

## A Thread of Faith

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At 95, nearing the finish line, I take computer in hand to write about religion, a thread that laces its way through my entire life. The paper can be divided into three parts: Decades of unquestioning innocence, a period of upheaval and questioning, and that, followed by years of unbridled adventure.

### A.

In my innocence period, one evidence of religion was my father saying grace at meals. His prayer, delivered from memory, was said so rapid-fire, I could only make out the last few words: "forgive us our sins and save us in heaven amen." His background was Church of Christ, and they teach that a person only learns they're going to heaven when they actually die and get there.

Another evidence of religion was books. During my early childhood in the 30s, my parents would not have spent money on a book, any book, except school textbooks. The nation was in a Depression, and the purchase of a book would have been a luxury. However, two new books graced our living room coffee table because one of my older brothers, to earn money for college, sold religious books door to door in North Carolina.

His enlistment in the army resulted in his sample case's being dumped at our house. One book, an enormous, family-sized King James Version of the Bible, and the other A Child's Bible Reader, my favorite. I liked the pictures with the stories and still remember the illustration of Joseph—of the coat of many colors fame—being drawn from a well and sold into slavery by his cruel older brothers.

Saturday night meant a bath in a galvanized tub on our kitchen floor and a white shirt with suspenders Sunday morning. Mother sent my sister and me off to Sunday school at the First Methodist Church, its four-columned entrance the only striking architectural structure in our small town. In season, we took roses for the Sunday school classroom and 10 cents each for the offering. As soon as my sister, older by two years, figured out that a cherry phosphate at the Rexall Drug Store cost 5 cents, the dimes were split: half for Sunday school and half for the drug store.

One Sunday pastor Rogers marched my class to the parsonage next door to the church, talked to us, then returned us to the church where he sprinkled our heads with water and made us all Methodists. When I told my mother, standing at the kitchen sink, I saw her tear and knew I had pleased her. It probably conjured up the ghost of her late father, an itinerant Methodist preacher who had preached in at least seven states, from Tennessee to New Mexico.

In January of 1942, World War II had just begun. Our family moved from Wilson, population 1,700, to Ardmore, the county seat, population 17,000. I never saw a plane overhead, but at an air force training field nearby, men flew B-17s, called "flying fortresses," well-built machines with guns on all sides to defend against fighter planes encountered in battle. Housing was critical, and my dad, a builder and contractor, was never out of work.

My sister and I attended Sunday school at the First Methodist Church each Sunday for a period, but when we dropped out, no one took notice of it. We lived on G Street, and Ross Hughes had built a small Baptist church on K Street. First my oldest brother and his wife joined, followed by my sister, then eventually, I joined.

One benefit from my membership was being accepted by adults outside my family circle. I looked normal, but I had no friends. I felt largely ignored by everyone, including my family. I began to see myself as a person.

Another benefit came from a youth group that met Sunday evenings before worship, called the Baptist Young People's Union. Each week we had a program where we were in charge. Lessons from denominational literature were divided into five parts and assigned to class members. They could read their part, comment on it, or make up something of their own. Everyone got a taste of public speaking. I was excruciatingly shy, and the BYPU experience broke the shell. I emerged, not quickly or easily, but I made it out.

During my freshman year at Oklahoma Baptist University, I felt an urge to enter the ministry. I interpreted it as a call from God, so at mid-year, I switched my major from music to English, more appropriate for a future minister. I paid tuition for my first two years working as a janitor for the university's music practice hall. Because I could play the piano with some flair, I was invited to play for church revival meetings that lasted a weekend, a week, or two weeks. Churches' love offerings paid for most of my last two years' tuition.

The term Civil Rights was catching on, and a speaker from California visiting OBU said that people of color were being accepted by whites there. At 21, I had never met even one black person—not on the playground, in school, or in sports. The idea of meeting and interacting with people of other races attracted me. So, a week after graduating from OBU, I arrived in Berkeley, California to enroll in the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

My first day there, I visited Dr. Smith's summer class in World Missions. When the class ended, Jimmie Dotson introduced himself and said his church had a mission in need of a pastor. I had little cash, so I needed to find work quickly. I didn't know Jimmie, but I thought, *Manna from heaven! My first day in California, and I am being recruited.*

Jimmie pastored a fairly successful church in Santa Rosa 50 miles north of Berkeley. I later learned that his method was to recruit tadpoles like me and scatter them across northern California to establish missions. He said his church had a mission in Klamath that needed a pastor. Was I interested?

Of course, I was. I needed a job.

In Oklahoma, a church would sponsor a mission, pay a pastor, and secure a building. The mother church supported the mission until it had grown enough to organize as a separate entity. That process was totally unfamiliar to Jimmie.

He failed to mention that he had sent young men to Klamath twice, and each time they had given up and left. However, two of his deacons ferried me overnight to Klamath, dropped me on the sidewalk in front of Berg's Motel, gave me about \$10, and drove away. There was no mission, and I found myself 350 miles from the seminary. However, I did not see myself as a victim. I was a man on a mission.

During the years I was in Klamath, I never received any money from Dotson or the Santa Rosa church. The deacons who had delivered me brought a 1939 Chevy coupe so I had transportation, but it was not a gift. I paid for it.

I got to work and rented a hall from Tony, who functioned like a mayor of Klamath. It was a former skating rink on Highway 101, Klamath's main street, and I posted a sign with the hours and days on the front of the building. I went door to door as I had done many times in Oklahoma, and we opened for business July 29, 1952.

The hall was one cavernous room with a stage, so I lined up chairs in a corner, pushed an upright piano off the stage, and waited for the rush. Gordie Calder and his little brother appeared for Sunday school. I played; we sang; I taught the lesson; they left for home. Around 11:00 a man and woman appeared. I played, we sang, I took an offering and preached, we prayed, and they went home. Day one.

Running low on funds, I was conserving money by eating in my motel room: cold cereal with milk for breakfast, and cheese and lettuce sandwiches the other two meals of the day. I got a job at a plywood mill, but I only lasted two weeks because I did not know what I was doing.

They fired me, but I had two weeks income to boost me a little bit. Still I needed a job. I expected and received nothing from the mother church, and our church offerings went into a building fund. I briefly considered asking my family in Oklahoma for money, but I decided that I was a man and would not do it.

Finally, I had one source left. In desperation I prayed. I knelt by my bedside in the motel room and said something like, "God, I'm here because you sent me. I'm not leaving. If I starve to death and die out in the middle of Hwy 101, so be it. I'm in your hands. I trust you to take care of me." Into my heart flowed a sense of peace and serenity. I knew things were going to work out.

I walked about less than half a mile out of town to the Simpson Redwood mill that opened after being shut down for two weeks for summer refurbishing and stood in line near the bridge that entered the camp alongside about 12 or so other men seeking jobs. From an old-fashioned, yellow, long-nosed bus hauling commuters from Crescent City emerged Sid Conley, the green chain foreman, wearing a green felt hat and sporting a red nose. He walked along the line I stood in, asking each what experience we had. I confessed I had none.

The mill started up, and lumber began pouring out of the mill, moving down the green chain. Several employees had left and not said goodbye, so when Sid saw a vacancy, he motioned for a man to take a position. Every time he signaled with his arm, I raised my hand. Every time I raised my hand, he shook his head no, not you, and chose another man. He did it 3 or 4 times and finally disappeared into the mill office, presumably to make out timecards for the new employees. The other men left. I stood there, feeling like an abandoned rag doll.

After a while, Sid came out of the office and walked towards me. I don't know what he thought. I was 21 years old, 6 foot 4 inches tall, and weighed 124 lbs.—not your ideal body type for a lumberjack. I could hardly believe my ears when he said, "Do you think you could toss that lumber onto the resort chain?"

Was he kidding? I would do it with my teeth if I had a job. I was employed and quickly moved into the men's bunkhouses.

During the next three years, the church accumulated around 30 members, including the town's postmaster, and a UC Berkeley graduate in forestry engineering whose wife Wilda was church treasurer. I had commuted eight months completing a year of seminary, had married, and become a father. We organized as an independent church. I resigned, and we moved to Berkeley to continue seminary. (Seven months later, the mighty Klamath River flooded, and the entire town was washed out into the Pacific Ocean.)

The next four years is a Jackson Pollack painting. Betty did substitute teaching, and I got two parttime jobs: directing music at the Thirty-Fifth Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland and giving piano and accordion lessons. I gave up those jobs when the Second Baptist in San Leandro employed me full time for about a year. When that failed, we returned to Berkeley. I got a job as desk clerk at the Berkeley YMCA and continued there until I graduated in 1959 at age 28.

Reflecting on those years, I now wonder, how can someone pop out three more babies in so short a time? Easy. Ask Betty and me. We both had grown up in households that never, ever mentioned sex. The culture we grew up in never admitted that sex existed, and information about birth control was unheard of. I never imagined a place where I could walk into a drug store, buy condoms, and walk out unashamed. No one loved me enough to take me aside and tell me about the birds and the bees. The result? Leigh came in November 1956, John in November 1957, and Penny in November 1958. We loved them all, but they clearly outnumbered us.

With my Master of Divinity degree in hand and a family of six, I had no job prospects in any church in California. I continued at the YMCA, 40 hours a week.

One day Clyde Skidmore entered the "Y" and introduced himself. He asked me if I would consider being minister of music and education at his church in Concord, just over the hill from Berkeley. The salary they offered would double our family income instantly. No way could I refuse.

After a few years in Concord, Clyde Skidmore moved on to a larger venue. His replacement struggled to assert his leadership. I had seniority over him, so, in effect, I was in his way. The invitation to move to White Avenue Baptist in Pomona in Los Angeles County in the same capacity came at the right time. It was a step up for me, a larger church and better salary. During the five years we spent there, White Avenue church also got a new pastor. I was approached by the First Southern Baptist Church in Fresno, a flagship church among California Southern Baptists that had registered 1,000 in Sunday school attendance, and many of the state's Southern Baptist leaders were members there. I accepted their offer.

However, by the end of my first year, I was in what I now believe to be a deep depression. I could place a small amount of blame on the church. They had just lost a popular pastor and a highly qualified music director. Their pastor had moved to Florida and the music director had misbehaved in some way I have no knowledge of and had to leave. But when popular leaders exit, no matter the circumstances, those who take their places are at a disadvantage. They always fail by comparison. The minister and I failed at every turn.

However, the more important factor for me was that I held a position I was not qualified for. I could plan and lead worship, but when it came to choral conducting, I had no training and was not qualified. I had never sung in a choral group to observe the role and style of a conductor. I had skated for 11 years on the good will of the churches.

I also realized I was not suited to the professional ministry. A minister views himself as shepherd of the flock, a nurturer of souls. From the practical viewpoint, he is a salesman. He has salvation to sell. A new member is a mark of success. If he is not a successful fisher of men, he must leave the ministry or spend his life working in small venues with no future. I could never sell cars or religion.

A square peg in a round hole, I resigned and enrolled in the university to complete requirements for a teacher's credential. I think I fit the category: "Those who can, do. Those who can't teach."

We were happy moving our membership to a smaller church. When the popular pastor resigned, his replacement, a graduate of a hyper-conservative Baptist seminary in Dallas, Texas, preached on a passage from the New Testament that directs wives to be quiet in church. If they wanted to know something, the passage commands, ask their husbands at home. In the parking lot, before the car doors were shut, my wife said, "We're not going back there." And we didn't. We ended up attending a Presbyterian church for several years.

My theological needle had not moved for 25 years. I still believed the same doctrines and theological concepts I learned as a youth. I had not grown mentally or spiritually. My religion was a fixed block that did not admit of questions or investigation. I was doing God's will and questioning it would have been apostasy.

## B.

Bill Tregelboff, a clinical psychologist who led a men's Bible study group, kick-started my period of doubt and confusion was. We met each Friday morning at a restaurant. Still clinging to Baptist ideas and practices that taught that all believers are missionaries, I asked Bill one Friday why he did not press members of our group to be soul winners.

Bill asked me to read Matthew 25 and tell him what I thought about it. In it, Jesus tells the story of a great king on his throne. Gathered before him are all nations. He divided the audience like a shepherd separates sheep and goats, then he invited those on his right hand to enter the kingdom. He explains to them, "I was hungry, you fed me; homeless, and you took me in; ill, and you cared for me; in prison, and you visited me. I was naked, and you gave me clothing."

They said, "We don't recall doing any of those things for you."

He said, "When you did it for the least of my brothers, that was the same as doing it for me. Come on in."

He barred the people on his left. When they complained, he said they had done none of the things the first group had done, and they were refused entrance.

For the first time, I realized all those masses were taken into the kingdom, not because they believed the right things, or were baptized and attended church, or prayed, or tithed, or were soul winners. Instead, they had spent their lives serving people in need. I had believed and preached Ephesians 2:8,9—that faith in Jesus was the only way into the kingdom. Suddenly, I found myself on the horns of a dilemma.

Every church that has a creed, as well as those who use belief in the Bible as their creed, emphasize what a person must believe to follow Jesus, not how to live the life of a follower. Candidates for membership may be questioned about their beliefs; never about their behavior. Beliefs are primary, the first step.

Following that revelation, two major events shook the walls of my theological castle. The first was reading "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism" by John Shelby Spong. In his book, the renegade bishop questioned beliefs formulated in the late 1800s, the most popular idea being that Jesus died as a substitute for sinners, and faith in him brought people back into fellowship with God. Most Protestant churches accept the statements formulated in the late 1800s; they called them fundamentals. We get *fundamentalism* from this group.

In the Friday morning Bible study, after all the others had left, I confided to the current leader, Dr. Ernest Iden Bradley, that I was having doubts about the concept of substitutionary atonement. His reply shook me. "Wayland," he said, "it's only a theory."

And now, here was Spong, questioning—like me! Suddenly, I could breathe. I found myself in No-Man's-Land without a fixed faith, questioning ideas I had spent my life advocating,

A second assault came when a group of 70 scholars, assembled by Robert Funk, gathered to ask the question: Did Jesus actually say things ascribed to him in the gospels. For years, the seminar's work made front page headlines of major newspapers. "The Five Gospels," published by the Jesus Seminar, included a fifth gospel, the Gospel of Thomas discovered in 1945 in upper Egypt. The book told no acts of Jesus but consisted of 116 sayings ascribed to Jesus.

*(Note: To qualify as a Bible scholar, one must have facility in six or seven languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, French, Coptic, and English. To contribute to the world of scholarship, they must know what others have written in all those languages to be sure they are not walking paths that have already been explored and they are plowing new ground. Scholars live in a sparsely populated universe and spend much of their time talking to each other.)*

The Five Gospels sold in the hundreds of thousands and is still available. They printed the words of Jesus in four colors, red, pink, gray, and black. The words scholars felt came from Jesus' mouth were in red. Sentences that had ideas but not the exact words of Jesus were printed in pink. Sentences they doubted were from Jesus were colored gray, and sentences they were sure did not come from Jesus' mouth were in black. Their work challenged every idea about Jesus held by groups that used their interpretations of the Bible as a basis of their faith.

To the question: Who was Jesus? the Seminar answered: he was a Cynic philosopher. Cynics rejected conventional desires for wealth, power, fame, and social status. Essentially, if society said you needed those things

to be happy, Jesus said you were better off without them. He roamed from town to town, taught any who would gather, prayed and fasted, and relied on his audience for food and a place to sleep. He owned nothing.

Then, along came Bart Ehrman at Chapel Hill University in North Carolina, challenging the 70 scholars. Based on a few sentences in the gospels, he was persuaded that Jesus was not a Cynic philosopher but an apocalyptic prophet who mistakenly believed history would be concluded soon, time would cease, and the world would be judged.

Challenged by Spong, the Jesus Seminar, and Bart Ehrman, my beliefs trembled like leaves on an aspen tree, yet I never thought of leaving my conservative sanctuary. Where would I go? I knew of no options.

We "had the preacher for lunch" each Sunday. By that I mean, on the way home from worship at the Presbyterian church, I dissected and rejected much of what the minister said. We finally gave up church attendance, my wife settling for a televangelist Robert Schuler, and I, still seeking and asking questions, drifting without much direction.

### C.

In time, I had an experience that, to almost anyone's ears, sounds bizarre. Here's what happened. I had paid the FoodMaxx grocery cashier and was headed for the exit. Without warning, I had a sense of a Presence. That Presence changed in a flash how I saw everything. It might not have been God, but it seemed godlike. I knew immediately my life was changed, and I would never be the same again.

My perception of god was blown away. No longer sitting on a throne, glowing like a neon tube, judging me, having body parts, ruling a kingdom, surrounded by angels, needing to have his ego stroked—all gone.

I could not "go away" from the Presence, as if it were an object, nor could I "come to" it. I was already there. I and the universe are in the Presence constantly, when I was behaving positively or in a negative way—sinning. It was everywhere, all the time. I use air as a metaphor: rarely discussed, but always present and essential for life.

Trying to describe the Presence, I have trouble applying adjectives—like ugly, beautiful, charming, not loving, just, or wise—nothing. I had a similar problem with verbs—like love, hate, reject, mourn, etc., things humans do. Does the Presence "do" things like an actor on the stage?

However, I will confess the copulative verb "is" works for me. I am comfortable with the answer Moses got from the burning bush when he asked, "Who should I tell Pharaoh sent me."

The answer he got was, "Tell him I AM sent you." I cannot add to those two words. For that reason, I coined the word: GodPresent—present and real.

It was a stretch, but I asked if the Presence were there when I was only a teenager? I was guilted into becoming a Baptist by an evangelist who proclaimed, "What is done in secret will be shouted from the housetops." I had learned to masturbate. I assumed it was sinful. I trembled to think my habit might be shouted from the

housetops. Was god present then? Yep. That idea put to rest the premise that good pleases god but evil doesn't. The Presence is in all, good and evil.

Today, I cannot imagine a god who can be described in human language with human characteristics or parts. A seminary professor, Dr. James McClendon, lectured for hours on end about the Nature of God. I did not understand a word he said. Given 60 years to think about it, I can at least start a discussion.

If there is interaction between god and humans, those interactions can never be the same because while god might not change, all humans do. I think of it this way. If there were a universal solution, mixing it with other substances would always get different results because one element stays the same, the other is always different. Mix sugar with coffee, tea, banana pudding, chocolate, Brussel sprouts, or onions, and the results would always vary. There would be no duplicates. Again, if there is interaction between god and humans, the results would never be identical for any two individuals.

So, my path that began with an age of innocence and drifted into a universe of questions and uncertainties, continues with an experience impossible to describe or to deny. It is a joyous state, full of surprises, still paddling, thrilled with the Presence in the Sea of Uncertainty.

Postscript:

After reading the account of my journey, some people ask me, "Are you a Christian?"

They usually affirm they are, meaning that, by an act of will, they have placed their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus with the hope of gaining salvation and an eternal home in heaven. Or, they have subscribed to a creed that for them sums up the Christian movement. Often, they acknowledge the other side of the coin, that those who do not place their faith in Jesus or the creed will not be saved and will not have a home in heaven when they die.

Their claim to believe the Bible is usually based on the interpretation of small parts of the Bible they consider critical. They are often not well informed about what the rest of the Book says or teaches, and they get little help from preachers, whose job is not to teach the Bible but to "preach the Word." Religious leaders use the Bible as both a carrot and a stick, to persuade members of their audience to choose the path they have laid out. They are not teachers, nor are they bad people. They are salesmen.

For example, Mother Teresa took seriously Jesus' words to "sell all you have, give to the poor, and take up your cross and follow me." I doubt the person who is now reading this has followed that directive. So, you must also ask yourself, *Am I a Christian?* But I digress.

To me, being a Christian has almost nothing to do with what I think or believe. It has everything to do with how I live. Knowing what little I know about Jesus, his injunctions to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, to give to those in need, and return good for evil, I would say yes . . . I am a Christian . . . sometimes.

The Bible story of Moses and the burning bush is told in 615 words. The story of Jacob wrestling with an angel is 255 words. My experience is related in 74 words. I am a numbers aficionado; I count things.