

NORTHERN LIGHT

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Great Is Their Faithfulness

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Hopefully you will agree with me when I observe that the place of the Christian church in Canada has changed in the last 50 years. The relevance of faith and in particular the Christian faith seems to be on the wane.

Many Canadians simply do not have a need for Christianity. Numerous observers list a number of different reasons for this trend. From my perspective,

as a pastor in a smaller Prairie community, I think there are two things at work here.

First, Canadians live in a world full of distractions and we are bombarded by so many different activities and messages in our day-to-day life. It is simply just too easy to be busy, being busy.

Second, and to me the most significant trend, is that most Canadians simply do not feel they have a need for God. When I compare the faith lives of those in what we would call the third world, this seems to be the case.

Does a society that has healthcare, a social safety net, and is driven by consumerism, really have a need for God? In some respects Canadians have become 'god' in their own lives. Add to that, the prevailing mood change that views Christians as a bunch of narrow-minded bigots or cultural dinosaurs and one quickly realizes why people reject the Christian message.



I believe that all these forces at play in our society make it harder, not easier, to be a follower of Jesus. In many ways our battle isn't against persecution because of our faith (unlike our brothers and sisters in the Middle East or other regions of the world). Our personal struggle to remain faithful involves refusing to fall into an attitude of society's general apathy when it comes to matters of faith.

So where does this leave us?

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Of course one can turn to books in the Bible such as Hebrews to gain some important points to consider when our faith is waning. It was written to a group of Christians who were apparently considering walking away from the Christian faith and returning to their previous belief system (in this case Judaism). Hence the admonition: “Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching” (Hebrews 10: 25 The Message).

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Being actively involved in Christian community certainly helps. But is that all we need to consider when dealing with faithfulness?

If it is, we are forgetting the most important aspect of faithfulness. Simply put, the Triune God has been faithful to us before we even knew of his existence (see the next article by Neil Earle).

Time and time again, I am reminded of this truth when I sing “Great is Thy Faithfulness” at church on a Sunday morning:

“Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

“Great is Thy faithfulness!” “Great is Thy faithfulness!”
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!

In his weekly blog for September 22, 2015, Lutheran teacher and theologian, David Lose, summed up the faithfulness of God by making the following observation: “Remember, the cross was not the way by which Jesus made it possible for God to love us, but rather was God’s message through Jesus that we were and are loved all along” (<http://www.davidlose.net>).

Great is his faithfulness.

Bill Hall

Staying Faithful: Why The Incarnation Matters

One of my high school principals had a favorite saying, “Well begun is half done.”

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I found this to be true across life. If you have a project to do—especially one you’d rather dodge—get jumping into it quickly and you begin to generate momentum to get the chore accomplished.

The harder challenge, however, is to live up to what Jesus counseled the church in first century Smyrna: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

There are other scriptures that challenge us on this subject of remaining faithful to our Christian calling:

- Proverbs 20:6: “A faithful man who can find?”
- Luke 16:10: “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much” (KJV).
- 1 Corinthians 4:2: “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”

There are also sterling Bible examples of faithfulness given to us as examples:

- Moses is described as being faithful as a servant over God’s house (Hebrews 3:5).
- David could say at the end of his life he had been faithful to God’s trust (2 Samuel 22:22).
- The apostle Paul could rejoice at the end of his life that he had finished the race, kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:6).

Yet somehow these examples of people who stayed faithful through thick and thin and encouraged us to do likewise—somehow these passages can have a different effect than intended. We Christians are not the strong and mighty, not the all-conquering heroes (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). We are described as weak, foolish, lacking in steadfastness which is how the apostle James described faithfulness (James 1:3).

God’s Initiative

Maybe you have felt that way. I know I sure have. It seems like every time we face a severe trial in life we go back to square one, wondering about our spiritual foundations. If you have, there is some good news for you. I find much encouragement in the particular school of theology that our denomination advocates.

The official title for it is “incarnational theology,” or sometimes “incarnational Trinitarian theology.” When we get inside these terms we find much encouragement. We learn—oh joy of joys—that just as with the subject of faith, the call to faithfulness in our lives is rooted in the supreme fact of the Christian’s relationship with Jesus Christ. When he comes to live inside us through the Spirit, we have all that we need to endure to the end.



Let's explain that.

Outside the door of our GCI home office in Glendora, California a quote from John's Gospel is written on the wall: "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I in you" (John 14:20). This seemingly 'mystical phrase' is amplified by Jesus a few verses later: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

To the believer, these verses are a potent tonic, an encouragement to sound Christian living. This is big a part of incarnational teaching. It is tied to the miracle of God the Father and God the Son coming to live inside us through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is also a forceful reminder that— thank God—our salvation does not begin or end with us.

The Reformers clarified this for all time. The initiative in salvation does not rest with us. It is a feature of the Father, Son and Spirit calling us, leading us to repentance, and helping us, every day, to endure in the Christian life.

Let's see how that works.

Jesus working for us

When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended like a dove upon him and the Father's voice was heard (Matthew 3:16-17). That was a Trinitarian experience. Wherever Jesus was, the Father and Spirit was also, that is why he was never alone (John 16:32).

But did you ever wonder why Jesus was baptized? He had no sins to repent of.

The leading Trinitarian theologian of our time, Thomas Torrance, explained this. One of his themes is how Jesus took onto and into himself our weakness and shakiness and perfected it by his own

obedience. That is the great regeneration God worked out in Jesus and is now working out inside us. The experience of repentance must never escape us (Ephesians 2:1-5). For when we grasp how God was involved with us even before we first responded to him it means we can have a living hope that we can finish the race as well.

Says Torrance: "Repentance is the submission of the sinner to the divine judgment and pardon—this was the repentance into which Christ was baptized at the Jordan and into which he stepped in his temptations in the wilderness where he fasted and prayer while suffering the assault of evil and chose the way of the cross." (Torrance, *Atonement*, page 68).

Jesus repented and was baptized on our behalf. For remember, we could never mount a "perfect" repentance in 100 lifetimes. We sometimes forget that we never would have started out on this Christian life unless we had been first called by God. Even our repentance was the gift of God (Romans 2:4). We forget that when we sometimes ascribe repentance to our own efforts.

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The wonderful good news is that God sets forth Jesus as our vicarious substitute, i.e. "in our place". He was baptized for the whole human race. Torrance hastens to add: "Far from meaning that we do not have to repent, Christ's vicarious repentance demands of us an even more radical repentance, for it demands the total recognition that his is the only true baptism, baptism into repentance."

The Author and Finisher

Here is where the phrase "well begun is half done" is a useful one. Jesus set the example. Our start on the Christian road was a gift of Christ—the goodness of God led to our repentance—and he will see us through to the end. That is, if we never forget that we live this Christian life from beginning to end only by the faith of the Son of God active inside us. This is why Jesus is called the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

"Faith" and "faithfulness" are not exactly the same but they are closely enough connected that we can grasp that only the faithfulness of Christ will see us through.

Jesus as the incarnate Son of God renewed and sanctified the human race as he passed through all the stages of the human life cycle. Even before birth his presence stirred John in the womb (Luke 1:41). As a baby he was a refugee fleeing to Egypt and only by a hair's breath escaped the trauma of early childhood. Very early he took upon himself our suffering.

At twelve he confounded the wise doctors of the law. As a man he interacted with men and women, sinners and Pharisees, Centurions and children and yet no one could convict him of sin.

This is why some call the Incarnation the greatest miracle. Jesus, God in the flesh, redeemed and cleansed all flesh from inside us by perfect obedience. He now dwells inside us through the Spirit by the will of the Father. He daily imparts his own faithfulness to us. This is the incarnational and Trinitarian work of God inside us.

Why the Lord's Supper

And yet, as Torrance well knew, we still have to walk by faith, not by sight, in this fallen and treacherous world. This is why Jesus himself laid stress on the need to endure as the future dimension of the Gospel.

This is one of the meanings of the distinctively Christian ceremony of the bread and wine. Jesus gave the Lord's Supper not only as a reenactment of his life and death for us but, also as a pointer to the future. To the coming Kingdom which exists in some measure now but which will come into its fullness at his Second Coming.

To endure to the end without the active presence of Jesus inside us is impossible (John 15:5). Living faithfully to the end is a challenge to our faith. But to see Jesus manifested symbolically through the bread and the wine on a regular basis is to call us to a vision of the Kingdom, a focused reenactment of a once and future event. Through the communion we symbolically take Jesus inside us. St. Paul said it well: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). We feed on him (John 6:54). With him on our side we are able to counteract the "cares of this life."

Here is an often forgotten aspect of the Lord's Supper—the pointer to the future reconciliation of God and humanity, the future union of mortal and immortal, visible and invisible, spiritual and material. As Torrance says: "Baptism and the Communion service make it clear that the kingdom is among us not in word only, not in Spirit only, but in deed and in power, as a real act in time enacted in our flesh and blood" (*Incarnation*, page 340).

The Lord's Supper reminds us how much has been done for us. The table is prepared by others, the wine and bread are placed on the table by others, the call to worship is performed by others, the invitation is offered by others. The whole setting recalls words which Jesus said to his disciples on the beach in Lake Galilee when he offered them his marvelous invitation: "Come and have breakfast" (John 21:12).

Baptism and communion remind us that our salvation begins and ends in Christ alone. We are carried to our appointed destination by stronger arms than ours (Deuteronomy 33:27). It is Jesus who begins the work of God inside us and it is he who made the perpetual reminder of his saving work available to us through the Lord's Supper.

How great then, is God's action on our behalf! Torrance sums this up when he explains what was in God's mind in the incarnation: "God in Christ is burdened with the griefs and pains of men and women...in Christ Jesus, his incarnate Son, God himself enters into the destructive power of evil and so hazards, as it were, his very existence and being as God for the sake of mankind."

Ultimately then it this divine love that moves God's plan forward and undergirds his actions on our behalf. Christ in us cannot, will not fail. This is expressed in a very moving hymn titled "O the Deep Deep, Love of Jesus" which ends with:

"How he watches o'er his loved ones
Died to call them all his own;
How for them he interceded,
Watches o'er them from the throne."

Our salvation begins and ends in Jesus. With that assurance we are able to remain faithful.

Neil Earle