

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Responding to the Gay Marriage Debate

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**The Disillusioned and Our
Need to Be Prepared**

**Eight Ways Preachers Can
Harm the Depressed**

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*Christianity After Religion***

**When We Feel
God's Silence**



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Editorial

Re-envisioning the Membership Meeting

WHAT DO YOU DISCUSS AT your membership or congregational meetings? My guess is that the topics usually revolve around money. Either it is a budget in trouble or a renovation project that does not meet quite everyone's approval. Sometimes membership meetings are about elections and filling positions in the church.

While doing research for my DMin dissertation, I needed to do a little digging into the history of the EMC (or Kleine Gemeinde as it was known in the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries). I ran across a ministerial journal that spanned the decades 1840 to 1860, when the KG still lived in Russia (now Ukraine), and found some interesting differences in our meetings.

Brotherhood meetings, as they were known then, were intense affairs. The men of the congregations discussed weighty matters such as the morality of having springs on your wagon or buggy.

In all sincerity, tough matters such as how a man was treating his daughter after he discovered she had an affair with a soldier were treated gravely. The father had beaten his daughter for this indiscretion and the brotherhood frowned on such violence. Also threatening the harmony and unity of the fellowship was the matter of a man incurring debts after taking a loan from an outsider, possibly a Russian lender.



context. Perhaps we do not need to hold a meeting to discuss the merits and demerits of the new Ford F150, banning anyone who buys Dodge. However, we are left far too much on our own to decide many other daily issues. Our ethic is left up to us. Yes, "love your neighbour," is a banner to live under, but how do we live that out? Is your church discussing this with you apart from the pulpit?

I suspect that many will not appreciate a sudden restriction on our purchases or winter vacations. For Sunday morning and one or two evenings a week, the church can have my time, but it will stay out of my other affairs. If I take two winter vacations to Mexico while the church budget struggles is my business. Buying a bigger house while our Burmese brothers and sisters worship in flood waters are two separate concerns.

We can go too far in legislating what members can and cannot do. I believe in some areas our EMC/KG forebears did go too far. But the principle of deciding together how we will be the church Monday to Saturday is a matter to be discussed by the membership.

What is appropriate in the workplace in which we live most of our days? How do we act at work parties and social gatherings? What things should we avoid? Where do you go for advice on these things? How do you make your decisions? Can the church help in any way?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about many issues the church was facing. He counseled them on eating idol meat (a socio-cultural issue), propriety in worship (a practical theology issue), sexual immorality (a behind-closed-doors ethical issue), marriage, gifts and other theology. These were not agenda items; they were practical life issues facing every believer. And the church was the body where living life was discussed.

The church was not Big Brother, watching and waiting for you to slip up so as to judge you. The church was a brotherhood (and sisterhood, family) where those who were striving to live like Christ would find guidance for living in a suddenly foreign world. Following Christ had turned their context upside-down, their ethics being challenged at every turn, and their faith clashed with daily-life issues.

Attendance at membership meetings is waning. If we would discuss faith-responses to societal and cultural problems in our midst, we might find a much more alert and populous crowd. If we would challenge each other to live by church decisions, ecclesial discipline might make a comeback. *o*

Darryl G. Klassen

In some areas our EMC/KG forebears went too far in legislating what members can and cannot do, but the principle of deciding together how we will be the church Monday to Saturday is a matter to be discussed by the membership.

The wearing of fancy clothes and jewelry were considered proud, and it was decided that such things should be put away. Members who strayed on any of these principles, and many not mentioned, were excommunicated (put out of the church). Let the record show that the members who improved their behaviour were quickly reinstated.

These matters may appear legalistic, but I suspect that the community of faith was experienced more deeply than we could ever know in our current individualistic

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Responding to the Gay Marriage Debate



Bruxy Cavey

Bruxy Cavey is the teaching pastor of The Meeting House, a Brethren in Christ multi-site congregation in the Greater Toronto Area. He holds a BA (Psychology) and a Master of Theological Studies (Tyndale).

Notes: the highlighting reflects the original and the version is available on The Meeting House’s website, where it is listed as “Updated Fall 2013.”

Editor’s Note: The position presented here, upholding marriage as between one man and one woman, is consistent with the EMC position: see *The Christian Home* in our Constitution (1994) and the *Evangelical Mennonite Conference Position Statement on the Practice of Homosexuality* (March 1999). The intention behind its publishing is *not* to suggest any change in our conference’s position on marriage.

FEW TOPICS HAVE THE potential to generate more emotion and misunderstanding in our culture than the Bible and homosexuality. As a Christ-follower and spiritual leader I am asked about this issue more than almost any other, by people who genuinely want to learn about Jesus and by people who just want to pick a fight. I have encountered bias and bigotry on both sides of the divide. Everyone seems quick to judge and slow to listen. More than ever, we need to

heed the wise words of James, the brother of Jesus, who said,

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

—James 1:19–20, NIV

We have covered this topic more than once at The Meeting House and messages

are available online. For now, here is a printed overview of some of our thoughts on issues concerning Christian faith and the queer community.¹

Being A “Third Way” Church

For years, we at The Meeting House have enjoyed the beauty and challenge of being a “third way” church.

Typically, most churches fall into one of two categories on this topic—conservative or liberal. Conservative churches highlight those passages of Scripture that condemn homosexual behaviour. At their best, conservative churches remind us that Christ-followers should have a serious concern about what the Bible teaches on this and any ethical issue. At their worst, conservative churches can get side-tracked by unbiblical and hurtful pursuits. They

As a “third way” church, at The Meeting House we want to have the biblical rigor of conservatives and the welcoming embrace of liberals.

might invest their resources in ministries that try to change individual orientation or that fight against any perceived queer community agenda. They might organize rallies, sign petitions, and keep a sharp eye out for any activity within the queer community that they might perceive as anti-family. They may say they love all people equally, but the actions and emotions they bring to this topic seem to say different.

Liberal churches react against this apparent love-less approach by reminding us of the inherent value and beauty of all people. At their best, liberal churches are places of healing and belonging for people with same-sex attraction. At their worst, liberal churches fail to wrestle with the biblical texts in a straightforward manner, often diminishing the value and inspiration of Scripture, and thereby failing to challenge all Christ-followers toward radical discipleship. Liberal churches tend to agree with, approve of, and support not only homosexual orientation, but also homosexual practice and marriage for Christ-followers, and, at their worst, they do so in spite of not because of biblical teaching on this topic.

[I am aware that my description of conservative and liberal churches could be greatly nuanced. There are a wide variety of expressions within the umbrella labels of “conservative” and “liberal.” But assessing the complexities of how conservative and liberal churches approach this topic is not a focus of this paper and I think the above description is accurate, though not complete.]

As a “third way” church, at The Meeting House we want to have the biblical rigor of conservatives and the welcoming embrace of liberals. We want to be honest and uncompromising in our call to all Christ-followers to follow Jesus as their Lord, their leader, their mentor and Master. We also know that people come to Christ in different ways and at different stages of spiritual understanding and ability, and we want to create a safe place for all spiritual seekers to come together in honest and loving community. In that sense, we consider The Meeting House a queer-friendly church. We do

not preach that people must change their sexual orientation in order to follow Jesus. Instead, we invite all people to change their spiritual orientation, toward God and their fellow human beings.

When we do this, we will submit our humanness, in all its wonder and flaws, to God and his way of living as revealed in the teachings of Jesus. To be gay or straight or bi or trans is to be a wonderful image-bearer of God, yet to be so in imperfect, broken, and often hurting ways, just like everyone else. We seek to embrace and challenge all people in their sexual purity, but this is not a message for any one classification of human being.

The Truth About ‘Us’ and ‘Them’

In short, the truth about “us” and “them” is that there is no “them.” There is only “us.” We are all beautiful and precious people, infinitely valued by God. We are also all sexually broken people to one degree or another, needing the healing of authentic community to live as Jesus calls us to live.

I may be heterosexual, but all that means is that I live every day with temptations toward inappropriate sexual expression—to have sex outside of marriage with women. Heterosexuality is not naturally monogamous. I am, to some extent, broken. My gay friends also live every day with the sexual temptation to express their sexuality in inappropriate ways. There is nothing more holy or noble about my temptation versus the temptations of my gay friends. Just because for them this temptation is directed toward others of their same gender does not diminish our common bond as humans and, for my Christian friends, as Christ-followers. Together we honour God by submitting our sexual temptations to the lordship of Jesus.

From a Christian perspective, our sexual orientation only helps define what our area of sexual temptation and perhaps dysfunction will be—but we are all tempted (and to some extent, dysfunctional) in one way or another. To

¹ Note: The term “queer” is not one that I am a fan of and feels to me somewhat self-deprecating for this community to use. Having said that, it is the term that members of the homosexual community have repeatedly asked me to use when referring to them rather than just using terms like “gay,” “lesbian,” and “homosexual.” Their reasons are many and, whether or not I agree with them, I will respect their wishes and use the term advisedly, though not exclusively. Knowing that not all members of this community will necessarily agree, I will use a variety of terms. At this point in our dialogue history, it is the best I can do.

be human is, among other things, to be in some wonderful and weird way, sexually dysfunctional.

We are all sexually broken people, as well as sexually glorious people (**Romans 3:23–24; Psalm 51:5**).

A Message to the Christian Community

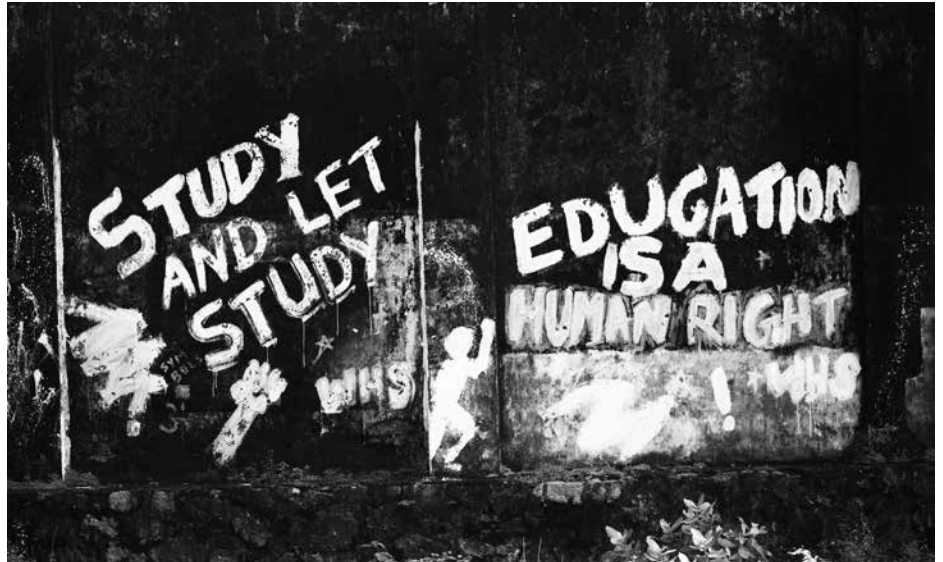
I would like to encourage Christians who invest too much time in making the queer community our opponents to *learn the difference between acceptance and agreement*. When we confuse these two concepts we do not love as we should.

Conservative Christians seem to find a hard time fully accepting someone unless that someone first changes, repents, and becomes like them. They cannot disagree and, at the same time, fully respect, honour, and accept the other person as the Bible calls us to (see **Titus 3:1–2; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Peter 2:17, 3:15**).

When we understand that acceptance and agreement are two different concepts, we will finally stop withholding acceptance as a form of disagreement and will learn to better love those outside our boundaries of agreement.

May I also suggest that we stop demanding Christian ethics from people who do not claim to be Christ-followers and Bible morality from people who don't claim to follow the Bible. Our secular governments are doing their best, outside of a Christian worldview, to create loving, respectful, and stable societies. We should commend them for that and not expect that they will approach this topic from a biblical perspective as we would, wanting to preserve the full image of God in us as male and female in covenantal marriage (**Genesis 1:26–27**). Remember that Jesus taught his ethics to his disciples (**Matthew 5:1–2**).

Lastly, I would also call Christ-followers to declare their love through their actions. Conservative Christians have the well-earned reputation of putting a lot of energy into their messages of disapproval. They hold rallies,



We [Christians] should be the first to look out for the human rights of any oppressed group, including gays and lesbians.

sign petitions, and write letters to the government to show their opposition to the gay “agenda” (whatever that may be). All of their active energy goes into the “we don’t approve” message. What about the “we love you” message? That aspect of Christian response to the queer community is usually given a token sound bite, often in the middle of longer sermons intended to make clear the “we disapprove” message.

I would like to suggest that we have it completely backwards. We should be pouring our active energies into the “we love you” message. We should be the first to look out for the human rights of any oppressed group, including gays and lesbians. We should find practical ways to serve the queer community, always showing them the utmost respect as image-bearers of God. If we are going to organize letter-writing campaigns, let them be letter-writing campaigns of love expressed to our queer community friends. If we do this rightly, we will be living the counter-cultural lifestyle that Jesus holds out for us. We will be that

unique Kingdom society within our secular culture that shows the world how to bless those whom we do not agree with and who may not agree with us. And within that context of organized, active, energetically demonstrated love, we may then also make ourselves clear with the sound bite of disagreement. If we are loving as radically as we should, this will only make the love we offer all the more meaningful and transformative.

A Message to the Homosexual Community

If you are a member of the queer community, **the most important thing you need to hear me say is simply this: “I’m sorry.”** I’m sorry that the church has for so long made you feel inferior because of your orientation. I’m sorry that we have not demonstrated love, but judgment. I’m sorry that we have not slowed down enough to understand your struggles, and I’m sorry we have not represented Jesus to you as we are called to.

If you are willing to hear me say more, then I would also like to encourage you

to consider the same lesson as the church needs to learn: the difference between *acceptance* and *agreement*. I would recommend that you stop expecting or even desiring all Christians to agree with you. It will never happen, and so, if that is to be the necessary basis for peace between our communities, that too will never happen. But then, who wants peace based on absolute agreement at all times? That is a fragile and false pseudo-peace that prevents us all from being completely honest while being intentionally loving.

Please know that it is possible for someone to believe that homosexual sexual expression is wrong, a sin, just as they believe that heterosexual sexual expression outside of marriage is sin, and that doesn't make them a bigot, a redneck, or homophobic in the least. Get to know us enough to realize that many

of us do not have an anti-queer agenda and do not divide our thought world into gay and straight. I believe we can form mutually respectful friendships between our communities without demanding absolute agreement on all issues. And it is this mutually respectful diversity that will, in the end, provide us all with the most opportunity for growth, loving, and learning.

A Message to Homosexual Christians

As a Christ-follower, we are spiritual family—brothers and sisters together, regardless of sexual orientation. As you brother in Christ, I want to encourage you to put aside the “I was born this way” argument in determining your ethics. That way of think does not apply to Christ-followers. **To be a Christian is**

to believe that Jesus is our Lord—not our past, our biology, or our desires.

Biological determinism is never the answer. Biology is not destiny. Life is about choice. I am not suggesting we can choose our sexual orientation, but I am saying we can all choose how we live.

As a heterosexual man, I could argue that I was born with sexual desires to have sex with more than one woman, and so I should have the right to live that way. But I do not go down that road because I am a Christ-follower. Not every desire I have should be indulged, whether I was born with them or not.

Jesus told the rich young ruler to give up everything he had. Why would God give him so much at birth, allowing him to be born into privilege, only to ask him to give it all away? I don't know. But he did. I suspect that Jesus knows what we

are tempted to make an idol of, whether that is our possessions, our sexual orientation, or our religious affiliation. Regardless, we submit all things to the leadership of Christ.

Let me remind you that the Bible never condemns *orientation*. There isn't even a word for “homosexual” in the ancient languages. Only *chosen* behaviours and attitudes are discussed. As John Stott explains, “In every discussion about homosexuality we must be rigorous in differentiating between ‘being’ and ‘doing’—that is, between a person's identity and activity, sexual preference and sexual practice, constitution and conduct.” Look up **Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:8–11**. You'll notice that the practice, not the impulse, is sin. Also notice that homosexual sexual expression is not highlighted as being more sinful than a host of other things, like



As a heterosexual man, I could argue that I was born with sexual desires to have sex with more than one woman, and so I should have the right to live that way. But I do not go down that road because I am a Christ follower.

We do not believe that the Christian agenda should be to get our government to act more Christian. We think we have enough to keep us busy if we focus on getting Christians to act more Christian. We know we may disagree with our government's understanding of marriage. And at the same time, we must hold true to what we believe, while the government does the same.

heterosexual sexual expression outside of marriage, greed, and gossip.

If you are a gay Christian, make Jesus, not your sexual rights, your focus and your Lord. As you do that, we will walk together as family, helping each other each step of the way.

Having said this, I am also keenly aware that there is one significant difference between gay and straight Christians' expression of obedience to Christ which has to do with the biblical relationship of marriage, which we will talk about in the next section.

For now it is worth saying that many of our homosexual brothers and sisters have laid down their desires, their "rights," to sexual intimacy in response to Christ's call to die to ourselves and follow the way of the cross. We believe that God honours the ongoing internal battle that these brave Christ-followers struggle with, and he certainly offers them a special grace to help them deal with their temptation.

What About Same-Sex Marriage?

We are well aware that biblically literate Christians have differing opinions on this sensitive issue and we respect other viewpoints while at the same time wanting to be clear about our own. We are sharing our views through this document in the interest of honest disclosure and dialogue, not out of the desire to be preachy or divisive.

At The Meeting House we believe that marriage is established by God and affirmed by Jesus to be a heterosexual union. This is not arbitrary but holds deep significance. The first time God's image

is said to be reflected in humankind it is male and female together in committed union that is being described (**Genesis 1 and 2**). To be male and to be female is to uniquely reflect one aspect of who God is. **And it is when both genders are brought together and united in loving covenant that God's image is most powerfully seen. This is a unique biblical relationship called "marriage."** The covenant of marriage and the sexual intimacy of marriage are both used as images of our intimacy with God. He is the Groom—we are the Bride. He enters us—we receive him. He leaves his seed in us and the result is new life—new birth.

We see Jesus supporting this understanding of marriage as a union between a husband [and] a wife reflecting God's union with us in his teaching as well (e.g., **Matthew 19**). He is rather straightforward in his teaching that there are people who for various different reasons are not called to marriage. He says that some people will be born "eunuchs"—in other words, some people are not given the necessary biology for marriage. This is a fact of life that applies to a variety of people for more reasons than sexual orientation. He also adds that some people will be made this way by outside influences. Most importantly for a Christ-follower, Jesus also says that some people will choose to be "eunuchs" for the sake of the Kingdom. This is a high calling according to Jesus, and will only be fully understood and pursued by a dedicated Christ-follower.

[Remember, we're not suggesting that we expect Christian ethics to be embraced

by non-Christians.]

Jesus also seems to be clear in his teaching that marriage is what God, not the State, defines it to be. So even when two people get married officially by the State, if their marriage does not follow God's righteous guidelines, God does not recognize it as a marriage (e.g., **Matthew 5:31–32** and **Matthew 19:9**). This should not surprise us since it is true in many matters of sin. There are many things that the state says are legal that God still says are immoral (e.g. adultery). When there is divergence of opinion or definition between God and government, as Christians we follow God's understanding on the matter.

In light of this, we do not believe that the Christian agenda should be to get our government to act more Christian. We think we have enough to keep us busy if we focus on getting Christians to act more Christian. We know we may disagree with our government's understanding of marriage. And at the same time, we must hold true to what we believe, while the government does the same.

If our secular society does not embrace a Christian worldview (as they do not), then we can only pray for them as they make the best decisions they can according to their own worldview. As Canadians, we are given a voice in current political debate and we are certainly free to participate in that process. But as Christians, we pour our energies into organizing our voice to offer a message of love and life to our world via the Gospel. This is not a message about political reform, but about life change, one life at

a time. And when the Church organizes itself around the Gospel, we give the nations of this world a glimpse of a better Kingdom.

What About Christians Who Believe Differently?

You now know where The Meeting House stands. But how do we relate to Christians who hold a different position?

A growing number of (Bible-believing) Christians believe that, although same-sex marriage is not God's original ideal, in our less-than-ideal world, God would and does bless same-sex marriage as a holy alternate for homosexual Christians. Although we do

not hold this position, we welcome and enjoy rich fellowship with any Christian who wants to study Scripture in order to follow Jesus.

As Anabaptist Christians, we have to learn to love, live with and learn from "Just War" Christians, even though we strongly disagree with their ethical interpretation of Scripture. Surely, then, we can do the same with Christians who interpret the Bible differently regarding same-sex marriage.

Conclusion

I hope these thoughts have helped bring some clarity, whether or not we find ourselves in agreement. If you would like to investigate this topic further, you can listen to three [sic] different sermons online on the series archives tab on the teaching page of our website—

themeetinghouse.com/teaching). Look for these teaching topics:

- Hot Potatoes 1 (Jun 1999)—#10 Is Being Gay A Sin?
- Hot Potatoes 2 (Nov 2002)—#5 Is Gay Marriage A Step in the Right Direction?
- Not Ashamed—Part 2 (Jun 2005)—on the second half of the first chapter of Romans.
- License to Sin (Feb 2011)
- Modern Family (Oct 2013)

In the meantime, it is our prayer that as Christians we would learn to better model the compassion of Jesus without pretending to agree where we do not. It is also our prayer that those who are not Christ-followers would be motivated to more deeply investigate the loving and life-changing teachings of this radical Rabbi from Nazareth. To whatever extent you are open to this investigation, we are happy to help.

Peace to you. *☪*

When the Church organizes itself around the Gospel, we give the nations of this world a glimpse of a better Kingdom.

The Disillusioned and Our Need to Be Prepared



Dr. Al Hiebert

Al Hiebert, an ordained EMC minister, taught for 28 years at Providence University College and Theological Seminary and seven years at Briercrest Seminary. He holds BA (U. of M.), MA (TEDS), and PhD (NYU) degrees.

WHEN LAST WERE you disillusioned with your friends, family, spouse, school, job, church or faith? How did you deal with such disappointing experiences? Many seek new friends, spouses, schools, jobs,

churches or faiths when their frustrations become intolerable.

On radio recently a world-renowned atheist reported that he had become an atheist at age 14 when he had earnestly and long prayed for a new bike. No new

bike arrived. So he decided, "That's it! There is no God!"

Atheism and Disappointment

Most atheists and agnostics with whom I've discussed these matters have



McLaren reports that some evangelical churches lose 50 to 95 percent of young people during their teens and twenties. What is the rate in our churches and community? And what should we do about this?

expressed their great disappointments with some injustice suffered at the hands of some Christian individual(s) or organization(s). Sad.

They now are convinced that if God did not make these people behave properly, then likely there really is no God. Usually they also reason that it's logically contradictory to believe both that an all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing God exists and that pain, evil, and suffering exists in the world.

When I suggest that the pain, evil and suffering in the world was brought on by humans' free choice to rebel against their all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing Maker, they often dismiss such a "free will defence" as unconvincing. Dr. Jason Xenakis put it this way in our Steinbach living room in December 1973: "If I had the power to create a pet in any way I wished, I surely would create that pet in such a way that it could not hurt itself or others." He also feared unemployment, because his PhD in Philosophy from Harvard could not get him a job driving a truck or a taxi (a few years later he gave

his life to Jesus.)

On a 1999 flight from Delhi to London, Dr. Gerald Wolf and I discussed these matters for nearly nine hours. A professor of brain biology at Wartburg University, East Berlin, he told me about how he had fought off a tiger who had attacked him in the jungle near Mumbai (India).

He had expected to die, never again to see his wife and family. He was sure that had he died, that would have been the end of his story, just as if he were a cat who died. He hated Communism. He was totally disillusioned with its dreams of a socialist utopia, but he still embraced the atheism he was taught as a child in school.

The Loss of Young People

On Feb. 4, 2011, in Winnipeg my pastor and I heard emergent church guru Brian McLaren (17 books including *Everything Must Change, A New Kind of Christianity*) talk of many people who are disillusioned with evangelical churches. He reports that some evangelical churches lose 50 percent of their young people during their teens

and twenties. In some cases that rate soars as high as 95 percent. What is the rate in our churches and community? And what should we do about this?

Apologetics Is Needed

Peter argues: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). How well are we doing this?

Some argue that we should not do this, lest it cause offence or make us look arrogant and intolerant. Some argue that this is "theology," which always seems to divide people, that we should love and unite people. Some see this as "philosophy" ("foolosophy"?), which involves too much reason—we should just have faith and be sensitive to our culture.

But what should we, our friends, and family do when our culture gets all consumed with best sellers like Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (2004); or Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

(2006); or Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007)? And what should we do if our kids' best friends and teachers get enthralled with the claims that these books represent the best of science, history, and a willingness to "ask the tough questions"?

And what should we do if we too are disillusioned by the Christianity that we were taught, and have believed till recently, but are now convinced that it "no longer fits the facts"? Do we feel disillusioned, despair, ambushed, and defenceless?

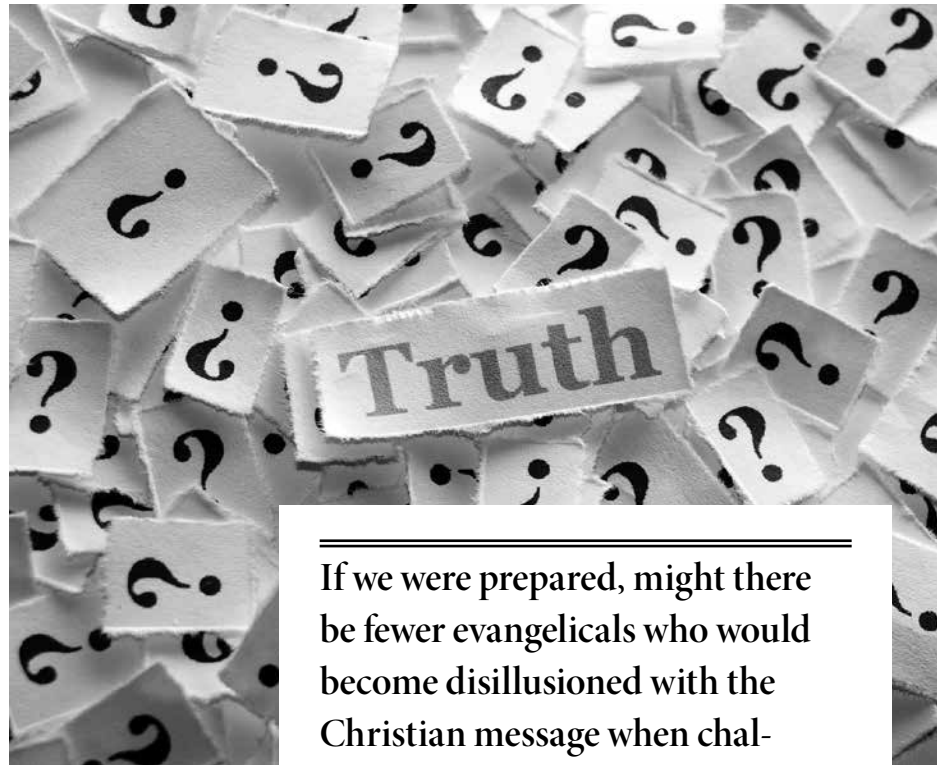
Jason Ching, editor of *Generous Living*, compares the believer who does not practice 1 Peter 3:15 to a policeman who does not carry a weapon, or who does not know how to use it, because he has no need for one—until he gets into a life-threatening confrontation with a criminal. Such behaviour simply makes no sense, however much we are committed to peace. We all need to be on guard against "every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Of course, not all of us can be fully prepared to give a convincing answer to every possible question that anyone might ask us about our hope in Christ. Also, not everyone will be convinced by facts and arguments that clearly warrant Christian beliefs. But Peter and Paul urge that every committed believer be as prepared as reasonably possible to offer such. Is that too much to ask?

Being Prepared Is Important

And if we were thus prepared, might there be fewer evangelicals who would become disillusioned with the Christian message when challenged by friends, teachers, professors or best-selling books?

Might there be fewer evangelicals who would become disillusioned with the Christian message when challenged by injustice and immorality in the church?



If we were prepared, might there be fewer evangelicals who would become disillusioned with the Christian message when challenged by friends, teachers, professors or best-selling books?

Might there be more evangelicals who would challenge the injustice and immorality in the church by going back to the God's written Word as did the Reformers?

Paul declares people like Brown, Dawkins, Hitchens, and their followers without excuse (Rom. 1 and 2), regardless of how many millions in our time buy their books or how many media appearances they are given in our world. New York City pastor Tim Keller asks which one is narrower: if Jack contends that a given batch of cookies is poisonous, but Jill contends that they are nothing more than a pleasant snack. Each may regard the other as incorrigibly narrow-minded. Only the truth can judge which is right. Clearly they cannot both be right.


Scientific Method Isn't Enough

No human alive is without beliefs that cannot be demonstrated to be true by scientific method alone. As useful as scientific method is on issues concerning matter and

the forces that impact matter, scientific method is simply incompetent to demonstrate the validity of any view of morality, the meaning of human life, or even the validity of scientific method itself.

Is it time for some disillusionment with scientific method as the only valid means of discovering truth? The turkey who is convinced that the farmer who feeds him daily will never harm him might be disillusioned with his scientific conclusion a few days before Thanksgiving.

Those in our midst who become disillusioned with Christian faith, need our prayerful and careful help to find the truth. I'm convinced it's to be found in Christ and the Bible, regardless of which clever people in our culture believe otherwise.

Dare we engage the disillusioned among us responsibly? If we really loved them, we would. 

Eight Ways Preachers Can Harm the Depressed



Dr. David Murray

Dr. David Murray is professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology at Puritan Reformed Seminary and pastor of Grand Rapids Free Reformed Church. With his wife Shona and their five children, Murray enjoys life in the Lake Michigan area.

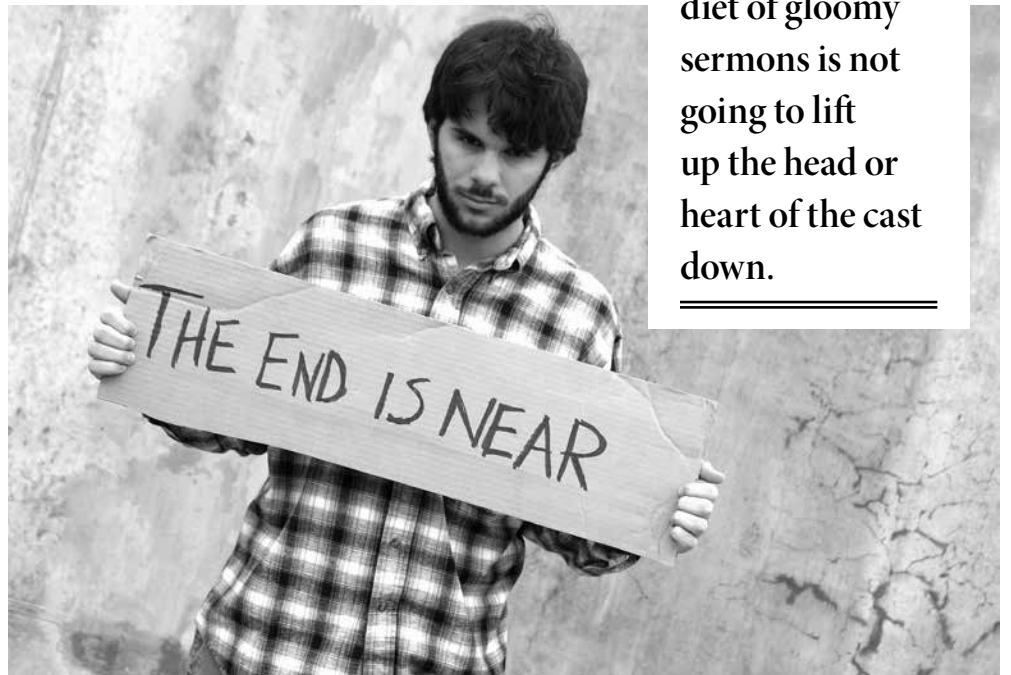
IN A CHURCH OF 100 PEOPLE, 20 PEOPLE WILL likely experience an episode of depression at some stage in their life. If you are in a church of that size, there are probably five to 10 people struggling with anxiety or depression right now. But instead of finding comfort and consolation in the preaching of God's Word, these suffering souls often find themselves battered and bruised by insensitive preaching. What kind of sermons harm depressed and anxious Christians?

1 **Sermons that over-stress the moral evils of the day.** They are anxious enough through hearing the daily news without every church service ramping up the "we're doomed" rhetoric. A steady diet of gloomy sermons is not going to lift up the head or heart of the cast down.

2 **Sermons that include graphic descriptions of violence.** They are deeply traumatized by preachers reciting the gory details of shooting massacres, abortion procedures, persecution of Christians, and child murders.

3 **Sermons that extol constant happiness as the only valid and virtuous Christian experience.** The deep pain of depression is multiplied when a depressed person is repeatedly told that sadness is a sin

4 **Sermons that question the faith of anyone who doubts.** A lack of assurance is not necessarily a lack of faith.



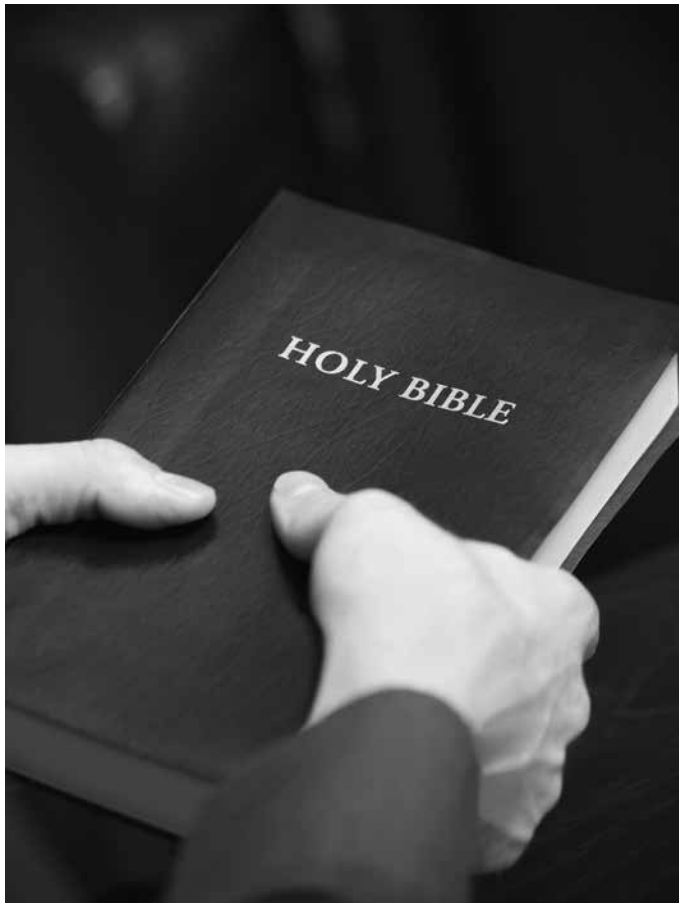
Depressed people are anxious enough through hearing the daily news without every church service ramping up the "we're doomed" rhetoric. A steady diet of gloomy sermons is not going to lift up the head or heart of the cast down.

Believers who hang on to God despite feeling no assurance sometimes have the greatest faith.

5 Sermons that demand, demand, and demand. The depressed person already feels like an inadequate failure. To be regularly berated for not doing this ministry, or failing to engage in that Christian service, only crushes what's left of their spirit.

6 Sermons that are too loud for too long. When a preacher pours out high-decibel words with hardly a breath between them for 45 minutes, it's not just the nerves of the depressed that are frayed.

Depressed people need to focus most on the objective facts of Christianity, the historic doctrines of the faith.




7 Sermons that condemn anyone for using meds to treat depression or anxiety. These are often preached by pastors whose medicine cabinets are overflowing with pills and potions for every other condition under the sun!

8 Sermons that overdo the subjective side of Christian experience. Depressed people need to focus most on the objective facts of Christianity, the historic doctrines of the faith. Facts first and feelings follow. There's a place for careful self-examination, but remember Robert Murray McCheyne's rule: "For every look inside, take ten looks to Christ."

AND THAT REALLY BRINGS ME TO THE best way to preach to the depressed, and that's to **preach Christ**. Preach His suffering and sympathizing humanity. Preach His gentle and tender dealings with trembling and timid sinners. Preach His gracious and merciful words.

Preach His beautiful meekness. Preach His miracles to demonstrate His power to heal. Preach His finished work on Calvary. Preach His offer of rest to the weary. Preach the power of His resurrection-life. Preach His precious promises: "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Matt. 12:20).

Preach Christ! Preach Him winningly and winsomely. Preach Him near and ready to help. Preach Him from the heart to the heart. Preach Him again, and again, and again. Until the day dawn and the shadows flee away. 

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Christianity After Religion, Diana Butler Bass (Harper One, 2012). 294 pp. \$13.36. ISBN 9780062003737. Reviewed by Russell Doerksen (Fort Garry), BA, Business Administration (Providence University College), MDiv, Biblical Languages (Providence Theological Seminary).

IN *CHRISTIANITY AFTER Religion* (CAR), a book on religious studies by professor and scholar Diana Butler Bass, PhD, attempts to explain and resolve the declining popularity of Christianity in the West. This work keeps largely in line with her previous books *A People's History of Christianity* (2009) and *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (2006), in which Butler Bass firmly states that in order for Christianity to stay relevant it must change.

CAR's Approach

Christianity After Religion is split into three major parts. The first entitled, "After Religion," sets out to explain the slow morphing of the American spiritual landscape from the "last great spiritual awakening" of the 1960s and 70s, to the first decade of the 2000s. The 2000s are of particular note, as they were objectively the hardest decade on Christianity throughout its existence in North America (76–83).

Butler Bass lays out for the reader that Christianity as seen in the mainline denominations is no longer strong in America, as an ever growing number of people are moving away from Christianity. Instead, these people are choosing the ambiguous classification of "not affiliated" (92). The point that really gets driven home in this section is that it is not that people have moved past spirituality, but instead they have moved past the rigidity of religion.

In the second section, appropriately entitled "A New Vision," we arrive at the heart of the book. The section is

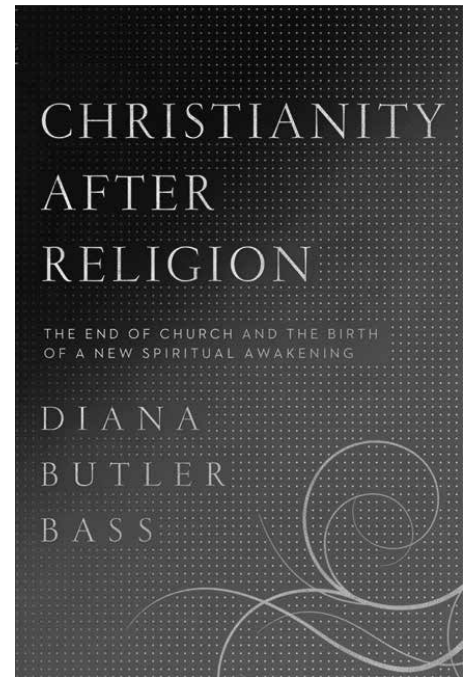
Butler Bass lays out for the reader that Christianity as seen in the mainline denominations is no longer strong in America, as an ever growing number of people are moving away from Christianity.

organized around what Butler Bass believes are the four main questions that religions seek to answer: "What do I believe?" "What am I to do?" "Who am I?" and, "To whom do I belong?" (103–111).

Christianity tends to answer these questions by framing them in terms of beliefs, essentially understanding the four questions in the light of the first question, "What do I believe?" To this, Butler Bass insists that the only way forward is for Christians to think of these questions in the reverse order, framing them all with, "To whom do I belong?" (173).

A renewed Christianity must think first in terms of the community to which it belongs, which will tell people who they are, which will in turn affect behaviour, and will only then affect belief. The main function of rearranging Christianity in this way is that this new order will produce a faith that is above all else oriented to experience.

The final section entitled, "Awakening," talks about the future of the Church. To Butler Bass, the conservative "meanness,"



or the efforts of American Evangelicalism to reach back and to recover the "faith of their fathers," are the dying pangs of an old religion trying to hold on to the long lost status quo (224).

To Butler Bass, the next great awakening began with the spiritual movements of the 1960's, but was brought to a standstill by the great conservative uprising brought on by Reagan's America, and the rise of the Evangelical Right (225). While for a time this resistance was effective, we have now moved to the point where it can no longer be sustained. The old guard will fade away and in its place will be the long awaited next great awakening, and at its heart will be Christianity after religion.

Unconvincing

For the most part, there is little that will shock anyone reading *Christianity after Religion*. Speaking on the importance of small community and change in Christianity has been commonplace for decades in religious studies literature. In this line, the most distinctive part of

Butler Bass's work is how far she goes, essentially calling for the end of the Church as we know it (224).

It must be pointed out that Butler Bass has an intensely enjoyable writing style, combining personal experience with the information she is presenting in a way that draws the reader into the narrative. When reading the book, it becomes near impossible not to find yourself nodding along with the points she makes at least in part to her skill as a writer.

With that said, and in spite of her delightful rhetorical style, when I arrived at the end of the book I was not convinced of Butler Bass's thesis. This is for one main reason: I don't think that this thesis can be undertaken without losing a major part of what it means to be Christian—basic Christian theology.

When I read *Christianity After Religion*, it became clear that this inverted layout of Christianity would not be possible within the existing structure of the Church. As noted by Butler Bass, Christianity is a religion typically defined by placing theology first and only then moving toward community (201). As Christians we define ourselves by what we believe above all else. Now whether this is the optimal position or not is not my issue with Butler Bass; but, instead, that I believe that it is the most pragmatic way to orient ourselves.

Experiential Theology Not Enough

Re-ordering Christianity in the way that Butler Bass proposes places experiential theology in the foremost position of power in Christian spirituality. Beyond this, having the community as the primary defining point of the Christian essentially does the same thing that I am taking issue with. What I am taking issue with is that there is danger in promoting common experience or experiential theology to the primary unifier of a group. This is because common experience is not a good unifier.

In spite of her delightful rhetorical style, I was not convinced of Butler Bass's thesis. This is for one main reason: I don't think that it can be undertaken without losing a major part of what it means to be Christian—basic Christian theology.



I should state now that I personally believe that true common experience or common experiential theology outside of an immediate group is largely a myth. Take, for example, theodicy. Everyone suffers, and because of this we will all have a theology of suffering. This is fine and is needed.

However, what if we in the affluent West try to identify with those who are truly oppressed and down trodden based on our two experiential theologies of suffering? At best, we will roll our eyes at each other because of the complications involved with trying to equate first world problems with what are truly matters of oppression and suffering. At worst we assume our understandings are the same, and we try to fix their problems with our solutions, implementing the guiding ideology of Imperialism.

The great problem with using experiential theology and common

experience as the main defining characteristic of a community is that then only someone who is of your world can fully understand your beliefs. Different experiences cause people to understand the world differently. What is rich and poor, what is suffering; there are many important things that are understood differently based on experience.

Having experiential theology as the main defining characteristic of a people is always going to promote the differences between groups above unity because there is so little that is truly common ground. Likely the Church will thrive as small and fragmented groups, but it can only do so at the expense of the larger body.

Early Anabaptists

There is an example in the book that I believe illustrates this point better than the one it is purposed for by Butler Bass. There is a section that talks about

the Anabaptists and their emphasis on common theology (209). When Anabaptism was coming into existence, there was no time for deep theological learning in large part because of the oppression that was being faced. As such Anabaptist communities became based on a common reading and understanding of scripture. For example, when the Anabaptists read, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” they took it literally and became pacifists.

As a Mennonite, I must agree that our common experiential theology is one of our wonderful distinctive qualities. At the same time, if our pacifism is to be viewed as one of our defining characteristics because of how common it is, another one must be how Mennonites are well-known for splitting up churches and denominations for little to no reason at all.

We do great in small communities where we have common understanding, but we do not have the commonality needed to keep it together in large groups. Our little groups come to a common understanding of scripture, but when we are confronted with outside views, our history shows that quite often we meet the difference by splitting.

This is not common to just Anabaptists either. The denominations that hold a strong central theology as paramount tend to be those who split less than those that do not. I believe that this is at least in part because there being a unifier that is more firm than the common experience of a small group and their experiential theology.

Defining Community

My second and chief issue with *Christianity After Religion* comes from the difference between our two assumed definitions of community. Butler Bass

speaks of community in a small way—a close group of people who live together, influence each other, and from whom people draw their identity. To her this is the most important group in Christianity. I will never downplay the importance of the small communities in the Church. It is our small communities which drive us on, who rejoice with us, and who mourn with us.

But as I understand Christianity, I believe that the importance of unity as a whole must always be paramount. This importance on unity in a macro sense I believe is intrinsic to the Christian worldview. To begin, the Apostles’ Creed, which is the agreed upon definition of the minimum belief necessary to be considered a Christian, contains that Christians must believe in “the holy catholic church.”

The reason for this is because if we go to the Bible, we read Jesus praying in John 17:22, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.” We also are told to make unity a top priority in Eph. 4:3 where we read,


The denominations that hold a strong central theology as paramount tend to be those who split less than those that do not. It is a unifier firmer than the common experience of a small group and their experiential theology.

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace.”

Now, I am not trying to say that people who are different cannot be unified, and as a Canadian I believe that I have seen this is possible firsthand. Instead, I am saying that if one of the primary goals of Christianity is to be unified, promoting the differences of small communities above the similarities of a large group

may be counter intuitive. If the history of Christianity, and the world for that matter, has shown us anything, it may be that people don’t typically deal well with others who believe their beliefs are slightly less than right.

While I have some strong concerns about this title’s approach to Christian theology and community, I do want to point out that *Christianity After Religion* does have many wonderful things to offer its reader. Apart from the wonderful writing style, the first section on the fall of religion in the west is one of the most concise and well-written explanations of the subject that I have ever read. For this section alone one would do well to pick up a copy of the book.

As for a final prognosis, though, while I do not question that Butler Bass’s suggestions would bring to pass all that she believes it would, I do remain unconvinced that it would do so without leaving behind key elements of Christianity—unity and common belief. 



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Feature Sermon

Psalm 22:1–5, Habakkuk 3:16–19, John 9:1–12, Isaiah 43:1–2



When We Feel God's Silence

Pastor Irma Janzen

Irma Janzen is associate pastor and formerly interim pastor at Fort Garry EMC, where this sermon was preached. She holds BA, BEd, MEd, and MA (Providence Theological Seminary) degrees.

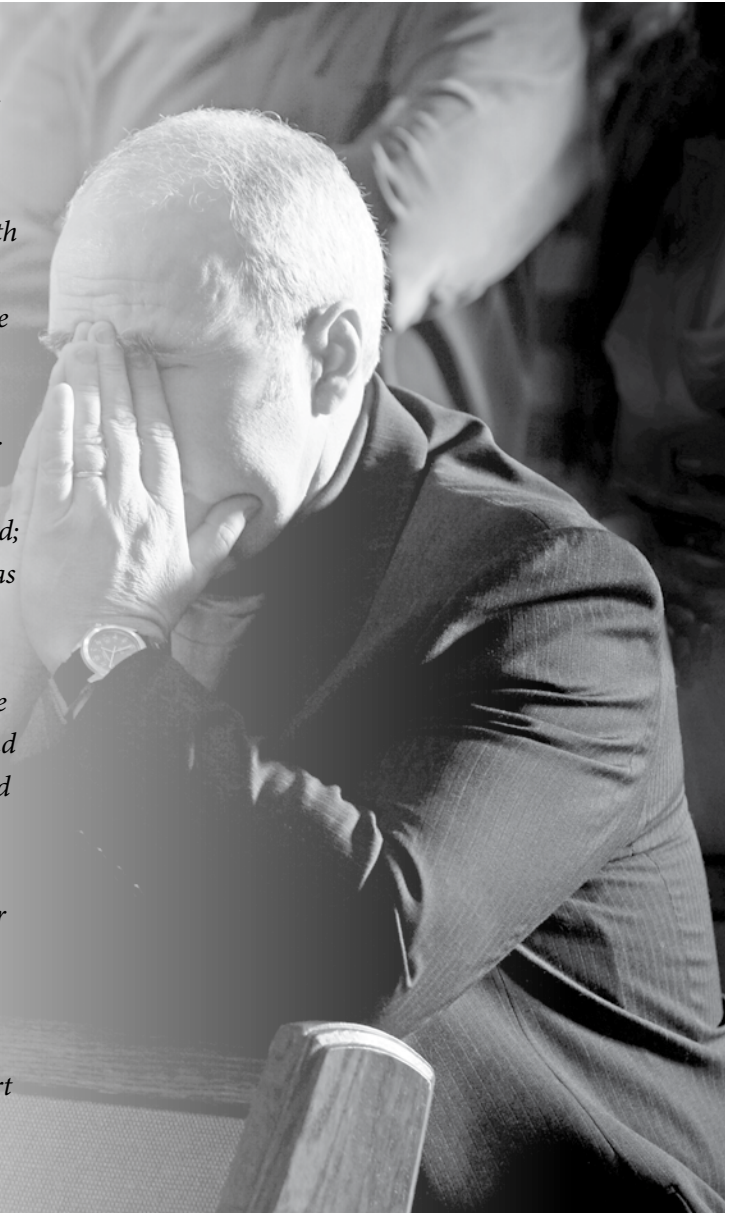
God, it's Charles here. I have spoken to you hundreds of time in the last month, but I haven't felt you hear me—at least I have not heard back. I've told you about my Dad's cancer.

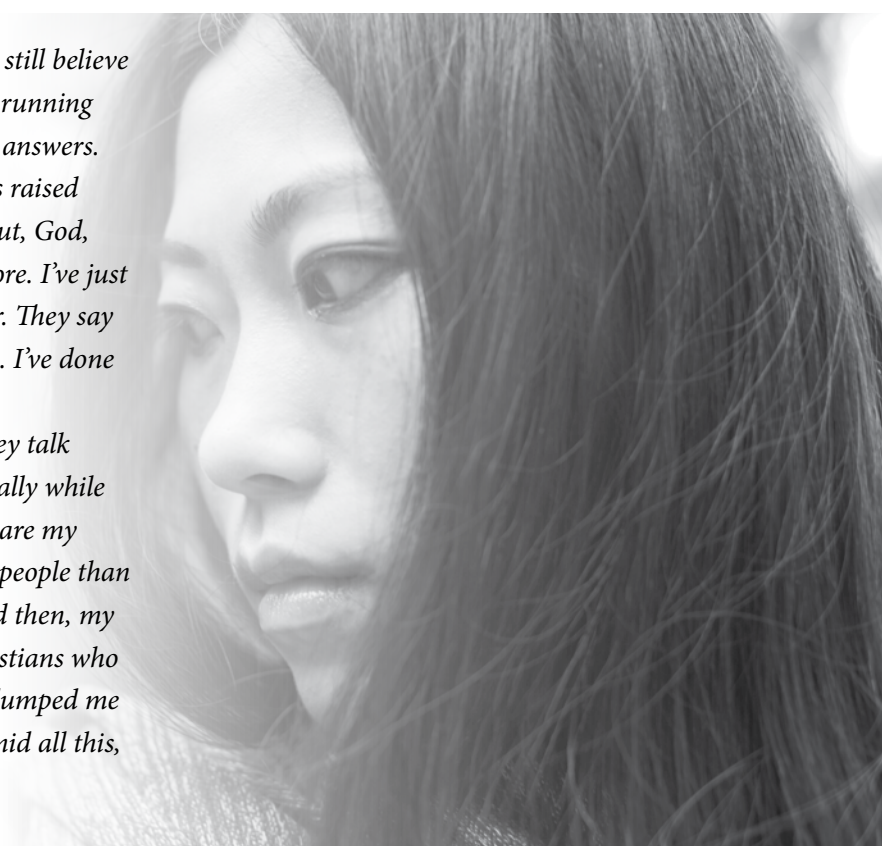
My wife and I have told you about her Mom's journey with dementia, which is progressively getting worse; and we know her Dad can't cope much longer even with the support we are giving—besides, of course, also trying to support my parents. We're really tired, God.

We were tired a month ago, and then three weeks ago our 20-year-old son, Greg, told us he is gay. He asked us not talk to people at church about it because he fears he will be judged; he also said he is leaving the church for good because God has not answered his prayers for his orientation to go away.

You know all this. You also know that we have sought to follow You. We entrusted our children to you when they were babies. We've taken them to church and read Bible stories and prayed with them. Greg has been part of the youth group and the College and Career group at church.

He decided to be baptized when he was 17, and You know He loves You. But, God, where are You? Why can't he feel Your love when he needs you so much? God, we love him so much, too, and are so sad for him and so afraid that he will be hurt even more. God, where are You? I need You so much; we need You so much, but You seem so far away. We need Your comfort and Your guidance. Where are You, God?





God, it's Pamela here. I don't know if I still believe in You. There are so many questions running through my head to which I have no answers. Oh, I know the Sunday School answers—I was raised in a Christian home and grew up in church. But, God, Christianity does not make sense to me anymore. I've just lost interest. Christians say You are the answer. They say read your Bible and pray about your problems. I've done all that.

But I see Christians living selfishly while they talk about loving. I see Christians acting judgmentally while they speak of kindness. I just don't get it. Why are my friends who don't claim to be Christians nicer people than the people who are supposedly Christians? And then, my boyfriend dumped me. He is one of those Christians who doesn't ask questions, and I have a feeling he dumped me because he can't handle my questions. God, amid all this, why should I keep on believing in You?

ISUSPECT THAT MOST OF us who are five years old or older have asked a question like our fictional characters Charles and Pamela asked. We may well have felt the silence, too.

You may remember a five-year-old saying, "I ask Jesus to help me good, but it doesn't help." You may be a youth who asked God for help in relating to the kids at school or even at church but it just didn't help you make friends. You may be a young adult saying, "It feels as if God is skiing in the Alps," seemingly unavailable, uninterested and in distant place not even accessible by phone or texting when you most needed Him.

I suspect we have all asked similar questions and have heard others ask them, too, as we or they sat in darkness similar to the darkness of the imaginary Charles or Pamela in the first paragraph.

I've asked God some similar questions myself. I remember one particularly

We are certainly not alone when we feel that God is distant or when we question His existence.

dark time when, as a middle-aged woman, I was thinking to myself whether I would actually continue to believe in

God or not if He seemed so absent, if He didn't do something to assure me that He was with me because I felt so alone, forsaken and desperate. (As a bit of an aside to that, I did tell Him in that same one-way talk to please take care of me because I did not actually want to stop

believing, I did not want to lose my faith, and that I really wanted Him to keep me.)

We are certainly not alone when we feel that God is distant or when we question His existence. For instance, there are numerous Biblical examples of people who had similar experiences and asked

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

— **Psalm 22:1–5, NRSV**

the similar questions. That means those kinds of questions have been around for thousands of years and even in a different culture. Actually, we're not that unique!

David and Job

We just heard one of David's prayers read from Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I'm not sure what the particular situation was when he penned Psalm 22, but we know that he had many big challenges in his life. He fled from King Saul when Saul wanted to kill him. Later he fled from one of his own sons for the same reason.

We know one of his sons raped his daughter. We know he had an affair with Bathsheba and we know he lost a child. He must also have lived with the guilt of having Bathsheba's husband killed to try to cover up his own unfaithfulness. No matter what the situation that led to this Psalm, it is the lament of a person who felt abandoned by God and that is what we want to focus on this morning.

We have Job. We don't know how long he struggled with the loss of family,

fortune, and health. We don't know how long he struggled with the friends who were accusing him. We read at one point about his wife questioning as to why he still believed in God when God was allowing these things to happen. We know he questioned God about why he had been born when all this was his lot. Plenty of questions there!

Naomi and Habakkuk

We have Naomi, who, when people greeted her at her return to Bethlehem, said, "Call me Mara because God had dealt harshly with me and brought calamity upon me." She had left with a husband and two sons and come home without them.

We have Habakkuk who asked God why God would use an even more wicked nation than Israel to overrun Israel. This just made no sense to him. He asked God, "Why, why?" God's answer led him to more questioning and eventually to silence before God while he prepared to sit and wait for worse to come. Notice what he said while he waited for worse to come in Habakkuk 3:16-19.

David, Job and Habakkuk spoke to God when all seemed wrong. They were very honest as was Naomi and our fictional Charles and Pamela. David, in Psalm 22, was very honest with God. He bemoaned what a weak or terrible person he was and he even acknowledged the physical symptoms he experienced in his despair.

He also recalled how God had cared for people of Israel in the past. And note how he actually affirmed God for who He is in the last verses of Psalm 22. Job's friends, while they have to be admired for sitting in silence for seven days, said hurtful things, and yet he maintained his own faithfulness and integrity amid his losses.

John 9

We have the story in John 9 we heard earlier in the service where Jesus' disciples asked whether the man who was born blind was blind because of his own sin or his parents' sin. We wish people nowadays would not ask that, but I remember a person telling me how someone had

¹⁶I hear, and I tremble within;
my lips quiver at the sound.
Rottenness enters into my bones,
and my steps tremble[a] beneath me.
I wait quietly for the day of calamity
to come upon the people who attack us.

¹⁷Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,

¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

¹⁹God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

– Habakkuk 3:16–19, NRSV

¹ As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

– John 9:1–12, NRSV

implied the same when their family was in an accident.

Naomi, as I said earlier said, “Call me Mara because God had dealt bitterly with me.” And she did what she knew to do and sent Ruth out to do what needed to be done to survive when you were poor and destitute.

We may have heard other statements like whom the Lord loves He chastens, or that God must see you as very special and able to bear a lot and that is why trouble has come to you. Or that God allows bad things to happen to grow us in our faith. While there may be some truth in some of the above statements, none of them are very comforting or reassuring. And they may not even be true, certainly not universally.

Not Why, But a Presence

Let’s switch our direction a bit at this point. I remember a writer who addressed the issue of going to Scripture to find the answers to the whys of unanswered questions about God and about hard times. He said, and I wish I was sure who the writer was so I could acknowledge him, that the Bible does not answer those questions. Instead, he said, the Bible gives us many role models of people who asked questions those questions and yet kept on believing. I guess ultimately that is what we call faith, right?

Think back to David, Job, Naomi and Habakkuk. According to the story, Job did receive good gifts in the end; and Naomi got a grandson, which was very important

¹ But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

– *Isaiah 43:1–2, NRSV*

in that culture. However, things in David’s family continued to be in a big mess. We have no evidence that things went well for Habakkuk either; in fact, it would seem that he may have been carried off into exile in Babylon with many others.

Stories of Trust

These are stories of trust amid hard times and unanswered questions that we find in the Bible, but we also have them among us. I read a story recently written by a woman whose mother has schizophrenia. Her Dad lost his job as a pastor and their family was poor, at least for a time. As a youth she did not invite friends to her home because she was never sure how her Mom would be.

There were hospitalizations, a time when her Mom landed up in jail, and a time when they no idea where her Mom was. When she wrote the story things were more stable, but she wrote about how God had carried her through the years and that her Mom’s illness had brought a richness to her life she would not have had without it.

Some of you may remember me sharing a statement my Dad made to me several times in the last years his life. My Mom had died, my sister was hospitalized for an extended period of time due to mental illness, her daughter went to live in a foster home, and finally Dad got cancer. Several times during those years he said to me, “Irma, no matter what happens it does not change who God is or His love for us.”

We have people in our congregation who are examples of continuing to live by faith amid the darkness, the pain and the unanswered questions. You may have talked to some of them this morning. They are role models for us of how to live when things go wrong or make no sense to us.

Words of Reassurance

If you are still looking for Scripture to go to when you ask, “Why?” maybe try the verses on the front of the bulletin. They will not give you the answer to the why, but they can reassure you of God’s presence with you.

“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isaiah 43:1–2).

I close with my Dad’s words, “No matter what happens it does not change who God is or His love for us.” And I truly believe that includes, “No matter how distant God seems, it does not change who God is or His love for us,” as well as, “No matter if I can believe today or not, it does not change who God is or His love for us.”³

We may have heard statements like whom the Lord loves he chastens, or that God must see you as very special and able to bear a lot and that is why trouble has come to you. While there may be some truth in some of the above statements, none of them are very comforting or reassuring.

The Final Word

Love

Lord Jesus,
Give me to love thee, to embrace thee,
 Though I once took lust and sin in my arms.
Thou didst love me before I loved thee,
 An enemy, a sinner, a loathsome worm.
Thou didst own me when I disclaimed myself;
Thou dost love me as a son,
 And weep over me as over Jerusalem.
Love brought thee from heaven to earth,
 From the earth to the cross,
 From the cross to the grave.
Love caused thee to be weary, hungry, tempted,
 Scorned, scourged, buffeted, spat upon, crucified,
 and pierced.
Love led thee to bow thy head in death.
My salvation is the point where perfect created love
 And the most perfect uncreated love meet together;
For thou dost welcome me, not like Joseph and his
 brothers,
 Loving and sorrowing, but loving and rejoicing.
Thy love is not intermittent, cold, changeable;
 It does not cease or abate for all my enmity

Holiness is a spark from thy love
 Kindled to a flame in my heart by thy Spirit,
 And so it ever turns to the place from which it
 comes.
Let me see thy love everywhere, not only in the cross,
 But in the fellowship of believers and in the world
 around me.
When I feel the warmth of the sun may I praise thee
 Who art the Sun of righteousness with healing
 power.
When I feel the tender rain
 May I think of the gospel showers that water my
 soul.
When I walk by the river side
 May I praise thee for that stream that makes the
 eternal city glad,
 And washes white my robes that I may have the
 right to the tree of life.
Thy infinite love is a mystery of mysteries,
 And my eternal rest lies in the eternal enjoyment
 of it.

From *The Valley of Vision: A collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*. Collected by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975)

Send editorial inquiries and submissions to Editor, *Theodidaktos*, Box 129, Kleefeld, MB R0A 0V0; kemc@mts.net; 204-377-4773. Writing guidelines are available. Submissions should be accompanied by a photo and autobiographical information.

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