

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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CREATIONSWAP

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Responding to Spiritual Experiences

Arianism: The Heresy that Won't Go Away

Book Review: *Benefit of the Doubt:*

Breaking the Idol of Certainty

When God Fails His People



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Potty Politics

THE POSTMODERN MINDSET espouses a relativistic outlook when it comes to truth. That truth is relative underlies the common worldview of many in our age. “What is true for you is not necessarily true for me.” Core values of one organization or community will find opposition and resistance from other groups. There are no absolutes when it comes to truth in our generation. Is this not the philosophy we have come to realize in our generation?

In recent news, North Carolina has been vilified by the media for standing against pressure from the Obama administration to allow transgender persons into washrooms of their choice. Texas school districts have also stood up against threats to cut their funding by not providing transgender bathrooms. Based on their moral convictions regarding the LGBTQ agenda, these states are holding on to the archaic principle that their values mean something.

Here in Canada, the Liberal government proposes to pass a law in the same spirit. The Prime Minister wants to insure that transgender persons have the right to use the washroom of their choice. According to reports, anyone who speaks against an individual entering a washroom of the opposite gender can face up to two years in prison. The individual who is biologically male but psychologically or emotionally identifies as female may without fear enter into the washroom they feel most comfortable.

What stands opposite the church of Jesus Christ today is not the absence of truth, but a truth born of the world system ruled by the prince of the air.

If citizens of the current generation, living in a postmodern milieu of relativism, believe that truth is open to interpretation, how do governments make and uphold laws of this nature? For you see, in the Canadian context, the Liberal government aims to make a certain truth absolute. That “truth” teaches society that same sex marriage is acceptable and that transgender bathroom issues are so Victorian—this is the 21st century, people!

And all who oppose this “truth” need to get with the times. So truth is not relative after all.

John Stackhouse recently wrote a piece on Canadian democracy decrying the current stance of the government. If, Stackhouse stated, Canada is a true democracy then the laws that are established today may be amended or repealed in the future by a different government. Same-sex marriage may not always be legal in that sense. Stackhouse is correct in his definition of democracy, but he has overlooked one obstacle to democratic process: precedence. In the court system lawyers will argue their cases based on precedence, the preexistence of a case where certain details or evidences were submitted as true and binding. Therefore, even though democracy in its purest form should allow a people to change their laws based on popular opinion, it won't be that easy.

What stands opposite the church of Jesus Christ today is not the absence of truth, but a truth born of the world system ruled by the prince of the air. Truth is absolute for both sides. Truth will be fluid from a worldly perspective because it needs to morph according to the will of the one who manipulates it to his purposes. His purpose is destruction of everything that is pure and holy. Truth will be and must be hard and fast from a heavenly perspective because if it is not we have no ground to stand on and we might as well give in.

God's truth is absolute. His Son, Jesus Christ, declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The Living Truth said, “Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4-5), thus affirming the Creator's plan for marriage and sexuality and bathroom assignments.

Absolute truth versus absolute truth. We are engaged in a civil war, a cosmic war, and a metaphysical war. God's servants must remember that the weapon we fight with to tear down opposing walls and weapons of the evil one is love. Jesus came full of *grace* and truth, so we uphold the truth that we believe to be absolute with grace and compassion for those who do not believe as the followers of Christ do.

Who knew the battleground would centre on the toilet? ☹



Darryl G. Klassen

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Poetry and Power: The Language of Spiritual Formation



Gareth Brandt

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ALL PEOPLE HAVE HAD spiritual experiences too deep for words and yet we feel a compulsion to articulate them somehow. How do we help others—and even ourselves—understand deep spiritual experiences we have had? How do we evaluate the

authenticity or validity of a person's spiritual experience?

What kind of language best describes spiritual experience? How powerful are the words we use to describe spiritual experience? I believe that articulation is important, not only to help us

understand each other and validate each other's experiences but also to foster ongoing spiritual growth in our own lives. Learning a new spiritual language may be both challenging and refreshing. Although words are limited, they are one of the best ways we have

to communicate and to make sense of inner experience.

Words Help

Words, as labels or symbols of a deeper reality, help us to understand and work with mystery. The word does not set the limits of our experience, just as the label on a shirt is not the shirt itself. You can rip off the label and it is still a shirt, but the label does help us identify and take care of the shirt. So too is it with words about ourselves, our spiritual experiences, and how we seek to make meaning of life.

Spiritual experience is something that is mysterious and hard to put into words; we need to acknowledge that all of our descriptions will fall short, but try we must. Augustine wisely said, “What can anyone say about you, God? And yet, woe to him who says nothing.” Words may be inadequate, but without words the meaningless looms. “Words are all I have...” sang the BeeGees a few decades ago.

What kinds of words are adequate for the task? Poetry is the language of spiritual experience, although I’m not talking about rhyming lines or balanced couplets. Spiritual formation is about the processes of the heart. Poetry is heart language. I love how Eugene Peterson describes it:

Poetry is language used with personal intensity. It is not, as so many suppose, decorative speech... Poets use words to drag us into the depths of reality itself. They do not do it by reporting on how life is, but by push-pulling us into the middle of it. Poetry

grabs for the jugular... Poetry doesn’t so much tell us something we never knew as bring into recognition what is latent, forgotten, overlooked, or suppressed.¹

Why do I describe spiritual formation language as poetry? Poetry, according to Webster, is “Writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm.” Poetry communicates experience not information and our spiritual lives are primarily about what we experience, not what we know.

Spiritual Theology

Theology is infamous for its big words and lofty concepts; I prefer to describe spiritual theology, or spirituality, as poetic theology. Systematic theology is about God; spiritual theology is about the human experience of God. Most of the writing we read every day in the marketplace communicates information and data which we need information and data in order to function. However, when we describe our relationship with God or another person,

God. Poetry uses metaphors; metaphors are about relating one thing to another, a direct comparisons between unlike objects. Thinking metaphorically means making a comparison between two dissimilar things, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known. For example, we could describe a relationship with God as “dry” or “fruitful.” Clearly, a relationship cannot lack humidity or produce apples, but because a relationship with God is hard to describe, we use such common comparisons to help us out.

Metaphors Are Needed

How else can we describe a spiritual experience or process but through metaphors? Richard Rohr answers by saying, “Metaphors open up the real thing we call God. Symbols bring things from the hidden unconscious to consciousness, where they can be operative.”² Poetic language with its metaphors and symbols helps us to grasp the depth of spiritual experience. “Metaphor uses the language of sense experience to lead us into the world of the unseen: faith, guilt, mind,

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we need the language of experience. Our relationships are not about hard data, but about the poetry of experience.

Poetry begins with the impulse to relate to the other, to nature, to people, to

God. The visible and invisible, put asunder by sin, are joined by metaphor.”³

Language, especially language about God, can become idolatrous. This is why I am saying that this language must function as poetic metaphor. “An idol starts with a mystery and fashions it into something that can be measured; a metaphor begins with something common and lets it expand into immeasurable glory.”⁴ We use words all the time to describe our experiences with God, and consequently, it is important

1 Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 11–12.

2 Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2013), 75.

3 Peterson, *Answering God*, 73.

4 *Ibid.*, 78.

that we recognize how we are using these words. They are not words used to restrict our experiences or someone else's—"this is how you are to experience God"—but to open them up to the mysteries of divine work in our lives.

Language Shapes Us

We have established that language is metaphorically descriptive of spirituality. Can the language we use actually shape us? How? I believe that articulating our experience of faith is in itself an important aspect of spiritual formation. This necessitates that we learn a spiritual language. Language is very important in coming to faith and growing in faith. In some ways language shapes experience just as much as experience determines the words we use to describe it.

The words that parents, evangelists, pastors and adults used to speak about faith when we were growing up have a profound influence on our spiritual experiences. For example, if you grew up with the language of "speaking in tongues" as a part of everyday experience, or at least an every Sunday experience, you are probably more likely to speak in tongues. If you grew up hearing talk of "accepting Jesus into your heart," it is quite likely that as a young child you knelt by your bed and "prayed the prayer" with your parents close by. Someone who had never heard the words probably never had the experience. Language has the power to shape our experience. This does not negate the experience; it just helps us to realize the shaping potential of language.

Definitions

To illustrate, let's examine a few key words that are used when talking about how

If you grew up hearing talk of "accepting Jesus into your heart," it is quite likely that as a young child you knelt by your bed and "prayed the prayer" with your parents close by. Someone who had never heard the words probably never had the experience.

human beings relate to God. The word "spirituality" has become popular and with that has often become very fuzzy and unclear in meaning since everyone seems to be free to define it as they desire. I usually use the word "spirituality" interchangeably with the word "faith" and use both to refer to the human experience of the divine, or the human response to God's initiative. Spirituality is how I express my relationship with God.

Here are a few definitions that incorporate some of the different dimensions of faith and spirituality. Each definition may not be as tight and clean as we would like but hopefully they give us a sense for what we mean when we talk about "faith" or "spirituality." Helpful synonyms of faith are: allegiance, trust, loyalty, sincerity, fidelity, conviction. The anonymous author of the biblical book of Hebrews says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."⁵ My graduate school advisor, Don Misener, said that, "In contrast to religion which can be accepted or rejected, spirituality is like a belly-button; everyone



has one." Kathleen Norris, in her very helpful book where she defines numerous Christian words, says that "Faith is best thought of as a verb, not a thing that you either have or you don't."⁶ Simply, I see faith and spirituality as the human response to divine initiative.

Tri-polar Spirituality

Traditionally, spirituality has been primarily, and sometimes exclusively, about the human relationship with God. Initially, it is important to understand that biblically it is rather a tri-polar spirituality: God, self, community. Spiritual formation begins with the relationship with the self, is focused on the relationship with God, and ends in community. Our relationship with God is inwardly directed toward personal transformation, upwardly compliant in our experience of divine encounter, and outwardly committed to relationships of solidarity with neighbours.⁷

All three of these are deeply intertwined and inextricably related to each other. We often cannot, except theoretically, separate them. They are inseparable and indivisible, although each of the three define and determine the authenticity of the other parts. "Tripolar spirituality is the breakthrough in which: love of God transcends and transforms love of self, love of God and

⁵ Hebrews 11:1.

⁶ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 169.

⁷ This concept is best articulated in David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 7–22.

love of neighbor become one, love of neighbor and love of self become one, and submission to God and solidarity with neighbor are indivisible.”⁸

More Synonyms

There are many other synonyms for faith and spirituality. Here are a few examples of words that have been used by practitioners in the field of spiritual formation. Each word choice reflects a bit of the theology or strategy of the one stating it. The word “development” is borrowed from the discipline of developmental psychology and seems to assume formation is something that happens naturally or inevitably.

“Discipleship” is a favourite word in the Anabaptist tradition that seems to imply that formation is something that comes about by the learning of the one being formed or by the instruction of a teacher or mentor. Jesus instructed his followers to “follow me” and “learn of me.”¹⁰ The word disciple itself is translated from the Greek word for student.

“Sanctification” is a long religious word with a deep history in various traditions. Basically, it is about becoming pure and holy through the intervention of One Wholly Other who does the work of formation. It is sometimes seen as a process and other times as a second experience, depending on the tradition.

“Conversion” is a popular word among evangelicals because it emphasizes the importance of a dramatic initiatory experience that happens at a certain time and place. Apart from

its historical baggage, the word simply refers to a spiritual change from one thing to another. The word itself does not prescribe whether it happens in a moment or over a long period of time. Gordon Smith points out that “most if not all people come to faith in Christ through a protracted series of events.”¹¹

I prefer to use the word “formation” to highlight the fact that spiritual change is a process that takes time, interaction between various factors (seen in the above words), and the creativity and energy of each one involved. In a sense all of the words above have part of the truth. Which words are used most predominantly will play a part in shaping spiritual experience. All of the words together give us a more complete picture of the dynamics of spirituality.



Unfortunately, I often felt inadequate in my Christian experience because I could not identify a dramatic or specific experience of conversion, and found it difficult to manufacture something genuine!

My Early Experience

My early Christian experience was shaped by the language that was used by my church, my parents, and later by influential teachers, musicians, and authors. Having grown up in conservative evangelicalism, I was inundated by dramatic testimonies of conversion events that were lifted up as the norm of Christian initiatory experience, yet

my own experience was that I grew into faith gradually through positive family influences and weekly Christian discipleship that was both modelled and taught. Unfortunately, I often felt inadequate in my Christian experience because I could not identify a dramatic or specific experience of conversion, and found it difficult to manufacture something genuine!

I grew up in a church that had revival meetings twice a year, usually just before seeding time in spring and right after harvest in the fall. These meetings were always accompanied with the obligatory altar calls where people would go to the front of the church with great emotion, usually with tears and sobs of remorse

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Mark 8:34.

10 Matthew 11:29.

11 Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 31.

12 Charlotte Elliot, *Invalid's Hymn Book*, 1836.

over sin and the desire to repent. We always knew that the critical moment was coming when we would sing:

Just as I am without one plea,
but that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.¹²

We did not sing this song at any other time; it was saved for the last night of revival meetings twice a year when the altar call was given. The song had at least five verses and we would sing them over repeatedly until enough people had finally made it up to the front. I do not remember ever doing this, but I do remember feeling great emotion, sometimes even guilt for not going forward and wondering if I would suffer in hell forever as a result.

I read a number of spiritual biographies during my early adolescence about drug addicts and gang members in New York being converted. Oh what wonderful testimonies

they had! I was fascinated by their stories of dramatic change from murderer to evangelist. Nicky Cruz's *Run Baby Run* was probably my favourite. He grew up on the mean streets of New York and became a gang leader with more than a dozen murders to his debit.

His life was dramatically turned around when confronted by a charismatic preacher from Pennsylvania named David Wilkerson. Here I was—a plain Mennonite farm boy living such a boring life with no access to drugs or weapons or anything exciting to build a testimony.

I sometimes wonder whether my rebellious years were an unconscious attempt to create something from which to repent. During my adolescence I decided that the church, and its faith, was a sham. My personality was such

that I felt spiritual forces keenly and so my rebellion was not a turn toward secularism or atheism, but a selling out to the forces of darkness. I do not recall praying to Satan to help me do bad things, but I was definitely in touch with spiritual realities, while at the same time making a big game out of the whole thing publicly as if it was all a farce.

Smoking and swearing were the most overt forms of rebellion available to us in a rural community at the time, drinking alcohol was added when a few older friends were able to supply us with liquor, and reckless driving was woven in when we got our drivers' licences. These activities continued for a few years until I had a personal conversion experience one hot August night, a Friday the thirteenth.

My experience of conversion was clothed by a spiritually sensitive personality, the practices of my church, the values of my family, and the language and stories of the books I read.

A Larger Context

That night included a lot of weeping over all the bad things I had done and recording my thoughts for posterity. I remember waking up thinking that the sun shone somehow brighter that morning, and that a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I did not tell anyone of this solitary night-time experience until much later when I told my parents.

After this I decided a more public display of my new commitment was needed. This happened when our youth group was traveling to a "Lundstrom Crusade" in a city half an hour from our community. I told one of my friends on the way in that I would be going forward at the altar call. I got a "Yeah, right!" of sarcastic disbelief in response. The band played

contemporary music with a full band that consisted of electric guitars, a synthesizer, and drums; it was pretty close to rock n roll! The last song was still "Just as I am," but going forward here seemed so much more interesting than in the midst of the voices of unaccompanied farmers.

The next day at youth group drama rehearsal, the youth leader shook my hand and said, "Welcome aboard." I felt I belonged. I was in. I felt a deep sense of affirmation and passion for the new life that lay ahead. I did "fall away" numerous times in high school, getting drunk with my old friends, but always returning to the commitment I had made. On one occasion I even made a public apology in front of my school class saying that my behaviour at the dance was not becoming of my faith. The school only contained a minority of "born again type Christians" and so there were some snickers even from the teacher, but I felt empowered by my witness.

My experience of conversion was clothed by a spiritually sensitive personality, the practices of my church, the values of my family, and the language and stories of the books I read. Was my experience of faith somehow invalid and inferior as a result? By no means!

But as I learned "discipleship" language at Bible college, "development" language in a university psychology department, and "formation" language at a mainline seminary and a Roman Catholic Retreat Centre, I gained a new perspective as I began to see the larger context of my spiritual formation.

Learning different words helped me to become more open to new experiences and helped me to understand the experiences of the past in a new way. Language not only helps us to describe our spiritual experiences, it also forms, or at least influences, our experiences. Being aware of these dynamics can help us to be more understanding of our own and others' experience of God. **e**

Responding to Spiritual Experiences



Kevin Wiebe

Kevin Wiebe is the senior pastor of New Life Christian Fellowship in Stevenson, Ont. He served as a missionary in Alberta for five years before obtaining a BA (Communications and Media) from Providence University College in 2013. He has been serving at NLCF since July 2013. He is married to Emily, and they have three young children.

WHEN WE GO through a particular experience, how can we know that it was real? Was our perception of the event accurate and true to reality, or did our emotions or even our worldview distort our perception of reality? Over the past several centuries, philosophers like René Descartes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Immanuel Kant have all wrestled with such ideas, and pop culture has also obsessed over such a question in movies like *The Matrix* or *Inception*.

While a theological paper is not the place for existential philosophy,¹ there are theological implications to these questions. When one has a spiritual experience, how do we interpret those events? If God is speaking to us, how do we know it was truly Him? In John 10, Jesus figuratively describes his disciples as

sheep who follow his voice. For believers, the question is not whether or not God exists or still leads us today. That much is presupposed. The question is, how does one know if they are hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, or if they are simply fabricating their own spiritual experience based on subjective personal desires?

I propose that there is a spectrum of ways that people seek to understand the voice of God, with two unhelpful extremes that will be explored. On one end, some create a rigid system of religion that is devoid of significant personal encounters with the Divine, while on the other end is a realm filled with subjective and experience-based ideas, devoid of objective and reliable truth. Despite having their own internal logic, these extremes are unhelpful in seeking an answer to this question.

Extremes of Distance and Experience

One extreme responds to Divine encounters by creating distance between themselves and the Lord. We see this exemplified in Exodus 20:18–21, when the Israelites wanted Moses to talk to God on their behalf because they were afraid of the overwhelming power of God. Having a sense of profound fear is common in the Scriptures when having a Divine encounter. When Isaiah encountered the Lord, he responded with a sense of dread over his own sinfulness (Isaiah 6). Angelic proclamations, such as the Annunciation, are often accompanied by the words “do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30).

But this is not the only fear motivating this extreme. It is also a fear of being duped. Francis Chan writes, “I had contempt toward anyone who claimed to have ‘a word from the Lord.’ I felt it was a righteous contempt because I’d seen people use the phrase ‘I have a word from the Lord’ to manipulate others for personal gain.”² One end of the spectrum responds to a Divine encounter by dismissing

One end of the spectrum responds to a Divine encounter by dismissing it, relegating all piety to that which is verifiable.

On the other end of the spectrum we find those who revel in experience-based ideas and claims of supernatural forms of Divine communication.

¹ For more about a Christian philosophical response to these ideas, check out these articles by Dr. Hendrik van der Breggen: <http://apologiabyhendrikvanderbreggen.blogspot.ca/search/label/Skepticism>

² Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 55.

it, relegating all piety to that which is verifiable, missing out on the mysterious and exciting aspects of the Christian life.

On the other end of the spectrum we find those who revel in experience-based ideas and claims of supernatural visions, dreams and other forms of Divine communication. While often remaining open to the more charismatic aspects of faith, this extreme looks strangely similar to what Paul talked about in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” Without having a firm grounding in the Scriptures, they can become like people Paul talks about in Ephesians 4:14: “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” Without holding on to the Bible as a source of truth, subjectivity abounds and people can be easily manipulated.

Legalism and Religion

On one end of the spectrum there are churches obsessed with religion, rules, and rigidity. Bruxy Cavey addresses such churches: “Although embraced by many religious institutions as their founding Scripture, the pages of the Bible reveal an *irreligious* agenda...I am convinced that the Bible holds clues to a way out of our slavish addiction to religious systems, while it simultaneously invites us into a direct connection with the Divine.”³ In the Gospels, Jesus spoke of the Pharisees,

While other religions had their talismans and objects where their deities were thought to be embodied, throughout the pages of the Bible God reveals Himself in events and in care for His people.

calling them “whitewashed tombs” because they had what appeared to be a beautiful religion, but on the inside they were dead and full of decrepit uncleanness (Matt. 23:27). Likewise, there are those who can see through the veil of such lifeless religion, who desire to move into a life-giving and transformative relationship and experience with the Divine.

Michael Gungor also addresses this type of extreme: “A concept makes a better product than a relationship. My wife could never sell my love for her to someone else. That’s not how love works. She could sell some of the engraved images of my love if she wanted to... She could sell her engagement ring or her wedding dress, but never in a million years could she sell my love for her. Idolatry mistakes relational love for God and neighbor with concept and formula, and the contemporary church advertises and sells the concepts and formulas. It reduces marriage to wedding rings and friendship to greeting cards.”⁴ In the Scriptures, God’s relationship with his people is repeatedly compared to the relationship between husband and wife, and any relationship reduced to only concepts and products is not much of a relationship at all.

If we only know *about* God without actually *knowing and experiencing* God,



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our faith is essentially worthless. In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus talks about the future day of judgment where people will come to him who only appear to be his disciples. His response to these individuals is sobering. He will say, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” These individuals never had a relationship with Jesus. He never knew them. It takes more than religion or outward action; it takes a relationship with Jesus, which will require some sort of personal encounter with the Lord. After all, Ephesians 1:13 says that all believers are “marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” and Romans 8:9 says, “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel makes this observation: “While the deities of other peoples were associated with place or things, the God of Israel was the God of events: the Redeemer from slavery, the Revealer of the Torah, manifesting Himself in events of history rather than in things or places. Thus, the faith in the unembodied, in the unimaginable was born.”⁵ While other religions had their talismans and objects where their deities were thought to

3 Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2007), 22.

4 Michael Gungor, *The Crowd, The Critic, and the Muse: A Book For Creators* (Denver: Woodsley Press, 2012), 120.

5 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 7-8.

be embodied, throughout the pages of the Bible God reveals Himself in events and in care for His people.

Christianity follows a God who entered history and embraced humanity, a God who dwells among us and in us instead of being distant, detached and only accessible through the proper performance of the right rituals. The Christian faith cannot be reduced to simple formulas, but requires ongoing encounters with the living God and his promised Holy Spirit.

Subjectivity and Spiritual Abuse

Since there is no device to objectively measure whether or not someone's spiritual encounter with God is authentic, how does one know when God is speaking to them or through them? How do we know if an experience is genuine, or if it is someone seeking to manipulate others for nefarious purposes?

Bruce Main describes the leading of the Spirit as "holy hunches" or as a spiritual nudge that people feel when being led by the Spirit of God. He writes, "I confess that I approach the issue of a hunch-inspired life with some trepidation and hesitation. Because of the subjectivity of the hunch word and its experiential implications, the potential of harm and misuse is a strong possibility."⁶ There are many times where people have claimed, and possibly even believed that they were following the will of God while doing all manner of things that are contrary to God's will as revealed to us in Scripture. Main writes about some questions he had after a negative experience with someone who misunderstood God's

leading: "When are [holy hunches] valid? Do they ever conflict with the greater good of what God is trying to do? How do we discern these intuitive inklings as to whether they are really from God or something that is fabricated in our own psyche to meet our own emotional needs?... Sometimes our personal experiences need to be tempered by the larger vision of what God wants to do."⁷

One must be careful with such things, because one can easily mix up the moving of the Spirit and an individual desire/ personal agenda. Main writes,

Sincere, pious, churchgoing people have acted on hunches that have brought scores of people destruction and ill will. Hunches have burned innocent people at the stake, sparked crusades, and led to genocide—all justified by someone's interpretation of God's calling. Misguided hunches have also caused people to lose their life savings, to make harmful career choices, to split churches, and to ruin relationships. Acting on misguided hunches can do a lot of damage to us, our families, our friends, and our communities. Is there any doubt as to why John would write to his community: Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world [1 Jn. 4:1].⁸

Consider an example in recent world news of a man who was touring a South African national park with his church group when they came upon a pride of lions feeding on an impala. He got out of the

We all have the capacity to confuse our own imaginations, emotions, ideas or agendas as God's voice and we must be aware of this.

vehicle to attempt to use the Holy Spirit to miraculously control the wild animals. He was attacked and had to be taken to hospital for emergency surgery. He said, "I do not know what came over me... I thought the Lord wanted to use me to show his power over animals."⁹ Obviously, he misunderstood, which led to a physical injury; though perhaps his ego may have been hurt more than his body.

Confused Imaginations

We all have the capacity to confuse our own imaginations, emotions, ideas or agendas as God's voice and we must be aware of this. If one admits the possibility that we can misunderstand the voice of God, then it logically follows that two people can experience the same thing and come to drastically different conclusions. Where one person understands something correctly, someone else might misunderstand. Put more accurately, the portion and percentage of the message from God that is misunderstood can vary widely from person to person.

How Do We Understand Our Experiences?

Pierre Gilbert writes, "Much of what we think we know comes from sources that are essentially unverifiable. As much as Christians may profess that the Bible is a reliable source of information on spiritual matters... [too much] is seen through a grid that values personal experiences and anecdotes over the biblical text. Thus, the age-old question can be asked again: *Do we interpret the Bible in light of our experience or do we*

6 Bruce Main, *Holy Hunches: Responding to the Promptings of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 14.

7 Main, *Holy Hunches*, 122.

8 Main, *Holy Hunches*, 123.

9 David Ingram, The Daily Buzz: Religious Prophet Attacked by Lions After Trying to Perform Miracle, *Yahoo News*, March 10, 2016, accessed March 12, 2016, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/blogs/daily-buzz/religious-prophet-attacked-by-lions-after-trying-191535286.html>.

interpret our experience in light of the Bible?"¹⁰ (emphasis added). This is a very important question to ponder.

Andrew Wilson offers several practical suggestions for better discerning what is and is not the voice of the Lord. To summarize, Wilson says we must check these experiences against the teaching of the Scriptures, against the character of Jesus as revealed in the Bible. We should also consult with our own spiritual leaders and church community, and on top of that examine the fruit of the experience.¹¹ Wilson's measures help prevent believers from being entirely subjective, providing some safeguards against misinterpreting the voice of the Lord, and discerning if something is not from God. These measures also encourage believers to actively listen for the voice of God, both in our experiences, church tradition, and in especially in the Scriptures.

While Wilson's points are excellent reminders, one must not forget that there is still a degree of mystery to how we come to recognize the voice of God. Jesus compares his disciples to sheep who "know his voice" (Jn. 10:4). Have you ever pondered how you came to recognize the voice of your mother, father, husband, wife? While there are machines that can quantify tone, pitch and cadence, one typically does not consciously examine those in order to recognize a voice. It is something that simply happens as you spend time listening to them. Likewise, sheep come to recognize the voice of their shepherd by listening to it consistently.

Thus it is logical to posit that the more we listen to the true voice of God, the

more we will recognize it and be familiar with it. Main puts it rather succinctly when he writes,

Responding to holy hunches is a subjective enterprise. There is no exact or detailed formula, pattern, methodology, or program that can ensure that our hunches are truly

In Numbers 14 the people of Israel sent spies into the land and, after their return, only two of the spies believed God could give them the land. The other ten could not move beyond what they could see.

holy. That fact is both exciting and terrifying. Exciting because we have been given this wonderful opportunity and freedom to listen to God's Spirit and respond to holy promptings with faithfulness. It is terrifying because we are human beings who are subject to selfishness, petty insecurities, and fear, and are fully capable of missing God's intention for our lives. Therefore, we have the capacity to be agents of healing and restoration—or the capacity to be agents of hurt and destruction.¹²

In our response to an encounter with God, we have the capacity to use our experiences to become His hands and feet in the world. If we are not careful,

however, we may become conduits of destruction because we let our own ideas get in the way of God's.

Consequences

In the Biblical narrative there are several situations that help paint a picture of how severe the consequences can be for not properly understanding God's leading.



The Spies Return from Canaan. Engraving by Gerard Jolain from the 1670 "La Sainte Bible."

In Numbers 14 the people of Israel were already free from slavery in Egypt, and God wanted them to take possession of the land that was promised to them. They sent spies into the land and, after their return, only two of the spies believed God could give them the land. The other ten could not move beyond what they could see. They did not have faith beyond the physical obstacles they witnessed; they did not believe in something remarkable or miraculous. They did not believe that God could give them the land.

Due to this report, most of the Israelites began to lament their situation, and thus rebelled against the plan of the Lord. As a result, God sent them back into the wilderness to wait for that generation to die off before giving the land to the next generation. The parallel should be clear: there are many who ignore the voice of God in a modern context because it goes beyond what they can see, beyond what is physical, tangible, or altogether objective. Sometimes

10 Pierre Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows: A Plea For a Return to Text and Reason* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2008), 17.

11 Andrew Wilson, "How Do We Hear God?" *The Gospel Coalition*, November 5, 2013, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-do-we-hear-god>.

12 Main, *Holy Hunches*, 129.

following the leading of God requires faith in that which we do not see.

On the other hand, it can be dangerous to brazenly declare that we have heard a message from God. This is not a new phenomenon; it also occurred in ancient Israel. Jeremiah 23:38–40 addresses false prophets when it says, “Although you claim, ‘This is a message from the Lord,’ this is what the Lord says: You used the words, ‘This is a message from the Lord,’ even though I told you that you must not claim, ‘This is a message from the Lord.’” This statement is followed by oracles of severe punishment for these false prophets. Just because one thinks that something is from the Lord does not necessarily make it so. Given the seriousness of God’s

For some, moving forward might mean living more humbly; for others, [it] might mean to live more boldly.

response to such actions, one would be wise to be careful about how or if we claim something was from God.


In reference to 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, Chan writes, “Some conservatives may quench the Spirit by ignoring His working, but surely putting unbiblical words into the mouth of God is a form of quenching the Spirit as well.”¹³ It would seem that both extremes may be guilty of the same thing, committed in different ways. While one extreme is quenching the Spirit through ignoring His voice and leading, the other extreme does so by attaching God’s name to things that really have nothing to do with God. One side

replaces the leading of the Spirit with rules and an obsession with things that can be systematized, quantified, and objectified, following only what we can understand and see without eyes of faith. The other substitutes God’s voice with their own, replacing the Spirit’s proclamation with ideas from their own imagination. Surely both sides must learn to better listen to the voice of the Spirit. After all, as John Webster put it, “The end of divine revelation is not accumulation of notions but conformity to divine truth.”¹⁴

Moving Forward

So how do we respond to a spiritual experience or what seems to be an encounter with God? As has been demonstrated, ignoring it out of fear is not a helpful option. Neither is blindly assuming that all such experiences are actually from God. We must live in the tension created by these two extremes, refusing to ignore the authority of the Scripture on the one hand, and, on the other hand, refusing to ignore the voice of the Good Shepherd.

For some, moving forward might mean living more humbly, recognizing that God’s will is often drastically different from our own and submitting our experiences to the authority of Scriptures. For others moving forward might mean to live more boldly, stepping out in faith when the Holy Spirit leads. For all believers, this means responding to God’s voice when He calls, being, “a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable”¹⁵ So listen for the voice of God, for His “holy hunches.”¹⁶ Be bold,

but also be humble, and let every moment of your life worship God by responding to him as a living sacrifice. 

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¹³ Chan, *Forgotten God*, 56.

¹⁴ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 63, accessed March 11, 2016, <https://books.google.ca/books?isbn=0567212947>.

¹⁵ Rom. 12:1b, NLT.

¹⁶ Main, *Holy Hunches*, 129.

Arianism: The Heresy that Won't Go Away



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THROUGHOUT Christian history, there has been a significant amount of doctrinal debate and controversy. As the Early Church continued to grow and develop, it became important to formulate and clarify key doctrines of the faith. Because of the centrality of Jesus Christ to Christianity, it should come as little surprise that much of the debate has revolved around the divinity and humanity of Jesus.

Some heresies died out quickly, while others were temporarily defeated only to re-emerge again in the future. Arianism, the denial of the full divinity of Jesus Christ, falls into the latter category. This paper will show that Arianism is an ancient and pervasive heresy that has been present throughout most of Christian history and is now more influential than ever through its modern-day manifestation in the religious group known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Origins of Arianism

While there has always been doctrinal debate in the Christian Church, widespread persecution during the first

three centuries of church history forced the early Christians to focus more on a common allegiance to Christ than on fleshing out the meaning of particular doctrines. Things began to change after Constantine became Roman emperor and accepted Christianity himself. It became important for church leaders to formulate specific doctrines so Constantine could unify the empire under one common dogma.¹ The precise nature of Christ's humanity and divinity became a key doctrinal issue that needed resolution.

Origen, an early and prolific church father, laid the groundwork for much of Arian thought. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen acknowledged the divinity of Jesus, but also made it clear that he viewed Jesus as inferior to God the Father:

But the archetypal image, again, of all these images is the Word of God, who was in the beginning, and who by being with God is at all times God,

Arianism, the denial of the full divinity of Jesus Christ, is an ancient and pervasive heresy that has been present throughout most of Christian history.

not possessing that of himself, but by His being with the Father, and not continuing to be God, if we should think of this, except by remaining always in uninterrupted contemplation of the depths of the Father.²

In other words, Origen considered Jesus to be fully divine, but subservient to the Father and directly dependent upon him for his continued existence. It should come as little surprise that some subsequent church leaders carried Origen's ideas about the inferiority of Jesus to their logical conclusion and denied his full divinity.

One of those leaders was Arius, a presbyter in charge of the church and district of Baucalis in Alexandria.³ In 318 C.E., Arius publicly challenged the high Christological views of his bishop, Alexander, and proposed instead that Jesus was a created being.⁴ According to Arius, Jesus was created by God the Father at a distant point in the past:

Foreign from the Son in essence is the Father, for He is without beginning.

1 Cairns, Earle E., *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 131–133.

2 Origen, *Origen's Commentary on the Gospel of John 2.2*

3 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 3.

4 Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 49.

Understand that the Monad was; but the Dyad was not, before it was in existence. It follows at once that though the Son was not, the Father was God. Hence the Son, not being (for He existed at the will of the Father), is God Only-begotten; and He is alien from either.⁵

Arius encountered fierce resistance to his views, most notably from his bishop. In a letter to Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, Arius complained about the persecution he was experiencing and defended his views as logical and biblically based. Arius explained that he could not accept that “the Son has always been” since it was clear that the Father must have created the Son at some point in the distant past.⁶ He attracted a significant number of supporters, most notably Eusebius of Nicomedia, who was an admirer of Origen.⁷

To resolve this issue, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea, which consisted of approximately 220 bishops.⁸ The primary opponent of Arius at this council was Athanasius, who held that Jesus was “coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial with the Father.”⁹ While there was vigorous debate among the bishops, the Nicæan council ended up condemning the views of Arius as heretical. Specifically, the council confirmed that Jesus was fully God, of one substance with the Father, and

begotten rather than made.¹⁰ However, despite the decisive rejection of Arianism at the Council of Nicaea, it wasn’t long before this heresy made a comeback.

Continuation of Arianism After Nicaea

When the Council of Nicaea rejected Arianism, it used the Greek word *homoousios* (of one substance) to describe the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. This word had the



Constantine burning Arian books. Illustration from a compendium of canon law (c. 825 C.E.).

advantage of firmly rejecting Arianism, but it was not fully acceptable to many of the bishops from the East, most of whom accepted Origen’s view that Jesus was inferior to God the Father.¹¹

The split between the West and the East on this issue created a window of opportunity for the resurgence of Arianism. Political considerations also benefited the Arians since they believed that the authority of bishops should be subordinate to the emperor and this obviously won them favour with the imperial leadership, particularly Constantius II who reigned from 337–361 C.E. In contrast, orthodox leaders applied their belief about the equality between God the Father and God the Son to the imperial realm and argued that church bishops and the imperial empire should have equal authority.¹²

The branch of Arianism that became dominant at this time was known as Homoian Arianism. It promoted a literal approach to biblical interpretation and focused on Bible passages that affirmed the difference in status between Jesus and God the Father. Homoian Arians noted that Proverbs 8:22 states that God created Wisdom (i.e., the *Logos*) and emphasized the many verses that affirmed that God the Father alone is wise, powerful, and unchangeable (Rom. 16:25-27; 1 Tim. 6:15; Mal. 3:6).¹³ The Second Sirmian Creed of 357 C.E. is the earliest clear declaration of Homoian Arianism.¹⁴ Prominent defenders of this view, such as Palladius and Maximinus, were quite open about their belief that there were actually two Gods, Father and Son, and that only the Father was to be worshipped.¹⁵ Obviously, this differed significantly from the orthodox consensus that had been adopted at the Council of Nicaea.

The resurgence of Arianism was met with fierce resistance from orthodox church leaders. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa came from the Roman province of Cappadocia and sought to promote a

5 Arius, *Extracts from the Thalia of Arius*.

6 Arius, *Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia*.

7 Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 28.

8 *Ibid.*, 29.

9 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Throughout the Centuries*, 134.

10 Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, 57–58.

11 Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 30.

12 Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, 59–62.

13 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 559–60.

14 *Ibid.*, 558.

15 *Ibid.*, 569.

proper understanding of the Godhead by affirming both the unity and the threeness of God.¹⁶ After Theodosius became emperor in 379 C.E., he called a council of church leaders, which met in Constantinople in 381 C.E.

Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa played leading roles at the Council of Constantinople.¹⁷ Among other things, the council affirmed the full and total equality between God the Father and God the Son and firmly rejected the Arian notion that Jesus had been created at some point in the past.¹⁸ Once again, the Arians had suffered a decisive defeat. However, Arianism may have gone dormant, but it was not extinguished.

Anti-Trinitarianism During the Reformation and Post-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation ushered in a new era of theological diversity that shattered the doctrinal uniformity of the Roman Catholic Church. Ironically, Martin Luther was initially more interested in reforming the Roman Catholic Church than he was in founding a new branch of Christianity. It was only after ecclesiastical leaders refused to make any concessions to accommodate his concerns that Luther formally declared

that doctrines based solely on church tradition did not have any binding authority on Christians.¹⁹

This rejection of papal authority was a watershed moment in the history of Protestant Christianity, and it didn't take long before other Reformers began to take their protest against the Roman Catholic Church much further than Luther had ever intended. For example, Ulrich Zwingli rejected any literal presence of Christ's body in the Lord's Supper and declared that the bread and wine used in the ceremony were purely symbolic.²⁰ Anabaptist leaders such as Menno Simons rejected infant baptism and argued that baptism should take place only after conversion.²¹

However, some Protestant leaders took their newfound theological freedom to an even greater level by rejecting historic doctrines that had long been established as a key test of orthodoxy. As a case in point, Michael Servetus denied the doctrine of the Trinity and argued that Jesus was inferior to God the Father. His views were so controversial that John Calvin ordered his execution in 1553 C.E.²² Faustus Socinus was also a strong proponent of Anti-Trinitarian ideas. In 1579 C.E., he moved to Poland where he founded a college and was able to safely propagate his own version of Arianism.²³

Socinus believed that Jesus was not inherently divine, but instead attained divinity by virtue of his superior life.

Socinus believed that Jesus was not inherently divine, but instead attained divinity by virtue of his superior life. The modern-day Unitarian church traces its roots directly to the Socinians of Poland.²⁴

Many more church denominations came into existence after the Protestant Reformation. Some of these new denominations had leaders who espoused Arian ideas. One of these was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. One of its most prominent early ministers was Uriah Smith, who held key leadership positions in the newly formed denomination. In his classic book, *Daniel and the Revelation*, Smith provides the following comment about Revelation 3:14, which describes Christ as the beginning of the creation:

Others, however, and more properly we think, take the word to mean the "agent" or "efficient cause," which is one of the definitions of the word, understanding that Christ is the agent through whom God has created all things, but the Son came into existence in a different manner, as he is called "the only begotten" of the Father. It would seem utterly inappropriate to apply this expression to any being created in the ordinary sense of that term.²⁵

This is strikingly similar to Arius's contention that there once was a time when the Word was not. Fortunately, the Seventh-day Adventists later expunged this and other Arian statements from subsequent editions of Smith's book and adopted a fully Trinitarian statement of faith.²⁶ However, while the Seventh-day Advent-

16 Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 36–38.

17 *Ibid.*, 39–40.

18 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 816.

19 Lars P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1942), 242.

20 Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 171.

21 *Ibid.*, 191–92.

22 Robert A. Baker, *A Summary of Christian History*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 1994), 223.

23 *Ibid.*, 235.

24 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 308.

25 Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (1897; Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1907), 400.

26 Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 69.

ists eventually moved to full orthodoxy on the nature of the Godhead, other groups retained their Arian beliefs. It didn't take long before a new religious organization, the Jehovah's Witnesses, became the largest Arian church in the world.

Modern-Day Arians: Jehovah's Witnesses

In 1870, a young man by the name of Charles Taze Russell started up a small Bible study group that quickly grew in popularity. He rejected traditional Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and suggested that Jesus was resurrected as a spirit creature rather than in the flesh.²⁷ After Russell's death, Judge Joseph Rutherford took over leadership of the fledgling religious group and renamed them Jehovah's Witnesses.²⁸ With a strong missionary focus and branches around the world, Jehovah's Witnesses have since established themselves as one of the fastest growing religious organizations in the world.²⁹ The worldwide influence of Jehovah's Witnesses means that Arianism is more widespread than ever before.

While earlier Arians often tried to downplay their belief that Jesus was a created being, Jehovah's Witnesses are more than willing to proclaim it openly:

Is the firstborn Son equal to God, as some believe? That is not what the Bible teaches. As we noted in the preceding paragraph, the Son was created. Obviously, then, he had a beginning, whereas Jehovah God has no beginning or end

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(Psalm 90:2). The only-begotten Son never even considered trying to be equal to his Father.³⁰

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus was created a long time ago by God and was originally known as Michael the Archangel. He then became a perfect man who lived and died on Earth. After his death, Jesus was transformed into a spirit creature who now lives with God in heaven.³¹ When making their case that Jesus was a created being, Jehovah's Witness arguments are strikingly similarly to that of the Homoian Arians who relied extensively on a literal interpretation of Bible verses that spoke about the inferiority of Jesus compared to God the Father.³²

27 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1993), 42–45.

28 Ibid., 152–58.

29 Ibid., 515–20.

30 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 2005), 41–42.

31 Ibid., 42–46.

32 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Halton Hills: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, 1989), 16–20.

Jehovah's Witnesses also have ready-made explanations for passages that appear to affirm Christ's divinity. For example, when dealing with John 1:1, Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the lack of a definite article before the second occurrence of the word *theos* (God) shows that Jesus may have been godlike, but he was not God himself.³³ This is strikingly similar to what Origen said about this passage centuries earlier:

He [John] adds the article to the Logos, but to the name of God he adds it sometimes only. He uses the article, when the name of God refers to the uncreated cause of all things, and omits it when the Logos is named God. Does the same difference which we observe between God with the article and God without it prevail also between the Logos with it and without it? We must

33 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1985), 212.

34 Origen, 2.2.

enquire into this. As the God who is over all is God with the article, not without it, so "the Logos" is the source of that reason (Logos) which dwells in every reasonable creature.³⁴

In fact, virtually every argument used by Jehovah's Witnesses to defend their Arian position has been used in the past. Because few Jehovah's Witnesses have earned scholarly credentials in fields such as biblical studies, they are heavily dependent on the writings of previous Arian theologians.

Unfortunately, the lack of scholarly support for their position has not slowed the growth rate of Jehovah's Witnesses. By all indications, Jehovah's Witnesses plan to continue promoting their Arian version of the gospel. This means that the Arian heresy is likely to spread in the future.

Conclusion

Arianism is one of the oldest and most pervasive heresies in Christian history. Much of the intellectual groundwork for this heresy was laid by Origen, although he did not believe Jesus was a created being himself. Arius then took the next

step and officially proclaimed that there was a time in the past when Jesus did not exist. Even though Arianism was officially rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., it did not fade away. It came back in various forms throughout the centuries, culminating with its most recent manifestation in Jehovah's Witnesses.

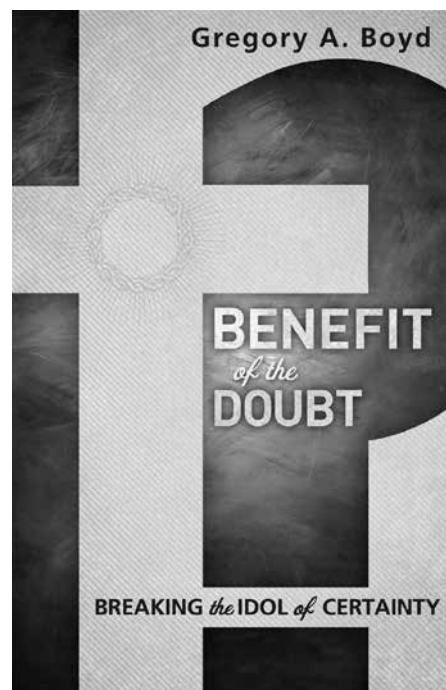
The ongoing presence of the Arian heresy means that contemporary Christians cannot afford to be complacent in the area of correct doctrine. While some Christians may think that ancient doctrinal disputes have little relevance to modern-day Christian life, the reality is that Christians throughout the centuries fought hard to come to a proper understanding of the nature of Christ. As 1 Peter 3:15 states, Christians should always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks them to give a reason for the faith that they have. While it is unnecessary to memorize precise answers to every question that could be raised by modern-day Arians such as Jehovah's Witnesses, all Christians should have a basic understanding of why they believe that Jesus Christ is fully equal to God the Father. **✉**

Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty, Gregory Boyd (Baker, 2013). \$19 CDN. 268 pp. ISBN 9780801014925. Reviewed by Jacob Enns, lead pastor of Leamington EMC. He holds a three-year diploma from Aylmer Bible School and a BA from Steinbach Bible College.

BOYD'S FOCUS IN HIS book is to present a view of faith, where faith is not the object of certainty, but where faith is the means through which he holds on to the one who he is certain about, namely "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (12). He discovered that seeking certainty is risky, and to engage the certainty-seeking journey means being open to doubt.

The book is divided into three parts: False Faith, Truth Faith and Exercising Faith. Boyd goes into great length describing his journey to faith, away from faith and back again to a different understanding of faith.

Early on he writes about sharing his certainty about creation in university with his class and professor. It didn't work and he was affected negatively. He allowed



that and similar experiences to shape his spiritual walk away from his faith; his confidence in certainty was shaken to the very foundations of his faith, which he later concluded were wrong to begin with.

He later realized how he had allowed man-made certainties to override what he now believes scripture actually does teach. He began his journey back to faith. Only now his faith became the vehicle where certainty focused not on faith, but on Christ as the object of his faith. He describes himself now as being in a place where he doesn't have faith in faith anymore, but in the one to whom his faith pointed.

Boyd's journey away from faith can be viewed as an act of grace from God, through which he was brought away from an idolatrous worshipping of faith to practicing a faith that rested on a relationship with Christ.

Boyd does a good job in pointing out the fallacy of worshipping ideas and tradition instead of the one to whom the ideas and tradition should point. However, having now read this book, his book *God of the Possible: a Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Baker, 2000), and having listened to some of his preaching online, I have concerns. My concern is that in his writing he is giving modern schools of thought and culture too much ground at the expense of biblical truths that the Church has held for millennia.

Human reason is playing a very key role here. Boyd uses feelings as the benchmark or reference point from which he arrives at some of his conclusions (37–38).

Boyd rightly points out the importance of recognizing the idolatry of the quest of certainty in one's life. Certainty cannot become the object of focus. But I do believe certainty must exist.

Simply because a person's mind cannot comprehend or grasp a teaching of scripture does not mean it should be modified to fit one's understanding and feelings or popular culture.

Throughout the book Boyd aims at steering clear of staking certainty on beliefs and the dangers of doing so. He mentions wars and blood baths have been carried out by people who were "certain" in their religious causes and beliefs (48–49). He is right in that it happened. But he does not mention how numerous dictatorial regimes, having been controlled by fear and certainty in doubt, were led to acts of bloodshed that far exceeded that of any religious group that has ever existed.

Over the centuries Christians have suffered and are still dying for their faith because of certainty in their beliefs—especially the Early Church, and the Reformation period, and now in some of the communist countries. They trusted in the certainty of their mandate from Christ and have gone, and many still are going, to heroic efforts to alleviate poverty and suffering, and to spread the good news. They are doing more than any other belief or religious group—all of that because they are certain in what and who they believe.

Boyd rightly points out the importance of recognizing the idolatry of the quest of certainty in one's life. Certainty cannot become the object of focus. And certainty should not be worshipped. But I do believe certainty must exist.

He uses the marriage relationship analogy to illustrate his position. When

he married his wife it was not about the certainty quest, but the commitment to a relationship (76–68). However, we should not have relationships with our beliefs. Rather our beliefs must support our relationships.

While certainty must not be the focus, one must, however, again recognize that it is the certainty built into the relationship that gives it strength. Another way to put it is, trust and certainty do go together. Is there such a thing as uncertain trust?

Boyd points out the importance of not treating the Bible like a legal textbook, but rather treating it as a book pointing to a God seeking a covenantal relationship with his bride, the Church. Boyd writes that this will likely surprise some of his readers, but he asks them to hear him out as he explains himself: "The all-important center of the Christian faith is not anything we believe; it's the person of Jesus Christ...Everything began to change for me several decades ago when I began to realize that I didn't need to rely on the Bible as the inspired word of God in order to enter a relationship with Christ" (159). Really?

One can only imagine what kind license this may eventually provide for any and every type of faith position out there. Imagine Paul or the other apostles saying that, or any of our Anabaptist forebears who staked their very lives on the words of Jesus they considered inspired. I wonder: did Jesus use Scripture the way Boyd uses it? I don't believe so.

Christian denominations are increasingly questioning biblical authority and making room for culture to have a voice in what Scripture should mean for us today. What Boyd does say to his credit, is he believes in "Jesus Christ and him crucified." That is good. But when using reason and science as the lenses with which to dissect and interpret Scripture, where does that stop? Did the apostles take their theology where Boyd does his? Were not the apostles "certain" of the reality of the teachings of Jesus?

When different interpretations of Scripture start gaining equal value and acceptance, the very margins that allowed for these variations will erode the foundations on which the whole belief rests, causing it to disintegrate and

crumble. The histories of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah are good examples.

Today, cultural relevance and personal feelings have, in the name of relevance and grace, become more important than truth. There is a steady, continuing drift with no end in sight. As much as we all enjoy good feelings and just getting along, feelings and reason cannot be allowed to be the benchmark from where we accept or deny something as true or certain.

Our Anabaptist forebears certainly didn't.

When feelings are allowed to override truth, grace becomes cheap and truth becomes shallow. We must believe and trust that Jesus was certain when he said: "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). And that includes all of the audacious claims Jesus made.

But with Boyd's approach to Scripture that perhaps the records don't have to be inspired, how do we know

Jesus actually said what the written record says he did? When using a road map to find directions, the person believes the map is certain, and trusts that map regardless of personal feelings or any other influence. We must retain certainty without it being the focus.

It seems for Boyd, in his early life certainty had become an obsession by which he measured his own spiritual security and it kept falling down. He left the faith, but since he has come back he has decided to trim down his boundaries of certainty because it does not fit with reason or science, and some of it with feelings. I wonder as the religious landscape changes, what will he trim down next?

It is not a very big step from where Boyd is in his book, to where the story of

the cross will move from a historic fact (it may remain a fact) and will be relegated to just one tradition of many, with no significant value over any other faith or belief that is out there (uncertainty). In other words, people will not need to worship Jesus as Lord any more to be saved. There will be other "Christian" ways. Slowly Jesus will more and more become one way of many.

Malcolme Muggeridge, a British journalist, in 1968 attended the World Council of Churches in Uppsala, Sweden. He later wrote: "At Uppsala, as one clearly saw, they were able to agree about almost anything because they believed almost

Reading *Benefit of the Doubt, Breaking the Idol of Certainty* by Gregory Boyd was, for me, a bumpy ride. I enjoyed much of it, but in the end come away with a sense of uncertainty and concern.

nothing." It seemed that for those who were gathered there, the less certainty there was, the better. They had to be uncertain about much in order to agree on anything.

Imagine an army going to war with that kind of uncertainty! It would be chaos. On the other hand, imagine our forebears during the Reformation dying at the stake for, among other things, refusing to baptize babies and believing in transubstantiation and holding to their pacifist views. It was not their faith in Christ that was the problem (the Roman Catholic Church believed in Christ too), but their certainty in how they practiced it that got them killed!

The landscape of religious certainty has changed, and Boyd claims he maintains his certainty in what Paul

wrote: "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." But we must remember it was to fulfill scripture that Jesus went to the cross. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth would pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35), meaning scripture. That is certainty. If the words of scripture are not that certain, is perhaps the cross not that necessary?

Reading *Benefit of the Doubt, Breaking the Idol of Certainty* by Gregory Boyd was, for me, a bumpy ride. I enjoyed much of it, but in the end come away with a sense of uncertainty and concern. Jolting the reader was perhaps the author's intent.

In some areas of Boyd's thinking, his mistrust of certainty in feelings, systems, dogmas, resonates with me, and I agree with him. Idol worship in the name of holiness has been practiced by many churches over the centuries. It needs to be challenged and rejected. But in some areas, especially on the certainty of scripture, I seriously question some of his views about uncertainty.

It is noteworthy that he is not afraid to be a singular voice out there. He comes across as honest and genuine. I commend him for his courage. But courage by itself is not an indicator of going in the right direction.

I would suggest this book as a study project for those who are serious about wrestling with their faith and the risks of trusting in faith rather than the one to whom faith points. Even though I don't agree with Boyd in some of what he writes, I do appreciate his honesty. He has written about his journey, and I have learned from him. My advice to the reader is to read carefully, but keep Christ and treat Christ's words as certain. **Θ**

Feature Sermon

Psalm 44:1–26, Mark 8:31–38, Romans 8:28–39

When God Fails His People



Terry M. Smith

Terry M. Smith (EFC Steinbach) is an ordained EMC minister. He holds a two-year journalism diploma (SAIT), BRS degrees (SBC and MBBC) and an MA, Christian Studies (PTS). This sermon was presented on Aug. 12, 2012, at Blumenort EMC, in southern Man., during the year of the EMC's bicentennial.

“Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love” (Psalm 44:23–26).

BECAUSE THE revelation of God is first in the Old Testament, we have a Psalm from the Hebrew Bible. Because revelation centres in Christ, we have a reading from the gospels. Finally, because the Church reflects on Christ, we have a reading from the Book of Romans. Together these passages present us with a question: what shall we do when God fails His people?

National Lament

Psalm 44 is a national lament. It is a corporate expression of grief, distress, and regret. It represents the cry of a nation, not an individual. It is a poem written mostly in “we” language. There is some “I” and “my” language in this Psalm, but there are more references to “our” and “us.”

The proper setting for use of Psalm 44 is in a public gathering, rather than our private devotions. The Psalm is a corporate voice, the community of faith speaking to God about how he is responsible for its pain, confusion, and disappointment.

I. Salutation/Rehearsal (1-4)

Psalm 44 starts off nicely. It begins with a greeting to God. There is a relationship: “O God” (1), “my King and my God” (4), “O Lord” (23). Atheists do not write Psalms to God, questioning his inaction and desiring action. God is God, King, and Lord—the Divine Ruler of the nation. Yes, Israel has a relationship. It is a covenant people with a history stretching back many centuries.

The Psalm moves quickly to remember God's deeds: “We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago” (v. 1). The writer of the psalm, and the nation, are from a later generation; they are not eyewitnesses.

The deliverance from Egypt is not mentioned, but the conquest of Canaan, settlement, and prosperity are: “With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish” (v. 2).

The Psalmist is clear to whom goes the credit for such blessings: “It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory. It was your right hand, your arm and the light of your face, for you loved them” (v. 3)—credit is given to God, not military might. In verse 4 you are my King and my God. In verses 5, 6, and 7 the thought is repeated: God is one who gives victories.

Look at wonderful verse 8: “In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.” The nation is openly dependent upon God.

Creed and Creation

Claus Westermann says that here we have a historical creed. Here is faith rooted in the God of history. When we say we believe the Bible, what do we mean? The Bible did not drop down from heaven; it reveals the actions of God upon the earth. It is an inspired record of God's actions in history and an inspired reflection on that history. It is the written word of God.

Most of us here are Gentiles—non-Jews, members of the nations. Why do we Gentiles study ancient Hebrew writings? It is because God intervened in history to deliver Israel out of Egypt—that's the central event in the Old Testament.

How many of us know biblical history better than our family history or Canadian history? Why do we read translations of ancient Greek writings? It's because our Lord Jesus Christ was raised on Easter Sunday. If God had not intervened in history by raising Jesus, there would be no New Testament.

Recently our Conference has been discussing creation. Some people might say, “Unless I can believe Genesis 1 and 2 are to be interpreted in a particular way, I cannot trust any of the Bible.” I gently

As part of the people of God, we are inseparably linked to the history of God's actions.

suggest that we can trust Genesis 1 and 2 more than our personal interpretation of it. I also suggest that we need to give more attention to how God has acted in history.

Jesus is the centre of human history, as Oscar Cullman says. Because of the Exodus and the Resurrection, because God has intervened within history, we are to follow Jesus. Then, as we follow Jesus, we are invited to, and dare to, study the edges of time—creation and the future. We start at the centre in Christ and from him move to the edges of time, not from the edges in.

What did Paul say was of first importance? That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared (1 Cor. 15:1–6).

As part of the people of God, we are inseparably linked to the history of God's actions, as Psalm 44 reminds us. We treasure this holy, revealing history.

II. Complaints Amid Claims (5–22)

Yet it is precisely because of this history, these past actions of God, that the nation is puzzled. Because of its trust, it is in trouble. Because of its trouble, it brings its complaint to God—a petition with reasons as Westermann calls it. He says the people complain in three ways: you, us, and them. *You* have mistreated us. *We* have not done anything wrong. Yet you allowed *them* to defeat us and shame us.

What troubles do they have? You no longer go out with our armies (9). You made us retreat and we have been plundered (10). We are as sheep to be devoured, scattered among the nations (11). We were sold for a pittance, for no real gain (12). You have made us a



The Israelites safely cross the Red Sea, but Pharaoh and his troops are drowned. Artwork by Bartolo di Fredi (1330–1409).

reproach (13), scorned among the nations (14). “My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered in shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me” (15–16).

Notice, the nation does not confess its sins; God is being confronted with his neglect. As Westermann puts it, the nation says it is falsely accused. So what do we have here? Does God sometimes neglect his people? Is this entire nation's situation similar to that of Job, where the truly innocent suffers? Or do we have a nation that claims innocence when it is actually guilty?

Setting

Scholars do not agree on the setting of this Psalm. Does it reflect the exile suffered by the Northern Kingdom of Israel, taken to Assyria and elsewhere? Or does it reflect when the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken to Babylon? Or is it of a lesser tragedy?

Verse 11 says, “You have given us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.” Verse 20 says you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and darkness. This fits with a national defeat and a scattering of people—an experience of exile. I hold that it relates to the scattering of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria and the psalmist is among those left in the land.

What is clear is that the exile was a

time of spiritual crisis. When the nation was conquered and God's people taken away, Israel's God was defeated—that's what other nations would claim.

The people appeared to be abandoned. God's promise of an eternal throne of David seemed empty. The people of God were swept away by a nation that did not honour the God of Israel. The people of God faced the physical trauma of being uprooted, the mental distress of the horrors they had seen, and the spiritual shock of being rejected by God who had called their nation into being.

Innocence

In response to this rejection, Psalm 44 has a claim of innocence. We had not forgotten you or been false (17). Our hearts and feet were true (18). If we had forgotten, would God not know? (20–21). This Psalmist, representing the nation and speaking to God, claims innocence for God's people.

Yet the prophets, speaking for God and yet part of the nation, spoke quite differently. As Rabbi Gunther Plaut says, the prophets were the nation's holy accusers. The prophets said both the northern and southern kingdoms went into exile because of unfaithfulness. The people lacked holiness. They had worshipped other gods and ignored the need for social justice.

If this is a Psalm written during the Exile, we have an honest, open, divinely preserved record of a hurting, puzzled people who continues to misjudge itself.

Is it possible for a nation to misjudge itself? Yes, any nation that seeks to take over the world reaches beyond itself—as did the ancient Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, and others.

The modern colonizing powers—England, Spain, Portugal, France among them—were misled. Nazi Germany in the Second World War misjudged itself. Today, the United States of America, Russia, and China can misunderstand their roles. Can Canada misjudge its role in the world? Yes.

Please remember that Israel *as a nation* had an actual covenant with God. When some nations today claim such a relationship, they can be misguided.

Byword

In verse 14 it says that the people of God have become a byword—a swear word, a term of scorn. Paul would say centuries later that because of the unfaithfulness of Jewish people, Gentiles blasphemed God's name (Rom. 2:24).

Today in Canada, because of the confusion of Christianity and western civilization, of colonialism and the residential school history, many First Nations people are wary of the Church. As thoughtful Christians today, we cannot go into First Nations communities and proclaim the gospel as if this painful history has not occurred. We are not innocent of what took place.

However, some people who use Psalm 44 are innocent. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a friend reminded me, applied part of this Psalm to “the martyrs,” to the six million Jewish men, women, and children who died in the Holocaust during the Second World War.

Joel Marcus is a Christian of Jewish descent, a New Testament scholar who remains Jewish. In 1987 he was in Gottingen, Germany, where he saw a sign:

Judenstrasse—“Jews’ Street,” where Jews had lived prior to World War Two. City authorities had erected a small memorial to murdered Jews of the city.

The inscription was from Psalm 44: “All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant. Because of you we are killed all day long, and counted as sheep for the slaughter” (22).

According to Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, the law in Germany in the 1930s considered a person Jewish if they had a grandparent who was Jewish. Fackenheim reminds us that one million Jewish children died in World War Two, not because they were unfaithful, but because their great-grandparents had faithfully identified themselves as Jews.

Bicentennial

The EM Conference is in our Bicentennial year. The KG moved from Russia in 1874–75 and, as Dr. Harvey Plett has written, the move spared the KG from going through the Russian Revolution. In the Revolution many Mennonites suffered horribly and died. For those Mennonites who were sent to Siberia, it was an exile experience. How did they look on God? What did they think about their guilt or innocence? We are to avoid simple judgments.

Earlier, part of Romans 8 was read. Verses 28 to 30 speak of God's plan. Verses 31 to 34 emphasize how God is for us. Verses 35 to 39 remind us nothing can separate us from God's love: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

This passage directly relates to Psalm 44 because Paul quotes from verse 22: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” Paul reminds the Church in Rome of the reality of suffering. Do we need the reminder?

In Mark 8, also read earlier, the possibility of suffering as Christians comes out clearly. Jesus said, “If anyone

would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (8:34). We are to follow Jesus, bringing along the cross—precisely what will be used to cause our death.

Here to Do God's Will

Jesus reminds us that we are here to do God's will; God is not here to do ours. Following Jesus is to be our ultimate value for which we are prepared to sacrifice all else.

We begin attending worship services for many reasons. Many of us enter to see if we can get what we want from God. We properly want what is good for us and for our children.

But with time our reasons get sifted and shifted. Ultimately, we are here because God is God and we are not, and it is proper that we follow Him no matter what.

Jesus said, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? If any man is ashamed of me and my words in this sinful and adulterous nation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:36–38).

Sometimes people will reject us. Even so, we are called to keep following Jesus. Paul said, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). What did Jesus say? “All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).

Today in Nigeria Christians still die when their church gatherings are attacked. Christians are leaving the Middle East. They are vulnerable in Syria. Christians died in concentration camps during World War Two. Protestants were martyred in the Reformation. Catholics died in 16th- and 17th-century Japan. Paul was killed in Rome; Peter was crucified upside down outside of it. We are vulnerable, for we follow One who was crucified.

Yet we have comfort. When were you saved? Some people might say: at youth

group, at camp, within our parents' home. When Swiss scholar Karl Barth was asked when he was saved, he said it happened on a hill outside of Jerusalem in about A.D. 34. On an ugly hill called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, God in Christ acted to save us. This is our comfort. Paul in Romans 8 reminds us that we are both vulnerable and safe as we follow the One who was Crucified and Risen.

III. A Bold Plea Amid God's Inaction (22–26)

Even as we follow, though, we can be puzzled by the inaction of God. Yet for your sake we are killed all day long, we are sheep to be slaughtered (22). Awake! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever (23). Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? (24).

Did Mennonites who suffered under Stalin feel forgotten? Joseph Sebarenzi in 2009 wrote a book *God Sleeps in Rwanda*, where Christians killed each other because they were Hutu or Tutsi. That God and his angels sleep, I suspect, was a common thought during World Wars One and Two.

Joel Marcus

Remember Joel Marcus, the New Testament scholar, a Christian and a Jew? He returned to the memorial on Judenstrasse. He again read the inscription and began to cry. "How can people just go about their daily business as if nothing had happened here?" he thought. "How can life go on as normal in a place where the ground is so soaked with blood, where there are so many ghosts of murdered men, women, and children floating around? Why doesn't the earth open its mouth and swallow this place up?" (110–111).

There is honesty here, an openness of relationship. Some of the Psalmist's words are surprising bold, even crude. Is it wrong to come to God with questions? No, not when it's like this: a sign of continued

belief. God is precisely the One to Whom we, as a community, should come with our questions. Questions placed before God can be a sign of faithfulness.

Jesus said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). Yet Jesus was faithful. The martyrs in Revelation 6 ask, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10). Yet the martyrs were faithful. It is because of the covenant with God that Jews—and the Church—can petition God.

We need to allow the community to express its feelings and not try to quickly move people into how we think they ought to feel. When I was a pastor in

We need to allow the community to express its feelings and not try to quickly move people into how we think they ought to feel.

northern Sask., a man shot and killed one young woman; he also wounded and kidnapped her sister. A pastor wisely decided to hold a community service and people came. Later, I overheard two women talking. One said the service had not helped her; I suspect it had not spoken to her anger.

Beyond the questions and strong emotion of Psalm 44, there is an expression of confidence: "In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever" (8). We see it again in the final two verses. In verse 25 there is a summary of their hurt: We are brought down to dust. And in verse 26 there is the request: Rise up and help us.

Then comes the confidence. Redeem us because of your unfailing love (26)—God's unfailing love. The community's petition is placed with God; the lament is left in his hands. The nation ends its

prayer continuing to look to God and to believe in his unfailing love.

Conclusion

As a community, what is our response? There's a story I had thought about quite a while ago when preparing for this message; Joel Marcus also mentioned it. Elie Wiesel was a teenager when he and his father were placed in a concentration camp at Auschwitz. Only Elie survived. Wiesel says Jews in Auschwitz decided to put God on trial (*Din Torah*).

The judges were three Talmudic scholars. Witnesses were called and evidence taken. Finally, God was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind. There was a time of silence. Then the scholars looked at the sky and said, "It's time for evening prayers."

They prayed to the One whom they had just convicted. Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46)—he prayed to the One by whom he had felt forsaken. And we, we pray to Jesus, the One who was Crucified, the One whom we crucified and yet who is our hope! Jesus, crucified and risen! Let us pray! ☉

Key Resources

Fackenheim, Emil L. *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

Marcus, Joel. *Jesus and the Holocaust: Reflections on Suffering and Hope* (Doubleday, 1997).

Plaut, W. Gunther. *The Case for the Chosen People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).

Westermann, Claus. *Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1980).

The Final Word

LOVE WITHOUT TRUTH IS
sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace.

— Timothy Keller

From *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Dutton Adult, 2011).

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