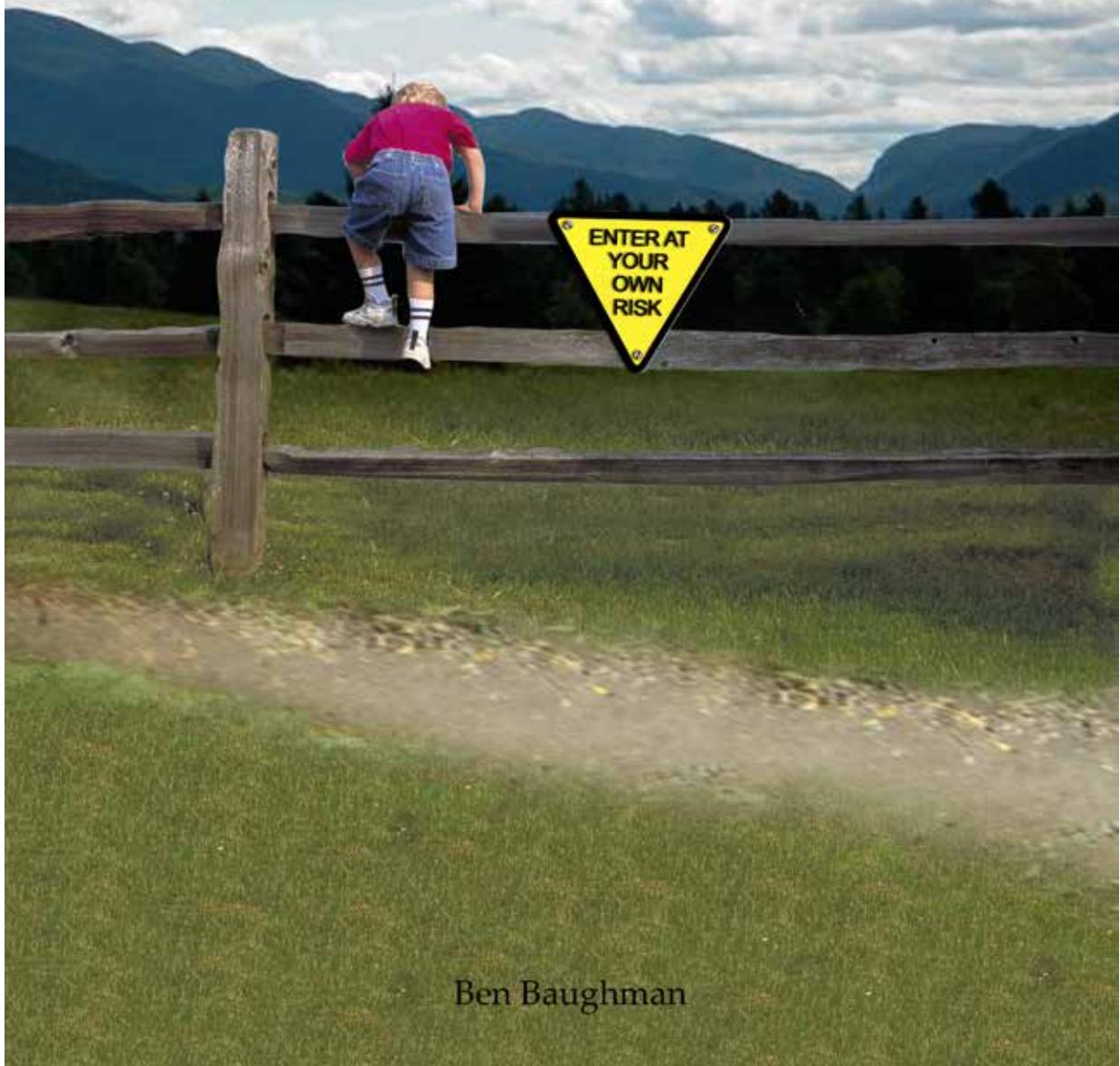


UNTRACKED

When religion doesn't let us follow Jesus



Ben Baughman

Untracked

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Preface

Hey! I'm Not Talking to You!

I write to those who have a religious background in Christianity, but have felt alienated from it, sensed it become irrelevant to their lives or watched it misrepresent their sense of God.

I write to those who have lost trust in the institutions of power around them, including the religious ones.

I write to those who either still have or would like to have faith in God, but what we refer to as religion troubles them.

I have absolutely no interest in converting anyone to some form of religion.

I write to thoughtful people who have been marginalized by those who remain in the church as having left their faith behind, when really they have only left that which they are uncomfortable with, even if that discomfort is vague and not quite voiceable.

I write to those who long for something that gives them purpose, reason, inspiration, life and courage to become all they can be; something that acknowledges and encourages who they already are and gives them reason to overcome and attain all they dream of inside.

I write to those who have tired of giving disproportionate time, energy, resources and talent to that which has ever less real impact on the world around it.

I do not write to those who are contented with Christianity as they have grown up in it or discovered it. I write to them only if they are interested in truly understanding the thoughts of those I have described above.

I do not write to those who have no religious background and have no interest in faith in a higher power beyond them. I write to them only if they also are interested in thinking through how those I've described above think.

I am not interested in argument for argument's sake. I am interested in honest thought and conversation about how to live out faith in community. I am interested in creative discussions about how to make life better for individuals, families, communities, countries and the world we live in. That which is truly good news to people of every variety on our planet is welcome dialogue. I believe this to be the heart of the one I call God and Father.

I do not pretend to understand all the thoughts, pains or perceptions of those I've mentioned above, but it is my desire to continually work at trying to apprehend them and speak into them more effectively.

I have absolutely no interest in converting anyone to some form of religion.

I long to die having lived and prayed with the one who taught us to live and pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven".

Part 1: Perigrinatio

*A leaving of one's homeland; a self-imposed exile and wandering for the love of God.**

* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peregrinatio>

65

I'm 65 now and have more hindsight than I used to. I think that makes me a better Monday morning quarterback than I was at 18 or even 45.

Starting out this life almost precisely in the middle of the twentieth century as the last sibling of four in a fairly poor but quite respectable family. Road-tripped from Seattle to Nevada to Minnesota as PK in small, not so successful churches until I was in High School. Reasonably smart, fairly athletic and not too bad looking, I could talk my way into or out of almost anything. I felt pretty good about myself and was a bit of a maverick. It was a great formula for popularity in small puddles. I was sure I would storm the world with greatness.

Read at your own risk.

I met my wife at 20 and started 42 years of a greater relationship to a more wonderful woman than any man deserves. We raised four men together. She died three years ago. Oh God, I miss her.

We pastored independent churches for ten years or so and I left depressed (another story). Marketed early personal computer products for a few years and ended up an Evangelical pastor in one location for just shy of 23 years. I retired from pastoring to have time with the love of my life and begin doing things outside the institution that I could never accomplish inside of it.

That brings me to now. I'm 65. I've married one of my first wife's best friends and I don't know how I got to be this fortunate twice!

Now, back to that hindsight piece I started with. You be the judge of whether I really have better or just more hindsight. Read at your own risk.

Letter of Resignation

I don't want to be known as a Christian anymore. I don't want to argue over the things that religions or denominations argue over, such as doctrine or inerrancy or infallibility or issues or power or politics...

I want to follow Jesus in being good; to have it said of me; "He went around doing good". (Acts 10:38)
I want to love God with all my heart and love my neighbor in the same way. I want to treat others the way I would like to be treated, and I want the only thing that matters to be faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

...the complex maze of checking off endless boxes to try pleasing Him makes living lifeless.

I think the religion of Christianity gets in the way of this.

I think the way we look at Scripture currently has made us followers of the letter of the law, instead of ministers of the life-giving Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:6 –The Bible). What we call the books of The Bible were never meant to be worshipped as inerrant, infallible, final authority. That view causes us to take them apart line by line as law to follow.

They need to be seen instead as story, wisdom, history, news, illustration, example, direction, poetry, prose, responses, mistakes, lessons, etc. I need all of that to understand what He's like and what it is to be like Him, to have a true feel for His character and spirit.

If it is just law to follow, I will struggle following, because the complex maze of checking off endless boxes to try pleasing Him makes living lifeless. I just want to watch Him and join Him in his story and have Him join me in mine and make it ours and feel His heart and wisdom and emotions and...

This story of God and the humans He interacts with gives me a love for Scripture. The inerrant, infallible, authoritative version doesn't.

It isn't hard to tell the crux of the heart of God.

From the New Testament, it isn't hard to tell the crux of the heart of God; what everything else is based on. It is refreshingly good news.*

From Jesus

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and Prophets."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

“My command is this: love each other as I have loved you”.

From Apostle Paul

“And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

From Apostle John

“Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

**all quotations above from the NIV Bible*

Everything else is story, example, illustration, pastoral counseling, advice, wisdom, direction, etc. about how God through Jesus lived this out and how we can now live it out as well so it passes on. It gives us a view of how The Spirit of God (as in: “I love that man’s spirit”), is passed on in actual human story and culture.

It’s kind of like someone saying about me: “He’s just like his father”. They don’t mean I have followed the letter of every word my father said, but that they see my father in me.

Scripture is a story of God being Himself while interacting with a world of people and those people responding to Him and the people around them.

I love it! I want to be like Him.

So please accept my resignation.

Sincerely,
Ben Baughman

What Really Matters: A Letter to the Existing Church

I am not concerned about the religion of Christianity or the culture of Christendom or Christian Worldview or Judeo-Christian Ethics. These make culture and institution and government the focus. It does not bother me that we have empty cathedrals and unappreciated statues of saints of the past in our cities. It does not bother me that mainstream and evangelicals alike are stagnant or slipping in numbers. It does bother me that these are the things that bother us. It tells me our focus from centuries of telling the story of Jesus in a certain way, with tools we've become comfortable with, has removed our ability to see that the only thing that really matters is the story of Jesus, not the tools we've used. We're like fathers more worried about the car in an accident than our injured daughter.

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Our systems don't matter-our buildings don't matter-our denominations don't matter-our services don't matter-all of these are only tools.

After this many centuries, even the story of Jesus has become tightly framed in our ways of thinking and talking and governing and communicating

and associating and marrying and fellowshiping and evangelizing, etc., etc. We think it appalling that the frame is changing but fail to see that the Story itself is just as needed and loved. We must lose our sentimental attachment to the frame and simply see it as a means of enhancing the picture.

We're looking through the wrong lenses, but we're comfortable with them. We need a visit to the Eternal Optician, because we've become near-sighted, losing perspective and the sight of our goal.

Our Western mind-set has geared us to a form of institution that now makes us ineffective and nearly irrelevant in a changing world. It's in all of the trappings of ways we organize; non-profit law, IRS rules, denominational structures, congregational hierarchies, building design, sermon structure and delivery, etc. These have kept us thinking like a train that can only go where the tracks go. We think in the confines of 501-C3s, income tax deductions, institutional or ministry-wide programs, buildings and other current corporate forms of structure. These demand an ever-increasing percentage of our resources just to maintain them, and they limit our thinking to the confines of the structures. As left-over's of a culture we are leaving behind, our efforts to use and improve them to share the Story of Jesus will be increasingly expensive, decreasingly effective and continually more difficult to resource from a people that are seeing us degenerate into irrelevancy.

We're looking through the wrong lenses, but we're comfortable with them.

We need to open source how it would be best to get the Story of Jesus out to the streets and marketplace and lives of people again. A sort-of "show and tell free for all" that would put people, rather than

institutions, as the carriers of the Spirit; letting the great work of the Spirit be moving the body (arms, hands, feet, eyes, ears) to the heartbeat of Jesus.

We have become “middlemen”, retailing God in a way that profits our institutions.

Even our doctrines become thinly veiled attempts at keeping organizations alive instead of focusing on the all important story of Immanuel, God with us. Our structures are the results of our Western Mind-set. They are the products of Capitalism and Competition and hierarchical power models. Is it any wonder that our churches are full of consumer Christians? Is it any wonder that flashier and bigger and

We have become “middlemen”,
retailing God in a way that
profits our institutions.

more benefits seem better to us?

Is it time for us to think deeply about the tools we are using? Is it time for us to ask if the tools we have used are outdated? Is it time to ask whether our indignations are more over the loss of sacredness of the tools of our

Christendom culture, or our inability to tell the story of Jesus in a way that is winsome and real and rational and relevant and extremely meaningful and good news to another generation God made in His image and loves with an everlasting love.

What if we saw the structure we use to tell the story of Jesus less in terms of “professional/laity”, “ownership/building”, “doctrine/denomination”, “congregation/membership”, etc.? These are building blocks of thinking stemming from institutional organization. What if we trusted the head (Jesus) to truly direct the body? What if we saw people as truly body parts, engifted to act out of the prompting and spirit of the head, uniquely designed to work together with the other body parts to bring whatever is needed to pass. What if we ceased being institutional middlemen? What if gifting (i.e. strengths, talents, skills, gifts, callings, etc.) was the basic structure used by God? What if He doesn’t need our “super-structures” of institution for the body to work? Is it possible that they even rob the body of strength and energy and resources? Is it possible that even apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastor/teachers would function more effectively outside the realm of positional authority given by a middleman structure? Would we truly take the chains off the other parts of the body if we dismantled the middleman structure? Is it possible that the structure itself is the chain that binds the body up?

What if gifting (i.e. strengths,
talents, skills, gifts, callings,
etc.) was the basic structure
used by God?

In illustration: What if those engifted as pastor/teachers began to teach and live out tithing/giving not as a way to keep the institution alive but as a means of flowing the river of salvation and good news and reconciliation and redemption into the life of a community or individual that God longs to run to and welcome home? What if we taught it out of Matthew 25:14-30 that the master has gone away for awhile and left resources with us to invest in a way that would return dividends when He returns?

What if a father, hearing this, sat down with his family and prayed and planned how they thought their \$6000 (tithed on their income) could be invested that year. What if they knew a single mother whose husband had deserted her and their three children? What if they decided to pay her tuition to Nursing School at the Community College, babysit the kids for study time, and be a family for her during this season? What would it feel like for the single mother? (Hint – good news?) How would she view God when she looked at them? Would it be natural to talk about their faith with her and her kids? Would she be drawn to finding ways to give like her family had been given too? Would any walls that have kept her from trusting God be broken down? Would her kids understand what the Father’s love is like? Would the children of the investing family be as apt to turn their backs on God when they leave home or would faith in Him be readily passed on? Would the story of Jesus become “magic” again? Would salt and light work, as Jesus knew they would? Would the invisible God become increasingly more visible in their lives and in the community around them?

What if a group of businessmen got together and planned how they could pool their resources and make their community more like heaven or how they could start businesses that could fund ministries that were desperately needed, or fund efforts to eradicate poverty or hunger, or bring justice or peace or....

What if we quit thinking about tax write-offs or keeping institutions alive or church buildings full or denominations going, and focused on how to make the Story of Jesus the best news in people’s lives? The things we have institutionalized are now the greatest detriment we have to Jesus being relevant and real

The Story of Jesus will be told. God will see to that. The question is: Will we be part of it?

and wonderful and glorious and alive for every person who needs good news.

I believe our greatest hurdle is fear. We are afraid that the Holy Spirit can’t possibly keep this under control. It’s too unpredictable for us. What if doctrine gets off base? What will we do with all the structures we have now? How would we transition? Aren’t our institutions the wisdom of the ages?

What would hold it all together? What about “assembling ourselves together”? (I think it interesting that so little is said about how we assemble in Scripture – it only tells us not to forsake it. In a day when even the geographical links are changing – we’ll need to assemble – but it may look very different). Church leadership must learn to function in a different world. The need for good news doesn’t go away, just the need to adjust the tools so the Story of God interacting with people flourishes.

If we keep holding back because of fear, are we not simply delaying the inevitable? Will we not have lost more ground than we already have?

The Story of Jesus will be told. God will see to that. The question is: Will we be part of it?

One Reason I Started On This Quest

Doctrine, in the way we use it, crystalizes understanding. We interpret with the rigidity of words and knowledge, but cease to comprehend and appreciate in the fluid forms of wisdom and knowing. The doctrine of the trinity has given us a rigid knowledge of the three we call one God, but it has caused us to cease knowing God. Let me illustrate this using the third person of the Trinity, The Holy Spirit. We have made a separate person out of him by trying to squeeze him into an explanation of God.

We've created a distinct and rigid knowledge of him that causes us to lose the innate sense of how he impacts our lives. As I would say of a friend "I love her spirit"; I need to be able to see God at work and say, "I love His spirit". I want to be like Him in spirit. That comes from knowing Him in life and story without the rigidity of what we have come to call doctrine.

It would seem to me that if God wanted us to have our knowledge of Him encapsulated in a paragraph or two of explanation, it would have been sufficiently important that He would have done it Himself.

It would seem to me that if God wanted us to have our knowledge of Him encapsulated in a paragraph or two of explanation, it would have been sufficiently important that He would have done it Himself.

Please understand it is not that I do not think the doctrines are well thought out by sincerely great minds, but rather that they limit God in ways that suppress the lessons that are better caught than taught. They cause us to miss the very gist of what He longs for in us; the passing on of what will make the world around us proclaim; "They look like their Father".

I don't believe it relevant that my life be lived so others learn facts about God, but by my living they grow to love and regard Him as I do.

Wrong Premise

Assigning more power to something than it was intended to have causes blindness in those who have thus assigned it. Religion in all its forms is prone to this. When whoever is designated as the founder is no longer around, and a certain amount of power is attained, an attempt is made to deify writings that sprang up around the direct or indirect writings of either that leader or his/her early disciples.

Once this happens, the writings lose their first person perspective. Instead we get third person interpretations of what was meant. The reasons behind the conversations and words are lost and they simply get codified into law interpreted by self-proclaimed judges as to its meaning.

What we lose is the unspoken communication of the heart: The innuendo, posture, eyes, tone and presence that give the words meaning. Otherwise, what the people in the situation heard, saw and felt is reduced to a single dimension of words.

Many years ago, in an early morning conversation with God, I felt Him say, “Ben, will you put aside everything you’ve been taught about the Bible and spend the next year consciously setting aside all of your presumptions as to what it says while you read it?”

I determined not to try to interpret anything that I read, but instead just absorb it. That was much harder than I expected, but it was one of the best disciplines I have ever attempted. I think it must have been a little like a purge for my body, only I was doing it with my mind.

I can’t tell you all the health benefits from that year of purging my mind, but I can tell you it still impacts me today. One of the major changes was that I began to feel the first person circumstances. I began to wonder what hurts and pain and loneliness a Samaritan lady had been through to have five husbands and finally live with a guy she hadn’t bothered to marry. Every story took on a personal tone. Every parable began to play at the edges of my life. I cried, I laughed, I sat in awe, I loved, and I made personal decisions about what I wanted my life to look like. I loved my wife more, I got angry at church institutions more, and I judged people less.

...he passionately believed in me and a tax collector and a prostitute and fishermen

Something I had never seen or heard before began to leap off the pages every time I read. I had been told all my life that God loved the world so much that He gave us Jesus and the most important thing was that I believe in him, but it always got wrapped up in doctrinal legalese surrounded with words like lordship and perish and hell and heaven and church, etc. ...

What now leapt out of every story was a first person perspective that I had never heard before, from anyone. God didn’t just condescend to giving me a chance to believe in Him, but instead he passionately believed in me and a tax collector and a prostitute and fishermen and everybody else on this planet. I

saw him mad at a church run by condescending professionals that claimed to represent Him, but were using His words to further their institutions and positions.

So Jesus comes and shows us God believes in us, and loves us out of that belief.

The world might believe and love easier if we show in the first person that we love the world because we believe in it. We believe it is good and we are not going to let power hungry “authorities” condescendingly use it for their own selfish purposes and then tell us it’s for our own good.

I love the scriptures. I hate the legalistic, inerrant, condescending version we’ve been spoon-fed.

Purge that version from your mind and listen to them in the first person. God is saying what every wonderful father tells his sons and daughters. I believe in you! I love you! My great desire for you is that you will become everything I already love about you in a world that will be better for what you bring to it.

God is saying what every
wonderful father tells
his sons and daughters. I
believe in you! I love you!

It seems to me any son or daughter could find it easy to believe in a father like that.

It bothers me that people don’t believe in God. It bothers me because it shouts that a 2000-year-old institution isn’t even aware that the gift God gives when He wraps His son in a human package has the hope behind it that those receiving the gift will feel and know they have a Heavenly Father who believes in them, loves them, and is proud to be their father.

Building another religion that uses our imperfections to control us was the farthest thing from his mind.

It seems it ought to be the last thing in ours as well.

Jeremiah – Prophet, Bullfrog, Son and Song in My Head

In a normal world, we kill our prophets, and then talk about how great they were 100 years in hindsight. In our lifetimes we want our prophets to be nice and tell us what we want to hear. Otherwise, we like the false ones. In 100 years, we'll know what the truth was. We'll then join everyone else in nodding our heads and pointing out the truth we certainly would have believed if we had lived then.

I'm not sure anybody in their right mind would grow up wanting to be a prophet, unless they had somehow fantasized it as a way to power and influence over weak people. Most of us have met a few of these. Ugh!

In a normal world, we kill our prophets, and then talk about how great they were 100 years in hindsight.

Prophets are a weird and eccentric bunch. It's hard to categorize them. They doubtless like being liked, but somehow manage to self-destruct when opening their mouths. They probably all have periods of time when they try to keep their mouths shut. I know the one named Jeremiah in the Jewish Scriptures did, but the fire inside forced it open again.

We named our first son after him.

God's summons to a life of prophet in the first chapter of the book with his name on it, fused with my crazy late teen thoughts about God and church and scripture and Christianity. Just like Three Dog Night singing "Jeremiah was a Bullfrog", it was the song in my head that I couldn't get rid of. It's still there.

So, here I go, spouting some compilation of 45 years of the stuff in my head. Judge for yourself if it's worth anything. The last thing I would claim is that I'm a prophet, just a thinker who's been influenced by one. Jeremiah's call from God ends with these words: "You will pull up and tear down, destroy and overthrow, build up and plant". Just as Jeremiah did, I've always hated the destruction stuff, but it seems to be two thirds of what is necessary. I love the last third when I get to build up and plant!

Part 2: Blaming Jesus and A Few Others

It Takes a Village

I must have been 4 or 5. I don't know where my parents were, but they probably thought I was somewhere safe. It was Sunday; we were at that Church By The Side of The Road that you'll hear me mention often. The service was over and I was outside, like every other kid in his or her right mind. I hadn't begun my journey to wisdom yet. (I know, I know what some of you are thinking:)). Without looking, I ran out in the street that was busy with cars leaving church.

Whop! I was hit before I knew it! Only I wasn't laying on the pavement, but somewhere suspended in the air with the palm of a big hand quickly applying a couple of very strong swats to the seat of my learning. Then, encased in big arms and being held very closely, I can still hear Mr. Graham's intense but loving voice; "Benny, I don't ever want to pick you up from under a car".

I learned a couple of things that day that I didn't understand until much later. The first one was a wise old adage from scripture that I think is often misunderstood. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom". I think that fast action with a couple of very strong swats gave me a healthy enough fear that

It takes a village.
That's what living in
community is all about.

I would think several times before I ran in the street again. The way I was held and spoken to afterward made it clear that he loved me enough to want me to live in a manner that would keep me around for a long time.

When my first born, Jeremiah, was 18 months or so, I went through more emotions in 10 seconds than I do in most weeks. I look up from mowing the lawn and see a car barreling down the road we live on. In the next moment, I see my firstborn running as fast as toddler legs can carry him, straight to a head on collision with the car. I yell, I run faster than I ever have in my life before, I get mad at the driver, mad at Jeremiah, love him more than life itself, and am more afraid than I've ever been, all at the same time. I get to him before the car does, sweep him off his feet and swat his butt harder than I ever had before, then I hold him and cry and tell him how much I love him and don't ever want him run over. Then I remember Mr. Graham again and I thank God: For Mr. Graham and Jeremiah and anger and love and speed and a lesson learned in community about the beginning of wisdom.

Years later I heard some pundit proclaiming how silly a new book by Hillary Clinton was. It's title: "It Takes A Village: And Other Lessons That Children Teach Us". My first thoughts went back to that day when I was 4 or 5 and Mr. Graham. Then they went to Jesus saying some things about no greater love than laying down your life for your friends and loving and I remember getting angry and wanting to yell at a not very wise pundit who needed a couple of good swats on his seat of learning. Hillary got it right and so did Mr. Graham. And Jesus taught it too.

It takes a village. That's what living in community is all about.

One of my great desires is to be part of bringing that back.

Holmsy

I don't know why we called him Holmsy, but all the kids did. The rest of them got him on weekends, He was mine all week. He lived at and cared for Bethel Temple in downtown Seattle in that glorious decade of the fifties when "I Love Lucy" and "Leave It To Beaver" had dogs named "Lassie" and "Rin Tin Tin". From the one cherished photo I have with him, I suppose He was in his seventies. I learned what Jesus looked like from him.

I learned what Jesus
looked like from him.

The few Sundays I was there, (we went to that great church I've mentioned elsewhere, The Church By The Side Of The Road) every boy in church would follow him wherever he went. (May have been some girls, but I was 5 and 6, I only remember the boys) He had this huge ring of keys, and would patiently stand by as one of us would try to figure out which key fit the next door. I can still see his mischievous grin.

On Monday, I would walk a mile, get on a bus with my young and beautiful mother, ride to Seattle and have him all to myself. She attended Bible School at the church and I was junior janitor to Jesus. (Sorry, I mean Holmsy).

I learned to lovingly dust the backs of pews with soft gloves he bought me for that purpose, vacuum never ending carpets, dust mop hardwood basement floors and clean BIG restrooms. I'm sure he had to redo everything a 5 year old did, but he never mentioned it.

Lunch was amazing. I can still feel walking the long dark hall with him to the basement kitchen. He'd fix me waffles and we'd have pie for dessert. (I think it was left from some potluck the week before). Then we'd walk to a nearby deli and he'd buy me the biggest deli apple that ever grew in Washington, and we'd walk slowly back in the sunshine (I know, I know, it was Seattle. This was my 5 year old memory) until we reached his basement apartment at the church. Checkers came next, and I was better than him because I usually beat him, and then we'd both take a nap.

I think Jesus has always been
proud of the fact that He looked
a lot like Holmsey. The family
resemblance was remarkable.

I think Jesus has always been proud of the fact that He looked a lot like Holmsy. The family resemblance was remarkable.

I think this was where it became natural for me to be mentored by people. I innately knew there was good and there was bad. I had seen and felt good. Bad couldn't fool me. I learned to absorb the good in others when I saw it revealed.

I never have learned well by command alone. I don't think any of us do. Jesus seemed to know this. Right in the middle of that last supper, He put a towel around his waist, got on the floor and gently washed his disciple's weary feet. A few moments later He could say, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." I think they got it.

I never have learned well by command alone. I don't think any of us do. Jesus seemed to know this.

Oh, and you know that other famous passage that we love to wag our finger with? In this same moment, Jesus gently says to a worried Thomas who has just observed all of this but hasn't yet put it all together, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".

(That's one of the problems with our doctrines; they mess with what we could really learn from the moment.)

Another son of God named Holmsy taught me that. In living like his brother Jesus, he became the way, the truth and the life to this 5-year-old that's 65 now.

Do to others... Third Grade and a Bad Hair Day

My father always cut my hair. We had a wonderful family friend who was a barber. I think he taught Dad how.

I was in third grade. My mother was an artist and I'm not sure why that's important to this story. One day, for a reason I shall never know, Mom decided to cut my hair with Dad's clippers. It was probably a work of art, but somewhere a few inches above my ears, she gave up trying to even it out. When Dad came home, the only salvageable resolution was a near shave. Now I realize that this would be in style today, but this always-wanting-to-be-liked third grade boy thought life was over.

Isn't it funny how we can remember some of the movies of our lives frame by frame? I had to go to school the next day. My third grade teacher was Mrs. Anderson. She was old and tall, had reddish hair, and was somewhat stern. (Third grade eyes and perception).

I couldn't bring myself to enter the classroom. I don't know how she knew I was outside the door. She opened the door, took a long look at me, thought for a moment, gave me a quick squeeze and marched me into the class. I have no recollection of what she told the class, but I do remember that the class loved my haircut and I loved Mrs. Anderson. I would have done anything for her.

I can still see her eyes when she saw me outside the door. I'm sure God has eyes like that. Somehow this story comes up when I look at people who are acting out in some way. It's my reminder that there are times I need to see and perceive and then do for them what Mrs. Anderson did:

What I'd like done for me, if I were in their shoes.

Thank you Mrs. Anderson for showing me in life what Jesus taught me in words.

I can still see her eyes when she saw me outside the door. I'm sure God has eyes like that.

300-Pound Jesus

I had a 300-pound Jesus in my life. I learned a lot from him. I affectionately called him Rev along with thousands of others, but different from many, he was my mentor and boss. He was a football lineman in college and built one of the largest inner city churches in the nation when white flight was in its prime. Reverend Gordon K. Peterson was his full name and the church was in Minneapolis. His personality and love may have exceeded his size. So one day he says, Ben, come with me. We got in that big, brown Mercury Marquis and went right to the center of where most suburbs were trying to get away from.

I still remember the odors of that day and the sticky foodstuff that covered everything. The reason I remember it so vividly is what was juxtaposed against it. While white flight was running to the suburbs as fast as it could, because of the fear of being close to poverty, a not always nice, but really good, bigger-than-life white guy wasn't noticing anything but a scared mom and her precious kids.

...the way you give hope and bring good news to the ones living in the middle of evil, is you plop down on the filth with that good backside and get whatever you can of evil to stick to it so you can carry it out of there with love in your heart and a smile on your face

So what happens? 300 pound Jesus grabs mom and kids in a bear hug (nobody gives bear hugs better than a bear), plops down in a chair that's going to cover his backside with foodstuff and proceeds to love that family with life and laughter and value and time and attention and hope.

I don't remember a thing about what I did that day. Whether I stood or sat or said a word. I just know that a vast, underlying truth began playing around the edges of my heart. You don't overcome evil by running to the suburbs

to be with the nice people. You might spend a little time being an activist, and trying to help that way, but the way you give hope and bring good news to the ones living in the middle of evil, is you plop down on the filth with that good backside and get whatever you can of evil to stick to it so you can carry it out of there with love in your heart and a smile on your face.

The Apostle Paul says something like that in The Bible in the letter he wrote to the Romans. (Romans 12:17-21)

You don't overcome evil by running to the suburbs to be with the nice people.

Jesus speaks this so loud with his life and death that you don't even have to take note of the many times and ways he says it with his words as well.

Thank you Rev for being my 300 pound Jesus on this one and modeling it so indelibly for me. I'm forever grateful!

A favorite quote from another mentor named C.T. Studd, whose biography I absorbed:

“Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell;

I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

Wisdom Is Known By Her Children

Jesus gives this great little illustration that ‘aha’-d a moment a few decades ago and then kept sticking around reshaping things for me.

Okay, a little doubting first. Cousin John’s about to give up his head as a party favor and just wants to double check if this totally opposite close relation of his is really who he thinks or if he is losing his head in more ways than one. So John sends a couple of his camel hair, locust and wild honey, repent or perish guys over to ask Jesus if he is really the right guy or if they should expect someone else.

Jesus is doing what he is kind of famous for, so a lot of people who are having crazy little things happen to them, like being able to see or hear or walk or be raised from the dead, are all around him, along with all the onlookers hoping for a show.

He assures John’s couriers, who were Baptists, and they leave, because they were on a mission, like all good Baptists. (I couldn’t resist)

So Jesus stops doing these crazy little things I mentioned he was doing and gets a twinkle in his eye and launches into a “let me tell you about my crazy family” moment.

“What got you off your duffs and piqued your curiosity enough to go to the desert? A normal guy? Nope?” I didn’t think so. That crazy guy got most of you to repent and be baptized. “He was the greatest.”

Now people began acknowledging that God’s somewhat crazy way was right, because they had been taken by what John had said and followed it as truth. (If you see or hear something you know is good, you can usually trust your response to it).

Author Luke gives a very telling observation next: “But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John”. (These guys were just too spiritual to read “Purpose Driven Life”).

So Jesus, with that twinkle, compares his generation (which seems a lot like the one that I grew up in) to a bunch of kids playing in the street and it turns into a “we’re right, you’re wrong, sticking their tongues out at each other” type of moment.

“That Baptist John was always fasting and was a complete tee-totaling nutcase. He must have had a demon.”

“That Presbyterian Jesus, was a complete lush and loved a good potluck, and he did it all with real bad sinners and regular ones too.”

Then this little caveat that Jesus throws in: “But wisdom is proved right by all her children”

Ouch, if you're a Pharisee or religious lawyer!

It seems Jesus was saying something like “If you live so you can look good and impress people with who you are today, the outcome might not be as good as a couple of crazy cousins passionately living their lives to make the world better.”

In another place, in Matthew's Gospel, in one of his “not very nice” moments, Jesus says, (I don't see any twinkle here), “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you are!” (Matthew 23:15)

Ouch again. (This passage always made me wonder if hell was a real place God created so religious people would have a place to practice their religion by themselves while the rest of us have a good time in heaven.)

I've obviously digressed, so back to what I learned: I don't care so much if they act like Baptists, Presbyterians, or the non-religious, I just want my kids to hang out with real people and passionately live to make the world better for them.

So I'm going to do my best to model my life around Jesus and his crazy cousin instead of a bunch of religious experts.

I don't care so much if they act like Baptists, Presbyterians, or the non-religious, I just want my kids to hang out with real people and passionately live to make the world better for them.

What Should We Do With Really Notorious, Disreputable Sinners?

I don't know when it started, but Jesus had a problem. He was woefully poor at choosing friends. It was obvious to all those who were experts in these kinds of things; you know who I mean, the guys we pay to give us advice in all areas of "what God is like and what He wants" type of stuff. It was probably Mary and Joseph's fault for not asking Gabriel for a good book on raising kids like God would.

[Jesus] was woefully poor at choosing friends.

The first time it hit the fan was when Jesus saw this guy named Matthew in his tax collection booth and told him he'd like him to be a disciple. Matthew should have told him right there that he was trouble, but he didn't do it. Instead, he invited Jesus and the other guys following him to dinner. That might not have

been so bad, but he got all excited and turned his nice little dinner into a big party and invited a whole bunch of his buddies from work and some other party types over.

The experts in God stuff were all over it. They grabbed his disciples and asked, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum"? It went downhill from there. Jesus just wasn't sharp enough to mend his ways. I think he liked being around fun people too much. Pretty soon all kinds of accusations were flying. He was a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and notorious, disreputable types. Someone said he'd spent time with some loose Samaritan woman who'd had five husbands and was living in sin with another one now. In another case, he obviously couldn't even recognize that he shouldn't let some shockingly immoral woman fawn over him, kiss his feet and pour perfume on him.

These weren't even normal sinners; they were really bad ones that were listed separately by God. (This was expert opinion, remember). They didn't do little things like ignore mercy or justice. They were tax collectors and prostitutes and a few other exceedingly immoral types in God's eyes. They weren't sinners, they were SINNERS. You pointed these out when you talked, because the world was going to hell in a hand basket if we let these degenerates get their way. So you said "tax collectors and sinners" or "prostitutes and sinners". These people were so bad they had their own category. It needed to be clear they were censured.

It got worse. Jesus was audacious enough to say that his friends (the really bad ones) were going to get into Heaven before the "we know everything about God" experts.

Don't you agree? He needed to be crucified before he corrupted the nice people...

Don't you agree? He needed to be crucified before he corrupted the nice people...

Oh Spirit that pulsed the good of God through Jesus, give me courage to pick my friends like him.

Eternal Life?

So there was this guy who was an expert in how people who belonged to the institutional church were supposed to act. He had enough degrees behind his name to school Jesus, so he decided to test him and see if he really knew enough to hang with the big boys.

First deeply significant theologically astute question: “What (ahem, ahem) should I do to inherit eternal life? You know that stuff that starts after you die? But Jesus bounces the ball back. After all, this man was the expert. “How do you read it? What does the rule book say?” The testor becomes the testee. But he’s good; he knows the answer, so he can’t help himself; he fires it back.

“You must love God totally, and you should love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself”. “Great answer”, Jesus says, Do this and you won’t have to wait until you die to live, you can start now”.

Somehow this wasn’t quite how Mr. Puff saw this going. He wasn’t wanting to hear anything about the way he was living, so he had to get this turned around with another theological stumper so he could get back to his paid job of “expert”. After all, he made a lot of money now by telling people how they could have life later. It’s kind of hard to feel good about yourself if you can’t justify what you do.

So here’s the “my theology always distances itself from real life” question: “And just who would my neighbor happen to be?”

Story-time...

A man who was a lot like you and knew all the rules too, had a rather bad day. You know, one of those kind that makes you go “tsk,tsk”, I wonder what he did wrong for God to let that happen to him” kind of days. Oh well, half-dead by the side of the road. The guy should have been smart enough to live better, then this wouldn’t have happened. He’ll just have to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. At least that was the assessment of a couple of other experts like you who were singing “Walk On By” when they saw him.

But then this guy who would drop the price of housing if he moved into the neighborhood came along. “Wow”, he said, “this guy had a tough day if I ever saw one, I think all my plans just got changed. I’m going to have to

If your expertise in institutional religion keeps you sitting on your backside sipping coffee while you talk about it, your reservations at the Hilton after you die might get cancelled.

skip Starbucks for a couple of days. Boy am I glad I’ve got a donkey, some olive oil and a bottle of good wine for this guy. Must be a God thing that I wasn’t traveling lighter this trip.” So he got him to a nice bed and breakfast he knew about and took care of him the best he could. The next day, after he was sure the guy had everything he needed to get back on his feet, he left some money for the B&B to make sure

the fellow had plenty of time to heal up.

Story-time was over, so Jesus asked the doctor of theology a kindergarten question. Which one of those guys was a neighbor to the guy like you that had a bad day and was left half dead?

Even a doctor of theology knew that answer. It was the guy who gave up his Starbucks for him.

And Jesus said. “If you want to start your ‘eternal’ life now, go do the same kind of thing, because there’s a whole lot of opportunity to be a neighbor out there.”

Moral of the story: If your expertise in institutional religion keeps you sitting on your backside sipping coffee while you talk about it, your reservations at the Hilton after you die might get cancelled.

Love and Protect Children and Other People More Vulnerable Than I

I don't suppose I'm a whole lot different than most guys. (I'll only speak for my gender on this one, if any of you ladies want to chime in, I'd love it). If you touch one of those spots inside that I've always allowed to stay tender, start tiptoeing. Let me explain. I like being a man and some of what that means in a patriarchal society. (Please bear with me; that may be another subject later).

Because of that, one thing resolves in clear purpose for me: *I am to protect every part of the world I love that is more vulnerable than I*. This is probably my major "hot button"; I can't even think of another at the moment I'm writing this. Touch a child wrong, hit a lady, kick a dog, and many other things that fall into this "more vulnerable than I", category, and a big red button inside of me gets pushed and I probably won't apologize for what I do. I consider this integral to my manhood, so it's natural that the men I've had a part in raising feel the same. Don't spend much time trying to soften me on this one; it probably won't do much good.

I'm not even sure where this one started, but I can tell you that a couple of my favorite stories of Jesus are why it'll be tough getting me to change.

I am to protect every part of the world I love that is more vulnerable than I.

First one: It's a normal day in Jesus and his disciple's lives. The crowds are pressing, Jesus is touching, talking, healing, and loving all he can, and the disciples are doing crowd control to make it all work. Good guys, these. Then some mamas, who want their babies to grow up to be prophets, start the mama jostle to get those babies to the front of the line. The disciples quickly assess and do a fast maneuver to block this "obviously unimportant interruption".

Whoa! Where did that explosion come from? The last thing they expected was a Jesus smack down. But that's what happened. They hit the big red button. This is how it reads in Mark's Gospel: "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them!" The next thing you see is Jesus taking those mama's babies in His arms and placing his hands on their heads and blessing them. So much for that "obviously unimportant interruption" thing; we never hear of that crowd control mistake again.

The last thing they expected was a Jesus smack down.

Second one: in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples are asking about the pecking order in God's Kingdom. Jesus calls a little child and says: "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

"And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea."

I mean, this has some awfully important messages, but I want you to put that aside for a moment and look at the not-so-veiled threat that comes out of this model son of man's mouth. See if you can find it. (Hint: Sounds kind of like the Godfather movie).

So don't push my red button,
it makes me act like Jesus.

All I can tell you is I love this man Jesus. He knows the power behind him and you better not mess with the little ones.

So don't push my red button, it makes me act like Jesus.

Nice and Good Are Not the Same

Nice people mostly go to church. Good people seem to be found in other places too. I trust good. Too many nice people have tried to sell stuff I didn't need.

I hope someone out there is a trivia nut, because if you are, I have a challenge for you. How many times in the gospels was Jesus not very nice? How many of those times was it toward people who were part of the predominant church of His day? How many of those times was it toward people who were outside the church? What percentage of the gospels is showing Jesus not being very nice? (Please share the results of your search with me so I can share it with our readers. I believe it will surprise you)

It seems to me Jesus instinctively knew his father thought way more highly of being good than being nice. I know I do, and I think my father heart mirrors the Father-of-all's heart in knowing that if my kids are good, they'll be nice when its time to be nice.

...if my kids are good, they'll be nice when its time to be nice.

The problem is that good at its core, is uncontrollable. We are good's servants if we chose it. If we want to be in charge, nice is our alternative. Systems and institutions prefer nice; you can control nice and use it. Good uses you for its purposes. That isn't always convenient for institutions, especially when they gain power. They'd rather have their adherents nice. Good people won't necessarily follow what is best for the establishment.

Jesus saw through the masquerade of nice. It was being used to promote institutional strength and personal power and love of position. The conversation might be "kingdom of God", but only as far as it didn't threaten established religious structure.

Jesus was a servant of good because he became a servant one step lower than the established religious structures. He chose to serve you and me and the woman at the well. Good is no respecter of persons, nice can be, so he chose good.

The religious structure had become exclusive because it was nice. The Kingdom of God was inclusive because it was good. You see, there was going to be this little girl in Cambodia, and this village in Rwanda, and this single mother across the street... . Nice just wouldn't be good enough.

The obstacle to choosing good over nice?... We'll end up doing it and not just talking about it.

"Jesus went about doing good..."

Oh God, I hope they say that about me when I die.

Part 3: Disambiguating!

The Color of My Lens Changes Everything

I love the Scriptures, and I love what they produce in me when I read them with clear lenses. But what I've discovered is that I often don't notice that I've begun reading without removing one of the tinted lenses that I'm frequently wearing; and that makes all the difference.

Doctrine Tinted Lens – I start thinking that the most important thing is getting it all right. God is very attentive to my getting him figured out down to the smallest detail and understanding every detail of how He operates. God blesses those who believe right.

Social Gospel Tinted Lens – I read “doing” into everything. God loves me most when I'm doing His will. God blesses those who perform up to His standards.

The problem with the tinted lenses is that even though they help me see some things with great clarity, they completely block my view of things of another color.

Experiencing God Tinted Lens – This is my “it's about me” lens. God simply wants to bless me with His power or presence or healing or Holy Spirit or gifts or wealth or health or.... After all, God obviously favors those who are experiencing Him.

Mission Tinted Lens – God's on a mission and I better be on one too. After all, if I don't get whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing, done, God's going to be disappointed and maybe mad. God blesses those who get it done.

Relationship Tinted Lens – What God wants is intimacy. Snuggle is gospel. God blesses those who melt his heart.

Denominational Tinted Lens – May the best team win, so the world will know who won the “Super Bowl”. This lens colors everything “alma mater” and competition. God blesses his favorite team.

I seem to have many other colored lenses as well: Evangelistic lens; Worldview lens; Justice lens; Freedom lens; etc. The list seems endless. One of my most paralyzing lenses seems to be my “Scripture is the authority” tinted lens. It stops me at every jot and tittle. Its very purpose seems to be that it is perfect, unquestionable in any way. God blesses those who use it to correct everything else.

The problem with the tinted lenses is that even though they help me see some things with great clarity, they completely block my view of things of another color.

I think the lens without a tint might best be called my Incarnational lens. I want to end up like Jesus. I love the way He talks and respects and honors and gets angry and lives out being true to who he is. I love to watch His tenderness and generosity and unpredictability. Whether we are president or ditch digger, emulating Him is our goal.

Help me Jesus to remember to don my clear lenses when I read.

Adjustments

At about age 40 I changed denominations. I went to the eye doctor and he told me I might as well admit that I wasn't seeing what was right in front of my eyes, which meant I had already changed to Presbyopian, even though I was still sure I could see with 20/20 vision as a Pentecostal. He said that only when I admitted I was Presbyopian would he be able to help me adjust my vision to see clearly. I argued a bit and had trouble admitting that the lens I see through was getting more rigid. It meant I was getting older and couldn't adjust to change like I could when I was younger. Finally I gave in and bought glasses. It was better than the alternative; arm extensions that let me hold things farther away from my eyes. Wow, it was great to see clearly again.

How many of us need to go in for at least an annual check-up to see if our focus has gotten out of adjustment. We live in denial until it's obvious that our arms aren't long enough, then we finally admit our need for the adjustment.

This is true in every important aspect of our lives. We get used to the changes time brings and just think everything's the same as always until our arms aren't long enough to get things in focus anymore. We often need an outside source to show us our need for an adjustment in focus, and when we finally acknowledge our need, the truth presents the wonderful ability to see clearly again.

“All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident.” - Arthur Schopenhauer

Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher of the 19th Century, put it this way; “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident.”

People, families, communities, corporations, churches, denominations and religions all suffer from a hardening of the lenses as they age. History shows us that periodically, “eye doctors” show up with “vision correction”, and true to form, it is rarely accepted right away. It is usually ridiculed; often violently opposed, sometimes with dire consequences, before it is finally accepted as self-evident.

The rise of our nation was just such an adjustment in a world ruled by monarchies allied with religion. We're getting older and don't want to admit it, but our focus may not be as clear as it once was. Maybe an adjustment is called for.

Maybe our community...

Maybe our church...

Maybe Christianity...

Maybe us...

Chicken? ...or Egg?

Okay, Okay. Was it the chicken... or the egg?

Who cares?!

All of us do.

Not so much about chickens and eggs and which one of them gets to be first, but about what comes first between important things like church and people.

Okay, which came first, the church or the people?

If we don't raise the question on a regular basis there's some kind of law that that sets itself in motion pronouncing we'll get them backwards and begin asking questions and coming up with answers and solutions from the wrong point of view. It makes us sound silly or irrelevant or a little off base when we loudly spout our conclusions on how to fix things.

This is a principle. So it's true in all kinds of important things. If we don't put first things first, our conclusions and solutions won't fix what's gone wrong.

John Kennedy knew it when he stopped us in our tracks with: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Teddy Roosevelt corrected our perspective when he said: "Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

If we put the church first, we'll worry about keeping the institution alive and become irrelevant to the people He loves.

Jesus says it over and over: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you."

We always have the chicken and the egg. It's just that over time we tend to give priority to the wrong one; get the wrong one first; and then all the wrong things become important and we don't realize that we're arguing about things that aren't even relevant.

Stephen Covey reminded us of this with his much used words: "If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster."

Of course, it won't matter tomorrow if we eat eggs for breakfast and chicken for dinner, but it will make all the difference in the world if we put the institution of the church first and people second. That's exactly what Jesus found when He came. Leaders were thinking it was all about an institution that people existed to take care of. That's the wall they had their ladder on. They thought if they took care of the institution, then maybe it would take care of them.

So Jesus asked the chicken and egg question. Which comes first; the people or the church?

It makes ALL the difference in the world. Every kid that's been in church knows it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

All the WHOEVERS have to come first.

If we put the church first, we'll worry about keeping the institution alive and become irrelevant to the people He loves.

If we put the people first, they (the church) will become an ever more effective tool for loving the world.

How is Christianity Influenced by Capitalism?

When government or culture endorses the church, it is in grave danger of becoming the voice of that government or culture, instead of the voice of God. We do not remove God; we simply begin to use him to endorse what has made us comfortable.

We must never become cultural tools or blindly capitulate to innate cultural weaknesses. We must always, in whatever culture we find ourselves, become living examples of how to live and visibly express the invisible God in our culture. This must be the constant conversation of the church.

As I think western culture has thoroughly permeated the church, I tend toward starting over, not trying to turn the ship. That opinion, at least in part, comes from attempting to turn the ship for 35 years with little success. I am speaking now, however, to how we have been influenced as majority religion in a capitalistic culture.

We must always...become living examples of how to live and visibly express the invisible God in our culture.

Any of our modern forms of culture work in their ideal form. One word describes each of their slippery slopes into less than ideal. Selfishness. Regulation would not be needed if not for this.

Some of the ways capitalism has influenced the church:

- Consumerism: Whoever has the best marketing campaign coupled with the most benefits wins. Buildings, programs, worship, preaching, teaching, missions programs, publicity, coffee, authentic feel, crowds, creativity, cultural awareness, etc.
- Competition among each other using issues, doctrines, labels and the list above to vie for market share and dollars.
- Economic Privilege: non-profit status, tax breaks for institutions and contributors; special tax breaks for leadership, etc.
- Exclusivism: Wealthy demographic attends different churches than the poor.
- Inward focus on benefits for investors: In what I call the black hole of church finances, the “Generous Giving” website states: “God’s people globally control a majority of the world’s wealth but spend 98 percent of those resources on themselves.”
- Focus on Brand: We use issues, doctrines, strategic marketing, etc. to establish our brand.

These are a few of the influences of Capitalism. We would sure like to believe that God endorses the western church, but I’m wondering... Are you?

Trust

Trust is at an all time low. Government, Religion or Corporate America; it doesn't matter. This is what breaks down when selfishness runs rampant. We begin to think we can solve the problem by changing the system, but the cause is deeper. If we were only selfless, nearly any system would work. It's why power is so dangerous; it enables our most easily excusable weakness, selfishness.

Selfishness ambushes all of us. It is the least confessed sin because it hides so well inside us that we rarely perceive it. We see it better in others, even though that perception is often inaccurate as well. Accusing others of it is how we often justify it in ourselves.

We begin to think we can solve the problem by changing the system, but the cause is deeper.

Evil is a direct result of selfishness. Good is a direct result of selflessness. Trust results when we observe people and institutions being selfless in their actions. Lack-of-trust follows when we observe selfishness in people and institutions.

I believe the church to be imperceptive of the great selfishness that stems from its power position. We justify mightily, but it's only believable in our internal groupthink. 98% of our resources are consumed on us. The number of people that trust us is at an all time low.

The only path to being trusted again is following the one of whom these words were written:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to

death—even death on a cross!

The Bible – Philippians 2:6-8

It's time for intense conversation as to how we can come together and selflessly love the world around us out of our God-given strengths and passions.

I believe it can be done; I'm just not sure it can be done from within. The corporate structures that we support with our 98% will be too much to overcome.

It's time for intense conversation as to how we can come together and selflessly love the world around us out of our God-given strengths and passions. New structural thought is needed. This is a time for creative minds to rise to the occasion. What we are about must be simple, so the only complexity that we face is in the innumerable ways we carry it out. (See chapter called "Simplicity" for a conversation starter).

Are you interested in being part of the conversation? Let's start!

benbaughman.com

Part 4: Percipience, Perspicacity, Perspicuity, and Profundity

Oh sure!

Listen To The Grace Writers!

Hey-a question for you: Do you need saving? No...I don't mean something like..."did you give your life to Jesus?" Or..."did you pray the sinner's prayer?" Strange terminology-this religious talk we use. Many of my prayers are "sinner's" prayers. i.e.-every time I ask for forgiveness; which in my case is frequently! And: what does it really mean to "give my life to Jesus"?

No, what I'm asking about has more to do with things like: Do you think in unhealthy ways? Do you have a sense of value that's somewhere near the bottom of the barrel? Do you have habits that rob you of reaching your potential? Do you even believe you have any potential? Or is that something that others have? Do you really believe God cares about you? Or do you think He wishes you'd just be quiet and melt into the woodwork?

I think we all need saving for real. Not just in some "religious mumble-jumble way" that really doesn't allow me to "give my life to Jesus" in any way that allows Him to use my potential to make this world a little more like Heaven.

Next Question: Do you want to be saved? Do you want to reach your potential? (I'm speaking of potential here as the design of God that's already inside you.)

Do you even *believe* you have potential?

There it is: Another word that's become trivialized by our religious connotations. But it's the key. *Believe*. Both who and what we believe. All of us believe, but believing the wrong people and believing the wrong things is what we need to get saved from. We've often allowed people who were not full of grace and truth, but full of condemnation and selfishness, to be the ones who write on our hearts., the ones that define us. But the only One able to accurately define us has had the mute button pushed on His voice, because we have believed a lesser voice. We have believed a voice of condemnation as if it were

...the only One able to accurately define us has had the mute button pushed on His voice, because we have believed a lesser voice.

God speaking when it was really the voice of deception speaking through someone's selfishness.

Our accurate defining can only come through grace and truth, and never with condemnation. Even when the truth is difficult because I am not living in it at the moment, it will be spoken in love, never in condemnation, if it is the voice of God.

Once we have believed something, we will act out of it, even if we wish it were different. Often we spend our lives living out of faulty, erroneous beliefs about ourselves, so when we are told a gracious and loving and encouraging truth about us, we simply don't believe it, because the lie we are believing has long masqueraded as truth.

How do we hear the truth? Why do we listen to lies instead? We want to hear the voice of God, and we often ask Him to speak to us. It reminds me of this old story:

A man was sailing on the sea in the midst of a terrible storm. His ship was being tossed around like a toy boat, and in the end, the ship gave up the fight and sank into the deep. The man, however, managed to stay afloat and clung to life until the morning when the storm passed and calm was restored.

Truth is best communicated with grace, not condemnation.

His life now depended on being rescued, and happily, in a short while, another ship came along, saw him bobbing up and down in the water and came along side to rescue him. The man's reply was that God had saved him up to this point and that God would save him again. He did not require rescuing.

The man in the rescue ship was surprised, but being unable to convince him to come aboard, continued on his journey.

Soon enough, another ship came along, and it too offered to rescue our man, but again, he refused saying that the good Lord would save him.

A few hours later the same thing happened, but again he refused.

Eventually, the man succumbed to exposure and exhaustion and his body sank beneath the waves. His soul ascended into heaven.

At the gates of heaven, he met St. Peter and in fact was more than a bit resentful, stating to St. Peter that he had put his trust in God. Why hadn't God saved him?

Listen to the loving, gracious voices in your life. They are the very voice of God...

St. Peter's reply: "He sent three ships!"

God sends people to speak the gracious words of life that save us from an existence lived out of harsh, condemning and defining lies we have believed; but I think we're

waiting for a booming voice like thunder from a cloven sky. The lies are often spoken in a way that shouts that they are truth. Like the proverbial pastor who writes in the margin of his sermon notes: "Weak point, shout loud!"

Truth is best communicated with grace, not condemnation.

Listen to the loving, gracious voices in your life. They are the very voice of God, spoken through someone's thoughtful, generous, truthful lips.

If there was condemnation or pride or selfishness in the voices that have guided your life, know that you have heard the words of the one who would love to see you destroyed and your potential never reached. Some will write with grace and truth on your heart and some with law and condemnation.

Only believe those who speak with grace and truth, and you will have heard the voice of God saving you.

Only speak graciously the truth of what you see of God's design in a person, and you will write salvation on their hearts and be the lips that God can trust to speak through.

No Regrets

Having it all turn out for good in the end is the fountain of life. It is where all the nutrients spring. Hope, purpose, faith, creativity, endurance, happiness, contentment, resolve, love, mission, vision, along with all the others you can name, rise from this instinctual flow of thought and energy. This is the God-designed cup of coffee that is meant to start every day we live. It gives me focus. Things will get better. I can make sense out of this. I can make a difference. I have something worthwhile to contribute. I can make the world better.

This is the God-designed cup of coffee that is meant to start every day we live.

It is the energy of technology and advancement of every kind. It is the fuel of every great debate or dialogue. It is what truth depends on. Not some linear, two dimensional, 'right or wrong', black or white answer to some question, but the sustaining knowledge that we will bring about a better end by following this 'path' than some other one. Conversely, a lie is that which we follow that takes us down a path to a lesser end than we desire.

Wisdom takes a bow here because she is always "known by her children"; whether or not their lot and contribution are greater than their parents because they have followed the better path.

This is why choosing and experimenting and risking and failing and learning from our mistakes is so important to us. This is why we innately know that a selfish focus will lead us down a path we regret in the end, and a focus on the good of others will satisfy us when our time ebbs away.

I will drink daily from this fountain. I will not die thirsty.

Live To Give But Don't Let It Be Taken From You

Guilt and Fear are first cousins and play in a band called “Condemnation”, and there are times in my life when this gloomy family band has been useful to me, but one thing I’ve learned, is that even though I sometimes appreciate the warnings in their songs, I never listen to them when they try to teach me how to live.

Guilt and Fear are first cousins and
play in a band called “Condemnation”
. . . Faith and Hope are first cousins
and play in a band called “Love”

Faith and Hope are first cousins and play in a band called “Love”, and they sing encouragement and joy. I love this family. They’ve taught me how to live.

Now I’ve done my best to listen to the right voices in my head for most of my life, even though I can see a few of my friends smirking even as I say that. Most of the somewhat healthy folks I know do a pretty good job at this.

Sometimes however, we get the voice in our head mixed up with what’s coming in through the earbuds that are tuned to our cultural ipods. The music of the culture is often from “Condemnation”. For whatever our specific reasons from our specific cultures are, we tend to turn up “Condemnation’s” volume to override the gentle songs of “Love”.

One of those gentle songs that seem to be pre-programmed into us is one titled “Living to Give” and it strikes a chord in each of us.

“Condemnation” always sings it overlaid with a rap number titled “SHOULD” and it reverberates over and over through our earbuds until Guilt’s solo vocals become the song I can’t get out of my head.

But “Love” overlays a different song to highlight it. Listen to the lyrics. Faith and Hope sing it as a duet and its name is “*Sustainability*”. Jesus sang it first.

*“The reason my Father loves me
is that I lay down my life
—only to take it up again.
No one takes it from me,
but I lay it down of my own accord.”*

- first recorded BY Jesus in The Bible, John 10:17-18 NIV

“Living to Give” is the most incredible song I know to sing my life to, and “*Sustainability*” makes it a joy to sing for all my years. “*Should*” makes me tire of “Living to Give” long before I’m done singing my life.

I want to feel the Father’s love as I lay down my life, so when someone tries to take it from me, I will take it back. I will lay it down of my own accord.

Thank you Jesus for teaching me that.

Longings

Do you ever long for something? To be noticed? To be loved? To be well? To be rich? To be wise? For time off? For a true friend? For life to be simple again? (Wow! I think this list could get long.)

Usually a personal longing indicates that something is missing from our lives. There is another level of longing. I'll call it community longing. It's a longing that forms in us for the world around us. A longing for something that we can feel way down deep.

Maybe I can best describe it with "If Onlies". If only the single mother next door could get her nurse's training. If only that region of Africa had better farming techniques. If only more people cared about recycling. If only there was a place for our youth to go. If only You get the picture.

"If Onlies" of the community type probably need an "I" added to them. If you're thinking, "If only more businessmen would invest in our community", try asking, "How

"If Onlies" = hearing the "call" of God

could I invest in our community so that others would get interested?". Longing on a community level may indicate that you are hearing the "call" of God. His Spirit stirring in your uniquely designed spirit to accomplish something He also longs for.

The Apostle Paul reveals his unique longings in several of his letters. One, in his letter to the Galatians, I deeply resonate with. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you". (The Bible, Galatians 4:19 NIV).

I realize that I long for Christ to be formed in each one of you in the way that His Spirit knows you have been designed to bring God's will to pass in this world.

What kind of community longings do you have? What is God's Spirit stirring your spirit with? That's where your unique flame of faith will rise up if you fan it. Sit quietly in God's presence with your longings. Let Him speak faith into them. Share them with a few of the encouraging people in your life.

God is bringing His Kingdom to earth through you.

Experts

I don't want to be the expert in everything. It takes way too much time and most of it I'm just not interested in.

Insurance, for example. It doesn't intrigue me even slightly. The thought of becoming an insurance agent makes me want to lie down and take a nap so I can uncross my eyes and wash the glaze away. Now mind you, I love my insurance agents. I love them because I know how important insurance is, and they keep me from having to spend all my time uncrossing my eyes. I am so glad they are the insurance experts and I don't have to be. All I want is a good agent who likes what he/she is doing, is honest, growing in their field and making sure I am covered adequately. I want him/her to keep up on what is going on in the insurance field so I don't have to.

I just want to be [an expert] in an area that fits my God-design. An area that intrigues me and gets me up early or keeps me up late...

I'm constantly being tempted away by advertisements that assure me I can save a few dollars if I'll only take back the control and buy insurance from them. But I'm not easily swayed. I don't want to spend my life feeling like I need another nap, so I chose an agent that I trust, who loves insurance work, and pay them for their work.

But that doesn't mean I don't want to be an expert. I just want to be one in an area that fits my God-design. An area that intrigues me and gets me up early or keeps me up late so I can think about it. An area that wakes me instead of putting me to sleep, and focuses my thoughts instead of scattering them.

In this area I am constantly reading and learning and conversing and arguing and tweaking and adjusting. It's here that I grow the most and change the most. My ideas change and others often have trouble keeping up with the changes, because this is not an area that intrigues them.

Alertness to trends and needs and blind spots is essential here, because this is the area of our investment. This is our area to become an expert in, investing what God has entrusted to us.

Times change, and just like the economic times we are in require a change in our investment strategies, we must constantly be vigilant and responsible to invest in such a way to get the best returns on what each of us has been given to invest.

So become the best expert you can be, doing the best with what God has given you.

Trust others who take their areas seriously.

Together we can cover all the areas that God needs hands and feet and eyes and ears to do his work in.

The world will be better for it.

Nickels and Noses

As far as I can tell from Google, this is mostly a church term that we fashionably use to discredit the insatiable desire we seem to have for bigger and better. Not us, mind you, but those worldly minded churches blinded by the fact that people like to go there and give there instead of coming to our church and giving to us.

The problem with this thinking is that it blames the unchangeables for systemic issues that we are not addressing. People will give to what they treasure; it seems Jesus said something about that.

People will give to what they treasure

The unchangeable that will always be with us, *our heart following what we treasure*, is the key to understanding the path into this wonderful new untracked era. Nickels and noses will always be needed.

This unchangeable, however, is one of the reasons I have come to believe we have to start over instead of turning the ship that we are on. The structure we know takes 98% of our resources to keep it going. We can't change the church to be truly missional if we keep the structure we know. Almost all the nickels and noses are needed just to sustain it. So, if our treasure is needed to maintain it and we choose to do that, then our heart will stay there. When we start to see people put their treasure elsewhere, we will see them less and less, because their hearts will have left.

If we are to become an apostolic, incarnational, missional, "way of life" movement, we will need to acknowledge this unchangeable and engage in weighty conversations on how to focus it.

...refocus on living to make God visible in the world around us.

Starting fresh will allow us to zero in on "heart of God" purposes for "nickels and noses". We can remove it from salaries and programs and buildings and comforts and techno displays. We

can refocus it on living to make God visible in the world around us. Our hearts and conversation can turn to wonderfully creative means of making God visible to our families and neighbors and world in ways that incorporate each of our strengths and giftings.

Single mothers abandoned by husbands, villages with no water, people with incurable diseases, countries without natural resources, and thousands of other needs, can be creatively resolved and resourced as those with passion and strengths to meet those needs gather together with those of like passion to find solutions.

Changing the focus of "nickels and noses" frustrated my years of pastoring. The system would rectify the focus back to services and programs and other internals for survival. I'm ready to remove the system and start fresh.

What do you think?

Part 5: Where is Google Maps When I Need It?

Still Burning!

I wrote the following six years ago while still pastoring. I was still a year away from hearing “pancreatic cancer” pronounced over the love of my life. Retirement wasn’t even in my vocabulary. I thought I could possibly take a wonderful group of people I loved into an untracked era. It was not to be.

Four years later, no congregation, no weekly pulpit, and only a few who may or may not read it, it still burns inside. This was written for my eyes only, so it may not flow like my other writing, but I would sure like to know if this or anything like it resonates with you.

MY FOCUS:

That our resources (money, time, strength, passions, talents), be directed in the most effective way possible to the fulfilling of our purpose of joining Jesus in loving and saving the world.

- **The way we accomplish this now** is through institutionalizing our resources, (Money, time, strength, passions, talents), and as a single corporate unit, acting as the agent of God’s love in our world. This creates the modern invitational/attractational model, a kind of “come and get it”, “one size fits all”, “we’ve got the answer”, “benefits”, mode of operation.
- **The result** is rigid programs that are one-size-fits-all. It causes a separation between the spiritual Sunday lives of people and their daily work and play lives. We go to church, do things for the church and live the rest (Monday-Saturday) of our lives away from the church. Life purpose is lived out separate from the “spiritual” part of us unless we are professionally called to church ministry. This creates the separation between clergy and laity, with clergy being the more knowledgeable and elevated in all matters spiritual. “Other” people (laity) come to church to receive instruction (interpretation) on what God says about things.

Clergy aren’t necessarily expected to know much about “real” life. That isn’t their specialty.

Instead of one life that you live joining Jesus on mission in this world, you split it into two: The spiritual one you “soak up” on Sunday and the “real” one that you live out the rest of the week. This one that you live Monday through Saturday you are made to feel guilty about if you don’t somehow use it to grow the institution on Sunday. That becomes your “spiritual” purpose, growing the institution, because people who you invite to church may “give their lives to Christ”, go to Heaven and join the church. Since this hasn’t been as effective in recent times, we have moved to an “attractational” model, which uses less guilt. Instead, it makes itself attractive through having bigger and better buildings, programs, technology, music and preaching.

You give 10% or less to support the benefits package you receive through the “spiritual” programs of the church. A small percentage of these funds are then designated to paying for other “professionals” (missionaries) to join Jesus in saving the world. Another very small percentage is used for benevolence and other community ministry. The vast majority of money, time, strength, passion and talent are invested in buildings, structure, staff, technology, maintenance and internal programs. We

have consigned our real efforts, not to join Jesus in loving and saving the world, but to keeping Him inside our lovely and comfortable sanctuaries of escape from the world, and to keeping these icons (institutions, buildings, services, programs) alive and prosperous.

The way I believe directing our resources to joining Jesus would be most effectively accomplished is:

- Remove our reliance and dependency on institutions, buildings, services and programs as the means of accomplishing our purpose (joining Jesus in loving and saving the world),
- Dismantle these icons via giving the corporate life to the common purpose (joining Jesus...). We must turn to dismantling for us and build for the common good, using what we receive back from the community. (“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” The Bible, Luke 6:38 NIV).
- Our mode of operation must start with every person living out their God-design, fulfilling the unique calling to them by God’s Spirit in their spirit to do their part to make earth more like Heaven. **This unique God-design** may best be described as *the topic in their lives that sparks a conversation that is the most alive, interesting and intense for them, with both God and others.*
- This will create natural alliances, as common interests will surface in conversations that pique each one’s interests and desires. Groups will begin to form, acting in this world directly out of God’s Spirit at work in the heart’s of individuals and alliances. Some will be more “people” oriented and some more “project” focused; but all will be living for the common purpose of extending God’s Kingdom to earth; of reconciling people everywhere to God and making this world a place that is taken care of like God’s household, God’s family, again.
- Our times of meeting together must not be what consumes either us or our resources, but times of uplifting where we gather for teaching and joint worship and celebrating Kingdom progress and encouragement that helps us overcome whatever hindrances we are facing and whatever sins keep entangling us.
- Our resources (money, time, strength, passion, talents) must be prioritized for our purpose (joining Jesus in loving and saving the world). Our individual resources (tithes, investments, accumulations, time, strength, passion, talent etc.) and our joint resources (in alliances) should be invested directly where they will do the most good in accomplishing our purpose (joining Jesus...).
- Project and goal-inspired alliances will join with people and need-inspired alliances to actually carry out “God’s will on earth as it is in Heaven”.

My hope is that this will bring some thoughtful and thought provoking comments.

Simplicity

Simplicity is...

- when each person in this world feels God's pleasure from us whenever his or her life expresses goodness.
- when each person in this world feels like they have the support and resources to find, develop and complete their unique God-given designs.
- when each person in this world knows they have the support and encouragement to overcome and defeat anything that would keep that from happening.
- when each person finds that loving God and loving others out of their unique God-design is a compelling way to live.

We will have completed what Jesus came to this world for.

Those already passionate about accomplishing this could support it well with a simple tithe (10%) of their incomes.

Jesus came. God became visible.
The disciples started over.
I think we need to again.

You do the math. I want you to feel the incredible power of combined resources under the Spirit's direction of our unique creativities and resources to complete the task. (If math was not your forte, refer to my chapter called "Refurbishing Old Hiking Boots".)

Just as in Jesus' time, the church has become an incredibly confusing fog making God invisible to most of the world, including our own sons and daughters.

Jesus came. God became visible.

The disciples started over.

I think we need to again.

What do you think?

Starting Over

We live in a world of culturally predominant religions. I long to step off the statistical radar screen into obscurity where policing the culture is not even a gleam of hope in my eye. There is nothing worse than religious fervor coupled with power. I'm not sure what the universal formula is, but it goes something like this:

*Religious fervor **plus** power = law **minus** love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*

The addition of power to what impassions us corrupts everything that inflamed the passion to begin with.

Christianity predominates capitalistic America. It carries the same labels as its servants of power in politics and economics. You can be conservative or liberal, progressive or fundamentalist. Consumption is key. Bigger is better. Might is right.

Did I say *right*?

When religion predominates under capitalism, *right* becomes a very critical notion. It takes over for truth. Power is maintained by being right, not by being truthful. Once in power, the essence of existence becomes maintaining that power.

Whoever is in power gets to police or control the system of power.

Issues represent the differences between those who want control of the power. They may not represent the real differences but are the chosen battlegrounds of competition to prove who is right. All is fair in this competition, as long as your representation of the issue wins the majority. Being right on the issue is more important than being truthful. Right is proven by who wins in our culture.

The earliest followers of Jesus had no illusions of cultural control or national power. Self-control was the only control that concerned them.

The addition of power to what impassions us corrupts everything that inflamed the passion to begin with.

their only means of influence until it became so strong that the Roman Empire endorsed it.

Getting the upper hand never compels truth.

The earliest followers of Jesus had no illusions of cultural control or national power. Self-control was the only control that concerned them. Serving others with *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* was

I wonder if that endorsement should have been our signal to start fresh again. Once corrupted by power, institutions formed by that power seem unable to free themselves from its perversion.

Individuals can, however.

We are in one of those great historic eras when people are running, not from goodness, but from the corruption of powerful institutions that are vying for power.

We can start over. We can band together for the purpose of serving a world by creatively finding ways to overcome the results of corruption with *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* as our means of influence. God's spirit will infuse us with power to do his will and bring His kingdom to earth as we follow the way of Jesus again.

What do you think?

Untracked Era

We're leaving the era called "Modern" behind. It was worn out. The borders had become too defined. No thrills anymore; only safety and predictability.

Somewhere over these last 100 years or so, a few brave souls started sneaking across the borders into unsafe territory. When found out, they were duly punished for breaking the long established safety standards of the modern era.

But the wall of old things was breached, and whispers, of new untracked thoughts and paths, started secretive infiltrations into minds dulled by over-tracked and paved plazas of modernity.

Frontier longings for new trails and vistas, making all that tried them breathless again and again with their adrenaline-spiking risks and hopes of reaching heights of previously unseen craggy peaks, left ever less satisfaction amid the drudgery of old familiar paths, with none less traveled.

People live in this new era now. Unnamed. Exhilarating.

Heretics.

Powerful groups of fixed and fortified moderns scream foul, because these lawless, godless profaners are destroying the safety of historically tried and tested principles of lethargic thought. But the volume doesn't sound as loud anymore.

I'm one of those who snuck over the wall. I can't seem to stay away anymore. Its elixir has beguiled me with tastes and sights and sounds and smells that beckon me irresistibly to their delights. I'm about to cross over for good, but there is still a longing to bring as many as I can with me on my continued forays, so they can see wide-eyed again as well.

People live in this new era now.
Unnamed. Exhilarating.
Heretics.

Sunrise Vista

I've had early morning quiet times for many years. I listen a lot and often gain insight during those times. But I would hesitate to call them mystical experiences.

I can probably count on one hand the experiences I would call mystical in my life. This was one of those life-shaping moments that occurred in 1993.

The Lord seemed to take me on a walk. We went from home to home in our community. I was only a bystander, watching him in action. In one home I saw him carrying groceries in for an elderly couple with canes. In another I observed him lovingly giving cookies and milk to a young boy whose single mother was still at work after school. In another I saw him listening attentively to a widow as she shared the stories of her life. In another he was painting gutters. In another fixing a car. In another babysitting. In another fixing meals. In another doing laundry. In another buying appliances. In another giving a ride. In another tutoring. In another making bread. In another mediating a quarrel. In another helping a young couple learn how to love each other. In another befriending an outcast.

The list goes on and on. This is only a small part of what I watched him lovingly do. Everywhere there was a need; Jesus was there, bringing life.

Then the scene changed ever so slightly and we were back where we started. This time, only I was aware of his presence. Those he had so lovingly cared for in the first scenes had no idea he was there. He appeared in my eyes as the gray matter of a brain, and I watched as we started back through each scene. I watched in dismay as we moved from scene to scene and he did exactly as before. Only this time none of these people were actually helped or given life, because there were no hands or feet or mouth or ears to carry out the will of the brain. I understood and wept in shame as he gently spoke. "Where is my body"? "Why will the church not do my will"? "Why will the church not do what I am doing"?

This became the compelling mission of my life as a pastor; to equip the church to truly be his body, to truly do what he was doing, to truly do his will.

People always seemed compelled by this vision of our mission. It was simple. It was clear. All we needed to do was implement it.

Trying to make this the actual mission of our church was one of the most frustrating experiences of my life, however. My hindsight has enabled me to understand now.

Don't Look Back

The Institution and its established authority trumped us. The power within the structure itself relegated the mission to a program of the church. We could talk about it being primary, but the “time tested” place for it was secondary.

Jesus, what He did, or wanting to be like Him, was not our main focus. It was “preach the Word”. After all, people needed to hear the inerrant, infallible Scriptures. They were the authority. Everything else was secondary and relegated to implementation in a program. Services for the purpose of “preaching the word” were what we were really about. Whoever had the best services had the most people and resources. No matter what we tried to add in as “primary”, it had to take backseat to this.

We always needed more club features. If people were going to join our club, we had to have the most attractive package; best facilities, best worship, best programs, best preaching; and we had to be ahead of everyone else technically.

Up until this “walk with Jesus”, I was doing a pretty decent job of increasing our club membership. Then I started not to care about club membership and club benefits anymore. Preaching the Word to club members and visitors became secondary in importance to me. I started wanting to be like Jesus in the way he lived in our community.

I didn't realize until later that I'd changed the authority I was following. Instead of His written words being everything I hung my life on, who he was and what he spent his time doing became most important.

It wasn't that this didn't resonate with others; it was that the institution that we were all part of wouldn't let us make it primary. The authority that had been in place since The Reformation (Sola Scriptura) directed everything, and even though an ever increasing number were agreeing with the desire to examine how Jesus would live in our communities and make him visible in the way we live, we were kept from being like him by a structure that centered around services where preaching “The Word” was our most important function and programs of the church were the means of living out what we learned.

Jesus wasn't CEO of Christianity. Neither was Scripture. Even though we claimed it to be infallible, inerrant and in charge, it was really our denominations and church institutions that were in charge. They could now declare each of their interpretations of the text as non-questionable. After all, *anyone* could see it was simply the Word of God.

I started wanting to be like Jesus in the way he lived in our community. ...I'd changed the authority I was following. Instead of His written words being everything I hung my life on, who he was and what he spent his time doing became most important.

The Spirit of the Pioneer

I want Jesus back as CEO. Well not exactly. He said when he left; we'd have his spirit. That's what I want; the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of his father and mine. Just as he was the visible manifestation of the invisible God, I want to make him visible now that he's not walking around down here. His spirit will direct me if I listen and keep my eyes open.

If all I passed on was words, it would not be long and they would all be arguing over what I meant when I said those things. We have done this great disservice to God as well.

A while back I wrote this in my early morning musings:

I can't imagine my kids enshrining my words. I can't fathom what it would do to my life to have them reduce me to written or spoken communication. Snippets, that in full context of circumstances and conditions and emotions and relationships meant one thing, now take

on meaning all their own without the frame of reference that produced them. My kids know me. They can't quote every word I've said but they understand what makes me tick and how I'll treat people and what I'll do in a given situation. They can laugh about my idiosyncrasies and groan over the bad joke that's coming next. I am so glad I pass on the responses of who I am (character, patience, calmness, forbearance, etc.), rather than a few inadequate words. If all I passed on was words, it would not be long and they would all be arguing over what I meant when I said those things.

We have done this great disservice to God as well. We have this built in "memory" of everything good about Him. We recognize it all around us and it elicits all kinds of response within us. When we see a mother tenderly loving her child, when a father protects his family, when a leader serves those she's leading and ten thousand other examples we could think of, we immediately know it's right and good.

It is the spirit of God, the way He acts and expresses Himself that we innately know is good. Living with that same spirit in our set of life circumstances is what He loves to see in us. Not "out of context" adherence to an interpretation of words that He said.

Jesus incarnates the very spirit of what God is like. His words are wonderful as memory joggers of the stories of life he lived in, living out the spirit of his father.

I can speak as a father. I am so glad my kids haven't enshrined my words, but have my spirit within them.

I am so glad my kids haven't enshrined my words, but have my spirit within them.

A New Trail Guide

So, if the words of Scripture alone are not enough, but some naturally assimilated blend of actions, words, attitudes, voice tones, emotions, responses, character and other things that commingle into something we call “spirit”, how will we portray this new authority we are going to follow?

The most common replacement for “Sola Scriptura” as next authority that I have heard is “The Holy Spirit”. Even though I understand the reasoning behind this seemingly excellent choice, it doesn’t have a chance of working. If you think “Sola Scriptura” created divisions, “the Holy Spirit” would only multiply them. Here is why.

Our thought processes when we say “Holy Spirit” emanate directly from our doctrines that have evolved from “Sola Scriptura”. We need to see God differently than our knowledge based, modern culture doctrines have allowed under “Sola Scriptura”. Even though The Gospels give us a story of what God is like in human flesh so we can understand him from our perspective, we have doctrinalized that away. We will go right back to making the Holy Spirit act like our interpretation of scripture says he should.

...we need to go back to the human story of Jesus so we can see it from a human perspective and not try to play like we understand the divine.

Instead, we need to go back to the human story of Jesus so we can see it from a human perspective and not try to play like we understand the divine. I love the spirit of Jesus. I love the way he treats children and women who have had five husbands and Pharisees and small-sized tax collectors. I love the way he washes his disciples’ feet and weeps at Mary’s pain of loss. I love his character and strength and heart and courage and tenderness. In other words, I love the spirit of the man Jesus. Since He claims to be God in human flesh, I want to have his human spirit, not the mystical divine one that I don’t have the mental acuity to fully understand.

Let’s take the religious/doctrinal verbiage out of the equation for our next authority and let it be the incredibly captivating human spirit of Jesus. I want to be like him. I want others to say I act like him. I want them to know that I follow him. I want, like him, to make the invisible God visible by the way I live in relation to others.

New Training for New Terrain

Our children are very different from my wife and I and dissimilar from each other as well. This was apparent from the day each of them was born. It was clear that even though there were familial similarities, they each had distinctive design. It was never our goal to somehow end up with clones of ourselves. We loved each one's uniqueness and spent our hopes and time on encouraging the strengths of each design.

We also longed to pass on to them the spirit of Christ that was selfless and giving with all it possessed.

So, we saw them two ways:

- Possessing unique gifts/strengths that needed development, and
- Having a choice between a spirit that was either selfish and possessive or one that was selfless and giving.

Jesus was our model.

We knew they would be awesome if each one would selflessly live out who God had designed them to be.

It seems that the early church must have thought God had something similar in mind. The practice appeared to be:

- You possess unique gifts/strengths that the world needs, and
- Model Christ in the way you use them.

It seems to me that if we make our new authority the human spirit of Jesus and spend our lives seeking to be like him through our own unique design, that the divine Holy Spirit might have at His disposal all the tools to direct a God plan to bring His Kingdom to Earth.

People with strengths of every kind imaginable, living out their lives in a collaborative and concerted effort directed unseen by God's Holy Spirit with solutions to individual needs, environmental needs, energy needs, city needs, nation needs, food and water needs, etc.

People purposefully meeting to work on solutions to individual, community or world needs, finding ways to live out the human spirit of Jesus in doing good, pooling resources to accomplish focused plans for bringing good news to those that their strengths are especially fitted to do.

Churches become the natural gatherings of people with common purpose and compatible gifts, getting better and better at being the visible hands and feet and eyes and ears and voice of God in a world that He is speaking life and hope and good news to.

Refurbishing Old Hiking Boots

Now, when I was a kid, I was raised with a 90% mentality. We were pretty good conservative Christians who believed it our duty to support the local church. We gladly put 10% of our income in the offering plate along with several others who interpreted the Bible to say that's what every good Christian did. Now I don't mean in any way to disparage this, even though I've changed over the years in how I view this voluntary tax we called tithing. We taxed ourselves so we could support something we viewed as essential to life and given by God Himself.

So if you weren't raised that way, I feel smugly superior to you. (just kidding) I was told things like my 90% would go further than 100% because God would bless it. I was told that I would get a reward in heaven because I had invested to save the world. I was told that it would help me to never be taken in by the "love of money" which was the root of all evil. I was told it was for bigger purposes than my little ones, and it would help me from becoming selfish.

There were other things I was taught that I won't tire you with, but suffice it to say, setting aside 10% became a big habit in my little life. Now I've never been rich, but I've done okay and never been poor, even if the government has declared me such a few times. Now adjusting for inflation (sounds good-like I know how to do that), I figure the church has received somewhere over a quarter million dollars from me in the last fifty years.

I may not be the Gates Foundation, but a quarter million dollars still isn't pocket change. I wish, back when I started this little habit, someone would have shared with me what I'm about to share with you... but wait, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Indulge me with a few moments of dreaming in incomprehensibility. I'm pretty average, and median household income figures would bear that out here in the United States. There are approximately 112 million households in the U.S. 10% of the income of this country this year would be something like 500 billion dollars. Extend that over 50 years and it amounts to 25 trillion dollars give or take 50 cents or so.

Now what I learned was that it wasn't so hard to live on 90%. In fact, knowing what I know now, it wouldn't have been impossible to live on 80% and put another 10% in savings, but we weren't exactly financial wizards, so I didn't learn that piece and am not reaping the incredible benefits of that today.

So, am I just pipe-dreaming? Might be. But if I can somehow get your heart and soul attached to this idea, we just might change the world after all. So let's start developing it.

If I started acting out this possibility that I could do everything else I needed to do on 90% of what I make, how much would I have to invest in a better world with? For the sake of this conversation, I'll work with the law of averages and put it at \$5000 per year and a quarter million for a lifetime. Don't let it worry you if you make more or less than average; if you do the numbers, it will still blow you away.

In fact, consider that you might want to team up with a few others in a little "Make the World Better" investment club. Four families could average \$20,000 per year and a million dollars over a lifetime. Seems to me you could do a lot of good with that kind of money!

Mental Preparation

Another principle I was taught over and over as a kid was “It makes you happier to give than it does to receive”. Back then I think I thought the guy who first thought of that might have been on drugs, but the older I get; the more I am taken by his wisdom. Now mind you, I love a gift when it’s given, and I enjoy it and am grateful, but that’s more about my birthday or Christmas; in life I love being in the position of being able to give way more than being in the position of need.

Passion is the key to how and what and who you give to.

In fact, I’ve found this principle to be so true, that it has become a way in itself to make a better world for someone. If my giving to them can lift them to a status of giver instead of just receiver, I have made a happier world.

Now I’ve discovered another principle. If a person is mentally stuck on being a receiver all his life, I’ll never make him happier; so no matter how much I give him, the world won’t get better. Here’s the principle: “Giving that helps others become givers is wonderfully satisfying, but giving to those who think life is about sucking makes giving suck”. This is the way Jesus said it: ...I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord”. (The Bible; John 10:17-18 NIV)

When you’re putting together the vocabulary list for your English class on giving, make sure you leave out the word should. Another of the maxims that I learned was “The Lord loves a cheerful giver”. Should and cheerful don’t make sense in the same sentence. Don’t ever give because someone’s trying to make you feel guilty if you don’t. Give only when it delights you or makes you laugh or cry, or lets you join in someone else’s hope. Don’t you dare give because you should. The world will get unhappier if you do.

Passion is the key to how and what and who you give to. Guilt may be good for some things, but it sucks here.

We're In This Together: "Necessity is the Mother of Invention"

I think Plato said that first, but he might have stolen it from someone else, because some things just fall into the category of "it's going to get said by someone, because we all know it's true when we hear it". Another old Greek guy named Aesop who nobody really knows much about for sure, has been blamed for writing a bunch of really simple animal stories that we call fables. Here's one that I think Plato probably read and I know I did.

The Crow and the Pitcher

A Crow, half-dead with thirst, came upon a Pitcher, which had once been full of water; but when the Crow put its beak into the mouth of the Pitcher he found that only very little water was left in it, and that he could not reach far enough down to get at it. He tried, and he tried, but at last had to give up in despair. Then a thought came to him, and he took a pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. At last, at last, he saw the water mount up near him, and after casting in a few more pebbles he was able to quench his thirst and save his life.

Little by little does the trick.

It kind of illustrates Plato's words several hundred years before he writes them.

Now I happen to think that this kind of "necessity" stuff happens all the time all around us and that the "it takes a village" thought goes way beyond just "raising kids". If you read that fable again, I think the way it could work is a little different than the story that he tells. In between "He tried, and he tried, but at last had to give up in despair" and "Then a thought came to him", is often a place for that "village" thing again.

I don't think it has to be our necessity that mothers invention in us. I think we are at the top of our game when it's another's necessity that brings out our maternal creative instincts.

I grew up believing in conspiracy theory. There was a trinity called God that knew all the secrets for making the world a better place. The third part of the God trinity was called by that mysteriously magical name "Holy Spirit". His job was to be everywhere whispering, encouraging and making the good things happen that the God Trinity wanted. Somehow, I could let this Holy Spirit of the God trinity flow freely in my thoughts and actions and I would be part of God's big plan to make the world a whole lot more like where He lives.

Now in this amazing theory, I was a very important, uniquely designed pawn. No... not the big guy with all the responsibility for the whole world getting better, but uniquely designed so that if I did my job,

this Holy Spirit could do his. My job? Figure out my design and live it out selflessly to the best of my ability until I die. The Holy Spirit's job...? Put all the pieces in place to make sure that everything I and all the other pawns were individually designed for was fully utilized to make the world a better place.

Now, just in case this totally impossible, you've got to be kidding conspiracy theory is true, (what you learn as kids has a powerful impact on you), I've decided that I'm going to do my job in the whole scheme.

That brings us to my premise. All of us are happiest and most creative when we're humming along like the finely tuned machines we were designed to be, doing exactly what this world needs from us.

I just hate it when the car that was designed to take me places doesn't do it and leaves me stranded by the side of the road. Its purpose is to serve my purpose. I might have bought it because of heated leather seats and a ride as smooth as silk, but its real purpose was to get me from here to Denver.

Now I know I'm not a car, but I was designed with a purpose. Sometimes people buy into me for a bunch of superficial and superfluous reasons, but when it's all said and done, the most important thing is that I don't leave them stranded by the side of the road by not doing what I was designed to do.

It seems that happens a lot. People get stranded.

When I was a child, my family attended a great church with the best name I have ever heard for a church. It was simply called "The Church By The Side Of The Road". It was in Federal Way, Washington, and I think it's still there.

It seems to me that all of us are at our best, doing what each of us was designed to do, for people left stranded by the side of the road.

Someone else's "side of the road" necessity, mysteriously combines in a moment with my well tuned "one of a kind" design, and makes life good again for a stranded person despairing of ever getting a ride to the next step of the future they had hoped to reach.

So maybe I can say... someone else's necessity will trigger inventive creativeness in me if I'll see my purpose as just doing my best to do what I was designed to do best when I find them by the side of the road.

I'll leave it to that mysterious Trinity to put it all together into a better world. I just want to be the best pawn possible.

Or maybe fabling just a little, I'll get to be the one who understands that if I just throw enough pebbles in the jar, this person who's dying of thirst can get a drink, and the world will be better for them.

This brings to mind another statement of truth that we all know, but best stated by a guy who became a famous poet after being helped while stranded by the side of the road; John Donne. "No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Sort of sounds like a "bigger than me" God perspective. Can't wait until he moves this pawn again. I know those three I call "Trinity" are strategizing to make this place I live in like Heaven.

Honing It Down

If a person or a group of people wanted to follow Jesus and feel like they had really succeeded in their attempt, it would seem to me that simplicity would be essential. Accomplishing it would need to lie within the natural ability of all who desired it.

Here in a nutshell are my first thoughts of what we would need to know and do:

1. Our purpose lies, with God's help, in making earth like heaven.
2. God believes in every man, woman and child that walk this world He loves. He longs for us to believe in and love Him as He does us. He longs for us to love each other in the same way.
3. The way we carry this out is found in an inward look that produces an outward action. Treat others the way we would like to be treated.
4. The example God gives us of how He thinks and how this works is Jesus.
5. He promises that He will always be with us and His spirit will direct the big endeavor of making this earth like heaven.
6. What will we face? Evil... in all its forms.
 - *From within*: selfishness, addictions, unforgiveness, lies we've believed about ourselves, loneliness, etc.
 - *From others*: rejection, expectations, scorn, etc.
 - *From the world and nature*: confusion, loss, disaster, abuse of power, etc.
7. We must do it together so we will be able to:
 - Leverage our individual resources by teaming and consolidating them with the resources of others.
 - Support each other in overcoming anything that keeps us from our giving potential; giving courage to each other through truth, grace and standing together. Otherwise, Love.
8. What is the contribution each one is to bring?
 - Who we are. Our talents, strengths, passions, skills and resources.
 - The purpose of the whole is to extend, expand and enable what each individual brings.
 - The whole is the creative well that God's spirit will draw from to bring good news to some part of the world.

I hope this raises a lot of questions and conversation. Ask away, discuss it. I believe in this simplicity.

Epilogue

Enough!

A while back, Fox News anchor Lauren Green succinctly illustrated why I keep trying to separate from this religion we call Christianity. In an embarrassingly awkward interview with Reza Aslan, the Muslim author of the book “Zealot”, (this is not a discussion on that book), she asks “You’re a Muslim, so why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?”

I don’t think we can overcome it. We have made Jesus the founder of a religion. That changes everything. Our view of his life, what he says, who he is, our responses to him, how institutions form, laws that are made, how we view politics, truth, the scriptures, life itself, all are impacted by that view. It becomes the premise that acts as foundation to all our thinking and reasoning.

I don’t know how to change it, so I’ve decided to separate from it. I love the movement that came out of lives ruined by religion that Jesus turned upside down with hope and life again. Nothing that I read from his life makes me think that founding another religion was anywhere on his agenda. When he clearly objects to what religion has become in his time, would he want to found another that would only confuse and legalize and obscure what he came to do?

- Showing what God was like as a human being to the world he loved and believed in.
- Showing us that God wants this earth to be like Heaven
- Loving us first, so it would be easy to love him back.
- Mentoring us in how to make God visible through loving each other.
- Showing us what it means to lay down your life for the ones you love.
- Showing us what our Father does for those who follow his example. (resurrection)

Enough of this founder, CEO, bottom line, get it right for the sake of the corporation type of thinking. Jesus did not found Christianity, a bunch of religious types did.

I’m not opposed to organization and institutions, just the middleman structures we call Religion. Let us organize out of passion to love and believe in and make more like Heaven our address in this universe.

About the Author

Ben Baughman is a writer on a mission. Having served in religious communities as a pastor for many years, Ben left to accomplish on the outside what he could not from the inside, freeing people to become everything they are uniquely designed to be so the world will be better for it.

In a time of massive cultural change, he longs to promote substantive dialogue that will enable people out of their uniqueness to contribute significantly toward assuring the new era's success.

From the Author

Thank you!

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