

Memories (Part 3)

This section of my personal memories deals in large part (not exclusively) with ministry-related memories rather than personal ones, and covers a period of some 20 years from 1995 until the present. I include it because, number one, these are special memories in my life, and secondly, they testify to the faithfulness and leading of God as Judy and I endeavored to be obedient to our calling as believers, spouses, parents, and missionaries.

Russia

We were in the process of completing our fourth term of service in Panama when a phone call came from Brother Eugene Waddell, director of the Foreign (now International) Missions Department. Would Judy and I consider transferring from Panama to Russia? After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, God had opened doors to Russia and all the former Soviet Union countries, and there was the possibility of Free Will Baptists partnering with the Russian Baptist Union, most of whom were very close to us doctrinally. This was the spring of 1995.''

As we finished up that term and came to the states, with plans to visit Russia with someone from the mission that year, our feeling was that we would be transferring. I picked up some Russian grammar books, a traveler's course, and other resources, thinking that would help prepare me. By the time we went in October 1995, I had learned several phrases and lots of individual words.

The trip was unforgettable. We traveled with Jimmy Aldridge (Overseas Secretary with FWB International Mission) and Galen Dunbar (board member). We met Brother Nicolai Sobolev, pastor and leader in the Russian Baptist Union, and what a wonderful host he was! We traveled from Moscow to Chelyabinsk, and then

to Yekaterinburg. We attended a conference in Moscow with many Russian pastors and leaders, and a number of expatriates. What a humbling experience to listen to Russian pastors relate their experiences of time spent in prison, torture and isolation. Their faithfulness to our God came through in their testimonies. Through impossible situations, they labored to keep the church alive in Russia.

As a result of that amazing conference, and through an extended season of prayer and reflection, we reluctantly told Brother Waddell that we didn't feel the Lord's leading to go to Russia. At that time, we did not know why God said no. A year or so later, Mike and Cathy Corley were appointed to do what we were asked to do and they did it so much better than we could have!. He knew Russian and could begin ministry without the years of language study. Don't second guess God. His ways are always perfect.

Director of Field Operations

In not choosing to go to Russia, we opted to return to Panama for a fifth term. That concluded in the middle of 1999, and we moved to Nashville to be near our oldest two sons (Michael was married and Phillip was a senior at Welch), and to enroll David in Bible College. Stateside assignment usually lasted a year or so, and involved visiting churches, speaking in mission conferences, attending associational meetings, and other mission-related opportunities. I was in western Missouri in an area-wide mission conference when one unusually warm November afternoon I received a call from James Forlines, who had become General Director of the Mission in 1998.

Bro. James told me he was considering me as a possibility for the Foreign Missions (now International Missions) administrative staff. Was I interested and willing to be considered? I could take some time and think and pray, talk it

over with Judy, etc. We prayed earnestly, considered the possibilities and implications as to what it would mean for us, and in early January 2000, I called and told Bro. James that if he selected me for the position, I would accept. In mid-January, I became the Director of Field Operations.

It was my role to supervise and coordinate the efforts of our field personnel. I had an office in Nashville, and from there traveled to approximately 20 countries over the next eight years. It was truly a great adventure, a challenge beyond anything I could have imagined. Thanks to the Lord's enablement, I was a part of several initiatives that enabled us as a people to have a greater impact around the world: partnership with Bible Mission International in Central Asia, the creation of the position of Regional Director which served us well for a number of years, although it has now been eliminated, the creation of the Hanna Project, and ongoing efforts with our international Free Will Baptist family. One of my most special memories was going to Bulgaria with Clint Morgan and Tim Awtrey to survey that country as a potential field of service for our mission, and later making that recommendation to our Board. The Board approved opening Bulgaria, and today, nearly 15 years later, God is working there in a mighty way through four missionary couples and a growing number of Bulgarian believers.

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc

In 1992 a historic event happened for Free Will Baptists around the world. Panama was host to a consultation that would bring representatives from a number of countries where our missionaries served. Spearheaded by Dr. Melvin Worthington, Executive Secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, USA, the consultation became the catalyst for an international movement.

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc. was officially organized in 1995 in Brazil. They decided to meet every three years. I missed the 1995 and 1998 meetings in Brazil and Uruguay, respectively, but starting in 2002 (we skipped 2001 because it was so close to the terrorist attacks of 9-11), I attended every meeting through 2010, plus a number of executive committee meetings on off years as a translator-advisor, or as a member of the committee. Bro. Worthington decided to postpone the next session until 2002, and we met near Nashville, Tennessee at Camp Garner Creek. We met in Panama in 2004, France in 2007, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 2010.

We'd basically meet every three years or so for a general assembly. The other years I would help coordinate an executive committee meeting, sometimes as a liaison and sometimes as a member of that committee. Working with men like Gerardo Acevedo (Uruguay), José Manuel Parrón (Spain), Luis Felipe Tijerina (México), and others remains a joy I can't adequately describe and has led to some treasured friendships as well.

Panamá, Part II

God is truly a God of surprises. I had served as Director of Field Operations at International Missions, truly loved it, and was able to visit around 20 countries during those years. However, I was having some health issues (turned out to be sleep apnea at the time, and later some more problems), and I also began to sense some unrest in my spirit that perhaps it was time to leave and find a different ministry. The Lord graciously opened doors. I would leave the position of DFO, but stay on with the Mission. The original plan was to stay involved with the International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches and help countries that had received the gospel from Free Will Baptist in the United States develop plans and strategies to begin sending out their own cross-

cultural missionaries. At the same time, it was felt that Judy and I should have a field ministry somewhere, so we decided to divide that role between Panama (helping the Bowermans at the seminary) and Uruguay (teaching Bible institute classes). However, by the end of 2008, Eddie's health had deteriorated, and he was going to have to return stateside immediately and go on a liver transplant waiting list. We made a trip to Panama in early January 2009 to meet with Eddie and LaRhonda Bowerman getting a crash course in the operations of the Seminary in Chame. Someone would need to assume leadership of the seminary, and it seemed that the Lord had brought us back to Panama for that hour. We served the next five-plus years in Chame, which turned out to be some of the most rewarding years of ministry. But it was not easy. The daily schedule was exhausting, on call 24/7, readjusting to the heat and humidity of Panama, and responsibilities without number. My undiagnosed health problems also left me extremely tired most of the time. Only God can be credited with giving us strength for each new day.

Judy had some flowers planted around the porch of the dorm where we were living. The beautiful small purple flowers bloomed every morning and then faded away in the heat of the day. Judy said they reminded her of Lamentations 3:23, "They (God's mercies) are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness." It was a reminder every morning when we walked out the door, that God is faithful and His mercy to us is new and refreshing each day.

Another blessing to us was how God sent us Ariadna and Lazaro Riesgo from Cuba to help us in the seminary! "God sent" is putting it lightly! They came and stepped in immediately relieving us of many of the duties we had.

Also, the churches in Panama were seeing the importance of the seminary and taking ownership. Pastors were willing to dedicate two days a week to teach classes and this was essential. We had students in three different years so it was

necessary to have three classes simultaneously. Not only was it a great help to us but the students learned from seasoned pastors. Another benefit was the pastors caught the vision and shared it with their congregations.

It is hard to believe that we're talking about nearly 20 years here. From a middle-aged couple with children still at home to watching those same children grow up, go off to college (all went to Free Will Baptist Bible College, now Welch College), meet their future spouse, get married, and start their own family. Now we're grandparents, several times over, but "greatly blessed, highly favored." As the old saying goes, "how time has flown!"

Bethany

A highlight of 2014 for us was our trip to Peru to see David, Bethany, and their three children; Isaac, Jude, and Naomi. Peru is a beautiful country, Lima is a fascinating city, and being with the kids was special. We actually had them to ourselves for a few days while David and Bethany went away to have a short vacation and celebrate their 10th anniversary. The next time we saw them was just before Christmas 2014 when they flew in to spend their Christmas break with the Lytles Bethany's family in the Huntsville Alabama area. How could I ever forget the night Bethany told us she might have cancer? She didn't feel well from the time they arrived, and kept getting worse. Judy and I were to have gone to Panama on January 7 for a special "Passing the Baton" meeting that weekend in which International Missions was turning the work there over entirely to the National church. Because Bethany was feeling so bad, Judy decided not to go and went down to Huntsville, AL with Sheila Sass. I was to go on to Panama, but that very morning David called to say that cancer had spread throughout Bethany's body. I got the message en route to the airport, so I canceled my trip, went down to Alabama that

morning straight to the hospital. Bethany went home to be with Jesus the next morning around 2:30.

Epilogue

I told one of the editors of Rambling Ever On that the Epilogue would be relatively short. We left Panama as missionaries assigned to that field in 2014 and retired from the Mission in June 2015. Growing health concerns led to an MRI which revealed that I have Intracranial Hypotension, a spinal fluid loss, which causes the brain to sag and, in my case, led to severe headaches, especially when preaching, lack of balance which caused me to not be able to walk a straight line, and even speed up, trip, and fall. To that, we could add lethargy, slurred speech, and delayed reactions that at times made it dangerous to drive. God has been merciful, and though it took a while, we've learned that getting horizontal and resting every day has helped tremendously.

Judy and I have both had a number of health issues, mostly minor, and for that we praise the Lord. It's all part of the aging process. Speaking of aging, our pastor at Cofer's Chapel, Allen Pointer, asked us to serve on staff at the church part time and work with the senior adults and to begin a ministry to internationals. God has allowed us to start a Hispanic ministry, and we now have around 30 Spanish-speaking folks to whom we minister, and whom we're seeking to fully integrate into the life of our church. It's also exciting to get to know our seniors better, especially since we are a part of the group!

At this stage of life, watching our grandkids be born and grow is truly one of life's greatest blessings. We have nine, with another on the way.

The Goodness of Effort

About a year ago today, the wheels were just about to come off completely. How do I know? Well, for starters, Facebook memories. The date is June 9th, 2017. The picture is of my wife, Kate, her mom, and our newborn daughter Analeigh in front of a bus at the Tokorozawa train station. There are half-smiles painted on their faces because that's...just what you do when you're getting a picture taken. What's not visible, though, are the struggles that we were already enduring. The severe depression, the blindness that had crept into Kate's right eye, the misdiagnosis of her having a parasite. The three girls were getting ready to go to the Haneda airport to fly to the US for two weeks to seek treatment for Kate's vision. The same two weeks that would see the beginning of my three-year-old daughter Audrey's battle against multiple severe illnesses in Japanese hospitals. It would be months later before she would be fully, and even miraculously, recovered.

Our first two years in the greater Tokyo area were mostly defined by something that was completely outside of our control. Or rather, our time was defined by an increasingly difficult set of circumstances that removed from us the illusion that we were ever in control to begin with. Somehow this knowledge, living through a storm like this, has changed the way that we view life in a profound way. Most of the time it's hard for us to pin down exactly what that is. One element of our new perspective is the simple knowledge that things can change so drastically and so quickly. That our health can decline rapidly and at any moment. These things can shake us, even unnerve us, if thought of outside of the context of a Sovereign God who reigns over it all. Thankfully, we trust in

a God who “sits enthroned over the Flood” (Psalm 29:10).

In the past year, especially in the past six months or so, my wife and I have been mulling over the idea of “success.” It seems as though, in our culture, the ones who are elevated and admired the most are those select entrepreneurs who not only have big ideas but who also have concepts that somehow see them through to grand fruition. What is their secret to this “success”? What bit of hidden wisdom might be found in their biographies and inspirational thoughts? And these ideas have other, even more implicit questions for our own work: How do I measure success in what I do, or in what I aspire to do, in light of these, what our culture might consider the pinnacle of excellence?

In the introduction to his book “Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work”, Tim Keller writes about a short story of J.R.R. Tolkien’s called “Leaf by Niggle”. In the story, Niggle, a painter, obsesses over one particular painting. In his mind, he sees a beautiful landscape with a tree and very much desires to see it come to life on canvas. Keller writes,

So he worked on his canvas, ‘putting a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there,’ but he never got much done. There were two reasons for this. First it was because he was the ‘sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf...’ trying to get the shading and the sheen and the dewdrops on it just right. So no matter how hard he worked, very little actually showed up on the canvas itself. The second reason was his ‘kind heart.’ Niggle was constantly distracted by doing things his neighbors asked him to do for them.

Later on in the story, Niggle, out on yet another task for a neighbor, gets sick and gets ready to die, his painting far from finished. “‘Oh, dear!’ said poor Niggle, beginning to

weep, 'And it's not even finished!'" After his death, the painting of the leaf is eventually noticed and put in the town museum, viewed by a few people in the years to follow. "But," as Keller continues, "the story does not end there."

After death Niggle is put on a train toward the mountains of the heavenly afterlife. At one point on his trip, he hears two Voices. One seems to be Justice, the severe voice, which says that Niggle wasted so much time and accomplished so little in life. But the other, gentler voice ('though it was not soft'), which seems to be Mercy, counters that Niggle has chosen to sacrifice for others, knowing what he was doing. As a reward, when Niggle gets to the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye. He runs to it—and there it is: 'Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. 'It is a gift!' he said.

Keller then continues, "The world before death—his old country—had forgotten Niggle almost completely, and there his work had ended unfinished and helpful to only a very few. But in his new country, the permanently real world, he finds that his tree, in full detail and finished, was not just a fancy of his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever."

Finally, Keller writes,

If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God's calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. 'In the Lord, your

labor is not in vain,' writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien's story shows how this can ultimately be true of all work. Tolkien had readied himself, through Christian truth, for very modest accomplishment in the eyes of the world.

The story of "Leaf by Niggle" cuts me right to my core. As I was recounting the story to my wife just yesterday, I started to choke back tears. Even now, as I think about it more, the tears yet come. I imagine myself as Niggle, having passed on, yet seeing with new eyes the fulfillment of dreams unrealized. And now, as the kingdom of Christ already begins to break into the present, with new eyes I can already see the great value of sleeping on a rough cot beside the bed of your sick daughter. I can see the restoration of time spent changing diapers or a child's vomit-soaked bed-sheets. I can see the nobility in a fight to the death against a cancer diagnosis. And I can rest in the freedom of the knowledge that even if plans fail and the ship of ambition meets a fiery end on the rocky cliffs, there is inherent goodness in the effort anyway. Though life can often be unpleasant and suffering is always looming around the corner, there is still deep good in cultivating, living, and even enjoying life. Even the simplest things, if done in Christ and for the glory of God, are of deep value and worth.

I've often thought about the great Judgment that is to come, when all of the secrets of men will be brought to light by the omniscient, just Judge, Christ. His grading scale will be based on the heart that was behind the work. Were we producing as a result of being connected to the Vine? And the "last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). Who will be the first? Most likely not those we have called such, or else this statement isn't striking at all. I like to imagine at times all those who have served in ages past, caring for the sick and the elderly, or sweating away under intense physical

labor, or even pushing a broom in a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere. But if they did it with a heart of service to Christ, who is to say that these, forgotten by the world, won't be the first in the kingdom to come? We will all find out together.

Yes, Actually, Marriage Did Solve My Loneliness

Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. [1 Samuel 1:17-18]

Since I was a week away from my 36th birthday when I got married, I frequently read and received advice about singleness and how to deal with it. People told me not to expect marriage to solve issues I had, about everything from lust to loneliness. It is fair to say that marriage has not solved many of my problems but instead has, as you may expect, taught me how selfish and proud I can be.

Yet I cannot deny that as badly as I struggled emotionally with loneliness the last few years before marriage, that this particular struggle was completely eradicated.

The issues I had didn't happen in a vacuum. It wasn't like I began to consciously think that because I was in my mid-30s that I should be married already. Or that this led me to feel discouraged. Until I was 32, in fact, I was quite content

being single and felt no pressure within or from without from people that loved me to get married. Yet I eventually began to experience trials in this area that were beyond my control and at times I did not respond well. And slowly but surely I began to suffer significantly enough with depression and anxiety that for a short time I was actually on a medication called Lexapro. These experiences were the foundation for a theology I've developed on waiting on God, [and how brutally truthful I am willing to be about it.](#)

But marriage changed all of this. My feelings were revolutionized. I have no longer struggled with depression or anxiety even a little bit. To me, it was like the moment in *Return of the King* when Gollum and the One Ring fall into fires of the volcano in Mount Doom. The first time I read those books, it felt like nearly the whole story was consumed in darkness until that moment and then light flooded the pages. The long dark night was finally over. That is what marriage has been like to me. Loneliness was a villain that has been destroyed forever.

There is much about marriage that I love and much that brings joy. And I cannot deny that because I was older when I got married and because I fell so deeply into an abyss before Kayla, that I value the companionship the most. I love it that I have someone to come home to at night. I love it that my wife knows all of my inside jokes and quotes and says them before I can when she knows I'm about to. I love that someone is there to take care of me when I'm sick, and honestly I love even more that I get to take care of someone when they are sick. I love it that when I preach, there is someone I can find in the audience that I can make eye contact with that understands and loves me like no other and makes me feel calm.

For those who have been victims in marriage—be it abuse or abandonment or something similar—or who are still waiting on it, it is not my aim to discourage. We at REO have written to those circumstances many times. I also do not want to

disingenuously paint a picture of what marriage is like. It can be frustrating at times. It can expose the deepest flaws of your soul that you do not want to know about or confront. But if the two people are quick to forgive, as we both have been so far, then the conflict can produce deeper intimacy. And it can be completely overwhelmed most of the time by the joys of companionship.

But the main reason I am writing this is that when people write things like "Don't expect marriage to solve [fill in the blank with whatever]," that often they are correct. But sometimes I do believe we make blanket statements in Christianity that can have exceptions. Yes, I believe my identity should be in Christ and not primarily in my marriage. Yes, I believe that Paul taught we can be content no matter the circumstances. But then I read the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel and how raw and passionate her grief was while childless, and how the news of having a child transformed her emotional state. And I wonder if sometimes God didn't give us the narrative in the Bible to remind us that the more doctrinal sections have exceptions at times. Real life is not always so black and white. I don't know if I could have been content the last few years of my life before marriage. But I know I'm content now that I am married.

Absolute truth is real. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means I do not have to stay dead after I die. Sex outside of marriage is immoral. Those are absolute. Yet in our social media world of articles that begin with things like "5 reasons you should..." and "Don't expect this to happen when you ..." I advocate for more nuanced advice. Oftentimes I have read articles and discovered they are based on preferences and experiences and some Bible verses that may or may not be absolute in their applications. I am not telling you that marriage solves loneliness. It may not for you. It did for me. And based on Hannah's story and God himself declaring it is not good for man to be alone (save the exceptions given by

Jesus in places like Matthew 19:12) and other Scriptures, I have zero issue testifying to it.

But as always, REO opens the floor to our readers for discussion and comments. Please feel free to do so below.

You Don't Know Who Ty Cobb Was?

A baseball great. Record holder. In the first class of Hall of Fame players inducted in 1936. Lifetime batting average of .366 – the highest of all time. Three times batted over .400 for a season. Possibly the greatest player of the early 1900s.

Violent temper with a reputation for viciousness and thought to be a racist.

Some recent studies seem to indicate that some of the things thought to be true about him may not have been factual. (This may have been due to an inept and extremely biased biographer.)

Earlier biographers depicted Cobb as extremely violent, sharpening his spikes and endeavoring to slide into other players and cut them. He is said to have attacked blacks and sought to inflict bodily harm on them. Even Ken Burns of the famous video series *Baseball*, presented that picture of Ty Cobb. In the movie "Field of Dreams," the ghost player Shoeless Joe Jackson talks about not inviting Cobb to come to the magical field because "we hated the ____."

More recent studies seem to show that he was not hatefully racist, was respected by teammates and opponents alike and tried to graciously reach out to fans. He was, according to Charles Leershen, in "Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty," an extremely complex man, far from perfect, but not guilty of many of the things alleged in earlier biographies.

Ty Cobb was born in Georgia in 1886, just 21 years after the Civil War ended. He played for the Detroit Tigers, and because of his attitudes and actions, and being a Southerner, he may have created more problems for himself than he should have.

Interestingly enough, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in 1947, was also born in Georgia, 33 years after Ty Cobb. And recent information would seem to show that Cobb was not against African Americans playing in the major leagues. "The Negro should be accepted wholeheartedly, and not grudgingly," he said. "The Negro has the right to play professional baseball and whose [sic] to say he has not?" And he was proved correct in the years that followed as African Americans reshaped the all-time baseball statistics from that point forward.

Now while I am sure there are those who do, it is likely that most people in China, India, or the heart of Africa would not know who Ty Cobb really was; in fact, he or she would never have even heard of him. Fame is not only fleeting, it's also limited by time and place. In this case, the real and total truth about Tyrus Raymond Cobb is known only to God.

Historical facts, anecdotes, trivia and the like, are interesting, at least to some people, at certain times, and in at least a few places. They do serve as good attention grabbers, make for memorable illustrations, and help transition us to consider more important things. But only one bit of information and only one Individual makes any real difference.

It's not Ty Cobb who must be known – it's Jesus! Jesus, Name above all names. Jesus, who said of Himself "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the father but by me." Jesus, supernatural birth, sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious, bodily resurrection, all to save people from their sins. Jesus, of whom it was said: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."

If Ty Cobb remains unknown except for a small group of baseball aficionados and historians, it will make virtually no difference. But if Jesus is not known – and received – there are eternal consequences. He tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. His name is to be proclaimed in all the earth.

Last, but certainly not least: we must clearly and accurately communicate the message. If indeed historians have missed the boat on what kind of person Ty Cobb was – intentionally or accidentally – that is sad, to be sure. However to miss the message of Jesus, or to transmit or receive a distorted message, is tragic.

There are still hundreds of millions of people who are not only unreached with the gospel – the only message that can save them, remember – but are still unengaged in the sense that no believer or group of believers is plotting a strategy to engage them with the gospel. There remain some 1,600 languages and dialects that do not have even a portion of the Bible. Thankfully, major efforts are underway to change that and get the Word to them in their tongue.

Ty Cobb was a great baseball player and a complicated person and while it is interesting to know who he really was and what he accomplished, that knowledge holds temporal importance. The same cannot be said about the most significant person to walk the face of the earth – Jesus Christ. We are to know Him and to make Him known to the uttermost ends of the earth. We

should proclaim the Good News about Jesus with clarity, accuracy, and consistency. There is nothing more eternally significant than this.

A Theology of Greeting People

If you want to be inspired in one minute, watch this:

I'll never forget spending a month in Peru in 2007 and having to kiss "hello" several times a day. Having lived in Chicago for a few years at that point I was aware of the cultural greeting but I had never been obliged to participate in it so much. I wasn't one to give intimate greetings to people I didn't know and I especially did not seek out physical contact but down there I figured it was prudent to conform. It was quite a month.

And for years I have considered exuberant greetings a cultural thing. Some people kiss or hug, others shake hands, others just nod. And while I still believe that is true, I have begun to wonder if my culture has devalued the impact greetings can have on others. No doubt there are things my culture does well, but this is one where I have been convicted to learn from others. Not just because I live in a predominantly Hispano neighborhood in Chicago, but also because there are clues in the Bible about how important greetings can be.

Here are a few examples of what I'm talking about:

First, in the book of Ruth when Boaz approached his workers, he greeted them with a sort of Gospel phrase: **"The Lord be**

with you!” And they responded in kind, **“The Lord bless you!”**

In the book of Luke, we read that just the **“sound of [Mary’s] greeting”** caused John the Baptist to leap for joy in Elizabeth’s womb.

In Colossians 4:18, Paul says he writes the greeting **“with my own hand”**. Of all things he could have written himself, it’s the greeting.

In several of his books, he makes greetings a huge deal, as in Romans 16 and Colossians 4, taking almost entire chapters of our Bible to simply greet people.

And more than once he gave the command to **“greet with a holy kiss”**. Which, again, I realize the form is cultural but I think the significance of a meaningful, intimate greeting transcends time.



This is something I perceive a new wave of church planting has figured out. When I see pictures of thriving church plants, I see energetic, smiling people outside with huge signs that say **“We’re glad you’re here!”** and like things. Some go so far as

to cheer as people enter the building, which is something my church does for each child that enters during our yearly VBS. I think we know that people can and do form opinions very quickly when encountering someone or something for the first time. In fact, while I am not saying I am convinced this is true always, consider the following from Malcom Gladwell's book *Blink*:

Research over the past two decades has confirmed that...a handshake may be all it takes to create a memorable first impression. But what we also know now is just how significant the first few moments of an encounter can be, and to what extent they determine the friends we'll make, the career path we'll pursue and the people we'll fall in love with.

*Tricia Prickett, a psychology student, collected a series of videotaped job interviews to test whether it was possible to guess the outcome simply from observing the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. She found that an observer could predict whether or not the interviewee would be offered the job from watching just the first 15 seconds of the tape – the handshake, the “hello” and very little else. What happened in those few, brief moments was enough to determine the candidate's future[1. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink*, 87].*

There are a handful of reasons why I think the Bible's emphasis on greeting well coincides with this research.

One is that I think the way we greet can be (though doesn't necessarily have to be) an issue of character. If you knew nothing about that teacher in the video above, do you think from the minute clip you saw of him that you can glean what kind of teacher he is? Probably. For me, I do not like to look people in the eye and I am not a big hugger but since I have been learning this, the number of men I hug as I greet them on Sunday mornings has more than doubled. Because I am convinced this is important enough that in my context I need to be stretched.



Once when we talked about this in our Spanish Bible study, as soon as the topic came up I could feel an energy enter the room in a way I do not think would have occurred in most English studies I have been in. Some expressed that when they moved to the U.S., getting accustomed to less enthusiastic greetings was difficult because in the countries where they come from, greeting is a huge deal. Not just in the hug and kiss, but in the eyes, the smile, the joy, and the whole of nonverbal communication. In fact, the Spanish verb that literally means “to greet” (saludar) seems to have much more potency than its English translation.

It is extremely common for someone to arrive late to our Spanish study and go around the table and greet every single person, even if it pauses the study for a few seconds. This is not something practiced often in my culture and I am learning that it is worth losing a few seconds of study to participate in something that can also be an issue of theology, as Boaz modeled. For me, it is an issue of character.

Secondly, I think greeting people well is a way to communicate to them “I see you. You matter.” In some cases it can communicate, “Whatever I was doing when you arrived is not as important as you are so I will pause and express that enthusiastically.” Any time I go to somewhere for the first time, I absolutely want someone there to help make it less confusing about where I am supposed to be. I want someone to see me and to make me feel secure and taken care of. As a

result, every Sunday I am able, I go and stand at the door of my church and greet people as they enter. I think it matters to morale.

Perhaps nowhere is this more important than how I respond to my wife when she comes home. While I will not say all husbands everywhere must greet their wives well to be good husbands, for me I know it is one of the intentional little things that is a big thing (and, in full disclosure, some days I do not practice this well).

Similarly, a greeting can be a means of building intimacy and encouragement. One of the best friends I have had in my time in Chicago was one of my roommates years ago before we both got married. Our landlord at the time had a hard time remembering our names. He at one point called my friend "Tiger" and at a later point called me "Slugger". To this day we greet each other with those names instead of our real ones. It manifests a depth to our friendship few other things do. There's another young man at our church, a star basketball player, with whom I share a "Cleveland Cavaliers" type handshake, as seen below. Because it means something to him. (The Cavs were the inspiration for the teacher in the opening clip, by the way.)



Also, there have been many times I have shown up to church in a terrible mood and the greetings of one of the other members

will be so exuberant, it melts my attitude a little. That is a huge benefit of church community.

I do not want to over-spiritualize this but as I think the Bible and greetings, I cannot help but think of the Prodigal son. The story details the reaction of the Father to the son coming home:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

How soon from the moment their eyes met do you think the son knew the Father forgave him? To what extent do you think he understood just from that verse above? Is it possible to preach the Gospel in a greeting? I think it is. My favorite professor at Moody, Dr. Wong Loi Sing, taught us that every gesture we make, from a smile to holding a door to kissing hello, can communicate grace. I think Luke 15 proves this is the most glorious way possible.

What do you think? How important are greetings to you? Let us know your thoughts below, even if you disagree.

Five Ways to Wage War on the Ego

“He must [by the very nature of things] increase, but I must decrease.” (John the Baptist)

One of the most clever things I've read in any fiction work is in *The Screwtape Letters* with the uncle advising the nephew to get his Christian to realize he's being humble because then – voilà! – he's automatically prideful. Countless Christians I've spoken to have picked up on this irony in joke form by declaring, as if they are the first to ever do so, "I'm so proud of my humility!"

I start with that because I fully confess that by sharing thoughts about how not to be prideful that when people put them into practice, they can absolutely be proud of their effort and ruin the whole thing. Humility and pride are so unique and tricky that way.

So no, I'm not trying to advocate ways to appear humble while you get a big head in your heart of hearts. But the Bible at various times and in various ways tells us to be humble. So I think a strategy is prudent. Here are five to consider:

1. Keep your good deeds private

I have spoken to this one before. Yet Facebook is such a constant assault on this, I find myself wanting to shout this from the rooftops. Making your good deeds known to others can be (and probably is) in direct violation of Jesus' command to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Yet on social media, we act like this isn't an issue. We brag about something we accomplished, the likes and affirmations come pouring in and it all seems like a normal part of our culture.

Granted, I will not cast stones on this because I have learned, like others, how to creatively do it where it doesn't look like bragging. Just post a picture of some great deed you are doing. People love pictures, right? Then you don't have to

brag with words. But people still know how great you are. Yes, I've been there.

Until we get to the place where we are secure enough in our identity as a servant of Christ who works for an audience of one, we will live in direct disobedience to Christ's command to keep our good works private. Especially on social media. And myself included.

2. Overwhelm complaining with thanksgiving

Here is one I really struggle with. My wife and closest friends will confirm this. Everyone on Twitter is an idiot. Our extended Winter this year is just the worst. Chicago traffic turns me into an ogre of rage and criticism. Even the woman who leads the workout videos my wife does is not safe from my ire, even though she is a successful woman, in much better shape than me, and doesn't deserve my insults.

It's all an ugly manifestation of how proud I am. Because I'm either only thinking of myself or I'm putting myself above others. By contrast, outside of November, my attitude of thankfulness is anemic. Yet of the two things, only one is commanded as something we are to do in all circumstances.

Criticism is at times warranted in Christianity. And we all need to vent at times. I am not advocating to avoid it completely. I just think some of us could stand to have our comments and actions of thanksgiving outnumber our complaints and insults about 10 to 1, or some similar percentage. Maybe getting specific will help: Trying to open our day by thanking for ten straight minutes or by handwriting thank you notes often or by showing a person how thankful you are with a simple gesture. It will choke our pride at a very sensitive point.

3. Associate with people who know more than you

The Bible warns that knowledge puffs us up. This can be seen so clearly when people attend college or grad school or seminary, or even when they are educated in any way on any subject. If we are knowledgeable in some way and proud as a result, it makes sense to me that exposure to those who know more than we do will help keep us in a more sober and humble state of mind.

A few years ago I began studying textual criticism, the art-science of trying to scour through nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts and countless other sources to determine the original wording of the New Testament books. I have learned quite a bit about it. But I also belong to a Facebook page on the topic, where some of the world's foremost experts post. And I have to admit: they can talk circles around me and some have written hundreds and hundreds of pages on it. And some of what they say in their books I do not understand.

It is similar with the languages and cultures around us. I have little doubt it is easy to get frustrated with how other people think and behave and what language they speak when it is different from ours because it annoys us. But God taught me a few years ago that exposure to and appreciation for what I don't know keeps me from being proud of what I do. So when people speak Russian on the Chicago bus, by God's grace I hope this reminder of how big the world is and how small my knowledge is will keep me humble.

4. Associate with people who have less than you

I have also written about this before, but Jesus once taught to throw parties for the crippled and blind instead of for your own family and friends. In that same chapter, Jesus talks about people making excuses as to why they cannot follow him and then concludes the chapter by saying that if anyone wants

to follow him they have to forsake everything. What I take from that is that our richness in material possessions and relationship cause us to forget how badly we need God. And the antidote is to rub shoulders with people who do not have much in the way of material possessions and relationship.

Why? Because part of our social makeup as humans is to become like whoever we are closest to. This is why my dad always told me "You are who your friends are." And so I think Jesus wants us to learn humility from those who live humbly by little to no choice in the matter.

5. Daily choose forgiveness over bitterness and vindication.

This one is crucial because it is a potent weapon against the "proud of your humility" threat. If you are forgiving because of how much Christ forgave you, as he taught in Matthew 18:21-35 and other places, then you are not confused by how bad a person you are. And yet you are not wallowing in your sinfulness but being proactive in trying to live out the grace that has been given.

Bitterness and vindication are the opposite. They take no account of how bad we as the victim are and do nothing productive or proactive in living out grace or mercy. Retaliating also manifests a spirit that trusts self over God, who vows that revenge only belongs to him.

To be clear, when a person is wronged in the worst ways, I will be careful (especially soon after the event) in counseling them on how and when to forgive. Yet, in reading stories like Joseph in Genesis and Corrie Ten Boom in more modern times, I think there is an authority in their words to teach that even those abused in the worst ways can forgive by the grace of the Christian God. And the worst act of injustice in human history – an innocent man being humiliated, tortured and killed for the very people who killed him – is the message

and heart of this humble way of living.

So by trying to live out biblical forgiveness daily (which is indeed more a process than an event in my experience because I often think “I forgive that person” and then the memories come back one day and I have to do it again) I will disintegrate my ego. Because I can’t think on and react to God’s grace and be proud at the same time. And by forgiving because I’ve been forgiven, that is what I am doing.

What do you think? Comments are welcomed below.

500WoL Reviews: “Tyndale, The Man Who Gave God An English Voice”

“And the Lyght shyneth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.” (*John 4:5, William Tyndale New Testament*)

I’m coming up on 40 years of life this Summer and it has me all self-reflective and evaluative. One thing I absolutely need to change is that I need to read more biographies. As someone who has championed fantasy-fiction as reading that captures the imagination, I have woefully underestimated how real flesh and blood human beings with real lives can accomplish the same thing. And in some ways, in a deeper

sense, since they are actual history.

Enter this book, written in 2012 by David Teems. It is cleverly written, packed with history down to the small players in Tyndale's life and absolutely edifies the English-speaking Christian reader with a life worth dissecting.

I confess that Tyndale's life is fascinating to me on the big story arcs because I am a pastor of a bilingual ministry, an ESL teacher and a subscriber to *Voice of the Martyrs*. Translation is my life's work, though not nearly to the significance that his was and to the cost that his gave. Persecution and martyrdom are horrific in a human sense, yet biblically we can see how God exalts it. William Tyndale literally gave his life to give people of my native tongue one of the most precious gifts there is, the readable Word of God.

Christian history is indebted to countless people for the Bibles we have today, many of them nameless and faceless, like the Masoretics of the Old Testament and the often maligned scribes and copyists of the New Testament. Tyndale thankfully is a name we can know and celebrate. He wasn't just a translator. He was a noble man, an educated yet humble man, and a great man. He is a hero. All of us who hold a KJV, or NASB, or NIV in our hands should know his name and his story.

Beyond the major and more well-known plot lines of his life, Teems gives other details that are equally as important. Like how much of the KJV was influenced by Tyndale and how many phrases we find in our Bible, and hence our popular culture, that can be traced back to Tyndale. Like "Am I my brother's keeper?". Tyndale used beautiful, easy-to-memorize, poetic English. And we owe our ability to recall many verses so easily to him.

Teems also speaks over several pages to how much Erasmus and Luther affected Tyndale and how much he affected them. These men were not friends, yet God used them all in their own way

to greatly affect how we do church and bible study today. It is a testimony to how no one can do anything on their own. Not just without God's grace, but without Christian community. Even from a distance.

I recommend this book to all Christian teenagers and adults. It's not just an inspiring story, but an illuminating one. In 500 years, this story will still matter. Yet let us read it today.

La Himnodia Latinoamericana

Hace un mes, una amiga aquí en Nashville que fue bibliotecaria en Welch por más de 30 años, puso una sugerencia en su pared de Facebook. Hablando de la bendición que son para los hijos de Dios los himnos y otras canciones cristianas, pidió que todo aquel que quisiera pusiera el nombre de alguna canción favorita y que incluyera porqué le gustaba tanto esa canción. ¡Muchísima gente respondió! Viendo los nombres de aquellos himnos y leyendo los testimonios fue de mucha bendición y edificación espiritual para mí, y según los comentarios que leí, para muchos más.

Ahora, yo quisiera poner algo en español, pidiendo prestado el concepto de mi amiga.

En mi opinión, en ninguna parte del mundo hay mejor himnodia que en América Latina.

Comenzando con los himnos que llegaron a Centro y Sudamérica de América del Norte y de Europa, las iglesias evangélicas han cantado "En La Cruz," "Cuando Allá Se Pase Lista," "Oh Tu Fidelidad," y "Cuán Grande Es Él," y mil himnos más, llenando sus cultos con alabanzas al Todopoderoso. Traducidos del

inglés, han enriquecido la vida espiritual y la adoración congregacional del pueblo hispano por más de cien años."

Autores hispanos como el famoso Alfredo Colom de Guatemala escribieron canciones inolvidables para el pueblo latinoamericano. "Manos Cariñosas," "Pero Queda Cristo," conocido popularmente como "Por la Mañana Yo Dirijo mi Alabanza," "Canten con Alegría," y "A La Victoria Jesús Nos Llama." Colom nació en 1904. En su juventud era mujeriego, alcohólico y pecador perdido. Cuando conoció a Cristo, su vida fue transformada.

El himnario "Celebremos Su Gloria" destaca dos famosos músicos, himnólogos de antaño: Alfredo Colom y Roberto Savage. Savage era norteamericano pero durante muchos años de su ministerio sirvió como misionero en Ecuador en la emisora HCJB, y dio a luz a proyectos musicales que incluían la serie "Adelante Juventud, himnos, coritos y cánticos espirituales que guió al pueblo latinoamericano en sus alabanzas al Señor. Hizo compilaciones de música de varios países y arreglos que eran fáciles de cantar. El impacto que se sentía por los esfuerzos de estos dos siervos es incalculable.

Otros nombres destacados de otra generación: Santiago Stevenson, el trovador panameño (A La Casa de Jairo Iba Jesús), Danny Berrios, Stanislao Marino, y Juan Romero ("Visión Pastoral," o "Eran Cien Ovejas") entre muchos de las décadas de los 70 y 80. Más recientemente, Marcos Witt, Juan Adrián Romero, Marcos Barrientos y Marcos Vidal nos han dado nuevas canciones, muchas, y el pueblo sigue alabando al Señor.

Pero los Latinoamericanos también crearon una multitud de coritos y canciones en español. No he visto ni conocido otro continente u otra cultura que haya producido más música original. Canciones espirituales, salmos abundan. (Piensen en "Si Fui Motivo de Dolor," "Más Allá del Sol," "Alabaré," y salmos como el 145, 3:3-4, 25, 92 ("Bueno es alabarte oh Jehová") La lista es interminable.

Me impresionó mucho cómo la gente respondió al blog de mi amiga en inglés. Me gustaría invitarles a ustedes que respondan a este blog, indicando su canción, o canciones favoritas, y diciendo por qué le gusta esa canción en particular. Estoy seguro que será de mucha bendición.

Termino con una canción – una de mis favoritas. No es necesariamente mi favorita absoluta, pero es linda, y la letra expresa grandes verdades. Muchos de ustedes la conocen – “Día en Día.”

*Día en día Cristo está conmigo,
Me consuela en el medio del dolor.
Pues confiando en su poder eterno,
No me afano ni me da temor.
Sobrepuja todo entendimiento
La perfecta luz del Salvador.
En su amor tan grande e infinito
Me dará lo que es mejor.*

*Día en día Cristo me acompaña
Y me brinda dulce comunión
Todos mis cuidados él los lleva;
A él le entrego mi alma y corazón.
No hay medida del amor supremo
De mi bondadoso y fiel Pastor
Él me suple lo que necesito
Pues el pan de vida es mi Señor.*

*Oh Señor, ayúdame este día
A vivir de tal manera aquí.
Que tu nombre sea glorificado
Pues anhelo honrarte solo a ti.
Con la diestra de tu gran justicia
Me sustentas en la turbación.
Tus promesas son sostén y guía
Siempre en ellas hay consolación.*

A Path of Truth: How the Doctrine of Biblical Authority Has Come Down to the American Church

The authority of Scripture. It is a subject rightly viewed as a fundamental truth by a large percentage of today's Christian world since its origin. The official doctrine might not have been formed until much later in history, but it is very clear in Scripture that God's Word is the final and supreme authority. Among many other things it tells us that God's Word is true (John 17:17), that it is complete and that we are forbidden to add to it (Proverbs 30:5-6), and that it is more than just a good book with good advice; it is God-breathed and sufficient for teaching, correction, rebuke, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). And those are just examples. If I were to list and adequately discuss everything the Bible says on the subject, the end result would be much longer than this article. The ecclesiastical discussion of biblical authority has appeared with several different faces throughout the centuries. It is a discussion that has seen many faces all over the world. There are many. For space reasons, I will just be looking at the line leading up to the American church.

No matter where you go with this the discussion starts in the Mediterranean area. For a long time after the start of Christianity, the exact doctrine wasn't truly set in stone. A more concentrated definition was found to be needed by the third to early fourth centuries to combat the increasing gross misinterpretations and false teachings of God's Word that were infesting the church. In A.D. 325 the First Ecumenical Council

of Nicea met and began the practice of condemning heretics who went beyond the accepted teaching of Scripture. In many ways, such meetings were a good thing because they fostered communication among church leaders and the formation of accepted biblical doctrine. However, these councils, while they met to defend biblical authority, were ironically devaluing it by placing more value on what the human church leadership thought than what the Bible itself thought. The Protestant Reformation would put a stop to the Catholic Church's growing pride and corruption. It put complete authority back in its proper place: The Word of God.

By the 1700s God's written Word was beginning to become subordinate to science and human intelligence. And by the 20th century, fundamental-minded Christians recognized that they desperately needed to band together against the growing modernism to defend the authority of the Scriptures. The battle over biblical authority revealed itself on several important stages inside the fundamentalist movement from 1900 to the present.

The Battle of Biblical Authority in America in the Modern Era

In 1889 Charles Briggs wrote *Whither? A Theological Question* for the *Times* in which he launched a particularly vicious attack against the doctrine of inerrancy. Briggs' well worded but misled criticisms caught on and would give rise to liberal Christianity. This, in turn, led to the birth of neo-orthodoxy with its emphasis on individual connection and interpretation of Scripture. Neo-orthodoxy was actually a negative reaction against liberal theology. It was formed by the German theologian Karl Barth. Neo-orthodoxy held to traditional orthodoxy but was new (neo) in that it was adapted modern thought to the orthodoxy. It also held that the Bible only became the revealed Word of God to individual readers.

The ever-rising popularity of liberal theology and neo-orthodoxy alarmed traditional, conservative Christians. Some

leading scholarly Christians took steps to sound the alarm. The most influential was a book series published between 1910 and 1915 called "The Fundamentals." It was so influential that it played a pivotal role in giving rise to the fundamentalist movement.

Fundamentalists and the Specter of Anti-Intellectualism

There was much genuine sincerity and passion in the fundamentalist camp when it came to defending biblical authority, but unfortunately early on many people in the fundamentalist movement started becoming increasingly anti-intellectual. This de-emphasis on the intellect backfired on them, particularly at a very important time. This was in March 1925 just after the Tennessee legislature had passed the Butler Act, which banned the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools. Hoping to make their small town more known, the citizens of Dayton asked a volunteer named John Scopes to be willingly arrested and put on trial for supposedly teaching evolution in class.

Although he was not learned in theology or science, a fundamentalist leader named William Jennings Bryan was called to the stand as a defense witness. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer for the evolutionists, succeeded in making a fool of both Bryan and fundamentalists.

But not all early fundamentalists were so anti-intellectual. There were fundamentalist scholars who pushed against this ethic. Probably the leading of these scholars was J. Gresham Machen. Although Machen considered himself a fundamentalist, he harshly disapproved of the fundamentalist movement, mainly because of the anti-intellectualism. His thoughts concerning fundamentalism as a whole as expressed in his famous book, Christianity & Liberalism.

Machen also worried that fundamentalists were allowing the liberals to associate with and therefore influence them too

much. In this book, Machen gave a logical, biblical defense of fundamentalism and called for a complete separation from liberal theology. At the time, he was teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. An important turning point in the seminary toward a more liberal theology came in 1914 when they hired the liberal-minded J. Ross Stevenson as president. This did not sit at all well with Machen. He left and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. At the same time, he started the hyper-fundamentalist mindset.

The Birth of New Evangelicalism

The fundamentalists had a very good founding intention which was to defend the inerrancy and authority of Scripture against encroaching liberalism. Unfortunately, anti-intellectualism wasn't there only big problem. From the 1920s onward there continued to be increasing intolerance coupled with argumentation within denominations and between denominations. Denominations split, and then those groups split, and on and on.

Some fundamentalists got fed up with the fundamentalist movement for what they saw as totally unchristian rigid intolerance. So Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham led the charge to begin a complete separation from fundamentalism. In 1942 a number of discontented fundamentalists began the National Association of Evangelicals.

The most influential of these three in instigating this new movement was Graham. Graham said the turning point for him came in 1955 when he came to New York to hold a revival. The fundamentalists there required each Christian in attendance sign a paper saying they agreed with the fundamentals. While Graham certainly agreed with them, he harshly objected to this and refused to sign.

The evangelicals were clear that they were still

fundamentalist in belief. In fact, several leading characters in this new movement started Fuller Theological Seminary based on fundamental doctrine. But they were also very clear that they were no longer affiliated with the fundamentalist movement.

During the 70s Fuller began to get lax on biblical authority. In 1976, Harold Lindsell, one of its original founders, verbally criticized Fuller and many other Christian institutions across the country for minimizing biblical inerrancy and authority. During that year he published the very influential book, *The Battle for the Bible*. In its pages, he loudly proclaimed that both of these things were the most important theological subject of all. The book that was so influential in the Christian world that it started a movement that took its name.

From that point until about the mid-1990s there was something of a revival of biblical inerrancy and authority thought among evangelical churches. Throughout much of the 80s, the climate of the American the evangelical world was relatively confused on this issue with many of them not entirely sure where they stood. By the 1990s, most of the evangelical world was kind of lost and unsure of its own beliefs on such matters. Carl Henry, who was still active in the evangelic movement at this time, urged evangelicals to take a stand on the authority of the Bible. Many evangelical churches listened and heeded, taking a firm stand once again on biblical inerrancy and authority.

As for fundamentalists, since the 1960s one biggest debate has been how much they should embrace separatism. Doctrinal debates have continued to rage between various fundamentalist denominations. However, the clear majority of fundamentalist believers still fully embrace the complete authority of Scripture.

The Many Paths of the Truth

The Bible is abundantly clear that there is only one God and that there is only one way to Him. But history has seen many paths of the truth throughout the world as Scripture has traveled through history. Each area of the world touched by the biblical message has its own stories concerning the passage of the doctrine of biblical authority. The story I have summarized here is one of the paths in America. It is not the only one. There have been many paths. And these paths, wherever they may be, continue on. Isaiah 40:6-8 says humans are like grass and our faith like flowers. It says that grass may wither, and its flowers may fall, but it says the Word of God endures forever. The battle over biblical authority continues. People may fail. Human faith may wane. But no matter what the Word of God and its authority will endure forever.

Turning the Stranger Into Family

Every week at my small group, I pray the same prayer: "God, thank you for friends who've become family."

There is no doubt that to me, after 16 years and being a thousand miles from home, my church is my family. The amount of people I could call in the middle of the night if I had an emergency is long. The number of people who drove six hours in the heavy rain to see me get married is almost the same number of people who come to an average Sunday service. I share no blood with any of those people, but we share something even deeper in unity of Spirit.

I'm sure many Christians all over the world could say the same things. Which is appropriate, since the Bible absolutely teaches us that Christians are family. God is our Father and we are brothers and sisters in our faith. It's beautiful, Psalm 133:1 says, when we live like we are.

Yet the Bible gets specific in how we are to practice this in a way that is extremely counterintuitive. Hebrews 13:2 states it this way: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Similarly, Job claims, "I have never turned away a stranger, but have opened my doors to everyone." Jesus makes it personal when he says, "I was a stranger and you invited me in."

I want to point out two things that are crucial to understanding and contextualizing these verses in 2018 America. First, the word "stranger" every time means someone from a different country who lives among you. That can be easily seen in both the Hebrew and Greek words used as well as how "stranger" was defined in Israelite law (Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 24:22). This group was often mentioned with the orphan, widow and poor as people to whom great compassion should be shown (Deuteronomy 24:17). God knew something back then that we can still see today: when you are a new immigrant, primarily because you have fewer resources, you are extremely prone to be a victim of injustice.

Secondly, all of them teach that we are to have strangers (and especially fellow Christians) in our homes. The word for "hospitality" in Hebrews 13:2 literally means love of strangers while the word for "entertain" literally means to receive a stranger as a guest. And the ideas of "inviting in" and "open doors" are specific as well. Having someone in your home is an intimate event in any culture that I have experience with. It is an act reserved for family and closest friends.

I say this is counterintuitive for obvious reasons. The very fact people from other countries have been historically and biblically called things with negative connotations in American English now like “stranger” and “alien” in some way proves that parts of our culture bend against treating immigrants (a more modern and less demeaning word) like family. As I have written before, we often tend to do church in a homogeneous way, where we are similar in culture and even in our coded language and preferences in things like music. And my guess would be that we are even more limited in whom we share our homes with than whom we share our church with, since there is research that indicates that only a tiny percentage of people have other races and ethnicities as a part of their circle of friends, and especially their inner circle friends[1. Christopher Ingraham, *Washington Post*, August 25, 2014. Information accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends>]. Yet biblically we are to share our homes for meals (and whenever possible, more intimate and longterm events than that), with Christians who look and act quite differently than we do.

This is an issue of the Gospel. In Ephesians 2, I find it impossible to separate salvation by grace through faith with how we accept immigrant brothers and sisters. In political discourse, it is completely understandable that we use words like “Immigrant” to describe those who have moved here from other countries. But Paul taught in Ephesians 2 in the church this terminology is obsolete. The Hebrews had many laws that commanded them to treat the stranger among them with love and compassion, like Leviticus 19:9-10 and 19:33-34. But in Ephesians 2:19 Paul says to Christian Gentiles, “So then *you are no longer strangers and aliens*, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household.” So I tell the immigrant believers in my church, “The world may call you an ‘immigrant’ but at Northwest, we call you ‘family’.” And unless I truly treat people like family, which includes

having them in my home, then I'm just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In his sledgehammer book, *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller drives home the point about eating with the stranger as being a Gospel issue by referencing Paul's confrontation with Peter in Galatians. Peter had stopped eating with Gentiles out of fear of man and Paul rebuked him that he "was not acting in line with the Gospel[2. Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, 124]." The Gospel has never ended with man's reconciliation to God. It has always included people groups' reconciliation to each other, as evidenced by Ephesians 2 and also by nearly 20 different languages present for the beginning of the Christian church. How can we be truly reconciled from a distance? We must invite them in. As Hebrews taught. As Job lived. As Jesus said we should treat him.

So my question for you today is: Are you acting in line with the Gospel? Are you practicing Hebrews 13:2 hospitality? Let me be plain that this is not a series of question with a political angle. I'm not writing this only to conservative white Christians. The truth of the Bible transcends that. I ask them to all Christians who read this. Because the familial nature of Christianity, and our Gospel, demand it.