers and "insiders" of his day. Only once does the Bible say that Jesus marveled at someone and that someone (Matthew 8:10) was a Roman Centurion, a man who was probably a pagan, a pluralist and an idolater. In another rare scene of faith-affirmation, Jesus said to a Canaanite woman (religious outsider), "your faith is great (Matthew 15:28)."

In a related way, Jesus relied on a Samaritan woman to tend to his thirst (John 4), he submitted to a sinner to anoint him with oil (Luke 7:37) and it was an outlaw that he chose to minister to him the rite of baptism (Mark 1:9). In his birth story, Jesus is "saved" by stargazers from Eastern lands (Matthew 2:1-12).

Jesus' words and behaviors are surprising indeed.

Expecting God's voice

Can anyone be my spiritual teacher? Can anyone have insight and epiphanies about the ways and values of God, regardless of their religious identity?

In asking this, we are not asking the question, "Is everything that anyone says at any time spiritually helpful or healing?" Of course not. I only have to examine my heart and life to know the answer to that. So much of what comes out of my mouth or is demonstrated by my life is in direct opposition to God's ways. I am often driven by selfishness, manipulation, arrogance, prejudice and disdain. I can only assume that this is also true of most anybody that I might come across.

However, am I open to the possibility that any person who crosses my path, regardless of creed or background, could be my spiritual teacher? Do I live in perpetual expectation of God's voice? Do I hope that every person has something to show me about the goodness, truth and beauty of the Kingdom of God?

There is an ancient Christian prayer by St. Patrick.

*"Christ, the lowly and the meek,
Christ, the all-powerful
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak
Be in the mouth of each who speaks unto me."*

Does someone have to be an artist to recognize beauty when they see it? Does one have to be a judge to proclaim justice to the world? Does one have to be a doctor to practice healing?

Identity and capacity are not the same thing.

Do I live in perpetual expectation of God's voice? If not, maybe it is not God who is limited. Maybe just I am.

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Beware



Beware

Six principles to faithfully discern God's voice among the howls of the "wolves."

As a kid, you hear a lot of stories about wolves. Beware of wolves ... Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing ... Don't be the boy who cried "wolf."

A month ago, I wrote an article asking "Can a Muslim Be God's Voice to Me?" I explored the fact that anyone has the potential to be God's voice, be they Christian, Atheist, Muslim, or Drunkard. I considered the following ideas:

- The belief that God is a creative communicator. He is able and willing to speak through a burning bush, an ass, a Centurion, and even through my non-religious neighbor.
- The difference between spiritual identity and spiritual capacity. Have we Christians unnecessarily restricted what we expect from non-Christian spiritual capacity, regardless of their creed? Can we separate spiritual identity from capacity?
- Christ's example in elevating spiritual outsiders. Jesus challenges us by hearing and honoring a widow of Sidon and a leper of Syria (Luke 4), a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:10), a Samaritan (Luke 10), and a Canaanite (Matthew 15:28) to name a few.

In the end, I asked, "Am I open to the possibility that any person who crosses my path, regardless of creed or background, could be my spiritual teacher?"

As you can probably guess, that column resulted in spirited discussion, full of thoughts and critiques for which I am thankful. In the wake of that debate, I am challenged by the flip side of the question. How do I know if someone is not God's voice to me? This is tricky, and probably more than a single article can cover. But I want to try. Let me state the obvious, and then lay out six scattered principles to help guide our discernment.

Stating the obvious

There are a few moments when we can assume the source is not speaking for God:

- Anyone arguing that the true God is actually the devil or a used Kleenex.
- Anyone who defends intellectually inane ideas: the earth is flat, the earth is the center of the universe, babies come from storks, or that the moon is made of marshmallow.
- Anyone desiring the eradication or marginalization of any people group on any grounds.
- Anyone justifying acts that God and all sane humanity agree are evil: chopping up babies for fun, contributing to slavery, and wanton violence like bombing the Boston Marathon or destroying a rain

forest.

These “obvious” categories cover a surprising percentage of human debate. Here are some other principles.

Principle 1: Trust No One.

I have an uncle named Larry. Larry is not actually my uncle, which I would not need to state if you saw the two of us standing side by side. Larry is a six foot, six inches, 270-pound retired cop. He is wicked smart and one of the most spiritually intuitive men I have ever known.

One day, Larry and I were sitting in a circle of men. Larry began to aggressively question one of the other men about his life, in the way that passionate leaders do. The other man responded, “I am not comfortable answering your questions because I haven’t known you long enough to trust you.” To this Larry responded, “Let me tell you something. I don’t trust any of these men in this room and some of them are my closest friends. I don’t trust them because I know that every one of these jackasses is going to let me down one day. They are going to lie to me. They are going to betray me.” (If we ask ourselves about the most important people in our stories—our mentors, spouses and best friends—we all know that Larry’s words are true. If you don’t agree, then Larry would probably question whether you have any true relationships.)

“Here’s the deal,” Larry continued, “There is only one person that I ultimately trust and his name is Jesus. Because of him, I am ready to lay my life down for any of you son-of-a-guns. I haven’t been called to trust you; I have been called to love you.”

Principle 2: When it comes to Christ speaking, we are all on equal footing.

I have a brilliant friend and mentor named Dr. Paul Metzger. He’s a faithful friend and honest with me. After reading “Can a Muslim Be God’s Voice to Me,” he called me with an important critique.

In the article, I had suggested that everyone, regardless of our spiritual identity, born again or not, has the capacity to be God’s voice. Dr. Metzger, a fastidious theologian, took exception to my choice of vocabulary. “As Christians, we must always make Christ the center, there is no other angle on the discussion,” he said. “The fact of the matter is that none of us, Christian or non-Christian, has capacity in ourselves. All of us, regardless of our spiritual identity can only speak truth, see beauty, or do justice because of the capacity that Christ works through

any of us by his Spirit.”

Principle 3: Warnings from Jesus

“Beware.”

Jesus was certainly concerned about false voices. In fact he joined the chorus of my childhood storytellers when he warned us about wolves. “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware ... (Matthew 10:16)” and “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matthew 7:15).”

Good advice.

The word “beware,” used above by Jesus, may offer us an unexpected perspective. Jesus uses that word on several occasions to help define the boundaries of hazardous spiritual exchange.

In my Bible, the word “beware” appears in eight passages in the Gospels, each time attributed to Jesus.

Two of those passages refer to “wolves” as listed above. In these passages, Jesus is warning against false teachers who will turn you over to the authorities to be tortured by religious/political institutions. Not pretty.

In Luke 12, Jesus cautions his followers to beware of the greedy. Jesus defines the greedy as those who have stored enough wealth for “years to come” (Should I check my 401K?). Jesus contrasts this by teaching, “consider the ravens ... consider the lilies,” two unlikely sources of God’s voice.

In the remaining five passages Jesus tells us to beware of Scribes and Pharisees. Beware of the Scribes (Luke 20 and Mark 12) because they use their religious position/power to feed their egos and receive public praise (Luke 20:47). Beware of the Pharisees (Matthew 16, Mark 8, and Luke 12) because of their infectious (leaven) teachings and hypocrisy. Jesus warned us to be particularly suspicious of those who use the name of God for personal power, wealth, or public acclaim.

Principle 4: The Magic of Divine Translation

I remember sitting in a dilapidated dormitory room in Albania back in 1993. The walls were bare; the windowpanes were cracked or missing. The stench from the well-used but long-broken bathroom down the hall rolled into the room like a swamp mist.

Sitting next to me was a 19-year-old student from an outlying city. He was a brand new Christian, his faith only a few hours old. We were

discussing the things of Jesus.

Suddenly his roommate burst into the room. Seeing his lifelong friend, the first student began to blurt out the gospel of Jesus. He did his best, but his presentation was horrible. It was full of religious half-truths and, quite frankly, a heretical understanding of Jesus.

I had been in this situation before, so I simply sat, waiting to see what God's Spirit would do. At the end of his five-minute presentation, the sort of which a first semester Bible school student could have ripped apart, he looked at his friend and asked, "Would you like to accept Jesus?" Without hesitation, the other smiled and they both knelt on the chalky floor. Together they prayed aloud the most beautiful, imperfect prayer I had ever heard.

Over the next hours (and weeks) as the three of us explored the Bible together, I was often amazed by the second student's grasp of biblical truth. When he told the story of his conversion, the words he heard were quite different than the flawed presentation I had witnessed. Through the stumbling gospel message, it became obvious to me that Someone had broken in, translating the presentation as it flowed from the first man's mouth to the second's ears.

Principle 5: Sometimes I need a lie.

I am not the first to say that the longest journey in the world is the 18 inches between your head and your heart. For a stubborn guy like me, that already long journey is even longer.

As a child and young man, I was taught quite a number of lies by the most well-meaning church people. These lies existed in categorical opposition to the gospel of Jesus. There were lies about God's character, about the source of my spiritual identity, and about God's affections for me.

And I needed all those lies.

You see, I am made of a certain sort of mettle, where I only learn by the long road, the painful road. I took those false beliefs on a long test drive to the other side of the world and back. Those lies eventually bankrupted my faith and left me feeling abandoned, broken, and bereaved. And that was exactly what this thickheaded, petulant boy needed. For in the wake of that spiritual bankruptcy and burnout, I finally met God and his seeds of truth were able to begin to burrow down into my heart.

I love those well-meaning people for the lies they taught me. I needed to

be sent on my merciful, long journey.

Principle 6: The Protection of the Community of Faith

Determining truth is very difficult to do alone. So we need to rely upon the community of faith to help us discern. However, which community are we called to rely upon? It is the “body of Christ,” where the eye needs the hand and the head needs the foot (1 Corinthians 12:21). This body, forged in the radical, multi-cultural fire of Pentecost (Acts 2) is being fulfilled in the every nation, every tribe, every tongue reality of Christ’s eternal throne (Revelation 7:9).

Each of us has blind spots. Mine are particularly large. If I surround myself mostly with people who are just like me, what hope do I have? If my faith life is populated with people who look like me, worship like me, read like me, vote like me, spend like me, and sound like me then it is pretty safe to assume that we will all have the same blind spots.

Perspective can be found in faith-filled diversity: culture, race, gender, age, region, denomination, and economics.

Sometimes a wolf is not a wolf after all

When do I know that someone is not God’s voice to me? That is a complicated question. I have only just barely started the conversation. I am sure you will have many important thoughts to add (the comment field is right below). But before I wrap up, I want to share just one more idea with you.

In my early 30s, I found myself at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. I was there for about three years, serving as a friend of the campus and something of a volunteer chaplain. I went even though I was warned against it.

You see, Reed College is widely considered the most godless college in America. It’s the sort of place that suburban churchgoers come to visit on a sort of spiritual safari, hoping to see all the wild pagans in their natural habitat. It is, we’re told, the very center of the wolf pack.

“Beware,” I was told. “Beware of Reed College. It is the sort of place that will ruin your faith.”

Well, it didn’t ruin my faith. What I experienced was just the opposite. It was one of the most faith-promoting seasons of my life, living side-by-side with folks of diverse spiritual backgrounds, but who loved and supported me as I endeavored each day to walk with Jesus. Wolves they may have been, but they took me in, and supported me in my journey. They embraced this stranger as one of their own, and I heard the voice of God speaking through their barks and howls time and time again.

In that same spirit, please watch the video below. It’s a powerful modern parable. It is, of all things, a commercial for a hotel chain, but the message is poignant—”To embrace a stranger as one’s own.” As the people of God, I believe there is something here for all of us, as we seek to both beware, and to welcome the voice of God, however he may choose to speak to us.

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Spiritual Friendship



Magi-Style

Spiritual Friendship, Magi-style

Christ's visitors from the East show us the importance of spiritual "foreigners."

In the twelfth century, the English abbot Aelred of Rievaulx wrote the foundational treatise *On Spiritual Friendship*. Aelred made the case that one of the great practices of the Christian life is being transformed by the presence of a spiritual friend.

He taught that through friendship we are sanctified, perfected into Christ. In one place he says, "The best medicine in life is a friend." And also, "... human beings are equal and as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship."

Tom is one such friend for me. He is a source of great spiritual encouragement. He is a defender of my soul. He nourishes my life and brings me both challenges and joy. Tom has helped me be a better minister of the gospel, and has advised me on my spiritual life.

Did I mention that Tom does not identify as a Christian? Not only does he not identify as a Christian, he most closely aligns with Unitarians and is unapologetically secular and progressive. Additionally, he is a promoter of liberal thought through his religious writings, primarily as a member of the board of contributors for *USA Today*.

You can find Tom Krattenmaker all over the Internet, if you want to.

Celebrating Advent values

We are in the liturgical season of Advent. In my household, this is one of the most beloved times of the year. My wife Aimee (who is the liturgical curator of our community) makes sure that our home reflects Advent values. Our family enjoys a small Advent ceremony every evening. We practice hope. We celebrate Christ's coming.

One of Aimee's practices is to construct a simple stable scene on our fireplace mantle out of rocks and driftwood. In the stable sits an empty manger with only the companionship of a lone donkey. Around the living room are placed the other characters of the nativity story. Throughout the Advent season these characters "journey" across the room to arrive at the stable in harmony with the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph arrive on Christmas Eve. Jesus appears on Christmas morning. And the Shepherds join the scene on Christmas mid-day.

Lastly, on the feast of Epiphany (January 6), the Magi (wise men) arrive. They are odd characters aren't they? On several levels, they are so incongruent with the rest of Christ's birth story that we can only assume that their appearance is not only historically accurate, but also theologically necessary.

Who were the Magi anyway? They appear to be spiritual scholars of some kind who—prompted by a strange star—went on a great quest to discover the divine story. They were not Christians (there were no Christians as such at this point in history). There is nothing in the text to suggest they were Jews either. They were stargazers from the East. Were they Zoroastrians? Astrologers? We do not know. But they are most assuredly spiritual “exotics” within the narrative of Jesus. They stand out.

You know what is most shocking to me about the Magi? How comfortable Matthew—the Jewish disciple of Jesus—was to include the Magi in his Gospel. And more importantly, how delighted Jesus, through the inspiring Holy Spirit, was to welcome these spiritual foreigners into their nativity story.

Maybe it’s because the Magi were viewed as spiritual friends.

Spiritual foreigners, spiritual friends?

Some of my Christian friends flinch a bit when they learn that my friend Tom does not identify as a Christian. It’s hard for some to accept the fact that a public purveyor of a secular-progressive message could be a true “spiritual friend” to a faithful Christian.

Tom would be the first to admit that he once lived on the other side of the cultural/theological gap which separates the stereotypically conservative Christian world from the world of secular progressives. He would also admit that he once had an agenda to reveal the foibles and follies of “fundamentalist” Christianity.

There was a time that, when Tom looked into the conservative Christian world, he saw mostly darkness. However, just as when one stares into the darkness of the night sky, the longer you look, the more you can’t help but see the stars. Yes, Tom now sees the twinkling stars in the once dark world of evangelicalism. He’s seen the side of us that many spiritual foreigners haven’t—the signs of Christian life and light that shine God’s life to the world.

He was so moved by what he saw, that he couldn’t help but write a book about it. The purpose of his book, to declare to the rest of the world the examples of heavenly beauty that he had witnessed through evangelicals. His book is called, *The Evangelicals You Don’t Know*, which is an examination of some of the most beautiful examples of faith-life in America. He does not necessarily have frankincense or myrrh to offer to us, but in seeing the stars, he has brought us (and the world, I think) a gift. Tom is my spiritual friend. I believe he is your friend as well. He may have come from afar, but he’s here seeking light.

Who are the Magi-friends in your life? Who are the unexpected spiritual-exotics that God has brought into story? Do you see the gifts that they carry with them?

This Advent season, celebrate those Magi-gifts that God has given to you and your family.

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Together, Without God



Together, Without God

New atheist communities look a lot like church.

Last Thursday evening I drove my rattletrap Volvo into downtown Portland. I had to run out of a book release party for one of my closest friends in order to make it to an event downtown.

I parked my car as close to the venue as possible, more than five blocks away, and began the trudge to the evening's festivities. I was going to the historic Portland landmark, the First Unitarian Church. I was going at the invitation of Tom Krattenmaker.

If you don't recognize the name, Tom Krattenmaker, let me tell you a bit about him. He is a member of the Board of Contributors for that beacon of the liberal agenda, USA Today. Not only does Tom write for them, he is their most prolific writer on the topic of religion in America. He writes more often than not with a piercingly critical eye toward American evangelicalism. Tom would never join a Christian church. While he speaks with respect for Jesus as a teacher and ethical-leader, he finds the supernatural and incarnational Jesus-teachings of the Christian church to be little more than fantasy. He is a self-proclaimed secular progressive. He has little use for God.

Now, if, based on that last paragraph, you judge Tom to be an enemy of the evangelical church, you could not be more mistaken. Tom Krattenmaker may be one of our most trustworthy friends.

When I say that Tom writes with piercing criticism, that blade cuts both ways. Yes, like any good friend, he points out the foibles and gashes in the American church, but he is just as likely, if not more likely, to proclaim the often overlooked beauties of the evangelical church. In fact, even risking heavy backlash from his progressive colleagues, Tom has made it his personal mission to illuminate the laudable in evangelicalism to the broader culture through his writings, most notably doing so in his book, *The Evangelicals You Don't Know* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

When, I got to the stately brick Unitarian Church, I was surprised to find a significant line waiting to enter. It was so long that it snaked the length of the block and continued well around the corner. Lucky for me, Tom had secured a press pass for me. I was able to enter immediately and found a seat in the fifth row.

I sat down in one of the fold-down wooden theater chairs, like we had in my middle-school auditorium. I took in the wide, aesthetically muffled room with its broad wrap-around balcony, imposing pipe organ and taupe walls. As we waited, I witnessed the room fill with a quintessential collection of Portland's progressives, academics, and activists. All of us, myself included, were there to hear a self-proclaimed opponent of the Christian church, Sam Harris.

Church critics

Sam Harris (author of *The End of Faith* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004)) is one of the strongest voices and brightest stars of “the New Atheism,” a movement that is growing in popularity and political/rhetorical power.

When I say that Sam is no friend of the Christian church, I am not being euphemistic nor am I exaggerating the facts. His words are clear. Through the evening I heard him make numerous statements like:

“The belief in revelation is the most destructive of beliefs.”

“It is better to care about people than to share the gospel of Jesus and sort of care about people.”

“(Richard) Dawkins has that amazing paragraph where he absolutely destroys Yahweh ... and beautifully so.”

He says such things with slicing wit and more often than not garners an approving laugh from his enraptured audience.

It gets worse.

Harris is very concerned about religiously fueled terrorism around the world and is certainly critical of the sort of beliefs that create groups like ISIS or the Taliban. But he places the greatest blame for this violence on everyday and moderate believers in churches everywhere. He blames, well, people like me, for every suicide-bomb that explodes or helpless child that is gunned down. From his perspective, it is us, the purveyors of everyday faith, that provide the covering for religious extremism with our absurd claims of the supernatural. We moderate believers enable the violence by normalizing the very possibility that the Divine exists or that God speaks. I don't think it's a misrepresentation to say that to him, Evangelicalism is worse than Al Qaeda.

But don't be fooled, it is not the acidic criticism that makes people like Sam Harris evangelicalism's new competition. It is, in truth, something much, much more dangerous.

Christianity has always had its critics. In this sense, New Atheism is nothing new. It is not smarter, not larger, and no better organized than other competing ideologies throughout church history.

The thing that makes The New Atheism an eyebrow-raising opponent is not their caustic campaign to caricature the church ... it is the way that it looks like they are beating us at our own game.

Community. Competition?

Sam Harris is a great example of this. The End of Faith, his anti-religion manifesto, was written a decade ago. While he still takes shots at theistic religions, today Harris is spending a great deal of his energy promoting prayer.

His most recent book, Waking Up (Simon and Schuster, 2014), is a thoughtful, scientifically supported exploration of the power of meditation. Not just meditation as an intellectual procedure, he espouses it for its impact on personal wholeness, enlightenment, correcting self-addiction, and creating a greater capacity to love ... some of the best impacts of Christian prayer.

Additionally, Harris and others like him are beginning to promote lifestyles marked by interpersonal gatherings (small groups), community engagement (“love thy neighbor”), and justice activism (“as much as you have done it to the least of these ...”).

It goes further. Many leaders in the growing movement of New Atheists are repenting of a past (misguided) emphasis on intellectual debate, public disparagement, political organizing, academic domination, and focus on the printed word. In its place, their note-worthy changes include encouraging regular local gatherings based in community, testimony and celebration (areas long regarded as the property of organized religion.)

Here in Portland, several “secular churches” have been popping up to supply local atheists and their friends (evangelism?) a communal and even spiritual home. One such “church-plant” is called Sunday Assembly Portland and meets in one of Portland’s iconic landmarks on Sunday mornings at 11am. This is no lecture on atheistic ideology—there is emotional group singing, testimonials, a short message on being spiritually whole, and invitations to small groups and justice programs throughout the week.

Think about how you found a home in the Christian faith. Your intellect no doubt played a role, but wasn’t it the feeling of belonging, the experience of celebration, the sensation of meaning or the participation in a greater story that played a greater role? The New Atheists seem to understand that.

If you have any doubt about the intentionality of this work, take a few minutes to listen to Bart Campolo, a leader and apologist for secularism, speak to the Secular Student Alliance:

“You’re not going to draw anybody in unless you can offer for them identity and relationships and a sense of mission that is about making the world a better place.”

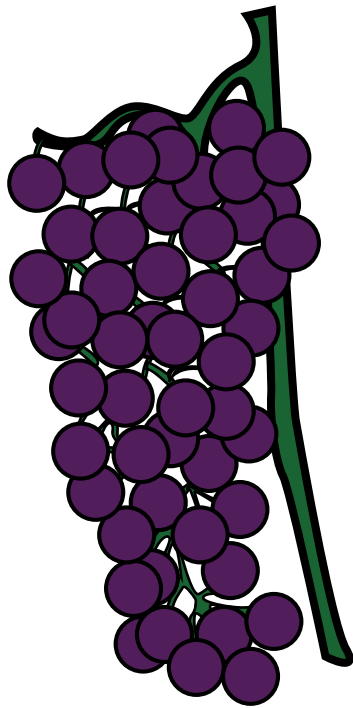
As I write these thoughts, I have not forgotten that a life of prayer, worship gatherings, mission trips, messages of meaning or even personal wholeness are not the centerpieces of the Christian faith. In fact they are tertiary at best. The essence has nothing to do with our activities or ability to organize. In fact it has nothing to do with us at all. We are not even the most important characters in the story. Ultimately, God is the protagonist. God is the one in pursuit. God is the one speaking. God is the one organizing. God is the source.

As I observe the tactics of the New Atheism, it causes me to wonder. Are we, the Christian church leaning on our services, on our rhetoric, or on our programs as the hope for our neighbors? Because if we are, we may find ourselves with some increasingly stiff competition.

Or are we leaning on the True Initiator, the one who makes the very question of competition disappear?

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Biodynamics and the



Kingdom

Biodynamics of the Kingdom

Diversity strengthens the vine and the branches.

Jesus was a storyteller, a purveyor of parables. Although raised in a carpentry shop, not one of his parables is about woodworking. Instead, he chose other topics to illuminate eternal truths. By my count, 10 of his timeless-tales sprung from the fertile soil of agriculture. Some of his most searing teachings were gleaned from the prophetic lessons of the farm.

Wine country biodynamics

A week ago I had the chance to travel out into the country. I joined a couple of friends, and we slipped west on Highway 99, winding along country roads into the hills outside Newberg, Oregon. It was the sort of perfect day that rarely finds itself in a Northwest April.

I could not have predicted that we were about to experience one of those parable-moments. The meandering road led us to Soter Vineyards and the chance to spend the late morning walking among the acres and acres of young grape vines. We parked the car and climbed to the hill's crest to take in the 360-degree view. Farms, pastures, and estates covered the rolling hills, separated by swaths of evergreen forest. This is Oregon farm country—half a world from Eden and still God's creative masterpiece.

On our walk, we were joined by Jamie, one of the vineyard's staff. She was a splendid companion. At carefully chosen moments, she gave details of the vineyard's history and philosophy of winemaking. She seemed particularly happy to tell us about the estate's organic growing practices.

I was introduced to a new concept. The term she used was "biodynamics." My household dabbles in urban homesteading. We try to grow organically. We just finished a greenhouse on our small inner-city lot in the hope of expanding our growing prowess. We have numerous books on gardening. We farm worms and raise chickens to increase the quality of our soil. And yet the hobby nature of our practices became obvious on that country hilltop. "Biodynamics" was a completely new term.

Mono-cultures

She explained that when it comes to agriculture, mono-cultures (planting large swaths of a single crop) can be very challenging to the plants. Their vineyard instead practices a philosophy that is a reversal of some long-held agricultural beliefs. Instead of planting grape vines surrounded by only grape vines and distanced from all other species,

their philosophy of growing strives for just the opposite. “We use a variety of ground cover to interact directly, root against root, with the wine-producing plants. We also plant other crops adjacent to the vineyards, and then we bring in domestic herds to graze in the offseason, adding their diversity to the nurturing culture.”

Now, here was the moment that got stuck in my soul. Jamie said something like this: “We find that when grape vines are surrounded by only other grape vines (a homogenous culture), they become weaker, less productive, even anemic. You could even say they become less ‘grape.’ On the other hand, when those same vines are surrounded by diverse influences, they actually become more grape, much more than if they were left surrounded by only their own kind.”

The ecology of heaven

Jesus the storyteller modeled a life that was surrounded by a surprisingly dynamic “ecology.” Though living in a male-dominated culture, he was in the regular company of women, anointed by a woman, women first witnessed his resurrection and the title of “disciple” was also shared by women (Acts 9:36 as one example). Jesus shared his story with people from culturally dynamic backgrounds (Roman centurions, Samaritans, Canaanites). He fellowshiped with societally dynamic characters (outlaws, children, sinners). He embraced economically diverse people (lepers and beggars, tax collectors and wealthy Pharisees). The God-Man even invited political dynamics into his inner circle, including among his disciples a man beholden to the empire (Matthew, the tax collector), and a passionate, maybe even violent opponent of the Roman occupiers (Simon the Zealot).

When the Holy Spirit baptized the new spiritual community in Acts 2, the call was forcibly and supernaturally extended to a most dynamic cultural web: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9-11).

It has become cliché to say that 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning is the most homogeneous and segregated hour in America. Cliché or not, it still rings with prophetic accusation.

When Jesus promised global impact through his new commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” He spoke these words to a tax collector and a zealot who shared the same table of fellowship. Is it any wonder that so many today question whether we, the people of Jesus, are a people of compassionate

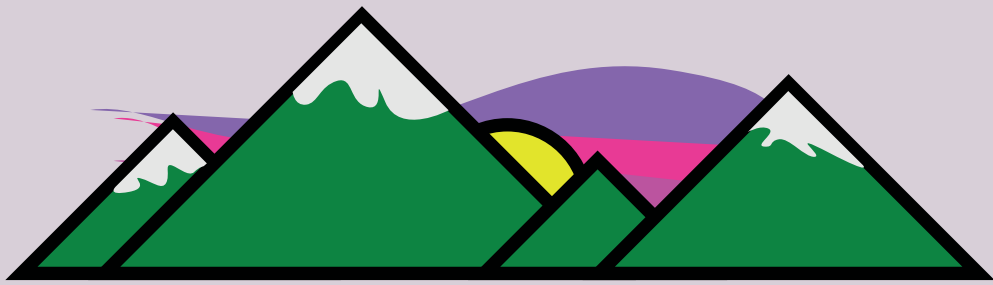
love?

As a boy I was taught to long for heaven above all else. It was the very center of my beloved Baptist upbringing. And yet in heaven we are assured that there will be “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne.” If heaven is in fact our longing, wouldn’t it make sense that we would start to practice the diverse ecology of heaven now?

Jody the winemaker taught me that when a grape vine is surrounded only by its own in a homogeneous environment, it subtly and insidiously becomes less grape. Any yet in a dynamic context, that same grape is strengthened, emboldened, fertile and can even be transformed into a gift worthy of a miracle.

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5 Damaging Messages



About God's Presence

5 Damaging Messages about God's Presence

We need to be more honest about our spiritual experiences.

My friend Mollie was sitting in a grocery store parking lot. She was upset. She was mad at the universe. In the midst of her rage, God spoke to her.

According to Mollie, it was undeniable, almost audible. God responded to her questions. God comforted her and cooled her rage. She said that she seemed to just know that the “God-voice” was Jesus.

Here's the thing; Mollie was not a Christian. She would not align herself with any religion. She believed that the spiritual encompassed all things. And yet “Jesus” spoke to her ... in the most tangible way.

Elusive presence

As I researched for my latest book, I asked hundreds of people about their life with God. Specifically, I wanted them to talk about God's tangible presence. The vast majority of people are not like Mollie. God's tangibility, his “felt presence,” seems elusive to them.

For most of the church people I've talked to, the whole of their personal and tangible life with God amounts, by and large, to some combination of the following:

- Some emotionally infused life experiences that are hard to separate from the common human life: birth of children, moments of success, weddings or celebrative events (like concerts, conferences, or church services).
- Some indirect encounters with God through things that seem to evidence the divine: witnessing mountains, oceans, sunsets, acts of goodness, healings, looking into the eyes of a child, etc.
- Maybe a few events of circumstance or serendipity that defy explanation. For instance, my friend Jeff has a story about a flock of birds and another about a Zippo lighter that are, for him, cherished evidences of God in his life.
- And then, if they are lucky, they may have a few accounts of direct (tangible) encounter with God (most often separated by long silences) that are all but impossible to dismiss.

Beyond our verbiage

We all have an unspoken theology. This unspoken theology is often starkly different than our declared creed. But this unspoken (maybe even to ourselves) theology is what truly governs our life with God.

Assuming that someone has had some combination of the experiences listed above, they have probably cobbled those moments together into their “personal doctrine of God’s presence.” This is their unspoken theology. They may not even have the vocabulary to accurately describe this theology, but it is there all the same (just ask any counselor about their client’s true theology of God’s presence, God’s parenthood, or God’s provision. Then ask them how deeply hidden that theological programming often lies.)

The dissonance between our “unspoken theology” and our “declared creed” is the playground of spiritual disconnect and pain. Unfortunately, well-meaning religious leaders often contribute to this dissonance. We may preach promises to parishioners (declared creed) that God may not deliver in their spiritual life. Here are five damaging messages propagated by many pulpits about God’s tangible presence:

God shows up all the time. We don’t even realize how much this message fills our churches. I think there must be a class in seminary that teaches future pastors to begin sermons with the statement, “I was talking to God this week and God told me to preach on...” Or “This week I received a message from the Lord.” Our worship training is similar, offering words like “God is close this morning” or “Feel God” and lyrics like: “God walks with me” or “Draw me near.” Now I am not saying that there is not a real sense of truth in these sentiments that saturate so many of our sacred Sunday services, but if they are not balanced and explained, they can leave parishioners with the impression that God shows up tangibly every day, at least for the spiritually “mature.” As a result, many people feel outside the real Christian club, because their lives don’t feel like the Sunday rhetoric.

One size fits all. God is the most dynamic and diverse Being and we have been created in that image. In Gary Thomas’ book, *Sacred Pathways*, he identifies nine different and equally valid spiritual temperaments. Some of your congregants may be activists, others intellectuals or ascetics. Church leaders need to avoid the pitfall of codifying their own personal spiritual temperament. It may preach well, but there is no one way to practice spirituality. There are no “5 steps to a dynamic Christian life.” There are also thousands of indirect ways we communicate that one way to experience God is better than all others—and those indirect messages get caught in people’s souls.

Beware of privilege categories. I talked to one influential denominational leader and he said to me, “If anyone ever doubts God’s tangible presence, I tell him or her to fly with me to (a distant city) to a church service where they will meet God.” Really? To meet God requires the capacity

to buy a plane ticket? Now, before we judge him too harshly, remember that Sunday church is a privilege. A five-day workweek is a luxury for many. So is having an accessible church—or even a “talented” church, an “entertaining” church, or a “cool” church.

God shows up all the time in the Bible. Decades ago, I heard a respected seminary professor who said that across the hundreds of generations in the Bible, there are only three generations wherein one could say God’s supernatural presence was normative: Moses’ generation, Elijah/Elisha and Jesus/early church.

There are certainly other times when God shows up dramatically, but he says that there was only three seasons in which we can say his presence was “normative.” Now, this professor had an anti-Pentecostal axe to grind and you or I may want to add some other biblical seasons to his short list, however, it is hard to deny his point. There was generation after generation that experienced God as silent. In the book of Acts, there are tangible God encounters in almost every chapter... up until chapter 10. Then, from chapters 11-28, there is a significant drop-off in God-interactions. And this drop-off continues until John on Patmos.

God promises to be a tangible presence. Jesus promised that God would walk along side of us (John 14: 16-17), but never promises that that companionship will be sensory or tangible. In fact, the walk-along-side Holy Spirit hardly, if ever, speaks in the Bible. Can you think of a verse that directly quotes the Spirit’s voice?

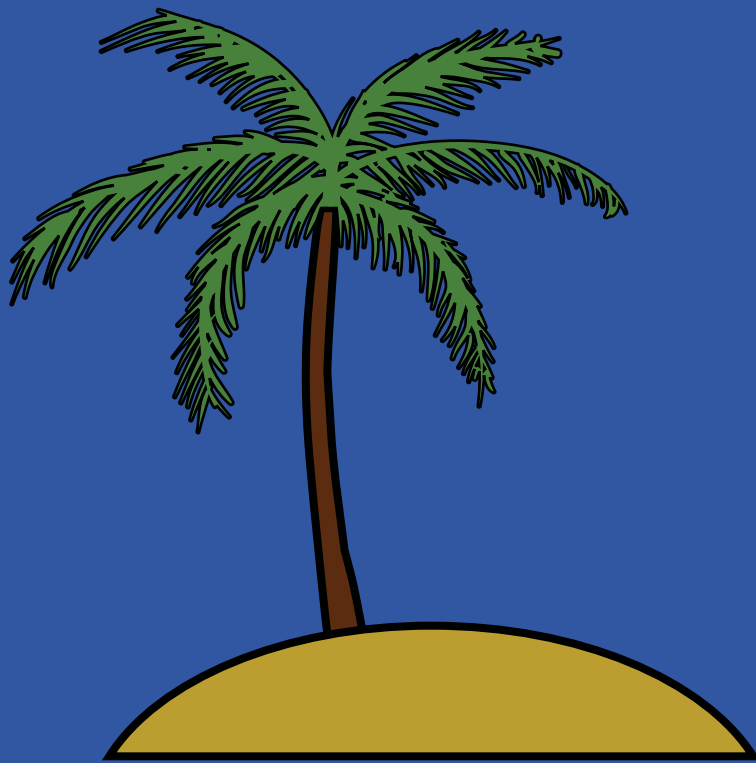
Finally, when we present God’s tangible presence as normative, we do a disservice to the doctrine of desperation. This is where we can really learn from our non-Western brothers and sisters. Persecution theology, poverty theology, and beatitude theology have much to teach us. In middle-class America, our theology of God’s presence is often fueled by comfort, entertainment, self-dependence, and convenience. In contrast, there is a reason why Jesus compassionately critiqued the man who stored up enough “for many years” (Luke 14:16-21) and why he made an example of the poor in spirit, the mourners, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the persecuted.

I’m not suggesting we ignore the many promises in Scripture that assure us of God’s abiding presence. God has promised to “never leave or forsake” us (Heb. 13:5). But that’s his real presence—not his felt presence. The truth is we can’t guarantee that people will always sense God’s presence. And I fear we have created a culture of pretending in the church. Our religious rhetoric doesn’t match our real-life experience with God. And that sets up us, and others, for dangerous disappointments.

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When the ‘Only Way’



is the Wrong Play

When “The Only Way” is the Wrong Play

The exclusivity of Jesus is an essential doctrine, but sharing your faith effectively often requires starting the conversation elsewhere.

If belief was a planet, I have always lived on Exclusivity Island. For as far back as I can imagine, I have understood Jesus as the singular provision of God for people’s salvation—and still do. On Exclusivity Island, Jesus is the “only way.”

But others have a different story than mine. For them, the trip to Exclusivity Island involves crossing ideological and cultural oceans. There are sea monsters and storms along the way. Their journey is long and costly.

Not for me. I have always resided on this unique and meaningful island.

Growing up, I was taught to believe that the exclusivity of Jesus might be the most important of all beliefs.

The energy around the discussions was not only about the unique provision of the gospel of Jesus, nor was it only about the beautiful substitution and healing (personal and creation-wide) that Jesus offers. It was also about the need for everyone else to be wrong. In fact it seemed like the most visceral passion surfaced, not over how Jesus was right, but about how other perspectives were wrong (ideologies, religions, and even other denominations).

In early adulthood, in my earliest days as a minister, I was trained to be an evangelist. Even to this day, there are few things I enjoy as much as discussing the gospel with people who live on distant locations around the theological globe.

In those years, I was trained in no uncertain terms that the belief that “Jesus is the only way” was an essential element of any gospel conversation. In fact, the gospel presentation that I have personally shared with hundreds of people, prominently included the verse John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”

Exclusivity. Written clearly in black and white ... and red.

I have shared it, with the hope of conversion, on four continents with

people with almost innumerable backgrounds: Muslims, Atheists, Buddhists, Jews, as well as with my global spiritual cousins from Orthodox and Catholic backgrounds.

Then I had some life-altering experiences.

Climbing the pyramid

In my early 30s, I returned home to my beloved Oregon and to an unexpected appointment as a volunteer chaplain at Reed College, which at the time was regarded as North America's most anti-religious institution of higher learning.

After many months of sharing faith with those widely intelligent and ideologically diverse Reed students, I made the most unexpected discovery. The question, "Is Jesus the only way to God?" did not make any sense to most of those students.

I am not saying that they did not understand the words or syntax of the question. They simply could not imagine why anyone would ask it. To them, such a question had no moral or practical relevance.

Do you remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs? It has been 30 years since freshman biology but I still vaguely remember the concept.

Maslow had five levels of needs stacked on top of one another in a pyramid. A quick Google search reminds me that those levels (from bottom to top) were: Physiological Needs, Safety, Love/Belonging, Esteem and Self-Actualization. The relevant part of Maslow's theory was this: No one cares about the higher layers of needs until the lower layers have been fulfilled. In other words, the question "How are you self-actualized?" makes no sense to someone whose stomach is empty and whose life is in danger.

I wonder if there is an ideological equivalence to Maslow's theory. I wonder if there is a hierarchy of beliefs?

"Jesus is the only way" is a belief that often requires a long list of presuppositions. Each presupposition may be a unique epiphany, one important step toward Jesus. For instance:

- For Jesus to be the only way, one may need to conclude that God is both One and/or Triune.
- To believe that, one may need to believe that Jesus is divine.
- To believe that, one may need to discover that Jesus was supernatural (performing miracles and rising from the dead).
- To believe that, one may first need to believe that Jesus is the most

astounding/otherworldly person in human history.

- To believe that, one would need to believe that Jesus is the best voice in human history on what it means to live a fulfilled and moral life.
- To believe that one must first conclude that Jesus is among the best voices in human history.

To believe that, one must be introduced to Jesus' moral teachings and example.

Like levels on a pyramid, one epiphany is built upon the others, from bottom to top.

Many of our neighbors do not think that Jesus is particularly interesting. Helping them understand that he is one important voice is, for many, a necessary first step as they move through this symphony of epiphanies.

You see, at Reed College, the question "Is Jesus the only way" made no sense. There were too many layers of presuppositions that, for them, were still unanswered. Our little community at Reed needed to begin the conversations at, "Have you considered Jesus as one of the most powerful and life-giving voices in human history?" and dance together from there.

As a lifelong resident of Exclusivity Island, I wanted every student to discover Jesus as the eternal, unique, and unprecedented provision for our personal and cosmic healing: spiritual, emotional, relational, moral, systemic, and universal.

But often it requires a long and perilous journey, but that journey can't begin if we don't ask questions that make sense.

For some of you reading this, you may want to stop there. Maybe God spoke to your soul in some lovely way with the concept that we need to find questions that make sense. I pray that that is true.

For others though, you remain unconvinced. As I travel and talk to my beloved cousins in the faith, there are some who find this sort of teaching as an abandonment of the true gospel. They accuse us of cowardice. They see it as a denial of Jesus as the stumbling stone.

I fully agree that Jesus is the stumbling stone (1 Pet. 2:7-8), but it is the role of mature believers to remove every other point of stumbling by conversing in ways that are thoughtful, loving, intuitive, and considerate of the others' life, beliefs, and experience (Col. 4:2-6, 1 Cor. 9:19-23.)

In an earlier Leadership Journal article, I discussed the only book of the Bible where Christians communicate with non-Christians, the Book of Acts. In those pages there are 13 presentations of the Jesus-message (evangelism). Of those 13 presentations, there is only one that makes a distinctive and particular point about the exclusivity of Jesus (Acts 4:8-

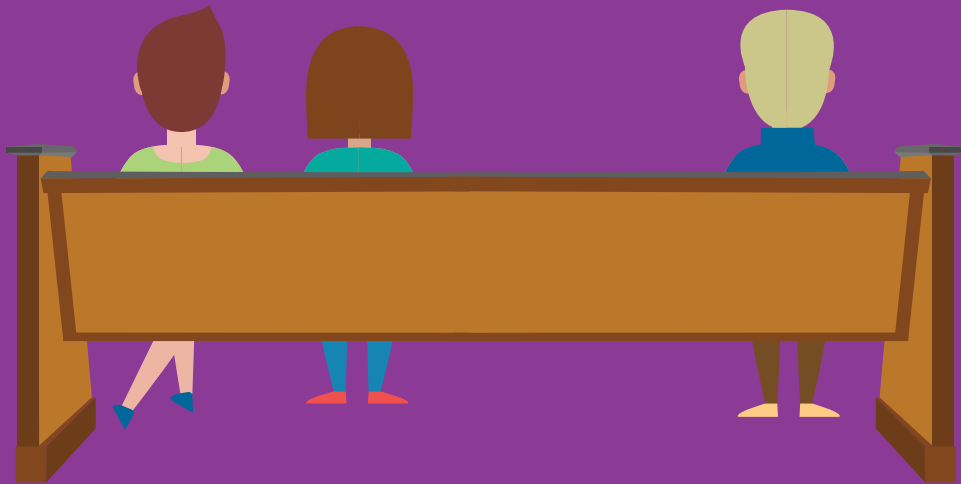
12.) One in 13.

Additionally, most of the passages where we find our core exclusivity claims are in passages where the audience is Jesus-followers (John 14:6, Rom. 10:8-10.) This raises the question: Is the doctrine of the exclusivity of Jesus a particular point for evangelism or is it more often a topic of discipleship?

The journey to Exclusivity Island is diverse and most certainly transcends our understanding of salvation. Evangelism may involve a dramatic series of epiphanies as we, the followers of Jesus, invite our neighbors to take their next step toward him. And if exclusivity is more often than not a topic of discipleship, as the Bible illustrates, then salvation may in fact be an archipelago wherein the belief that Jesus is the only way may only be one island among many.

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Learning from



Weirdos

Learning from Weirdos

7 missional gifts from ancient Christian mystics

Every family has its weirdos. For some it is Aunt Trudy (the cat-lady), Cousin Sarah (who still can't hold down a job), or maybe Uncle Chet, who always, always speaks his mind—whether his thoughts have anything to do with the occasion at hand ... or not. We try not to exclude these characters from family gatherings, but sometimes we are (shamefully) relieved when they're unable to attend.

It is no different with the family of the Christian church. We have more than our share of odd-balls, characters we begrudgingly include in our history texts. Many of these fringe-dwellers have been relegated to a club, affectionately (“bless their hearts”) referred to as the “Mystics.”

Thanks to a recent “Spirituality of the Mystics” class at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, I have been drawn back to those often outcast writers of old. Those strange sages of spirituality (Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jan van Ruusbroec, etc.) have quirkily burrowed themselves once again inside my soul, inspired my imagination, and have even renewed my hope for the church and our sacred mission.

What to do with the weirdos?

There is little doubt that the Mystics are a complicated band of personalities: desert-dwellers and pole-sitters, ascetics and scholars. Their discourses are often difficult to follow, full of foreign metaphor and rhetorically tedious, to say the least. To put it even more frankly, much of that world is downright scandalous to our modern sensibilities.

My friend Chuck Conniry recently said that many of the mystics would likely find themselves hospitalized if transported to today: talking to animals (Francis of Assisi), bizarre wounds, possibly self-inflicted (stigmata) and self-destructive eating disorders (the fasting of Catherine of Siena.)

Scandalous? Yes, the Mystics are. But let us not wholly dismiss our obscure aunts and uncles. There is much for us to glean and utilize from the lives and teachings of these ancient guides.

To that end, I was recently inspired to ask this question: What contributions can the Mystics make to the 21st century proclamational mission of the church?

The gift of the “messy.” Broader society often dismisses the church today because it is perceived as fake. That's right, fake. We reinforce that

perception—often unknowingly—when we present a triumphalistic message fueled by the illusion that Christianity is always clean, neat, together, well-dressed and convinced. “Perfection” smells like “manufactured and manipulated” (think of the movies *The Truman Show* or *The Stepford Wives*).

In contrast, the mystics give us story after story of struggle, of organic, clumsy pursuits of God, including: embracing extreme poverty, rejecting broader society, and scandalous acts of devotion. A whimsical and affectionate story about one of our odd-relatives could help open a transparent faith conversation. (For more, read *Messy* by A.J. Swoboda.)

The gift of the ancient. Most people live in a world that is only 15 minutes old. Everything they interact with is immediate, shrink-wrapped, faddish, fleeting, and transient. Most people don’t even have intimate relationships with their own grandparents, let alone a sense of being part of an ancient tradition that has been tested by time and reaffirmed by generation after generation. We are titillated by the words of a pop-star (or a pop-preacher), but the human-soul is ultimately inspired by time-tested wisdom. The mystics, within the surrounding cloud of witnesses, can give our neighbors a link to the ancient that the rest of society has neglected. (For more, read *Beyond Smells and Bells* by Mark Galli.)

Expanding our metaphoric vocabulary. The church is perceived by many to be verbally constipated. Our vocabulary is as predictable and unimaginative as the trinkets in a religious bookstore. We describe God by well-worn images such as “lion,” “king,” or “Lord,” but would we dare to refer to God as a “rainbow,” “black widow,” or “grandmother”? Heck, Jesus displayed the Divine as an Unjust Judge, a wind, and a fig-tree murderer. The teachers we choose help us explore the boundaries of our vocabulary. The mystics were far more courageous than most of our modern thinkers. Maybe we could lean on them to expand our rhetorical comfort zone and thus light a more imaginative fire in the souls of our neighbors.

Helping us bring the creation (environment) into our spiritual dialogue. One of my dearest friends has left the Christian faith. He is sincerely inspired by the life of Jesus and even fondly respects many of the Christians in his life. However, he flatly refuses to be a Christian. Once I pressed him to explain to me why. The first thing he said with passion and supreme sorrow in his eyes was, “I have tried to believe, but I cannot get past the fact that Christianity has no coherent and practiced theology of earth-care.” For the sake of my friend and many more of our nature-devoted neighbors, I hope that stories like those of Francis of Assisi (who loved all creatures) and Ignatius of Loyola (who teaches us to find the voice of God in all created things) help provide language for the church’s long-held (if minority) dedication to environmentalism. (Look for *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis*, releasing October, 2014, from Baker Academic.)

Show us we are not alone. Loneliness is becoming epidemic in society today. Our detached and depersonalized culture starves people's souls, and the resulting entertainment and consumption addictions keep people trapped in those pain-filled states. The writings of the mystics are littered with many a "dark night of the soul" and they can help us demonstrate how spiritual pain and loneliness are an integral part of the human experience. (For more, read Leadership Journal's Fall 2011 issue on "dark nights of the soul" in ministry.)

Illustrating that "we are all on spiritual journey." It seems counter-intuitive to my life-long religious training, but in our culture today, it often breeds credibility for me to lean on teachings—like those of the Mystics—that I cannot fully explain or cite teachers that I do not even fully agree with. Each time I do, I communicate to my neighbor that I am actively wrestling with my faith, that my hope is not in my thinking alone but in God, and that I am open to new ideas (which is exactly what I am asking my neighbor to be).

Bringing reciprocal exchange to cross-spiritual conversations. If my neighbor sees that I am willing to learn from weirdos (especially if I can do it in a laugh-at-myself, non-anxious way), they may in turn believe that I am willing and wanting to learn from them as well. There is nothing as powerful as a cross-spiritual conversation fueled by genuine exchange, genuine mutual trust and affection, and genuine hearts for learning.

Weirdos in the pews

Well, I don't know about you, but I am convinced. Even though there is no doubt that many of the Mystics dabbled in the heretical. It is also true that most of these characters would make for challenging additions to any modern congregation. But still, for the above reasons and many more, there is much for us to learn from these weirdos of old.

But before we go, this conversation begs one more question. If I am willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the oddballs of yester-year, then what about the oddities of today? Am I also open to affording them the same benefit? I am talking about the unique personalities that walk the halls and foyer of most every church. You know who they are: syrupy-spiritual-lady, the one-issue activist, mumbles-to-himself, always-raises-hand, passion-prayer, always-critical, under-socialized, never-speaks, the list-keeper, old-curmudgeon, young-zealot, Bible-thumper, political-extremist, etc.

Will I offer them my ear; treat them as my teacher?

If there is one thing that the Mystics remind us, it is that God is not limited in the palette the Divine might draw from in order to reveal the Kingdom to the world. If I believe that God is truly an unhindered communicator, then I must even open my learning to the weirdos all around me: across history, and across the pew.

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Authority Issues



Authority Issues

Is community or authority the best way to grow our souls?

There is an awful lot of talk these days about why so many people are leaving the church. One of the things we are not discussing as much is why some people are staying. I would like to explore one aspect of that Christian retention.

My friend Derek is a lifelong churchgoer. He is smart, articulate, and has an inquisitive mind. He was raised in a conservative church and spent his college years as an active member of a famous parachurch organization. He even spent a few years in seminary, though he never completed his degree. Derek spent all the way up into his 30s in the loving arms of evangelicalism. Their relationship was not always one of romantic bliss but his conviction in the gospel of Jesus Christ always managed to overshadow his existential angst.

Where did his angst come from? Well, truth be told, that is a complicated topic, but one of his most poignant issues was his loss of assurance. When I say assurance, I am not primarily talking about the popular evangelical phrase “assurance of salvation,” though I am sure that also comes into play. What I am talking about is assurance in a more ultimate sense. Derek couldn’t figure out what was ultimately true. The resulting chaotic assurance-void left was more than Derek could bear.

Desperate for answers

For smart guys like Derek, the evangelical church (at least the particular subculture in which he was raised) had left him with an untenable paradigm for authority. This paradigm had been delivered to him through multiple channels.

At first, the tension was mostly anecdotal. He became exhausted by the intellectually insulting positions that so many people in religious circles take. Derek wanted to slap people who passionately espoused that there are no intellectual quagmires in the Bible. (He wasn’t saying that the Bible was false or flawed, he just wanted authorities to stop treating the Bible like a Pollyanna script.) He was annoyed by absolutist beliefs in a 6,000-year-old earth or that Jesus never drank wine, only grape juice. There were also more fundamental quibbles. How could the meaning of the cross be limited to humanity’s heavenly destination, when the Bible contains literally thousands of passages about injustice and the poor?

Part of Derek’s epistemological crisis was caused by the epistemology of his religious authorities. Citing the reformation-based belief in *Sola Scriptura*, his leaders taught that he didn’t need any external authority to know ultimate truth. Truth was found in the Bible alone with no

need for tradition or history. This, coupled a theological individualism, left the center of authority ultimately in, well, Derek. Derek knew “I think therefore I am” and his church told him that all answers could be discovered by any person, if only they obtained the tools to study. (Let’s just set aside the fact that these beliefs make God’s truth more accessible to the educated elite.)

Ultimately Derek was left to trust himself to logically discern God’s truth. Derek is smart, but he knew he wasn’t that smart.

Derek wanted to seek help, but where could he go? There are approximately 30,000 Protestant denominations in the world. Which was right? Which held the truth?

Well, Derek did what a growing slice of disillusioned evangelicals do: Derek turned to the ancient.

Ancient appeal

I have watched a dozen of my friends take this journey. They felt overwhelmed by the authority placed on the individual’s ability to discern God or to place that authority in a particular Protestant sect (note: the act of choosing the right sect also resides with the individual.) This led my friends to put their spiritual trust in the ancient church, either Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy.

These young women and men became so tortured by the question, “What is right?” that they threw themselves under the authority of 2,000-year-old traditions that carried the audacious claim that they were literally God’s voice in the world. This was no flippant action; the pain became so great, that these friends risked being ostracized from family and friends to attain some sense of assurance. For once in their lives, they just wanted to feel sure. They swallowed beliefs that they would never have considered before (infant baptism and praying to saints, among others) just to feel certain. In order to complete the transformation, many of these busy young people went on an academic pilgrimage to fully justify this absolute submission.

Just tell me what to believe and I will believe it.

Have you come across folks like Derek? Have you watched smart friends or family members make the transition to one of the church’s ancient traditions? Have you noticed how passionately they defend their conversion? Have you noticed how much of that argument revolves around authority under the guise of: “It is the original or purest church” or “unbroken apostolic succession” or “seat of absolute ecclesiological authority”?

I believe that so much of this is happening because young evangelicals are exhausted. They are wearied by a church that claims intellectual supremacy and yet delivers lazy logic, sectarian divisions, and a paradigmatic shelf-life of about 50 years (the approximate time it takes a denomination or emotionally charged religious movement to die).

Now, for Derek, his experiment with the ancient church amounted to little more than ecclesiological affair. They flirted for a little while. He attended sign-and-symbol churches off and on for a couple of years. He even tried to get his family involved. But in the end, his kids didn't really like it and his wife was "just going along." The delight of early infatuation eventually wore off.

Instead, Derek and his family found another home. It was an incredible gift, because it held the unique quality of holding the "best of both worlds." Derek found a church that offered almost no cultural conversion from his religious experiences growing up. The church was driven by impressive music and dynamic preaching. It was a place where his kids all had a department to go to. It had the benefit of being both satisfying and entertaining.

But here was the real appeal, something that allowed it to replace the role of the ancient in Derek's heart. It was a church with an unapologetically absolutist theological agenda. It had structured its beliefs so tightly there was no need for questions or confusion. This ironclad theology was delivered by a charismatic leader, who demanded submission and obedience. In this church, there was no question about who was in charge and every person had a place in the hierarchy of power. All of this was very comforting to Derek. Sometimes you just want to know.

Derek and his family found a home. His lifelong anxiety over assurance of truth had been numbed. And to be perfectly honest, Derek has never been more content. I am happy for my friend, I guess.

Just tell me what to believe and I will believe it.

What will the future hold?

Many people smarter than me have hypothesized about the future of the church, specifically as we move increasingly into a post-Christian North America. The trend is already afoot. Cities like my beloved Portland, Oregon, have already leapt into the post-Christian reality. Most Portlanders would never even consider visiting a church.

Some people claim that the exodus into ancient churches will only increase with time. Others believe people like Derek will continue

gravitating to absolutist and authoritative Protestant churches.

Either way, we must continue to process our epistemological and authoritative confidence as the people of Jesus. I don't know if "that's the way it has always been" (the Ancient church argument) will hold people's imagination. I am, however, very confident that the twentieth century addiction to the individual as the seat of enlightenment will not last.

I imagine that one part of the answer for the future of the church can be found in the birth of the church: Pentecost, found in Acts 2.

When the Spirit of God gave birth to the church, we were not endowed with super-intellect, a university system, or with a divine walkie-talkie. We were left with each other and more importantly, a radically multi-cultural community:

Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs ... (Acts 2:9-11).

In our modern globalized world, the multi-cultural "other" is closer and more accessible than ever before. Why wouldn't we take full advantage of our global church?

I know that my blindness is most insidious when I surround myself with people who are just like me: spend like me, read like me, vote like me, worship like me, etc. If I surround myself with people just like me we will probably all have the same blind spots. We will tend to adopt self-serving beliefs. That is one danger of a ghettoized faith built on affinity structures. However, in the company of the other, my theological prejudices and arrogances come to light.

When people from the most diverse backgrounds—Global South and Global North, rich and poor, urban and rural, marginalized and mainstream—agree, as followers of Jesus, on the way of Jesus, what could be a more resounding affirmation of God's will and the Spirit's leading? Is it possible that such a radical culture of listening could bring that much-sought assurance? We could fulfill the hope of the great church councils of old. After all Paul said all believers in Jesus are "a royal priesthood." Do you think he meant that we should listen to only a narrow frequency on the bandwidth of God's priests?

The Spirit's wisdom chose from an infinite palate of options when birthing the church of Jesus Christ. The Spirit's choice: a multi-cultural beginning.

It is important to note that the Spirit also showed us the end of this

glorious church story:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... (Revelation 7:9)

There must be some hope in these multi-cultural bookends of the church's story. On that day, when we stand before the throne of Christ, there will finally be assurance ... for Derek, for me, for all of us. Ultimate assurance. For in that day our faith will literally become sight.

Maybe while we wait for that day to come, we could start practicing that heavenly existence now.

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