

# On religion, politics, and becoming a mature human

by J. Howard Meharg

## FOREWARD

James Howard Meharg served as director of choirs and taught vocal music in the schools of Castle Rock, Kelso, and Longview over a period of some 42 years, with a “time-out” to sell houses as a real estate agent for a five-year stint. He has been president of the Washington chapter of the American Choral Directors organization twice, and served as editor of the Washington ACDA newsletter (Unison) as well as serving as editor of ACDA’s six-state regional newsletter for about 15 years. He founded, along with colleagues Bruce Browne and Larry Marsh, Male Ensemble Northwest in 1982 and then founded Chor Anno in 2009, a 38 voice mixed choir of professional level singers. Both groups were made up of choral colleagues from the northwest. He has since turned over conducting duties for Chor Anno to Dr. Nicole Lamartine, DCA at Central Washington University. It should be noted that both of these groups continue to astound audiences with their virtuosity as of 2023.

It may be important to note that Howard has directed choirs for several years at a time in churches ranging from evangelical, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal.

Part of the material in this book has been compiled from essays and other documents written by Howard over a period of 30 years. The reader will note, for example, that one chapter speaks of George W. Bush when he served as president (2002-2009). Such references were left in the book because they serve to illustrate concepts of which Meharg writes.

A reader will no doubt notice passages that indicate Meharg’s own transitions in thinking (about religion especially) as the book unfolds. In a very real sense, the ideas expressed here represent a “work-in-progress” in Howard’s own life. In a sense, despite no direct reference to the year some statements were written, the reader will no doubt ascertain the progress in development of Howard’s own thinking about religion, politics, and human maturity of thought. The last chapter, for example, is a “sermon” given by Howard in 2003 at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Longview, WA. In a real sense, this marks a real mid-point in his developing belief system. He leaves it as it was, for the main points of that presentation (Howard’s one and only time to stand in the “pulpit”) are still vitally important...to him and to believers and non-believers.



## Chapter 1

### Setting the Stage – Telling the Story

I've wrestled with several issues in writing this material. Why bother? Who cares? In some ways there may be nothing to gain. One relative says he is sorry that I had to go through the brainwashing and intolerance of my early days in the Pentecostal church. He attributes my writing a rather critical essay on to this "terribly skewed" upbringing. I don't think that's altogether the reason, but I readily admit it's possible that part of my reason for writing is a matter of ridding myself from the effects of growing up in that atmosphere.

While I truly have no specific desire to "convert" others to my way of thinking about religion or politics, I do believe that many of us who were "hammered" by the views about the inerrancy of the Bible and the need for "rebirth" through "the blood of Jesus," can find, and will find, a huge burden being lifted by knowing that so much of this is based in superstition. Put frankly, it's false. Ridding oneself of this superstitious view can help one find huge freedom of spirit. Perhaps reading this will help in that regard.

I noted recently an article in National Geographic on the life of Jesus. I include this quote to make a point.

*At this moment I realize that to sincere believers, the scholars' quest for the historical, non-supernatural Jesus is of little consequence. That quest will be endless, full of shifting theories, unanswerable questions, irreconcilable facts. But for true believers, their faith in the life, death, and Resurrection of the Son of God will be evidence enough. Staff writer [Kristin Romey](#) covers ancient civilizations and new discoveries for the magazine and website*

Yes, for "true believers, their faith in the life, death, and resurrection of the "Son of God" will be evidence enough." My views about such matters will not amount to much for them. I'm aware of that.

I'm also aware that many who claim a life of such faith hold "secret" doubts and these doubts are many. I say to you, read on! You have nothing to fear. After all, a solid faith should stand scrutiny. My views may, in fact, do nothing but strengthen that faith.

The "battle" of faith vs. reason has been going on for a very long time. I quote a paragraph written by Bertrand Russell in 1954. It brings us to another point regarding how "faith" becomes so important to many.

*The important thing is not what you believe, but how you believe it. If you think that your belief is based upon reason, you will support it by argument, rather than by persecution, and will abandon it if the argument goes against you. But if your belief is based on faith,*

*you will realize that argument is useless, and will therefore resort to force either in the form of persecution or by stunting and distorting the minds of the young in what is called "education". This last is peculiarly dastardly, since it takes advantage of the defenselessness of immature minds. Unfortunately, it is practised in a greater or less degree in the schools of every civilized country.*

— [Bertrand Russell](#), *Human Society In Ethics And Politics (1954), Part. II: The Conflict of Passions, Ch. VII, Will Religious Faith Cure Our Troubles?*, p. 220

The following excerpt from the “Word on Fire” series by the present-day bishop in the Catholic Church, Robert Barron, points out the large role that the church has in “training up a child in the way he should go.” Barron refers to an editor of his *Word on Fire Spark* children’s book, Haley Stewart, as she writes:

*As a parent, I’m often reminded of the importance of offering my children a ‘hands-on’ experience to help them understand the truths of the faith. But adults are also sensory beings! This is one of many reasons why our liturgies offer incense to smell and to watch curling in the air; opportunities to kneel and make the sign of the cross with our bodies, and other participation of our five senses. Whether as families or as single people, by engaging our senses with music, food, and traditions as a household in preparation for Easter, we can allow our experience of Holy Week to saturate our home life.”*

Both statements (by Bertrand Russell and by Bishop Barron) lead directly to the connection I find between superstition (a certain kind of immaturity) and our growing up years. I find no better illustration of the “education of” or the taking advantage of “defenselessness of immature minds” than what I see in the words of Haley Stewart.

Now, not for a moment do I think this teaching on the part of the church, the Sunday School, Bible studies or any of the rest is done with malice. The education of children in religious matters is nearly always done in sincere belief by both parents and by the church. I believe, even in my own case, that such teaching was done by Bible believing, honest people who truly believed they were doing the right thing.

It also follows that those who have been taught at a young age (at an age of those “defenseless immature minds” that Russell mentions) will have huge difficulty seeing life’s issues, including religion and politics, in any way except that of their parents and respected adults in their sphere of influence.

This is where I get into even more “dangerous” ground, for I believe that many adults have simply not “grown up,” and that they continue to live in childlike superstitions. I got much more into this subject later, but maturity in thinking may be lacking in a good many adults, even adults who are otherwise thoughtful, kind, and, yes, mature in other ways.

Please note, especially, the last two sentences of this quote from a writer on the subject of maturity:

*No one is born being absolutely perfect. It's natural and even expected that we will change. A mature person accepts that we may have a lot of limiting beliefs that have been passed on to us since childhood. This may be from our schools, the media, and the prevailing culture.*

*It's not our fault that these are the belief systems that we've inherited. We don't get to choose which beliefs we get exposed to. However, mature people feel that they have the responsibility to unlearn ways of thinking that are not helpful and fulfilling. These kinds of people want to make a stand for what is right.*

So, this is the point where I say that mankind...people world over...are subject to the teaching they receive as children. We grow up believing what we are taught. That includes matters of religion. It probably never occurs to Christians, for example, that “I am the way the truth and the life, no man cometh unto the father but by me” may be a message never heard by two-thirds of the people on earth. Or that what they were taught and now fervently believe could possibly be “wrong.” Most people who claim Christianity as their faith look upon the gods of other peoples (today even) as mythology. “Mere myths,” they say of the Islamic faith, Hindu beliefs, and dozens of others, as well as the gods of the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians of several thousand years ago. I suspect that Christians never pause to think that other faith systems look at their Christian beliefs with such skepticism.

Tim Elmore, Founder and CEO of *Growing Leaders*, and a psychologist, offers a long list with ideas on the characteristics of a mature human. Here are two:

*A mature person seeks wisdom before acting. The wiser they get, the more they realize they need more wisdom.*

*..., a mature person is teachable. They don't presume they have all the answers. They're not ashamed of seeking and learning from others.*

### **Some observations**

These are observations. It's the year 2023. I've been around for over 84 years. Allow me the privilege of offering some observations and suggestions. Who knows? Some of these thoughts could be helpful. Oh, and some of my observations are definitely critical in nature, so be aware of your toes...they might be subject to bruising. So, I plunge onward!

I'm perfectly willing to admit that my age, or that of anyone else, may have little to do with maturity. For what signs do we look, then, in determining whether one is mature or not? More on that later.

It's risky stuff, this talk of maturity in humans. One might argue that the implication in the very title of this book is that people who don't share my views about religion, especially the Christian faith, as well as my views on politics, deal with life in immaturity. Well, okay then, that about sums it up! Wait, wait! No, I am fully aware that there are many people of faith who live a life of relative maturity. While nobody is perfect, such folks treat people with love and generosity. Many live lives of gratitude. Some of these folks admit they do not have all the answers. Many live by values and do what is right.

All of us have plenty of room to grow. I address myself especially to those who "have all the answers"...to those who simply refuse to believe there could be another way or other ways to look at faith and politics. My hope is that those who refuse to read, explore, and talk about the views expressed here might find reason enough to take a look. I admit, total refusal to explore other possibilities definitely falls into the immature category, in my opinion. I doubt anything I say might even be considered by those who refuse to read, but one can hope.

It's that "growth" thing that concerns me. I say that both for myself and for anyone brave enough to read what I have to say. Yes, I do have plenty of criticisms related to religion in general and to the Christian church in particular. I'm also brash enough to think that MAGA style politics and politicians who quite obviously push toward fascism, book banning, laws that continue to enrich the rich without asking the wealthy to pay a proportionate share of the tax burden, and who are quite willing to deny the accurate results of an election, are basically beyond persuasion. But then, there is the old cliché about hope springing eternal!

We may "hop around" a bit in this book. I'm certain there is a connection between aspects of mankind's religions and his political views. That connection may not seem obvious at first, but it's there. We'll begin with religion!

### **The beginnings of religion, beliefs in the supernatural...**

Let's start with a story. It's a story about fear! What's that got to do with maturity, you ask. Read on. There is a connection.

Earliest man had reason to fear. Despite a hand that could grip tools and weapons and a brain that was superior in most ways to all other animals, man was certainly not the

strongest or fastest of the mammals in the landscape in which he lived. So, he lived in fear.

Furthermore, even with this superior brain, he was unable to understand the vagaries of nature such as thunder, lightning, volcanos, landslides, floods, and earthquakes. So much was out of his control. As the shadows flickered on the cave walls, it seemed apparent that other forces were evident. Fearful forces lurked everywhere.

As the eons passed, he planted and harvested crops and he was left wondering about rainfall and droughts, why some years the crops flourished and why some years they failed. He still lived in fear.

From the beginning he had no answers and could easily believe that supernatural forces were the only answer. Shaman types arose. A priestly class was not uncommon. These were the men or women of the tribe who (purportedly) could explain what the gods wanted. Most often the prescription called for a sacrifice of some sort.

Virtually every primitive tribe on earth fits the pattern.

He lived in fear about death itself. Wanting to live eternally was no doubt a wish for virtually all of mankind. The priests and shamans could easily co-opt this desire with stories of spirits and contacts with those who had died. He lived in fear.

Oral tradition, the only means of telling a tribe's history, easily embellished the stories. Gods became huge in the lives of people. Fear still dominated.

As a means of writing developed, the traditions and tribal stories were told in that format. Whether written on stone, papyrus, scrolls or other medium, the written word became even more than a history lesson, it often became a record of what the Gods or a God had to say to people.

I propose that living in fear is almost universal. I theorize that religions developed out of a search to relieve the sense of fear.

Is it not possible that the brain of men, through millions of years of evolution, still carries (sometimes for good reason) a sense of fear? Despite our claim to "enlightened" thinking about superstitions, ghosts, and a mysterious spiritual realm, we are not far removed, if at all, from a great deal of this fear.

Most people still believe that when they die, they will see departed relatives and live in some form of paradise. Many still believe there may be a way to communicate with the dead.

Are you beginning to see a connection between maturity and superstitions/religion? Let's look at the religion we know best in this part of the world.

The Christian faith accepts the death of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. The Lent and Easter season of the Church dwells extensively on this sacrifice. It culminates in a redemption miracle where a man defeats death and rises again in bodily form. Cool story! True?

I think it fortunate that many of man's fears can be sent packing. Most of us live in a world, or a part of the world, where we need not fear wild animals or starving for lack of food. We now know the reasons for storms, lightning, thunder, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes. At least they can be explained as natural occurrences in nature and science provides a start for understanding all such happenings.

We're less likely to blame droughts or storms on the evil acts of people, though such blaming still occurs. It's not all that uncommon to hear of preachers who blame the devastation of, say, a hurricane on the sinful nature of people living in a given area. But most often we look to science for help with vaccines for illnesses and for explanations of natural disasters. Some deny, however, the use of a vaccine to prevent or lessen the symptoms of, say, Covid-19. The same people have no doubt been vaccinated as children for polio, diphtheria, smallpox or any number of other childhood diseases. Why doubts now? I confess to no answer!

One of the reasons polio has not been totally eliminated around the world is because isolated areas of the world have leaders who have expressed fears that the vaccine will cause infertility. One even hears (in the USA) of people who are fearful that a Covid vaccine may contain "markers" identifying the recipient as now carrying the "mark of the beast." Science, once viewed as a means to prevent disease, now in itself becomes a fear factor, especially when certain religious leaders claim distrust in science. Such "preachers" have not only been responsible for killing people, they are of exactly the same ilk as the shaman of the cave dweller!

Despite so many of our fears being "sent packing," superstitions prevail with many people. They are unlikely to be in the form of werewolves, witches, or ghosts. They're unlikely to create concern on Friday, the thirteenth or cause someone to go a different direction if a black cat crosses their path. But "talking" to an unseen entity (prayer), pledging faith (reciting a creed) that must be accepted without evidence of any sort...these are, indeed, acts of one dealing in superstition. Well, it seems so to me!

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I don't doubt the sincerity of those who do believe in such things. But I also don't doubt that there was a whole society of people who sincerely believed that Zeus (or was it Apollo) was the top god on the lists of gods in the early days of the Greeks and Romans. Does anyone believe that today? Most people of religious views look at such views, once firmly accepted, as myth...and perhaps even with a bit of disdain. Perhaps someday mankind will grow up!

So begins the notion of becoming a mature human being! Living in fear and in superstition is not an attribute of maturity. Living thusly is a characteristic of children. It is not mature.



## Chapter 2 The Lost Centuries

For now, allow me to skip along through history, including the Biblical tales. We'll get back to those later.

Rather let's look at the lost centuries in western culture (I speak here of Europe and the development westward).

At the Council of Nicaea in the year 318, a man who mostly preached poverty, forgiveness, and non-violence had his message altered; turned into political power at a meeting in a city in Turkey, now called Iznik. A meeting of early bishops of the Christian church was held. This meeting was called by Constantine.

I suspect what I say represents a heretical view of the church, both Protestant and Catholic. But, allow me to paraphrase and quote the articulate writer, Steve Berry.

Yes, I refer here to a novelist, Steve Berry and provide a list, a quote (paraphrased) from his well-documented research as he wrote the novel called *The Malta Exchange: a Novel*.

Berry strongly suggests that Constantine had something more in mind by calling the Council of Nicaea than simply unifying factions of the Christian faith that were fighting within themselves. Yes, far more sinister reasons. His reason, total control of the lives of all those claiming allegiance to this emerging faith. Constantine at the head of it all. As much as people might want to believe that Constantine saw a vision in the sky. then won a great battle, crediting Christ with his victory, not true. He likely only converted on his deathbed, though even that is open to debate.

We should be clear. He cared little for the teachings or of the example set by Christ. His was essentially political, not religious in motivation, though it was couched in religious terms.

Here are some of the tenets...many of which are only loosely connected to the teaching of Jesus or taken from Jewish scripture (with my own comments in italics):

1. God is generally an angry and vengeful God, preferable to a benign, loving entity. *Over and over again, the Old Testament speaks of a God who smites...either through leaders such as Moses, Joshua...the list is long, or directly Himself! Contrary to the picture Christians and Muslims would like*

*us to believe, God is rarely portrayed as anything but vindictive, angry over what seems to be the smallest of infractions. **God is not nice!***

2. Obedience and compliance with God's directives are the only ways to obtain eternal peace in heaven.
3. Disobedience leads to everlasting suffering, the fear of which should be used to keep the faithful under control. *(It's the "fear factor" still again. I might add that Jesus himself contributes to this by speaking so strongly of hell.)*
4. The only salvation from this fear comes from the Christian faith, its doctrine and practices never open to question. Obedience must be absolute.
5. Sin is the mechanism whereby control is enforced. A list of sins should be created, one that adapts to the times, each sin designed to instill fear.
6. Failure to obtain forgiveness of sin places one's immortal soul in the gravest of danger.
7. Forgiveness can be obtained only through the Christian faith. This concept must begin at birth.
8. All men are born into the world with sin. *(The original sin concept is vitally important to the control of humans.)*
9. They can never dwell with God unless there is absolution for this original sin through the Christian faith.
10. The Christian faith says there is only one physical life and only one opportunity at eternal salvation.
11. When that life ends the soul moves to either heaven or hell. *(This is the trump card of the church.)*
12. There is most certainly a spirit, a devil, one who constantly poses challenges along the path to salvation.
13. All of man's sins must be blamed on the devil, who is always present, always tempting, never relenting and the only way to resist comes from Christian doctrine.
14. Those outside ordained clergy, who profess the ability to speak with God are a danger. This is treason and is punishable by death. Heretical thinking and acts must likewise know the wrath of God. Killing heretics in the name of God is not a sin. The spilling of blood is a duty we must never abandon. *(St. Thomas Aquinas makes this clear. (St. Thomas Aquinas declared: "If coiners and other malefactors are justly doomed to death, much more may heretics be justly slain.")*
15. Sacred objects cannot be touched or created, whether they be churches, places, people, words, or things, unless permitted by the church. Rules and punishments are important here.

16. Priests shall become a special class unto themselves. Constantine is the natural choice to lead all priests. The first duty of the state is to stay right with God and keep God on good terms with the people. The priests' duty is to keep the people on good terms with Constantine.

Here is the Nicene Creed (a creed that come out of this meeting (and others that followed) of bishops in the early 300's) as it is repeated service after service (with slight variations among churches):

### **The Nicene Creed**

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.*

*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.*

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.*

*We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*

*We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

May I add at this point, that virtually all this creed must be accepted as a matter of faith. "Faith, the substance of things hoped for..." Hmm! Could this not also be a form of superstition?

**Faith was the death of reason.** Faith relied on blind allegiance, without thought, only an unquestioned belief. The very purpose of religion was to institutionalize faith. This remains one of the oldest and strongest conspiracies ever formed.

Any hints at developing science, the scientific method, seeking truth through observation and repeatable experiments were to be squelched immediately. Control was paramount. Essentially, an original message of non-violence was turned into a government ideology of power...**power over humans from birth to death!**

Religion had always been a tool. It offered spiritual reality, with benefits, to all who chose to follow. It didn't matter whether that was Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or even paganism. They all created their own peculiar truths, then constantly misconstrued them to their advantage.

Constantine elevated the clergy. He gave them a fixed annual salary and exempted them from taxation. They were not required to serve in the army. They became a special class. They dressed differently and groomed differently. They became the guardians of orthodoxy, more powerful than local governors.

After Constantine died his heirs made a mess of the empire. It split, the eastern portion becoming Byzantine, the western remaining Roman. Finally, the Rome church began to assert, claimed a lineage back to St. Peter and took a pagan title. Pontifex maximus. Supreme pontiff.

This was about A. D. 800.

The Holy Roman Empire was born and Charlemagne was anointed and the imperial crown placed on his head. All but a tiny portion of Europe came under Rome's thumb for the next 800 years.

It erased and replaced all competing spiritual beliefs, it deadened the search for knowledge, persecuting mystics, heretics, and scientific efforts. It forced mass conversion of anyone and everyone. It assumed control of everyday life by claiming a divine authority to rule. It was a virtual stranglehold.

This stranglehold by church hierarchy has to be called "lost centuries" because enlightenment and science were stifled. Anything felt to be contrary to church teachings (based on the Bible, its myths, its lack of understanding of scientific ideas, its beliefs (for example) that the earth was flat as well as the center of all...all this leads one to think these must be called "lost centuries." While "lost centuries" may be

my own title for the era, this period has most often been called the “Dark Ages.” Not without cause.

Then we had the huge loss of life brought on by the Crusades. My guess is that most of us don’t really realize how long this went on and how many well-meaning “believers” lost their lives during this era. Here’s a capsule of it as provided by Wikipedia:

*The **Crusades** were a series of [religious wars](#) initiated, supported, and sometimes directed by the [Latin Church](#) in the [medieval period](#). The best known of these military expeditions are those to the [Holy Land](#) in the period between 1095 and 1291 that were intended to conquer Jerusalem and its surround area from Muslim rule. Crusading declined rapidly after the 15th century.*

*In 1095, [Pope Urban II](#) proclaimed,,(and) Participants came from all over Europe and had a variety of motivations, including religious salvation, satisfying feudal obligations, opportunities for renown, and economic or political advantage.*

Many of us are only vaguely aware of this period of history. But various wars called “Crusades” continued for almost 500 years. While the early Crusades were given the task of removing Muslim rule from Jerusalem, others were sanctioned by the church and were even directed against Christians for not obeying papal rulings or against heretics or apostate communities. Other campaigns were directed against pagan tribes. The wealth of the church as well as that of many rulers of given European areas was often directed in such sanctioned and non-sanctioned “Crusades” such as the Peoples’ Crusade of 1096, the Childrens’ Crusade of 1212, the Shepherds’ Crusade of 1251 and again in 1320, and the Hungarian Peasants’ Crusade...as late as 1514.

I would hasten to say, however, that wars often were fought based on who ruled what area. It was the land acquisition of territory and allegiances to this ruler, king, head of state, that most often prompted the fight. Religion differences in themselves, world-wide, are said to account to account for less than seven percent of the world’s wars.

Almost as an “aside” into politics, this period where the church had a stranglehold on the western world’s inhabitants also “featured” the Hundred Years War. While not directly connected to the church, battles between kings and military leaders of the English and French went on for actually more than one-hundred years. The history of the world seems to be replete with war after war.. This one went on between England and France between 1337 and 1453. While there were periods of “peace” between the battles, it still retains its title.

The Inquisition had its start in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Kingdom of France, with the aim of combating religious deviation. Hmm...religious deviation...so says history. The last

execution of the Inquisition was in Spain in 1826, barely 200 years ago. This was the execution by garroting of the Catalan school teacher Gaita Ripoll for purportedly teaching Deism in his school.<sup>[58]</sup> In Spain the practices of the Inquisition were finally outlawed in 1834.

One can only speculate about living conditions of a commoner during what we blithely call “The Dark Ages.” For most people, life was short. Plagues killed hundreds of thousands. One can only speculate as to whether freedom of scientific discovery could have discovered a means to help with this issue. Again, I say, we don’t call this period of time “The Dark Ages” without reason.

Yes, there were shafts of light, a few “good” things that developed as time marched on. A good many marvelous cathedrals were built! Pardon my skepticism, but no doubt with peasant (slave) labor. Marvelous pieces of music were written by composers (to name only a few) such as Dufay, des Prez, Ockeghem, Tye, Palestrina, de Lassus, Gabrieli, Byrd, Hassler, and Monteverdi. Most wrote for church purposes, though we have record of a good many secular songs, including madrigals, as we moved into the 1600’s.

I can’t resist including some music trivia at this point. Traveling musicians and “entertainers” seemed to provide some respite from the hassles of daily life.

Wikipedia speaks of these in the following:

*Itinerant singers and performers existed, but they were called jongleurs and minstrels—professional entertainers, usually of somewhat lower social status. Troubadours and trouvères, on the other hand, were often of higher social class and did not typically rely on music making as a trade. They were either poets and composers who were supported by the aristocracy or, just as often, were aristocrats themselves, for whom the creation and performance of music was part of the courtly tradition. However, these distinctions were not always clear, and varied by community.<sup>[2]</sup>*

*The texts of these songs are a natural reflection of the society that created them. They often revolve around idealized treatments of courtly love (“fine amors”, and religious devotion, although many can be found that take a more frank, earthy look at love.*

I suppose it easy for us to look back on this thousand years and more period with disdain for part of it, horror at other parts, and a feeling of helplessness about this rather wasted period of human existence I choose to call the “Lost Centuries.”

My view is that the church continued to rely on ignorance and fear. It still does. Despite the last 400 years of very gradual enlightenment, many still live in ignorance and fear...and actually choose to do so.

***Here's a question: When ignorance and fear are dissipated, what happens to the church? It dies. It is dying today.***

The sins of the church's leadership are there to be seen. The Internet and media make that possible.

But this is not the story only of the Roman Catholic Church. Virtually every one of the sixteen items listed on the document listed previously apply to all facets of the Protestant Church.

Some fundamentalists of today, and of the past century, are totally dictated to by these tenets. Item fourteen is not mere hyperbole. (i.e., Killing heretics in the name of God is not a sin.) This could easily be reality in many facets of the fundamentalists of today with only a bit more of a nudge.

Why is the only part of Christianity that is showing growth today in evangelical churches? Because some (many) people are still in ignorance, and they still live in fear of death and are told that only the faithful go to heaven. They simply can't give up on this hope. In short, they live in basically the same fear that was felt by those who lived in the Middle Ages (or even as cave dwellers thousands of years earlier), but now under complete control of the church.

The so-called mainline Protestant churches of today no longer preach the angry and vengeful God. *They've lost their trump card.* They've lost the drama, the fear, and therefore the control. They no longer preach about hell. And they are dying or fading in significance.

**Expectations...just a few random thoughts about all of this**

The Roman Catholic Church, just as some evangelical churches, will continue to function, albeit in a diminished manner. Buildings and some parishes will be given up as merging takes place because of fewer people and fewer priests. The concepts of the "Christian faith" as described earlier will not die easily or quickly. I suspect there will always be people who prefer the defined paths, the promise of heaven, or will continue in the fear of hell.

The Methodists, progressive Presbyterians, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, liberal Lutherans, and others will merge (or should merge), again...setting aside ethnicities and unprovable and silly doctrinal differences.

In all fairness (as well as common sense) communities can be well served by such a merger of congregations who find within their church caring individuals, the warmth of friends and the desire to serve mankind in large and small ways. I speak of serving the homeless, the hungry, and I speak of the power that like-minded people (those who share in the universal ethical values outlined later in this book) can have at the city, state, and national political level. The land and facilities of most of these churches rather stand waiting for this kind of merger and the prospects can be exciting.

It probably goes without saying that there will be some agonizing splits. Some people simply will not be able to give up their deeply ingrained allegiance to the tenets spelled out by Constantine and (in some cases) their long-held dogmas. These folks will, first, create dissent and make the movement difficult. Friendships will no doubt suffer. None of this will be easy. Much drama will occur if and when mergers are considered as the leadership, the heads of various denominations face the real possibility of losing their job or no longer holding a position of power. This will, indeed, present a serious dilemma over the next century.

Will any of this happen? Not quickly. While some of it is already happening, much of what I've outlined is merely wishful thinking...for the time being.

If becoming a mature human is to take place, we must live by values and character, not feelings. We must seek wisdom before acting. And we must remove ourselves from superstition and acting out of fear.



## Chapter 3

### Cognitive Dissonance and the Founding Fathers

In what may be the world's greatest example of the cognitive dissonance experienced by a democracy and religion, we can look to, yes...the United States of America. Our documents, including the Constitution, serve as a base for discussion. The men who wrote them...our founding fathers...were very careful to create a nation that separated religion from government.

A huge misconception exists in the minds of most of evangelical Christianity in the United States. This nation was not founded by Bible believing "Christians" as defined by most evangelicals and/or fundamentalists. Such believers, in all good faith I'm sure, would have us believe that the U. S. is a Christian nation founded on Biblical principles. That is simply not the case!

I refer now to astute writing by Steve Allen, the famous talk-show host, who (and most people probably don't know this) wrote a powerful, documented, articulate book called "Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion, and Morality."

Allen goes back a few centuries and observes that John Locke, as early as 1700, said the role of "civil government is quite distinct from that of religion. The state, properly, is a society constituted only for preserving and promoting the civil interest, such as life, liberty, health, and the possession of property." He goes on to refer to the thinking of John Milton of 1644, who said that "knowledge, correctly observed, is increased through the expression of fresh opinion, and truth is arrived at, or at least more closely approached, by means of free discussion. (In other words, it seems that even Milton considered censorship of any sort to be condemned.)

The dichotomy is evident today in that religions (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, and virtually all others) are happy to shout in favor of freedom, as long as it is freedom to express "my point of view." Yes, expressing one's point of view is an absolute right, as long as it doesn't tread on another. Use, say, of public money for the building of religious monuments must not be allowed. Some would say that it's a fine line. Personally, I find it clear. There are many universal moral principles that can guide governments of democracies without favoring one religion over another.

Despite remarkable agreement in some moral principles, religious zealots of all sorts hold that their sacred writings, and theirs alone are correct. "Error has no rights." As Allen puts it, (rather tongue in cheek) "it would be quite wrong for them to be guided

by, say, the American Bill of Rights.” Despite their seeming adherence to patriotism and freedom, they preach only “freedom” when the freedom they want agrees with their doctrine.

At its worst, when one is in possession of “the truth,” burning a heretic alive or executing a “criminal” whose sole offense fell into the heretical category is quite permissible. Call it “moral certainty.”

The single largest illustration of this notion comes from the views of “Christians” who held slaves. The Bible, both Old and New Testament, condones slavery. The enlightened, mature human looks at this and says, “I stand with the document that says all men are created equal.”

The “founding fathers” of the nation wrote amazing *documents that allowed for freedom of religions* of all stripes. One can worship or not worship as one pleases, but pushing one’s religious views, practices, or doctrines on others through the government violates the founders’ very efforts. Trying to force the tenets of one’s faith into the laws of the land risks having the results thrown back into the face of the one originating such tenets. If, for example, the Baptists (because of their freedom) manage to get a political body to allow the erection of a monument on which is written the ten commandments, worshippers of Satan (because it should then be their right to do so) must be allowed to erect a statue, say, of Beelzebub! It becomes evident, it’s best to leave religion out of our political system. Universal moral values shared by virtually all of us are, and should be guidance for our lawmakers, but never specifics of one religion.

Lest there be any doubt, the Founding Fathers of this nation did not try to reconcile their views with those expressed in the Bible. Again, to give only a few examples, I quote from Steve Allen’s book:

1. *The Bible implies in many places the union of church and state, whereas the American system is based on the separation of church and state.*
2. *The Bible generally teaches that civil power comes from God, whereas the Constitution asserts that it derives from the consent of the governed.*
2. *The New Testament preaches that there is one true religion and that all others are an abomination, whereas the American system tolerates all religions and permits none to attain dominance.*
4. *The Old Testament condones slavery and bigotry against outsiders, whereas the American system outlaws slavery and discrimination.*

It is also good to note that those founding this new nation were completely aware that many people came to America hoping to find respite from governments that were inextricably inseparable from religious views, intrigues, wars...and all the rest. (I refer, especially to the Protestant/Catholic/Church of England squabbles.)

I was amused by Allen's illustration as he suggests a "fantasy" that has God Almighty appearing in the private chambers of the Pope, saying,

*Your Holiness, I have decided to make this personal visit because I sense that in the modern, secularist, scientific age, an age when the church has suffered many setbacks, it is conceivable that even the Vicar of Christ may experience fleeting moments of doubt as to whether I am still in support of the Catholic church. To get to the point, I am indeed the Lord God Almighty, and the Catholic version of the Christian religion is the one true faith, personally founded by my only son Jesus. Of this you need no longer have the slightest doubt.*

He goes on to say that there could be little doubt that the Pope and his aides would all quickly agree that Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witness', the Jew, the Muslim, all other religions, or the atheists have no rights whatsoever to preach what would be heretical and "morally deviant" views. Talk about moral certainty!

Here we have a clear understanding of what happens when "true believers" quote the Bible (as they interpret it or accept it, especially, as inerrant). **They have absolute certainty they are right.**

The founders, even though some were probably "believers," wisely designed documents such as the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and other material which carefully allowed for freedom of religion for ALL persons, but **separated religion from government** itself.

Perhaps at this point, I should add that present day attempts at book banning is nothing more than the latest in efforts to wrap government with religion. This is the antithesis of the "founding fathers' efforts. Further, evangelicals often lament the influence (or so they call it) of "godless communism, sinful "anything goes" liberalism, atheistic efforts or even the work of the devil," when many rush to defend the separation of church and state. A woman's freedom to do with her own body as she chooses is another issue related to freedom vs. government involvement in the personal life of individuals. What should be settled continues to raise an ugly head even in 2023.

### **Moral Clarity in politics –**

I've always thought it dangerous when one reached a state of absolute moral clarity, especially in political matters. At first glance such clarity would seem like a good thing. It would make it simple to determine right from wrong, the moral or the immoral, truth or untruth, or the good from the evil. Like the athlete, musician, or even the politician who seems totally committed to reaching a goal, we often commend such commitment. Even in our commendation, however, the thoughtful temper it with a caution that in efforts to achieve even worthy goals, one should not lay waste to others along the way. That idea is usually summed up in the oft quoted belief, "the end does not justify the means."

Ultimately it is in the attempt to make it simple that we find our dilemma. Nothing makes it simpler and epitomizes lack of rationality more than the political labels we bandy about. It makes things so easy for us if we can just attach a label to someone. He's a *liberal*. He's a *conservative*. Look at the label. You now *know* this individual. No need to dig deeper. No need for subtleties. In fact, you have now defined this individual so clearly that you need not listen to what he says. In so doing, your own clarity is so penetrating that you couldn't possibly learn from him or temper your views even an ounce. Never mind that the label describing the ingredients therein is written by you. You wrote it and you attached it. Simplicity rules. All it takes is a key word or phrase from an individual. That triggers a reaction that allows you to mentally reach out and attach the label. No need to listen now. It's clear. It's easy. It's also the exact stuff that begins to polarize us.

It plays out like this. In the course of a conversation you mention, "I was listening to Rush Limbaugh on the radio this morning, and he said..." "What, that ultra-conservative idiot, I wouldn't believe a word..." From the other side, it's "Hey, I read in the Al Franken book that..." "Al Franken...that liberal jerk, he's an embarrassment and a sinner himself." Again, never mind that even the extreme ends of the political spectrum could have something rational to say. The label says it all. No need for the rest of the sentence and certainly no need to ponder what was said.

Magnets don't let go easily. You're stuck. Polarity is powerful stuff. It sure makes things simple, though. You're either pregnant or you aren't. In a complex world it (polarization) becomes a haven for simplemindedness, the frightened, the uninformed, and those who look no farther than network television and 30 second political ads to determine their voting choice.

Perfect moral clarity may be a wonderful religious ideal but generally, when applied to politics and social issues, it leads to amazing misuse, even atrocities.

Don't you imagine that slaveowners of the early south had precise, literally Biblical, clarity about the rightness of their cause? Don't you imagine that the subjugation of women over thousands of years in the name of religion was done with perfect moral clarity. And don't you think that the clarity of purpose that is found when religion, politics, and hopelessness combine in a breeding ground of violence, that today's suicide bomber probably flips the switch to annihilate himself and others without moral ambiguity.

Unfortunately, most of us won't admit to falling into the "polarized" category. Here are a few tests for us all. Can we listen with respect to the ideas of another without interrupting before having a chance to mull it over at least a bit? Can we lay aside our preconceived labels and all that defines for us, and consider the idea being expounded as apart from the individual doing the expounding? Can we lay aside our emotions and heavy-handedness and speak to the issue in a search for compromise and a solution that allows respect and a measure of satisfaction for all? Despite my desire to persuade everyone to accept my views on about everything (*and thus have a perfect world*), I rather humbly think that the best I could hope for would be a respectful audience for what I have to say and the possibility that my ideas could resonate with others as a fair compromise.

My call is for some political middle ground that offers fairness for all. I have no desire for state control and state ownership of our lands, businesses, and lives. Life on the dole can become habitual, incentive sucking, and I enter this writing without a desire for a total socialist state. On the other hand (and you knew that was coming), I'm terribly concerned that we saw under Trump the most polarized, ideologically driven White House in the history of the nation. So, despite my plea not to be labeled or to attach labels, I plunge into my real concerns for the country, touching on these concerns from all levels.

We can, unfortunately, look at issues as in black and white, good and evil...little room for doubt. It either is or it isn't. This is our course and we're not deviating from it. It's simple and it's appealing. True religion calls for it. Ideology driven politics calls for it. When the two combine, we have a potent force. To argue is not only to be labeled a heretic, to argue may also be called unpatriotic.

The problem with all of this is that politics, social issues, moral issues, religious views, issues related to the distribution of wealth, the environment, health...and many, many more, are all so very complex. Moral and political certainty appeals because it appears to clarify the complex.

### **Looking back a short while in our own history**

There was never a doubt, for example, that in a conventional military fight, U. S. forces could conquer Iraq. Not for a minute do I minimize the planning, skill, and courage of our military, but with utmost respect for lives lost, taking out the military control of Saddam Hussein was simple. The common assumption was that with the evil dictator removed, the people of Iraq would celebrate, welcome the victors who would initiate a transition to a democratically elected government and we would then have a model for democracy in an Arab world. This would work because Iraq is a modern country with intelligent, educated people who will be free at last.

Whoops! Major problem. While there is no question as to the intelligent, educated people in that country, it turns out (but we knew it all along) that the nation is faction filled, split in at least three distinct groups, primarily as to religion and ethnic issues, the Sunnis, the Shiites, and the Kurds. Holy smoke! It's complicated. One size doesn't fit all and one approach won't fix it. We went in with little or no plan to deal with this and now we pay the price while the struggle for political power continues. That's the price you pay for "simple."

### **George W. Bush**

Getting back to the "moral and political clarity theme," don't you think that George W. Bush's ideological agenda of making "what's good for business and industry is what's good for America," is done with absolute moral (or at least political) clarity? To the slave owner, the patriarchal society, the suicide bomber, and to George W. Bush, there is no ambiguity. This is the way it must be!

George W. Bush was an ideologue guided by ideologues. Molly Ivins, (a Texan with an earthy vocabulary and a critical view of Mr. Bush) in her book, "Bushwhacked," summed it up very nicely. It all falls in the "simple" category.

*They believe the free market can solve all problems, that government is generally bad, that we should privatize everything we possibly can, that there is no such thing as global warming, that the environment is unimportant, and that worker safety will be protected by benign employers. (p. xii)*

### **Government and Taxes**

It's so appealing! Why, it's even downright American to ridicule government. It's a time-honored tradition to carp about the role of government in our lives. Humorists from Mark Twain to Stephen Colbert have found ample fodder in the foibles of government officials, rules, inefficiencies, and (sure enough) corruption. American political history is full of scandals, intrigues, and favors to friends. We chuckle at the line "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you."

So why *not* let the free market be the guide? Why not privatize education, the electrical power system, and even the Social Security Department? Get rid of regulations. Regulations strangle enterprise and thus the entrepreneur as well as the large corporation attempting to survive. And while, you're at it, for God's sake, don't raise the minimum wage by legislative action. Businesses can't afford that. Well, read on for the answer!

Nobody likes to pay taxes. The notion of cutting taxes is so universally appealing that it doesn't take a genius politician to know which side of the issue he or she will come down on.

Look at it this way; you're the candidate...try campaigning on the premise that we need to raise taxes. You'd better be persuasive or your career will be short. The "thought for the day" at a recent Rotary meeting was "We're grateful that we don't receive all the services of government that we pay for." It's not so much that the attitudes about government have changed, it's that world history is filled with evidence of governments that have made life harder for people. Even democracies have such stories and suspicion always lies beneath the surface. This atmosphere makes it easy for the philosophy espoused by the Bush regime (for example) to make sense to people. It's a populace ripe to accept tax cuts, deregulation, freedom from restrictions on where companies can drill for oil, and continued stalling on efforts to wean us from dependence on oil based energy sources.

It wouldn't take long for someone to come up with the argument that, indeed, there is waste in government. "Get rid of the waste, and I won't mind paying my fair tax share." Here's a thought on that. First, wasteful use of money and resources is not unique to government. Industry knows this. Workers loaf occasionally at Weyerhaeuser, too. Company resources have found their way home from major industries of all types, too. It takes vigilance, good accounting, planning, and employee loyalty developed through fair and honest dealings to keep that waste at a minimum.

Cutting taxes, either by presidential mandate on a national scale, by a "no" vote on local levies, is not going to "teach the bastards a lesson." The answer to dealing with waste in government is, once again complex, not simple. The answer, at all levels, is a free and unbiased press, including radio and television, that is not owned by two or three conglomerates; a press that does its job of revealing the truth as one network calls it of the "fleecing of America."

The answer is in making governmental service and political service a high calling that invites the brilliant minds and leaders from various segments of the society to offer their service. (Or, perhaps in the absence of that paradigm shift, it will take a few good men and women literally sacrificing careers in other fields to help bring this notion to pass.)

The answer, just as in industry, is in developing a system that provides accountability, accuracy, crosschecks, and complete transparency. The answer is in having the courage to develop tax systems that are fair. All this needs to be done, beginning with the local, city, county, state, and finally plunging into the morass of unaccountability that is apparently to be found in the Pentagon. Too complex? Maybe, but we've got to begin.

Cutting taxes is a simpleminded idea, but it plunges the nation into deeper debt, and is political trickery at its most insidious, for it grabs us at a fundamental level...the desire to hold on to what we've got for us and for our family.

Again, nobody likes to pay taxes. I suppose our wanting to pay taxes is like expecting industry to police itself against causing damage to the environment. Fat chance! If we're offered an option, we'll take the cut. Some of us, when the car license tab tax was cut a few years ago, rose up in righteousness and said we'd be glad to continue paying what we paid before as a symbol of our resistance to that cut in revenue for bridge and highway maintenance. Did I do it? No. I took the cut and was glad to get it. However, judging from the grooving and ruts in our highways and in the delays in repairs to many a place on I-5, I'd say we are all feeling the results of that cut in state revenue. And that's the key to it all. We're in it together.

Laying aside the issue of efficiency in the use of our tax money, we need to be reminded that roads, schools, police protection, zoning and permit protections, fire protection, sewage treatment, dikes, safeguards for the poor and the unemployed, the protection of children from abuse, the entire legal system, juvenile justice, jails, and hundreds of other services are provided by our combined tax dollars. Before telephone directories went away, we could look in our directory and see the long list of services provided by our shared taxation. We choose to do it that way. For the most part, it needs to be done in this manner. Privatization doesn't work, for privatization is based on the profit premise. Not everything we need can be done by a business that turns a profit.

Wouldn't it be great to see a political candidate tell it like it should be: "I'm going to do everything in my power to make your government accountable, but the truth is, to reduce the deficit, improve our schools, clean up our water, and deal with health care, we're all going to have to pay higher taxes." Or, this statement, "Paying for this ongoing war is going to cost us \$700 billion dollars this year alone. It's got to come from somewhere. A 5% tax increase should do it." Or, one last statement from an incumbent, "Yes, I voted on that bill that would have raised taxes and I'm damn proud to have done so. Providing health benefits and extending insurance coverage for the needy is costly, but it was the right thing to do."



Instead, we get warped logic! First, appealing to our basest instinct to hold “more” for ourselves, we love the idea of having our taxes cut. But here’s the catch. It’s not really warped logic to George Bush. He has total political (if not moral) clarity about this. Cutting taxes does exactly what it’s supposed to do. It increases the wealth of the richest 3% of the nation, his friends and the ones who provide the richest treasure chest of campaign money ever to be held. The fact that cutting taxes widens the gap between the poor and the rich and decreases in alarming percentage the number of people who make up the “middle class” of the nation is simply not an issue of concern. Further, it’s just plain bull-pucky to believe that a few hundred dollars of tax relief in the hands of some American families is going to boost the economy. Oh, and one step further, the people who need the additional few hundred dollars the most didn’t see one cent of that tax relief, for they didn’t pay taxes to begin with. No jobs. You want to see a boost in the economy, extend and increase unemployment benefits. Now see money ploughed into the economy. See the groceries and clothing being purchased. Sometimes you have to spend a little (or even a lot) to make a lot.

Remember those pages in the telephone directories of old that list government agencies? They started with the cities of the area, move on to the county, the state, and then to the federal government. You want to know what your tax dollar buys, consider the list. Very little of it could be privatized and made into a business that could make a living for people. Most of it could not. Much of it is designed to protect, help, and defend children, the unemployed, guarantees of representation in a court of law, the hope for justice when criminals stand before the law. That last phrase bears another thought on how we demand protection from crime and incarceration of those who commit it...and then handcuff the police and the justice system by our failure to provide money for jails and judges.

The real test of what kind of life we would live would be to try and imagine how it would be without laws, regulations, and the power to enforce them...in other words total freedom from government intervention in our lives. Imagine driving where there were no signage, stop lights, school zones, speed limits, restrictions on turns. Imagine no game laws and therefore no bag limits or seasons. How many animals and fish would be left in the wild? Imagine no police to call when your house is burglarized or your life is being threatened. Imagine no fire department when your home is ablaze? These are so obviously important that it’s unnecessary to list them. But what about no Child Protective Services, no welfare for the poor, no unemployment check, and no public education?

A long time ago, I taught a class in fundamentals of business to high school sophomores. The first chapters covered the basics of our economic system. Comparisons were made

between various systems, especially in those days to the total control exercised by the communist government of the USSR and the free enterprise system in this country. I remember the material making a distinct point that we operate in a *modified* free enterprise system. An absolute free enterprise system would have all goods and services in the hands of “for-profit” businesses and industries. Competition would determine how many would survive. The modified free enterprise system meant that it is recognized that there were simply some things that could not work for the good of citizens in a competitive system. One of these was electrical power. It didn’t make sense to have two or more companies stringing power lines in a given area. The same was true for water and garbage services and telephone service. Regulations, therefore, were needed so that even though a monopoly existed the consumer would not be charged unreasonable prices.

Is it not surprising that deregulation of the electric power industry resulted in the volatile prices to consumers in the history of the business as well as excesses in profit taking by Enron and other “for-profit” corporations to the point that the scandal still reeks today. The public needs government to play a balancing role. Competition can’t do it all.

Molly Ivins is a Texan who writes of George Bush from her long term experience as she followed Bush during his tenure as governor of that state. I quote Molly Ivins again.

*The odd thing about Bush at midterm is that most of the Washington press corps has yet to recognize how extreme his ideology is. As governor of Texas he tried to privatize the state welfare system and considered privatizing the University of Texas; he fought for “voluntary compliance” with environmental regulations. With the power of large corporations in this country already grossly disproportionate because of their influence over politicians through money, government is the last effective check on corporate greed. To put a man in charge of the government who basically doesn’t believe it should play a role is folly. The tragedy of having him in office at this time is that the man is congenitally incapable of checking the excesses of capitalism.*

In short, George W. Bush had absolute moral and political clarity. He and his ideologue advisors were a danger to this country.

I might add, in bringing us all to 2023, that the current governor of Texas is swinging the state as far to the right as possible. I keep wondering how George Bush feels about all this now!

## **Chapter 4**

### **Athenian values and the Visigoths**

#### **Contrast: Maturity vs. Childishness**

*(This chapter, to be perfectly clear, is based on ideas of Neil Postman, from his book “Conscientious Objections.” The first section of this chapter is largely in the words of or paraphrased ideas from Dr. Postman. While this article originated nearly 40 years ago, it applies today even more powerfully than then.)*

I don’t purport to say that the following material is history in the strictest sense of the word, but rather it is illustrative of two types of thinking, one representing a certain maturity of thought that provides “good” for a society and one that “lives for the moment” and cherishes nothing but power and control.

With that disclaimer, let us take a step back in “history” and examine some of our ancestors.

Author, Neil Postman talks of our ancestors; not our biological ones, but of two groups of people who lived many years ago. The first group lived in a city they called Athens. They were noted for considerable accomplishment such as the alphabet, literacy, political democracy, philosophy, logic, and rhetoric. They came very close to inventing what we call science. They composed great epic poems, wonderful songs, and created plays still used today.

The Athenians started what we call today the Olympics. None of their values stood higher than that in all things we should strive for excellence. They believed in reason and in beauty. They believed in moderation. It’s hardly possible to speak on any subject today without repeating what some Athenian said on the matter 2,500 years ago.

The second group lived in Western Europe about 1,700 years ago. We call them the Visigoths. They were great horsemen. This may be the most positive thing one could say about them. The Visigoths were marauders, ruthless and brutal. Their language was coarse, what little art they had, grotesque. They overran the Roman Empire, destroying all in their path.

They burned books, desecrated buildings and smashed works of art. From them we have no poetry, no theater, no logic, no science, no humane politics. They ushered in the Dark Ages and it took a very long time to recover.

An Athenian is an idea. A Visigoth is an idea. We can choose either to live a set of values based on the Athenian or based on the Visigoth.

An Athenian cherishes language, holds knowledge in esteem. An Athenian reasons, experiments, questions, is moderate in temperament and in his dealings with others. An Athenian admires beauty, exalts life, and finds joy in learning and accomplishment of all kinds. Manners and courtesy are vital. Violence is an act against the very social order.

To a Visigoth, one word is as good as another. A Visigoth's language is satisfied with the cliché. A Visigoth centers his life around himself. Good manners are stupid. History is yesterday's newspaper. Popularity is all that counts for there is no other measure of excellence.

***My comments on these concepts***

Most of us rush to claim allegiance to the Athenian way, for there is little to be said favorably for the Visigoth.

The very analogy, however, sets us up for placing people into categories, them vs. us. The problem is that the Visigoth and the Athenian live side by side in each of us. We all struggle with self-interest (our tax bills, for example) and the public good. We struggle with a personal schedule rooted in self-interest as opposed to involvement in public service. We're caught in the web of the popularity scam, serving up only "what people will like."

Communication media and entertainment provide some prime examples of a total sellout to popularity (Visigothian). TV shows of police work, the more violent the better, Fox news, "professional" wrestling, the tabloids at the checkout stand, a barrage of Internet sites can all illustrate the tasteless, the banal, the violent, the Visigoth.

Over and over, despite the banal, we can find examples of giving, of serving, of courtesy, and of holding others in high esteem. I heard a great example lately at a Rotary Club meeting at which a Rotary team told of their work in rural Mexico helping in the construction of a public building serving hundreds in an area of poverty.

One can find marvelous examples of "the Athenian" all around. Service clubs, yes, some churches, teachers, those who serve the public such as most employees in law enforcement, nurses, doctors, mental health professionals...all such areas provide a model.

It strikes me as Visigothian when we see book banning, attempts to insert religious doctrine into public discourse, violence on the capitol steps in an attempt to overturn an

election that was basically corruption free, bombings of abortion clinics, as well as mobs of individuals using the right to protest as an excuse to steal and damage property.

We fight a battle on the fine line of appearing snobbish and yet holding to the highest of standards. Oh, there is a battle! I don't know what it would take to make the Athenian within us and our society overcome the Visigoth.

My hope is that each of us continue to renew our commitment to those high values which place honor and beauty, truth, service, moderation and love of learning at the top of those forces which guide our actions.

Is that not a vital characteristic of a mature human?

## **Chapter 5**

### **The economy and religion...some parallels (and watch out in this chapter for the possibly of bruised toes!)**

Another title for this chapter could well be “How the Christian Church can stay alive.”

A page from Matt Haig’s book “Reasons to Stay Alive,” showed up on my Facebook page a few days ago. A simple premise. “If we were happy with what we had, why would we need more?”

It’s probably more than a theory, but he asks, “How do you sell anti-aging moisturizer? You make people worry about aging! How do you get them to have plastic surgery? You highlight their physical flaws.” Haig sums it up with “To be comfortable with our messy, human selves would not be good for business.”

In short, advertising in particular and the current economy is designed to keep us in fear (of sickness, of death, of being out of step with our peers), or in a state of longing for more (money, status, power). To keep us buying things, it preys on the needs, desires, and motivations common to human nature. So, we ask again, “If we were happy with what we had, why would we need more?”

We don’t often connect an economic system and religion. But, if it works for motivating us to buy things, it definitely works for keeping us “in the fold” of religious beliefs. Constantine’s Council of Nicaea still prevails today. Fear still prevails and remains a motivating force.

In the Christian religion (yes, even in some of the teachings of Jesus who spoke of everlasting hell), a potentially angry, vengeful God must always be lurking. Disobedience leads to punishment. Fear of everlasting suffering hangs over each of us.

The only hope for salvation is to be found in the faith. Only heaven or hell awaits those who die. There are no other possibilities.

I’ve said this earlier, but fear must reign. And, yes, even in the economic sector, this is true. Just as in an economic system built so much on advertising, fear must reign.

Just as those who sell things keep us wanting more by making us worry, making us feel we’re being left out or falling behind, the world’s major religions (I speak primarily here of Christianity) use fear to control people. And always, always remembering that the only people claiming to have no fear are those who have had absolution by giving themselves

to God. The source for this “salvation” can be found only in the church. That could be those who have “confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior” (evangelicals), those who kneel at the altar for communion each Sunday, or those who confess to a confessor and are absolved by a priest (RCC). But even this is merely temporary for everyone knows that he or she has bad thoughts or is prone to “sin” and therefore lives in the fear that forgiveness is needed on a daily basis. So, believers must constantly come back for more.

***But suppose it's all a hoax.***

There is a real difference between the *need* for shelter, food, clothing, and other factors of living that lend themselves to a comfortable existence and being sold a bill of goods that makes one *want* more. Fear of hunger, of having no warm place to sleep, or of having no coat...these are driving and constant fears for some people. Allowing oneself to be titillated by the latest sleek comforts, electronic devices, the smell of, and sheer beauty of a new car could easily fall into the category found in the question, “why would we need more?”

We are urged by a time-honored and working capitalistic system to *buy, buy, buy*. It's almost a call to patriotism to buy! But what if I didn't? My 2007 Prius has 128,000 miles on it. It still runs fine. It gets me from point A to point B...and still with mileage better than most cars on the road. Now, if it quits, I have a decision to make. Fix it or buy another car. New or used? Wow! There are some beauties being advertised! If I don't buy a new or late model car, will I throttle the country's economy? If we all were able to combat our need for status (in the case of the car) and were happy with what we had, would the economy tank?

Not to worry. While the system may be a hoax, nothing will change. We are too much in the grip of a system that promotes buying. It's a system that is designed to make us unhappy or dissatisfied with what we have. It won't change because we apparently do not have the willpower, maybe even the desire, to fight it.

That may well be the case with the Christian faith. A good many people attend, attended, or know enough about the faith to still be caught up in the birth to death grip that the church has on people. Though that is diminishing.

The Christian church is dying. But it'll be a long, slow death. Even though some segments of the faith claim greater numbers, the numbers of people claiming to be Christian are falling. Article after article in magazines and online tell the tale of loss in membership, giving, and in influence on the lives of people. Why?

Reason after reason has been given for this loss. My take is that the church has lost its main hammer...fear! That may be harsh, and herein lies what I call the hoax of it all. "If we've happy with what we have, why would we need more?" If I'm not living in fear of the devil, fear of death, fear of eternal punishment, I can live a life without need of attending church every Sunday, without need of absolution of my sins. In short, the church becomes irrelevant. Well, maybe not quite.

Maybe the church becomes a better place...eventually. I keep saying "maybe" for a reason And I vacillate because I'm not purporting to know. That, however, has never stopped me from speculating.

Is it possible that the Christian Church could survive with a leap backwards of about 2100 years? Is that the answer? This would be a jump that bypasses the rules, the hierarchy, and the complete control established by the Council of Nicaea...the absolute control of lives from birth to death. This leap would demolish control by fear! This would be a simple return to a simple teaching and all the values entailed therein as taught by Jesus when he summed up a basic found in several world religions, "do unto others as you would be done by." I'll say it again. The beauty of that adage is that it is shared by virtually every religious faction around the world. What a refreshing thing to find a truly Christian church that tosses fear as a controlling factor right out the window; a church that examines and either rewrites or tosses all the hymn texts, liturgy, creeds and "tenets of the faith" that are, in themselves, pure speculation or wishful thinking.

Look at the Apostle's Creed. It's similar to the Nicene Creed which I quoted earlier. Virtually every phrase a statement of pure speculation. How does one know that any of this is true? (Yes, I know. That's why they call it faith!)

*I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell,  
on the third day rose again from the dead,  
ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty,  
thence He will come to judge the living and the dead;  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the remission of sins,  
the resurrection of the flesh,  
and eternal life.*



This could be the most important thought in this entire book! This is vital!

**Universal human values of honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, fidelity, loyalty, fairness, caring for others, respect for others, responsible citizenship, pursuit of excellence, and accountability seem to me to be ethical values that are aligned with virtually all religions...but are not specifically “religious” and should not be a source of argument for any religion on earth!**

**Why not center "church" around this? I believe these values were key thoughts of the “founding fathers” of this nation. These are real, mostly measurable, worth committing to for a lifetime, and not one of these values is based in fear! Again, we speak of mature humans. Every value listed is characteristic of being mature!**

I wish I didn't have to wrap this segment up on a pessimistic note, but I must. The economy would tank if we bought only what we need and were not bombarded to buy, buy, buy.

And the Christian church will eventually die unless people of this faith give up on the petty divisions of non-provable theology and join forces around the most of the core teachings of Jesus (other than that "hell" part he purportedly talked about) insofar as can possibly be ascertained.

Admittedly, from my standpoint, there is easily some doubt about the existence of a "real" Jesus as most "true" believers accept. Let's say, however, for the sake of a direction for today's Christian churches, that what he said, mostly, (whatever the original source) *lends itself well with the values listed in the paragraph in bold font above!*

Here I go, being pessimistic again, but again drawing on the economic system as a parallel, a bunch of good jobs within the hierarchy of the church will be lost and current leadership can't have that happen, now can they!

## **Chapter 6**

### **That thing called faith (A very personal statement to a friend)**

My friend spoke this morning about looking at the universe as a beautiful thing...that tiny speck we call earth, our home. The universe, our galaxy, our solar system, our sun, the earth, which is millions upon millions of years old...ostensibly created by this one God who is in total control, you said.

But I ask, why earth, why human beings? Why, in all this unfathomable vastness, a microscopic dot and human beings even smaller than a dot? You've seen that photo. It's the one taken by a space device from millions of miles away.

When did Adam and Eve exist? This question is more than metaphor or allegory. It is central to the issue. Was this before or after Neanderthal man and, really, at what point did humans become human?

What was their failure that led to the concept of "original sin" that required a savior? And why, after a few thousand years (actually many thousands of years of the development of the human species...cave man and onward...was it necessary to intervene to save man from himself in the form of a sacrificial death...now of one who people say was the very Son of God? It makes far more sense (again, using logic and seeking the truth) to believe that the creation story of the Bible, even as an allegory or a primitive myth, is no more viable than the creation stories of hundreds of other people or faith systems. I speak here not only of the Biblical creation story itself but of the "fall of man" aspect built into that myth.

While we're asking such questions, why did an "omniscient" God decide on a relatively small group of people in a small mid-east country to bring about this "Savior" for the world...and not tell the rest of the people on the globe about this? This is a momentous thing. Why be vague about it? And what about the fate of all those who lived before the time of this savior...to say nothing of two-thirds of the world's population today who have grown up in other faith systems, most never having heard of there being "no way unto the Father but by me." (Jesus)

I must be very clear here. Most believers in the Christian faith are believers because they grew up in a home and a church where this was "normal." Most believers in the Islamic faith grew up in a home where the expectation was that they be Islamic. This is true of every religious system worldwide. Two-thirds of the people in the world are likely to have never heard of Jesus or of him saying "no way unto the Father but by me." Even if

they heard about it, they would likely pass it off as myth, for (after all) "I already have my way, and it works for me."

While I'm perfectly aware, having grown up in this environment, that Christians are told to "go into all the world and preach the gospel," it has never happened and it will never happen. If the God of the Universe, the creator of it all, wanted the allegiance of all persons on earth, he/she/it made a terrible miscalculation on the means for mankind to come to knowledge of him/her/it. If the Creator's Son was crucified for mankind's sinful nature, telling the world about this extremely important (saving one from the torments of hell) event was done inefficiently, to say the least!

### **The subject of faith**

So, basically, faith, the substance of things hoped for, is little more than a hope. Believing something doesn't necessarily make it so, no matter how strong the belief or fervent the hope.

But believing something that is verifiable, or based on scientific evidence is not just "hoping," not just a matter of faith. Furthermore, such scientific evidence is subject to change as more evidence is uncovered. That's good. It's never locked in to an absolute. And an absolute is characteristic of religions and has always been thus. (I'd love to go into the idea of "believing something that is verifiable" in much more detail but will save that subject for another time.)

It's a story. There is virtually nothing more about the "fall of man" into a sinful state, the need for redemption as provided by a benevolent God, than a story that attempts to explain mankind's penchant for doing bad things. It's also bloody. Yes, and even the "redemption" part of the story is bloody.

Consider the "body of Christ, the blood of Christ still a part of the mass today. All this because of the sin of "Adam" whose offspring for thousands of year following are automatically sinful creatures. Such redemption sacrifices...of animals and even of people...were not uncommon among ancient tribes of people of all parts of the world. (Consider the Aztecs and, I'm sure, dozens of others as example.)

And what about God? Yes, this part of my thinking about this subject is only speculation. First, I suspect there is a built-in part of the human brain that evolved from man's desire to know the unknown. In the cave's firelight he/she was spooked by the shadows on the wall, the fear of savage animals. Danger lurked. It was easy to accept the legends about

the unknown. The vagaries of weather, lightning, thunder, earthquakes, volcanos, storms...surely all of this was controlled by unknown entities.

To be perfectly clear, I speculate in the following paragraph, for I'm far from being an expert on the human brain.

Not knowing led to more legends and myths. As brains evolved, a part of the brain developed that became even more attuned to, yes, even things of beauty, such as music, and even scenes in nature. I think we can be thankful for this part of the mind that allows us, even today, to love, to appreciate beauty. I believe that this aspect of the brain is the "spiritual" dimension to which we refer. Some of us find immense satisfaction in specific forms of music, for example. Unfortunately, this part of the brain can also lead some people to religious experiences or acceptance by faith in concepts that offer explanations and hope for living forever, for life after death, for seeing loved ones again, or for healing of illnesses.

The unfortunate part of all this is that many people are still susceptible to nonsensical myths, legends, and writings of ancient and primitive tribes. People study diligently. They look to "sacred" books of Mormon, Islam, and the Bible. They puzzle over this material and wonder how it could apply to their lives today. Some accept the Bible, for example, as being inerrant and are even more puzzled...coming up with amazing explanations...to explain contradictions and the unexplainable. God seems to change from being largely vengeful and hard to please in the Old Testament to becoming more of a God of love and forgiveness in the New Testament. I hasten to say, however, that the very concept of a hell of everlasting suffering was not Jewish in origin. Jesus himself grabbed this notion and therefore set things up so that most Christians of today believe that there are only two alternatives after one's death, heaven or hell. Continuing the narrative, since God doesn't change, it must be that people's concept of God has changed. That must be the answer!

But maybe the answer matters little. If the concept of God is indeed a *construct of the mind* driven by an evolving part of the brain and passed on over a million years...a construct that may very well have been started by fear of the unknown, maybe it's time for another way of looking at this. Maybe it's time to realize that God is made in man's own image!

Could we possibly simply be thankful we have a "spiritual" dimension...a dimension of the mind that allows us to view beauty, hear beauty, feel the goosebumps, weep at the glory of a sunrise, moonlight over a lake. Wow! What a wonderful and refreshing part of the brain we possess and cherish!

At the same time, why must we hang with primitive and totally unfounded views based in superstition and myth? We can find utterly amazing, mind-blowing discoveries in nature, in biology, in anatomy, yes, and in music. From the microscopic to the infinity of space, there is unfathomable richness to be found. I note this quote from Albert Einstein: "If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it."

There is marvelous freedom in rejecting the myths of religious faiths. I say that even knowing that the Bible and other "sacred" books have interesting legends, artistic prose, and all the rest.

The freedom of which I speak is not of license to do totally as I please. Mankind doesn't need ten commandments or the law of Moses or even the "beatitudes" of Jesus to know that treating each other as we would like to be treated is a good idea.

Goodness, compassion, fairness and all such issues related to morality don't happen any better with religion, or those claiming God, than with those who simply understand things work better when we deal in civility.

This bears repeating. While the Christian faith, for example, has brought about hospitals and, in some cases, the discovery of a good many helpful ideas for mankind, it has also brought the Inquisition, dark ages, religious wars including the Crusades. Even Hitler claimed to be a Christian while killing seven million Jews. Slavery in America was not only condoned, but claimed as acceptable practice by many faithful Christians of the era who used the Bible for verification.

Old Testament material provides ample evidence of women being nothing more than chattel. Treatment of women in the Bible is rarely more than a form of slavery. Abraham tried to pass off his wife as his sister who was to be given to a threatening king in exchange for living in the area. Lot was willing to give up his virgin daughters to use as they wished to men surrounding his house rather than turning over his "angelic" visitors to the mob. Women of conquered tribes as the Israelites plundered the Hittites and others were taken as concubines or slaves, if they weren't slaughtered, along with the men. I need not document this further. It happened over and over in the Old Testament.

The New Testament writings of Paul make it clear that slavery was perfectly acceptable. We really must acknowledge this. Is it any wonder that plantation owners of the American south had no qualms whatsoever about the vile practice of "owning" humans. Paul's admonitions regarding the low place of women haunts his message throughout his writings.

I'm aware that many people find comfort, companionship, and a sense of "belonging" in their church. I certainly can't speak for all who claim Christianity, for example, but I feel certain singing in their church choir, sharing common beliefs among friends, the repetition of ritual from service to service, is reason enough to stay involved. And that's to say nothing of the totally social...the coffee hours as well as friendships made that result in socializing together outside of church. Sharing of any experiences, especially those involving emotion, draws people together. From a personal viewpoint, I find much of the music, especially the choral music of the church, beautiful. The canon (as it is called sometimes) of sacred music is replete with virtually every composer of the art adding his or her contribution. The entire mass itself has been set to choral music thousands of times...and parts of it lifted for settings many more thousands of times.

I try not to begrudge, belittle, or make judgments against those who find comfort in their faith. (I'm not always successful at that, especially those who are so "right" in their beliefs that all the rest of us are automatically placed in the "heathen" category.)

It is difficult for me when individuals cast judgment for having come to the conclusion that the "laws" of the ancient book and the use of my own thinking skills have led me to reject what they believe and apparently hold so dear.

I also find it difficult to understand why "true" believers in the tenets of Christianity absolutely refuse to read and consider other possibilities. **A faith system that is secure will certainly stand up under scrutiny of any sort.**

I'm sorry that my discarding of the superstitions of our ancestors, ancient and late, means it'll make family and some colleagues uncomfortable. (And, yes, I'm aware that calling these beliefs superstitions is, in fact, a form of judgment. Sorry about that! But do look up the meaning of the very word "\*superstition."

^ A widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event, or a practice based on such a belief.

So, all this must be summed up by saying that a mature human simply does not live in beliefs that are nothing more than superstitions. Maturity virtually demands that one look for verifiable evidence. Looking to "sacred" writings by either charlatans or to the myths of ancient peoples does not work! Who among you believes the amazing tales of Zeus and the Gods of ancient Greece? Not even the Greeks of today, I assume. We look with interest (and that's about all) at the stories of the ancient ones, the fiery Loowit and many others of several tribes concerning the mountains of the Northwest. Religions all over the world have their creation stories. Most Christians look with a chuckle and term each story a myth. They apparently find it impossible to look with a chuckle at the preposterous myths to be found in the Bible.

Why not, I ask, simply admit that the Bible, at most, is full of myths, stories, sometimes eloquent poetry, but many metaphors or allegories where people are used to represent an idea? I suspect the answer for many people is that to do this would violate the concept of “inerrancy.” This was a difficult step for me. I wish you well as you think about it.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Circling back to what is often circular proofs**

As promised at the beginning of Chapter 2, allow me to speak about the greatest source of mis-information that influences the thinking...and contributes to the superstitions of so many people today. This is a bit of a review of ideas presented previously, but perhaps important enough to include at this point. If your toes were not bruised earlier, perhaps this is where you should put on your steel-toed shoes.

The Bible is not the inerrant word of God! The God of the Old Testament is purportedly omniscient, omnipotent, all-knowing...okay, basically in charge of everything from beginning to end. How could this entity allow the inconsistencies, the contradictions, the stories which purport to break his/her/its own laws of nature, as well as the confusion thus generated in his chosen tribe as well as in people to this day?

What part of “thou shalt not kill” is unclear? Almighty God himself does some of the killing. The list of illustrations for all this killing is long. Deuteronomy 22: 18 says: “You shall not permit a sorceress (witch) to live.” Verse 20 reads: “Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, shall be ‘utterly destroyed.’” I shall not continue with the long list of scripture verses which serve to prove that God simply was not very nice! Hardly a page can be found in the Bible where someone is NOT killed...either by God or by one of his tribal leaders. Spare the platitudes about God being a loving and caring one!

Apparently worshipping other gods is a big-time “no-no” with the Lord. Over and over the advice from this “loving” God is to slaughter (we would have to say) all other tribes for virtually all tribes of the region worshipped a good many gods other than the one “true” God of the Jews themselves. Actually, we can’t forget that much of the Old Testament calls the “chosen people” to task for so many times the Jewish people themselves went “a-whoring” after other gods and suffered the consequences.

One could go on and on with the stories of destruction as the Israelites made their way into the “promised land.” But the case of men helping Moses hold up his hands into the air as Joshua’s forces finished off their adversaries comes to mind.

If you need more illustrations of killing, simply read the book of “Ezekiel” of the Old Testament. There, the wrath of God seems to be directed at his chosen people. Amazing!

It is, of course, incredible that anyone could possibly accept the story of the sun holding still to make the day longer so there would be time enough to slaughter another tribe



facing God's forces. No such "long day" could have happened without catastrophic consequences world-wide. It did not happen.

Much of Genesis is full of contradictions as well as impossibilities as we consider the days of creation, the world-wide flood (and the "wow" of eight persons taking two of every kind of animal into the ark, finding space for all of them, feeding them for even 40 days) a flood in which the entire population of the world was wiped out because God made a mistake. (Starting over with a clean slate didn't work out well, either...or so it seems.)

But, as they say...wait, there is more! The New Testament gets no pass either.

First, there are many inconsistencies and several out and out contradictions given, even in the gospel narratives. The stories of the birth of Christ don't line up well from gospel to gospel. So called Old Testament prophecies of the birth and "reign" of Jesus are easily explained as pertaining to other events in Jewish life.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is clouded with oddities. One comes to mind immediately. One gospel tells of thousands of people rising from their graves and walking among the living at the death of Jesus. That strikes me as big news! Not one historian of that period has ever mentioned such a spectacle. By the way, "proving" something happened by quoting the Bible doesn't work! It's a form of circular reasoning.

And, lest we be convinced by the usual argument that the New Testament portrays a God of love, we must be reminded that Jesus said "I've come not to destroy the law (reference to Jewish laws), but to fulfill the law."

Finally, Jesus, made it perfectly clear that "no man cometh to the Father, but by me." He seemed to be saying, he (too) was God, though there seems to be argument about his claims in that regard.

I might add that Jesus was perfectly clear about the existence of the flames of hell, too. Those flames await the non-believer, we would assume. Hell is not a subject in the Old Testament. Many of today's Christians believe that hell is inflicted upon them by an otherwise merciful and loving God. Steve Allen provides this quote that I must use: "If hell is real, even the most depraved and vicious wretches in Hell have my sympathy since, compared to whatever atrocities they might have committed on earth, the punishment that many Christians believe is inflicted upon them by an otherwise merciful and loving God far exceeds the terror of their own deeds."

Then we have the ludicrous and incomprehensible words found in the book of Revelations. Preachers during my childhood and youth loved to cite verses from that book. Not long ago I noted a beautifully laid out flyer advertising “end-times made clear” with services at a local church on upcoming dates. In my church, fiery and dramatic consequences awaited anyone who dared not step up and “give their life to Christ” at the altar call. The book of Revelations was great fodder for scaring people into “the Kingdom of God!”

Ministers, even today, in fundamentalist churches will lift the Bible in the air and claim their allegiance to its every word. Even an admission that any of this could be metaphorical, or the myths of a primitive group of people would likely seem heretical. The stories of creation, the flood, the fiery furnace, turning a woman into a pillar of salt who dared look back at her burning city, taking a man’s strength away by cutting his hair, a many thousands of people living in the desert on manna (whatever that was) and water for 40 years without an archaeological trace, or this same number living in Egypt as slaves without evidence in Egyptian history that this happened; all this must be met with skepticism, if not debunked.

I’m fully aware of the beauty and serenity we all can find in the Christmas story and in such things as the “sermon on the mount.” While “going unto others as you would have them do unto you” was not new as a concept, it can easily be a great starting point for morality.

The point of all this is not to poke fun at folks who genuinely believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. The point is that a mature individual attempts to find truth. She does not live in a fantasy world or believe in superstitious stories. Yes, I feel certain I’ve stepped on some toes!

## Chapter 8 God and prayers

Prayer is very real and very important to large numbers of people, but...

God doesn't appear to be moved to action by prayers.

Pleas for intervention in things as simple as "turning the light green" as you approach an intersection, to the deepest cries of a parent for a dying child, appear to be met with silence or apathy.

At best, such prayers seem no more efficacious than one might find in chance alone. The suffering of vast segments of the human race continues despite the prayers of true believers.

The recent history of seven million Jews (God's chosen people) being annihilated points more to "no one home up there" than it does to a God who personally cares for individuals.

But, on the positive side, prayer seems likely to serve a purpose in at least a few ways. A thoughtful prayer expressing gratitude before a meal, for example, is a good thing. That's because an attitude of gratitude is healthy. Pausing to express it is healthy. A prayer for the speedy recovery of a sick friend will likely do nothing for the sick friend unless he or she knows of the concern being expressed. Knowing others care is important and it, too, is a healthy thing.

It seems likely, too, that prayer could focus the mind...that is, help the one doing the praying organize thoughts about an issue of concern. While that may be a good thing in itself, *it becomes a better thing if it leads to action.*

At the risk of sounding critical, those who offer nothing but "thoughts and prayers" for say, victims of a mass shooting or for those who have lost all in a firestorm, may be wasting breath. Take action yourself to further or give to the cause of controlling the sale of firearms. Actively look for solutions to an epidemic of firearm violence that plagues this nation fifty times the rate of any other country on earth. Contribute to charities that genuinely help fire victims, or write to legislators expressing a need for action at that level.

I'm aware that this next sentence seems cynical, and I wish it were not true, but the religious among us seem to take refuge in their prayers to the exclusion of doing all in their power to elicit change.

Unfortunately, the activists among the religious tend to be those who want all others to think as they do. They, for example, abhor the “sin” of the gay despite ample evidence that sexual preference is not simply a matter of choice. They fail to see that most people who support “choice” in the abortion issue hate to see abortions take place just as much as they do. They fail to believe statistics showing a huge drop in abortion rates when contraception is freely promoted and sex education is provided in schools and by such clinics as Planned Parenthood. Further, they don’t accept the fact that abortions are unlikely to stop or even diminish in numbers if they are outlawed by legislatures. Abortions go “underground” and are then often done in backrooms without proper medical help and women then are at much greater risk of dying.

Again, to sum up the “prayers” idea, it seems to me that another mark of maturity would be to take action, donate money, volunteer, contact one’s government officials; all this would offer the possibility of actual help rather than mere thoughts or prayers.

## Chapter 9

### A new look at an old phrase

Evangelicals and those in fundamentalist churches often suggest that one be “born again” by accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior as the way to peace, joy, and (or course) eternal life.

I got a new slant on the phrase “born again” recently. But first...

My growing up days were rather consumed by the goings on in a fairly exclusive, conservative church which had a distinct sense of “us” vs. the “world.” Some of us...the good guys...had been born again. Even though there were some very nice people in the other camps, they simply were not complete members of the club.

You had to be very careful about this. Marrying someone outside the “us” part of it was taboo. Associating socially with those “in the world” was frowned upon and fraught with danger. I think the danger was that you could easily find yourself *liking* the activities of the world. For young people the horror was going to movies except for films shown by visiting missionaries. But the worst of all was dancing. For a very long time the church made sure the “young peoples” service was held on Friday nights...to avoid making that evening free to go to football and basketball games...and the dances that often followed them.

Most born again Christians could tell you the place and the date of their born-again experience. The “place” for me was in a tent revival meeting. The tent was located in what is now shopping center very near what became a cinema complex. Must have been a portend of things to come. I still love movies. Most of the ones I like are not filmed by missionaries.

Carl Jung...or one of those famous names in psychology...said that “the child in us is older than the man.” While I’ve long ago more or less rejected the narrow confines of what being “born again” meant to me in my childhood, the child in me struggles with a way to understand the phrase and make it relevant today. What a joy to see a new look at this whole “born again” notion in the Episcopal Church where (at that time) I directed the choir.

Fr. Richard Green, the rector, often came up with some astute thinking that I admired greatly. In his sermon (now, of several years ago) he intimated some of the following ideas. Maybe I won’t do him injustice if I carry them a step further. (Please don’t blame Fr. Richard for the following thoughts, however.)

Looking at this idea from a broader perspective, I wonder if Jesus had some insights into what mankind could really be if we “let go” of some things that are major obstacles to being redeemed human beings. You may even substitute “mature human beings” in place of “redeemed.”

I’ve long contended that we humans are a very small step away from all that is childish, primitive, animal, and evil. Look at the evil on this planet; the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the rich and the powerful, genocide and ethnic cleansing justified by religious views and tribal or racial bias, wars, reprisals, drug trade because it feeds the need to feel good and makes huge money for the traders. It continues with the abuse of children in every conceivable form.

Most of us are only peripherally affected by the heaviest of these evils. But we still have our difficulties.

What if we “let go” of our narrow theological views and said something like, “Hey, if I can tolerate you being a Republican, I certainly can care a great deal for you and attend church with you even if we don’t agree whether a bishop in the Episcopal church can be gay.” Whoops, too close to home? (Whether to allow a gay bishop in the Episcopal Church actually was an issue a few years ago.) Back to the bigger picture.

What if humanity could be reborn to see that all human beings must be treated with dignity? What if ethnic differences were viewed as part of a multi-colored fabric made the more beautiful because each thread that we bring to it is integral to the whole?

If Jesus were anything in his teaching, he was idealistic. But what a profound insight...being born again to enlightened thought, enlightened respect, enlightened tolerance for differing views, to forgiveness and forgiving, and for treating each other with profound dignity.

Perhaps my childhood religious friends were right in one sense; it does seem to have to begin with a personal commitment. I think that commitment is a matter of stepping into a type of humanity, a type of human living that is beyond complete self-interest.

Being “born again” is considerably more than having a personal religious experience. It may be a real joy to feel that your sins are forgiven. Now what are you going to do? I know. Go to heaven. Yeah, but you don’t really want to do that right this minute. So, what are you going to be doing during this lifetime?

Why not become a mature human being!

I can be critical of reciting the creeds and liturgies written almost two-thousand years ago...especially those that reflect the societal values of a long dead past. However, there

is one part of the religion of Christianity that must remain. It's that part where we ask still again for forgiveness. Being born again is a continuous process. It's part of that journey during this lifetime that we talk about. Now, let's go out there and live it...in the largest sense of the phrase. Let's move beyond the primitive, the childish, and the inhumanity...large and small...with which we treat each other. Could that be being "born again?" Could that not be a matter of living a "mature" life?

One reader of material I wrote about this experience referenced my advice to read some of the work of John Spong, at that time a bishop in the Episcopal Church. My "critic" returned the advice by implying Spong was considerably "off course" with his writing and went on to call my reference "Spongian business," and "Gnostic mysticism."

I, of course, had to reply by saying:

*I doubt, for example, that what he talks about can be written off as "Gnostic mysticism." (whatever that may be) Further, you must believe me when I say that he is not the only one speaking in terms of a new look at Christianity. I refer you to books by Karen Armstrong, and one I just recently read by Bart Ehrman, called "Misquoting Jesus." In this book, Ehrman, who entered into the "born again" version of Christianity through the Young Life movement during his youth, went to a Moody Institute college, Wheaton College for graduate work, and then on to very impressive scholarship, very carefully analyses the sources for what became the New Testament (especially). What we ended up with was filtered through a developing theology that involved "power struggles" as to a good many concepts (the virgin birth, the trinity, and even the depictions of what Jesus said and did), as well as the errors of "clarification" as well as errors made in the hand copying of these documents...some of which became the "canon" or labeled as "holy scripture.*

I went on to say that Spong was referring to information concerning all Christians "growing up" to an understanding that God is not "out there" directing traffic for us...or as one person described it, "doing stuff" for us. The reference is to a certain childish wish that many have that "it happened" so it must have been God's will. You, of all people, know that much of what happens (negatively) to people is the result of poor choices. (My friend is a psychologist.) Making better choices is a mark of maturity and maturity is not altogether a product of age. "We are responsible" was that reader's call for people to move out of a childish state of dependency (God will take of me) and growing up to take action, make decisions, that reflect maturity.

No one, and certainly not Spong, denigrates the humanitarian efforts of any Christian organization or denomination, conservative or liberal (how I hate such narrow-minded

labels, by the way). Personally, I might “denigrate” the motives of missionaries and the (most often not deliberate) arrogance that asserts that because we have a “better plan” that we’ll foist and force our plan on the rest of the world. If it’s better, it need not be foisted or forced. It’ll “draw all men” unto it if it works! And that without superimposing “Western” values, music, and all the rest on the “heathen.”

My reply to this person went on to say...”that leads me to your statement about ‘you can’t grow up before being born again.’

Yes, there is something to be said for “starting over.” For many, that is a worthwhile and most desirable concept...a virtually necessity. In the context of what Spong has said in earlier writings, it is not the concept of a fresh start that is troubling. It is in the notion of remaining as immature children in a state of dependency. It’s remaining in a state of saying, believing, singing about being a pitiful sinner at the mercy of an all-powerful, all knowing Santa Claus who has the power (and exercises it frequently) to dole out the goodies or withhold them. (Witness the Old Testament God who was constantly doing that to the Israelites, by the way...and while we are witnessing look at the large number of hymns and gospel songs that are filled with “dependency” cries of that pitiful sinner.) Again, you know as much as anyone could know, that it is not healthy to grovel and live in a state of dependency.”

We may not have precise accounts of what Jesus said and did, but he definitely had an effect on people (to say the least). I believe he was a good example of what it means to live, love, and be. He seemed to reject all the multitude of rules, narrowing all the commandments to “doing unto others as you would be done by.”



## Chapter 10

### **You guessed it...a chapter on music and becoming mature!**

If you read the forward to this book, you know that I've been a choral conductor. I was a teacher in the schools, director of community choirs, the choir leader at seven different Christian denominational churches, singer in a professional choir, and founder of two different high-level choirs made up primarily of colleagues who sing beautifully and who direct choirs in the schools and colleges of the northwest.

It has struck me, even in the past few years, how much of my life's work had me conducting sacred music! Yes, music with lyrics from hymns, the Bible, the mass, and sacred poetry. Considering my present views on religions of all sorts, especially the Christian faith (the one I know best), how is it that I appear to be resistant to the very message of this faith as well as to a large part of the source for the lyrics of some very lovely choral works...the Bible?

At one point I was puzzled by what seemed to be my own inconsistencies with regard to my feeling that beautiful moments in music, a lovely piece of art, or an incomparable scene in nature offered what I called at that time "glimpses into the divine." Those "glimpses" intimated another realm of reality or the "handiwork of God." Or, at the very least, I seemed to be saying there is a spiritual dimension that remained undefined.

Maybe there is another dimension. I suspect it will be found as part of the human brain as study continues in this area. The brain already turns out to be utterly amazing. We all shall await what scientists come up with next. Whatever happens and wherever such study leads, I feel certain it won't be found to be supernatural.

At the suggestion of a friend, I read the book "How God Changes Your Brain," by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman. Being the skeptic that I am, I rather quickly came to the conclusion that the book was mis-named. Any descriptions described in the book resulting in changes (for the better) reportedly came about through meditation.

In other words, God (at least the God as described in my youth and to which I tried to believe and cling at that time) was not making the changes, but the changes came about as a result of actions taken by the individual. Something might easily be happening in the brain itself as a result of conscious efforts to quiet oneself and spend time daily in meditation. Apparently, "by manipulating our breath, body, awareness, feelings, and thoughts, we can decrease tension and stress. We can evoke or suppress specific emotions

and focus our thoughts in ways that biologically influence other parts of the brain.” (p. 63)

Now, here is where I truly speculate...

I speculate partially because I know so little about the brain. So, I wonder if this amazing organ has evolved over hundreds of thousands of years. I wonder if various parts of the brain...the frontal, parietal, temporal, and limbic areas or some such part of the brain have perhaps developed a sensitivity, say, to beautiful sounds, to sounds (I speak now of music only) that are deemed beautiful. Perhaps the whole of the person is uplifted, inspired, energized...in short, perhaps even made to feel happiness as he or she listens to this beauty.

One could call this experience God related or accept it as a marvelous gift of being truly human. I choose to describe it in human terms. You may have other ideas on this. But it happens. Sometimes it's a response that sends those "chills" through the body. Sometimes such beautiful moments can elicit joyful tears.

To me, at least, it seems my puzzle is solved.

Very much of our singing related to the so-called spiritual dimension would, and perhaps should, take a new twist. As we grow to maturity as human beings it strikes me (resonates forcibly within me) that what one might call worship is not singing songs of adulation as if trying to flatter a father figure, but rather singing the poetry that exalts life (a living internal life force), love (the inclusive, unconditional and revolutionary concept of love), and being (the playing out of this maturity in the form of service, kindness, and all the universal values that make being human tolerable and worthwhile for all people).

So, yes, it is time to grow up. But such musical literature is scarce. It will arrive, however. If a church is to survive, the liturgies, the concept of worship itself, and all that goes along with exploring spirituality in the Christian context...including the music...will change.

In the meantime, because of my inalterable condition (not just mine, but virtually all of us in this particular culture), I still find richness, beauty, and profundity in the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of my heritage. I don't have to agree with the texts of every song I sing to find meaning in the music for my inner being.

In illustration, during the choral directors conference in Portland recently, I heard (among 30 or more superb choirs) a fantastic professional women's ensemble of sixteen voices sing a concert Saturday night. Karen Thomas (Seattle), their conductor, composed a set of two songs (sung in Latin) that this group presented. I didn't have a clue what was

being said as to text, for I didn't happen to have a program with a translation. But in one place, the chorus sang this intricate interwoven and dissonant and oh so powerful section that finally culminated in a brilliant major chord that just levitated you. I felt tears rushing to my eyes and an uncontrollable smile on my face. It was a glimpse into the "divine." I can't explain it or define it and, quite frankly, at that moment the text didn't matter.

## Chapter 11

### Propaganda approaches...political, sales, and religion

The “aware” and mature human knows that he or she is being bombarded constantly today by what we formerly called “propaganda.” While the word “propaganda” has negative connotations and most often deserves that criticism, it is a tool of persuasion worthy to be added to the cautions about religion as well as to politics.

I probably don’t remember too many specifics from my high school classes of the early 1950’s, but I do remember a particularly interesting lesson taught by Rosemary Leadon, my English and Journalism teacher. The subject, oddly enough, propaganda.

It’s the stuff of everyday advertising, a lot of preaching, and political persuasion. Perhaps not so oddly, this type of attempt to persuade remains the same from 1955 (the year of graduated from high school) to today.

#### **Name calling**

Let’s start with name calling. I’m not talking about everyday swearing at someone...calling a person a SOB, or whatever. I’m talking about labels that we attach to people. It’s names like “socialist,” “liberal,” “conservative,” “racist,” “libtard,” “woke,” “Trumper.” Attaching a name to someone or even to ideas being espoused becomes shorthand. Once the name is applied, one need think no further. No need now for evaluating what is being said. No need to examine the content of the ideas. So simple. Stick them with a name and one’s pre-conceived notions of who and what they are is all that is needed.

#### **Glittering generalities**

Glittering generalities is a second propaganda technique. It’s nothing more than statements encapsulating ideas of love, honor, glory, patriotism, and family values. Sounds good. This technique is most often used in connection to other efforts to sell something or to sell an idea.

#### **Transfer**

The use of transfer as a selling or propaganda technique is a matter of associating a revered symbol such as the flag or the Bible with the idea being promulgated. A high level of emotion is often involved.

#### **Plain folks**

Those selling ideas or even political candidates are fond of the use of of the plain folks approach. This candidate is like them. I’ve often thought that the lack of coherence in a Donald Trump speech...the flights of fancy and the jump from one thought to another...may have appealed to many simply because it is what would happen if any “plain folk” person stood up to give a speech. He certainly was not “one of us” in any other conceivable way.

### **Testimonial**

The testimonial approach is used constantly in advertising and is often combined with the plain folks idea. But then, the testimonial can also come from a celebrity in movies or sports. I guess we have to ask ourselves, why would a movie star sitting in an easy chair facing the danger of being run over by a car in a busy intersection know any more about car insurance than anybody else?

### **Bandwagon**

Most of us just don't want to be left behind. Yep, something attractive about crowds and everyone being on the same team. Crowd behavior, however, is a strange thing. Being on the bandwagon may not be in one's best interest. A little independent thinking here!

### **Card Stacking**

Card stacking is a common device, especially in the political world. It is a technique where the seller of an idea piles on the attractive notions and conveniently leaves out all the negative. As with many of these techniques, it really is a form of lying.

We have a responsibility as mature human beings to, first know there is a constant flow of material designed to manipulate us. Whether it's called "propaganda" or advertising or political or even religious persuasion, it's there! I'm certain most people are aware of this, but I add this chapter as a reminder.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Using the Bible to support a viewpoint...with book, chapter, and verse to back ‘em up!**

I recently read a rather fascinating book called “The Year of Living Biblically” by A. J. Jacobs. It dates to 2007. I like the numerous comments regarding the book that are found in the introductory pages. Here’s one:

*Throughout his journey, Jacobs comes across as a generous and thoughtful (and yes, slightly neurotic) participant observer, lacing his story with absurdly funny cultural commentary as well as nuanced insights into the impossible task of biblical literalism.*  
(Publishers Weekly)

I recommend the book, both for the humor and, to be honest, for the absurd regulations with which even the Iron Age or earlier people of the days of Moses must have found very hard to live! However, if one were to follow “the law” as prescribed in the Bible...well, we’ll let it trail off here!

So, with that book in mind, one would hope that it is worthwhile to add a bit of levity to the whole subject of growing up into becoming a mature human being. The following material has oft been quoted, but seems appropriate here, too. These quotes and admonitions are not from A. J. Jacobs’ book. They’re more often straight from the Bible itself, some paraphrased and some with a lead-in statement.

#### **Preserving the Sanctity of Marriage:**

Any religious person believes prayer should be balanced by action. So here, in support of the Prayer Team's admirable goals, is a proposed Constitutional Amendment to codify marriage based solely on biblical principles:

- A. Marriage in the United States shall consist of a union between one man and one or more women. (Gen 29:17-28; IISam3:2-5)
  
- B. Marriage shall not impede a man's right to take concubines, in addition to his wife or wives. (IISam5:13; I Kings 11:3; IIChron11:21)
  
- C. A marriage shall be considered valid only if the wife is a virgin. If the wife is not a virgin, she shall be executed. (Deut 22:13-21)

D. Marriage of a believer and a non-believer shall be forbidden. (Gen 24:3; Num 25:1-9; Ezra 9:12; Neh 10:30)

E. Since marriage is for life, neither the U.S. Constitution nor the constitution of any state, nor any state or federal law, shall be construed to permit divorce. (Deut 22:19; Mark10:9)

F. If a married man dies without children, his brother shall marry the widow. If he refuses to marry his brother's widow or deliberately does not give her children, he shall pay a fine of one shoe. (Gen. 38:6-10; Deut 25:5-10)

**And there are other issues, maybe you can help here too**

1. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev.1:9. The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?
2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
3. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness - Lev.15: 19-24. The problem is how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.
4. Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
5. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2.passage clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?
6. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this? Are there 'degrees' of abomination?
7. Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

8. Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev.19:27. How should they die?

9. I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

10. My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? - Lev.24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)



## Chapter 13

### More on using the Bible as “the source”

Let’s lay aside the issue of whether there is, in fact, an entity called God. Let’s instead, examine the Bible. If the universe’s omnipotent, omniscient creator exists, the question must be approached with logic...the question being, how does this ancient, highly revered book portray God?

Christianity in whatever sense, from the most conservative or narrow perspective to a broader version of the religion, depends on the Bible as its source of knowledge about this supernatural force. One would expect all such written material to “line up,” to illustrate with consistency a God who, ostensibly, allowed mankind to tell about his attributes. In fact, most Christians would argue that writers of the books of the Bible wrote under direct guidance. They wrote as under the inspiration given by God himself.

Most would say that this written document is inerrant. Most Christians would acknowledge that the Bible is their chief guideline. Is the Bible accurate? Does the “inspired Word of God” hold up under scrutiny? Many Christians refuse to accept views that claim inconsistencies and contradictions in their sacred book. Science and reason are often tossed aside. If a divine hand or mind was dictating the story, such writing as found in the Bible should stand up easily under simple logic.

Dr. Jason Long, in his book called “Biblical Nonsense: A Review of the Bible for Doubting Christians,” offers this in his introductory remarks:

*In the past 2000 years, Christianity has been guilty of initiating several wars and crusades resulting in thousands of needless deaths, blatantly oppressing women to the point of worthlessness, abhorrently justifying the enslavement of Africans and perpetuating cruelties upon them we would rather just forget, shamelessly driving its followers to hang or burn alleged witches, nearly exterminating the entire Native American population, and inconspicuously robbing billions of people of countless man-hours that could have been much better spent on improving our planet.*

Dr. Long goes on to say that “the book most of the Western world swears by demands a thorough critical analysis. He goes on to say that people are often victims of what is called “cognitive dissonance,” a term I’ve used earlier.

It seems important to understand “cognitive dissonance” a bit better. What is it?

*The inconsistency between what people believe and how they behave motivates them to engage in actions that will help minimize feelings of discomfort. People*

*attempt to relieve this tension in different ways, such as by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding new information.*

Dealing with cognitive dissonance provides an explanation for so many who refuse to read or consider in any way the “new information” provided by those who attempt to explain the “epiphany” moments when one decides, for example, to consider whether the Bible is, in fact, inerrant!

Allow me to tell you of my own “most difficult” hurdle to clear as I gradually pulled away from the tight grip under which I was held when growing up and, finally, into my middle years of life. I had been taught that the Bible was the final authority! That yes, “there was a way that seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof was destruction.” (Or something to that effect.) I had read the Bible cover to cover. (That has nothing to do with whether I had absorbed it or not.) All my life I had been to Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Adult Bible Classes...and had listened to thousands of sermons. In my childhood, youth, and even through my college days, I had seen the Bible held up (waved in the air) as the ultimate “word of God.” One did not challenge such a statement.

Unless you are one who shares a similar story, you can never grasp the cult-like grip of the Pentecostal church of my youth and younger adult years. You might be excused for never hearing a “message in tongues” followed by “interpretation” of same during a Sunday evening church service. The “messages” were purportedly straight from God himself. “For thus saith the Lord,” as the interpreter was bound to say at some point.

At the same time, it’s unlikely one can fully understand how difficult it is to finally realize that the Bible is (among even the good to be found in it) little more than a conglomeration of myths of an ancient Iron Age people.

Even the history, purported to be of a tribe of people, is inaccurate. I said it earlier, but it bears repeating as an example...there is virtually no historical record *aside from the Bible’s version* of multiple thousands of Israelites being held captive by Egyptians. Hundreds of thousands of people living in a desert for 40 years after escaping Egypt? No signs of such a thing in archeology! The Egyptians kept accurate historical material. It seems unlikely they would have allowed many thousands of Israelites to live as slaves without some record of this. None.

No record either of the fables concerning first born Egyptians being slain, of a river of blood, of boils, or pestilences. Interesting reading, but myth. The Egyptians were good historians. No records of these events of epic size!

We find inaccuracies in geography, impossibilities in things scientific such as a world-wide flood, the earth's rotation being stopped or held up while Joshua finished off a battle, talking animals, people living many hundreds of years (and having children at that age). How much easier to take all of those as the myths of a tribe of people...no more viable than the legends of the ancient Greeks, or even of tribal stories of native Americans!

The inconsistencies and outright error of much of this material, given here in random order, is amazing. So, here is more:

Briefly, a bit more of a look at Joshua's "long day" myth. First, Joshua 10: 13 implies that the sun stood still and the moon stayed, until the too vengeance on their enemies. It apparently did not "hasten to go down for about a whole day." The implication is that the sun moves around the earth. Apparently God did not tell the Hebrews that the earth and nine other planets move around the sun. The all-wise and loving God gets no credit here.

All of that, plus ... Let's take a look at some the rules of living that I touched on in Chapter 12. Much of this, when evaluated, had to be exhausting.

I've touched on Noah and the big flood. Many ancient groups of people had flood stories. Localized flooding no doubt happened occasionally in the lives of such groups. These stories were passed on by oral tradition and were no doubt exaggerated in the process. The Israelites had their story in the form of Noah. There was no "world-wide" flood. Certainly not one as described in Genesis.

One could also ask why all this emphasis on circumcision? It seems difficult to believe that a God of omniscience and omnipotence could actually care about whether a man still had a foreskin or not. But this is "big-time" in importance according to the Bible, even into the New Testament stories.

We know there is controversy over dealing with Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Matthew has one genealogy. Luke has still another. They cannot both be right. It seems that the genealogies were given in an attempt to make sure Jesus was from the house of David as Joseph purportedly was...Mary was not. Yet, according to scripture, Jesus was not the son of Joseph. Further, Matthew's version of the story has Joseph being a resident of Bethlehem who moved to Nazareth. Luke, however, says that Joseph lived in Nazareth before Jesus was born.

Luke makes no mention of a dream had by Joseph and does not refer to an angel visitation. Nor does this author write of the trip by night into Egypt.

In Luke's version, Mary and Joseph take their son to be circumcised and then to the temple in Jerusalem to be consecrated. No further mention of Joseph can be found. Did he die? Not a word on him to be found.

With regard to the important virgin birth of the "Son of God," Jesus made no mention of the subject. This "virgin" notion is huge in the Roman Catholic church, especially.

The story of Job, apparently a righteous man, who became a "test-case" as between God and Satan, is ludicrous. Is the mythical legend even worthy a place in the inerrant word of God?

Moses did not write the books we now call the Pentateuch. Multiple ancient ones put all this together, according to most researchers. For one thing, part of one of the books is written in third-person and describes the death of Moses. One does not write about one's own dying and being buried in a given place. There is even more. Scholars are certain that the material in the Pentateuch was placed in written form many hundreds, if not thousand or more years after the time of Moses.

I see no need to go on with the hundreds of inconsistencies, myths, and (no doubt) exaggerations one can find in the Bible. Many hundreds of books have been written that outline much of this. One that has been virtually forgotten in the flood of material that deals with this is Steve Allen's "On the Bible, religion, and morality." It's well written, well documented, and worth reading...for the brave ones of faith who are not afraid of their toes being trampled!

## Chapter 14

### **A choir director is allowed to preach a sermon...yes, for real!**

A special note to the reader...

As I mentioned earlier, I've directed choirs in at least seven different churches from 1959 through about 2005. I met and became friends with many wonderful people who kept coming back, just as I did, week after week to enjoy, and without a doubt, for us to be enriched by our work together.

It was during the ten years at my last such role that I finally began to voice my own change in views about the Bible and about religion(s) as a whole. I continue to be grateful for the friends I made and for the freedom to "be myself" in that accepting atmosphere of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Longview, WA. I also wish happiness and peace for Fr. Richard Green and Mo. Kathleen Patton, a husband-and-wife team of priests who served St. Stephen's a bit longer even than I did.

At one point at my position as "Minister of Music" at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Longview, Washington, as it happened, both the Fr. Richard and his wife, Mo. Kathleen, were to be gone for a Sunday. They said, "Howard, why don't you give the sermon on (the given date)? I suspect I hemmed and hawed a bit for several reasons...one being that I don't fancy myself as a public speaker. And two, I couldn't quite see where I could honestly have much to say that would be helpful to a congregation of (mostly) believers!

But, I finally said "yes."

One may see large scale hints at my own "turning point" as the sermon to follow shows. At that point in my life, I was not quite ready (or perhaps didn't have the courage) to say the kinds of things I've stated in earlier chapters of this book. I hope the reader will forgive my attempt at sermonizing and enjoy what I presented to folks a good many years ago.

#### **MY ONE AND ONLY SERMON STARTS HERE – ARE YOU READY?**

I have a copy of a cartoon that shows a dignified looking man standing at a lectern and saying, "Today we will consider three metaphysical questions: (1) What is the meaning of life? And (2) How did the universe come to be? And (3) What are cats all about?"

We have two cats at our house, so I can tell you that I have nothing to say on question three. I also have nothing to say on the question of the universe.

In many ways I'm hardly the person to be standing here today delivering a sermon...

The reason I say that is that I'm full of doubts about so many things considered important to most people who consider themselves Christians.

I'm full of doubts partially because I'm not sure I saw much in the way of reality in the religious setting in which I grew up.

Let me tell you about that briefly...my little religious odyssey.

I was born into a family that attended a Pentecostal Church of God... this in Arkansas...my place of birth. We moved to Longview when I was seven years old....and continued to attend a church a bit similar to the one in Arkansas.

I've seen dancing in the spirit, speaking in tongues, high emotion. I've heard Oral Roberts live and in his prime, Rex Humbard (a distant cousin, in fact), and amazing oratory by masters at hell-fire preaching. I went to the altar a good many times while "Pass Me Not Oh Gentle Savior" was being sung. For us, it was church twice on Sunday, then Bible study on Wednesday night and youth service on Friday night. (It was on Friday night so we wouldn't be tempted to go to the football and basketball games that evening...or worse yet, a movie or even a school dance.)

Of course, three or four times a year we had the two week, every night of the week, revival services. For these they brought in the big-name evangelist. There isn't a fifteen-year-old boy in the world who wouldn't have felt the guilt rise up within him at virtually every service. And, believe me, we didn't miss a one. These guys were masters at hitting all the buttons to scare you into the "kingdom of God." And since lust takes up residence in the mind of a fifteen-year-old, you can well imagine how easy it was to take me by the heels and dangle me over the fires of hell. Believe me this was a regular occurrence. You can't imagine what a relief it was to find out that every one of you guys out there had that lust problem like I did at that age. Nevertheless, during my growing up years, guilt with a capital G was forever emblazoned on my forehead.

Now, as I got a little higher up in my teen years, I began to notice that even the most eloquent of evangelistic orators weren't exactly immune from the temptations of the world either. It was a matter of high priority on the prayer list when Brother so-in-so slipped up in matters of sins of the flesh. It was serious business when one esteemed minister conveniently pocketed a great deal of money from investors who trusted him to make them some money in the stock market. We had a pedophile organist. We also had the harsh words of gossip and criticism...especially for teenagers...from the lady who most often stood to give the evening's expected message in tongues. I'm really not trying to be mean, but I truly expected that with her direct pipeline to God, she probably knew about all those evil thoughts and goings on out there with us kids, and that the next interpretation of her message in tongues would reveal all!

In my adult years, my job as a choir director has taken me through a good many churches. From the Church of God to the Assembly of God, to an evangelical community church, to the Presbyterian church, to the Lutheran Church, to the Catholic Church, a slight step backwards toward Protestantism recently at the Methodist Church, and...at long last...to the Episcopal Church. My 90-year-old mother (when I told her I had another job at another church) said, “you’re like that old hound dog, you’ll hunt for anybody who’ll feed you!”

Well, it’s a little more than that. First, I can’t explain why, considering the days of my youth, but I really like liturgical worship, the bells, the robes, the music, and the dignity of it all. I suppose, most of all, it’s a joy to know that I’m among fellow doubters. It’s also a joy to be able to be honest as well as accepted and not judged because I do have doubts. After all, failing to toe the line in absolute surety in some of the early churches of my upbringing would have the choir director up before the board of elders to explain himself.

What about those doubts, you say? I have doubts about documents that were written two to four thousand years ago and to which nothing has been added since about 150 AD, being the sole authority on moral issues, and in some cases, even scientific issues that confront us in 2003. I have doubts about the relevancy and inconsistencies of doctrine based on customs and the mores of a middle eastern society of two to three thousand years ago. A society and scripture that allowed for slavery, prevented women from being first class citizens, made sex to be an evil thing, and assumed that sexual preference was totally a matter of choice.

“This is the word of the Lord” ...a phrase we repeat each Sunday may bring comfort to some, but I readily admit my concerns about the accuracy of some of its pages. Epilepsy is not caused by demon possession. David did not write the Psalms. The earth is not the center of the universe. Mostly, my problem is that verses from the Bible have been used to affirm war, slavery, segregation and apartheid. And yes, in some quarters today it’s still being used to define women as inferior creatures and quoted as suggesting that homosexual persons be put to death.

OK, enough about my doubts...

Now, lest you think I’m totally in the wrong place this morning, let me assure you that despite my doubts I find meaning, joy, comfort, and a great deal of satisfaction in my church.

For one thing, despite what I perceive to be its flaws, the Bible still holds some magnificent literature, poetry and songs. The Psalm that was read today is a truly beautiful thing, for example. The best part is that it ultimately defines core values of

love, compassion for others, and...speaking in the language of Paul in the Epistle today, fulfilling the law...the greatest fulfillment of the law of all, ...that of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Here's another thing that I find meaning in.

Let's look at one of the greatest of symbolisms ever to be a symbol...the Eucharist.

I say it's like this.

**You are what you eat.** Not for a minute do I want to get into the transubstantiation debate, but the concept is so profound. Symbolically or whatever,

When you ingest the body and blood of Christ, the very cells of your body absorb this nourishment. We become what we eat.

This is revolutionary thinking...

Paul, in our Epistle today says that Jesus came to abolish the law. Actually Jesus, in one of the gospels, is quoted as saying "I've come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law."

What does this mean? And how does it tie in to being what we eat?

If we are what we eat then the very spirit of Christ should show in our behaviors, our attitudes. While no one is perfect, I'm firmly of the opinion that for those who take seriously their communion experience that there is greater evidence that you'll find people who are more apt to love their neighbor as themselves, love their enemies, and treat others as they would want to be treated. Even approaching the altar on a regular basis indicates that an individual at least wants to grow in that direction.

Part of becoming a living embodiment of Christ is understanding what Jesus really taught. If we really want to have some relevant study groups, we ought to examine what this revolutionary individual had to say and (I might add) not necessarily what some of the ancient writers had him saying. That might get us into some deep waters, but I'm thinking it would be worth it.

As I said earlier, you can use the Bible to support just about any cause you feel passionate about.

I'm sure this pulpit is not the place for me or anyone else to espouse my political views. However it is most assuredly the place to call for tolerance, patience, transparency in our motives, and a desire to be peacemakers in a world short on all the above. And, for the sake of our own conscience and intellect, let's be thinkers...not taking the easy way that limits issues to "my way or the highway" or even necessarily assuming that there only



two sides to an issue. Let's not be afraid of the complex. God knows the issues facing us today are indeed complex.

Finally, despite my doubts, I'm a believer because I see glimpses of what I perceive to be the divine...spiritual realities that can't be defined in any other way. Many times, for me, it happens in the area of music. Now and then, often during the rehearsals of a group I've experience exquisite moments ...again, glimpses into something so profound that it cannot be explained in words. Sometimes it happens in performance. Once I had a high school choir singing in a festival in Ellensburg. We were performing a piece called "The Peace of God" or "Pax Dei." At a moment toward the last measures of the music there is a wonderful bit of writing using what is called a "suspension," a note in the chord that doesn't fit, but then resolves...dissonance resolving to consonance. As we sang the phrase and came to that moment, I had this astounding sense of awe. It was definitely goosebump time. I could see it in the faces of the kids...something wonderful was happening. But here's the interesting part. It wasn't just me. A friend of mine, Richard Nace, from the Tacoma area, was one of the adjudicators. Rich was the clinician assigned to our group following the performance. He said to the choir, "are you aware of something absolutely wonderful happening as you concluded that piece?" "It was magnificent." "Just as you were singing that phrase around bar 37, I turned to the judge sitting next to me and whispered "Did you hear that?" I can't explain it. But to us, at that moment, we had gotten a glimpse of something very real and beautiful.

Robert Fulghum, best known for his book, "Everything I Needed to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten," tells this story...which I paraphrase:

He said he was attending a seminar on an island off the coast of Italy. The seminar leader was about to conclude a long day of discussion and training, but asked the usual question at the end of the session, "Are there any questions?" Fulghum, just to get a laugh from his friends, asked "What is the meaning of life?" Everyone chuckled and got up to leave, but the leader said, "No, wait a minute, I'm going to answer that." Everyone sat down.

He said, "On this island, during World War II, the Nazis governed with brutal force. At one point, several villagers rose up and attacked two German soldiers on motorcycles, killing one with farm implements. Other soldiers arrived and literally massacred the farmers, killing over forty people. The hatreds seethed for years. The seminar leader went on to say, "As a child growing up here shortly after the war, I was told that story and shown the spot where it happened. I passed the area many times. Once as I explored, I saw a small broken piece of a mirror that I was certain had come from one of the German motorcycles.

As a child, I was fascinated by the way I could take that mirror and shine light into dark corners and crevasses.

Now, at that point, the leader opened his briefcase and pulled out the tiny piece of glass. He held it up and said, “this little mirror has become the symbol, for me, of what life is all about...reflecting the light of peace and understanding into the corners and crevasses, in however small a way.

For me, you see, there is a reality that is beyond words. I certainly can't answer the question “what is the meaning of life?” But I can give my answer to the question, “what gives life meaning?” It's in the little things...the small glimpses into beauty, seeing a newborn grand-daughter, or even at the altar where I'm led now not by guilt, but because I sense the love of God.

So, what makes life have meaning? Realizing that we can have the privilege, despite our flaws, of being the embodiment of Jesus, his very core teachings, in our world. And keep in mind that OUR WORLD is not way out there somewhere. It's in the everyday lives we lead. Practicing kindness, understanding, tolerance, and having ears, eyes, and the soul to constantly be looking for those glimpses into the divine.

