

ABEL – FINDING *HIS* WAY

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Author Note

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Background Information

As a sixty year old, single White male baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, I was raised in an upper-middle class family background. I attended catechism classes briefly but subsequently have not regularly attended religious services of any denomination since my youth. Yet, over the last 10-15 years, I have realized a definite emptiness in my being, which I attribute to distance from faith. A month ago, I arranged to join my friend Dave, a fifty year old, single Black male, in worship at Calvary Chapel Toledo, a non-denominational church in Northwood, OH.

I know Dave to be an intelligent, honorable, upstanding truth teller who happens to have strong faith. However, I knew nothing about his church, its doctrines, practices or orthodoxy. Furthermore, I was ignorant of any real understanding of organized religions, excluding a very limited, outsider's perspective of Catholic Christmas and Easter masses with my sister's family. I showed up as an observer and left as a member, accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior.

Founded in 1965, Pastor Chuck Smith's (1927-2013) Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, California ministry welcomes all people to learn the Word of God through demonstrative and precise biblical interpretation. From twenty-five original members of the small local church, today the ministry has reached international status with over 1500 fellowships (Calvary Chapel Association, 2012). Zavada describes the belief system in Calvary Chapel as generally following the tenets of evangelical Protestantism. However, in accordance with a strict interpretation of the Bible, Calvary Chapel does not support some parts of Protestant beliefs. Four examples of some "unscriptural" Protestant beliefs are provided: 1) Calvary Chapel practitioners believe Jesus Christ died for "all" the sins of the "entire world" as opposed to Christ dying for only the "Elect"

(or chosen few), 2) Christians cannot be possessed by evil demons since the Holy Spirit cannot reside in man at the same time as such demons, 3) human prophecy that either supersedes or “adds to” the Word of God must be rejected (again, unscriptural) and also, 4) Calvary Chapel opposes the “prosperity gospel”, a teaching in some of the contemporary mega-churches directing God’s will for riches to his chosen (Zavada, n.d.)

Calvary Chapel worship services are not rigidly standardized. Calvary Chapel Toledo’s Sunday pre-service typically begins with informal prayer. Service commences with asking for God’s blessing, to reveal His will and desires to all who request His direction and grace, followed by praise singing, messages to attendees and then, deep dives into verse-by-verse teachings from the New King James version of The Holy Bible. More praise songs follow these teachings and finally, adjournment to fellowship with light food and drink. Calvary Chapel Toledo embraces a casual, “Come as you are” dress code, in keeping with Pastor Chuck’s original vision.

The syllabus instructions for this assignment are to “show how diversity, social construction of difference, and privilege impacts us all and has profound effects on how we interact with, lead, and treat individuals who are different than us.” The Diversity and Leadership texts and course work introduces the concepts of privilege and power as unexamined assumptions and behaviors of the insiders (or dominant group/class) which are inextricably entwined with the oppression of their out-group counterparts (Johnson, 2006). The systems of oppression under course investigation are sometimes referred to as “-isms” using the following examples for clarification; racism, feminism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism (relating to disabilities) and ageism. The nominal term religious oppression is the obvious system explored

in this assignment. However, -isms and oppression are not singularly occurring natural phenomena. Instead, there are “intersecting aspects” within and across any class or group. For example, my White-ness cannot be isolated from my male-ness and furthermore, both aspects are also enveloped in my upper middle class-ness.

Prior to entering this house of worship I carried my very own unique “privileged” White male, perspective and preconceptions of churchgoers in the United States. Admittedly uneducated in religions per se, the intersecting facets of my male Whiteness provided me a comforting assurance that should the visit turn out to be too discomfoting, I could walk away and resume my life. Would I be the only White in a Black church? How would I be able to mask my distain should I encounter a room filled with “Holy Rollers” or people speaking “in tongues”? Apart from these superficial unknowns, the more realistic research question was “How will I assimilate the differences between my perspectives and those of the members of this congregation?”

How did it all play out?

On Sunday, September 22, 2013, I arrived early enough to be met by friendly, welcoming members offering warm greetings with eye contact, handshakes, and their names. As evidenced by the casual attire of those in attendance, social class was unheralded. This was a house of brothers and sisters, all children of “our” Lord. Pastor Todd Kopet began the pre-service prayer by thanking “our” Heavenly Father for allowing us to be present to worship him. The next prayer was to request God’s grace and forgiveness for the two suicide bombers who had killed 78 Christians in Peshawar, Pakistan earlier that day. Of course we prayed for the innocent victims

and their families. Yet, those terrorists and their supporters were in obvious and desperate need of God's intervention into their misguided lives.

Next, we sang songs of praise for 15 minutes, accompanied by the five member church band. I was able to join in song, since the words were projected on the wall using PowerPoint slides. The sermon on "overcoming" from the Book of Revelations was more meaningful and personal through contextual explanations of each verse. Ending announcements of the upcoming (September 28, 2013) outreach program in Detroit included emotionally overpowering testimonies of reception. Calvary Chapel members had gone to Detroit to pass out flyers for the coming event, meeting people, learning about their needs and desires, and explaining how salvation is possible through Jesus Christ. Inner city residents were overwhelmed that folks cared enough come into their neighborhood to share the Word of the Lord. They were engaging in true Christian outreach. We ended with 15 more minutes of praise singing then adjourned for food and fellowship. In high school, I sang in the glee club. With tear filled eyes, I grinned to my friend Dave and said, "I've always wanted to sing in church". That was never easy in Catholic mass where I had to decode which song from a book in the pew was next on the agenda.

It could not have turned out more Righteously

My expectations of this encounter were dissolved away entirely when I walked into church. I did not encounter people different from me. Moreover, I met people I wanted to be with. I had fellowship with a reformed Hindi as well as a janitor who had lost both parents this year. I spoke with the husband and wife who had coordinated efforts to help with the outreach program and was humbled by their enthusiasm for the work.

When Pastor Todd asked forgiveness for the terrorists, I was taken aback. “My” idea of justice was voided by God’s more supreme judgment. I acknowledged my distance from faith and admitted having personally unresolvable parental issues over the last ten years. My testimony was emotionally overwhelming and simultaneously cleansing. I prayed for forgiveness for trying to be in control of my out of control life. I asked God to impart His Holy Spirit in me, allowing me to accept Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for all sinners and become “my” Holy Savior. This is the most incredibly exhilarating experience of my life! Seeking to do His will, not mine, accepting that God’s desires are to be my desires allows me to begin an irresistible journey toward knowing Jesus Christ more intimately.

Putting this into practice

I learned that Scriptural study at Calvary Chapel Toledo recently hit a milestone. After ten years of sermons and weekly Bible study, Pastor Todd had taught all the lessons and was ready to begin the process anew. This suggests two things, there is much to learn and I’ll be starting with the next beginning. Strict scriptural understanding is outside my realm at this point. However I make an attempt here to discuss two intersecting aspects of diversity within Calvary Chapel ministries.

“We do not believe in ordaining women as pastors and/or elders. This does not at all mean that women cannot be used mightily in ministry.” (Calvary Chapel St. Petersburg, n.d.). This might be perceived a gender issue when viewed through the lens of diversity. Yet, I would argue that for oppression to occur, one dominant class must exercise some power over the “other”. God made men and women different to compliment each other. Those who adore God, voluntarily surrender any earthly power to His design. This removes the concept of sublimation

of females under males replacing sublimation of “all” under God. Consider Jesus’s faithful Roman Catholic Church reformer, Saint Francis of Assisi whose diligence resulted in the papal ordainment of the Order of Franciscans. Francis’s lifelong friend and follower Clare of Assisi was the inspiration for Francis’s Second Order of Poor Clares. That both orders exist suggests equality not divisiveness.

Adams and Joshi (2013) present evidence of a “history of the influence of Protestant Christianity on the development of ... social institutions of the United States. (in order to understand) the historical role of Christian privilege and the religious oppression of non-Christian faith traditions” (p. 229). As stated, Calvary Chapel adheres generally to a Protestant Christian belief system and my scriptural understanding is woefully weak. But a summary of teachings states, “we are cautious to avoid division within the Body of Christ” (Calvary Chapel St. Petersburg, n.d.). The Body of Christ could be interpreted here as the all-encompassing world Jesus came to save. Under this meaning, even non-Christians and non-believers are not exempted from His love. This connotation speaks more directly toward Buber’s I-Thou position (American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2013) resulting in true dialogue and true sharing. Non-Christians and non-believers are not objectified. Rather like all mankind they are also sinners capable of redemption and salvation.

In conclusion, the fine balance of adhering to God’s rules as written, without abrogation, additions or modification, provides mankind with the boundaries necessary for a healthy society. The belief in a Loving and Forgiving Lord offers space for human waywardness and sin along with an open path to return to His acceptance. Ignorance of these possibilities is a rather pitiful detour on the road to an adoring Father. Praise Our Almighty Lord, and do so loudly.

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