

Wednesday April 17, 2013

They're all the same thing!

By Jim Taylor

For 20 years or so, I was active in an organization called Canadian Church Press. We had about 50 member publications, if I recall correctly – obviously, the heyday of print and religion. We got along well together, despite our theological differences.

One thing I learned, soon, was that I could never take someone else's theological position for granted. Nor could I assume that my experience would match theirs.

Christian initiation, for example. My tradition baptizes infants. At a later time, those children are expected to "confirm" (or, more likely, to ignore) the commitment their parents made on their behalf.

But for some other mainline churches, baptism equaled admission to the church. Period. Indeed, some still maintained that the rite of baptism saved children from going to hell.

Of course, several branches of the church required voluntary adult baptism to become a Christian. Usually by total immersion, like Jesus in the Jordan.

The Calvinist and Reformed strands tended to emphasize education – you entered your chosen faith by studying it, understanding it, accepting its doctrines, as the Ethiopian eunuch did.

Pentecostals required an ecstatic experience, an encounter with God's living spirit – like the disciples at Pentecost. Evangelicals, generally, expected a dramatic turnaround -- a humbling realization of one's inherent sinfulness, a total rejection of a former way of life (including, sometimes, one's family and friends)...

Over the centuries, the experience of Saul has become the standard model for conversion – even though it's the only example of its kind in the Bible. I've heard the story many times. But as it was read last Sunday morning, I heard some parts of it again for the first time.

Conversion? Epiphany?

Saul has a highway accident, on the road to Damascus. Perhaps he got hit by lightning, felled by heatstroke, run down by an impaired camel... The Bible doesn't provide cause-and-effect explanations.

In his distress, he cried out.

And someone answered him. Someone he believed was dead. Buried. Gone forever.

Broken and blinded, physically and spiritually, Saul tottered into Damascus. Where one of those religious rebels whom he had come to uproot, came to visit him.

And the Bible says, "Something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see clearly..."

Whoa! Those are the kind of words usually used to describe an epiphany. Seeing the light. Getting an insight. Achieving enlightenment.

I happen to like epiphanies. A week without an epiphany is like a week without chocolate.

And I wondered if, in our desire to justify our own practices, we have sub-divided religious experience into too many, too exclusive, categories. The Damascus road, the Upper Room, the Jordan dove, even Easter morning -- whether you call it epiphany, conversion, baptism, rebirth, resurrection, revelation – maybe they're all about the same thing!

First century Greek used the word *metanoia*. We might call it metamorphosis. Like the cocooned caterpillar emerging as a butterfly. Transformed.

They're all about coming out of an experience transformed. With a new understanding of who you are, what you are, what you are called to be.

It's the transformation that matters, not the name we give to it.

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YOUR TURN

In the flood of letters wishing me well after my accident, there were a few dealing with the substance of recent columns. Steve Roney, in particular, wrote a long and detailed rebuttal of my ideas (ideals?) about heaven. I'm including some of that letter here, not because I agree with it, but because he raises points that deserve consideration.

Steve writes, "Can we really imagine heaven as a place without wars? I think not. Those who have read the Bible will be aware that it indeed speaks of a "war in heaven." St. Michael and all that. Revelation 12: 7-9, inter alia.

"This is usually thought of as happening in the primordial past; but in Revelation, it is also reported as a future event, part of the end times. Jesus also speaks, cryptically, of "the violent taking heaven by storm" (Matthew 11:2). And when the New Jerusalem, the ultimate image of the perfection of the created world, descends from the sky... it has walls. "It had a great, high wall with twelve gates" (Revelations 21:12). There is no point to a walled city if there is no threat of war.

"So the matter is clear. Not only has there been war in heaven, but war is an eternal feature of heaven. And there are armies in heaven. God is "The Lord who commands armies" (Isaiah 6:5).

"So long as there is free will, there is the chance of choosing evil. Ask, not only Lucifer, but Adam and Eve, who chose evil in the very face of the beatific vision. Therefore, there can be and has been moral conflict in heaven. And, if there has ever been war in heaven, there is always war in heaven. That is the nature of things eternal....

"Could a truly moral person be content sitting in heaven strumming a harp with the awareness that evil and suffering persisted in the created world? Therefore, so long as there is ill-being on earth, there must also be conflict in heaven. Happiness for a moral person would require continuing to fight in that war. Hence, of course, the Catholic doctrine of saints."

Steve explored other themes within that column, but those comments were, I thought, dependent on the premise above.

Isabel Gibson contributed her own musings on "bionic bodies": "Interesting how we so often focus on our bodies when we think about our 'selves'. I've not heard anyone muse about their selfhood as they adapt their PDAs (personal digital assistants; aka 'smart phones', these days) to what is, in effect, an external hard drive that supplements their 'onboard' memory. Nor, indeed, as they reach for a stickie to make a note-to-self. The (eventual/inevitable?) insertion of a computer chip in our bodies may not be the turning point it appears to be: the change may have happened with the invention of writing.

"As for whether this (like your bionic elbow) diminishes or enhances an individual -- perhaps an answer from someone who doesn't make their living as a writer (or use glasses and hearing aids) would be less self-interested, as it were..."

Similarly, Fran Mayes wrote, "Even more confounding: it is now possible to cure some inherited diseases by replacing a defective gene with a newer, stronger one. Sometimes these new genes come from other animals (like rhesus monkey genes for hemoglobin). How many genes from another species makes one a chimera? What does that do to our definition of what it is to be human?"

Charles Hill pushed the same point a little farther: "When I work with individuals who have undergone sexual abuse and many times live with a lifelong sense of shame and perhaps guilt, I say to them, 'You are not your body.' Disassociation of the 'I' from our bodies can be healing and sometimes necessary for a life of contentment. It strikes me that if we cannot say that, we cannot be a Christian or a Moslem or a Hindu or....

“Disembodied existence of identity is the key belief of nearly every religion. If ‘we’ are located in a part of our body, then there is justification for cosmetic surgery, steroid use, mammary gland implants, etc.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The fourth Sunday of Easter calls for Psalm 23. I have mixed feelings about this psalm. On the one hand – I’ve got to stop using that phrase, as a one-handed typist! – I dislike monkeying with what is in many ways the perfect biblical psalm. On the other hand, and perhaps for that very reason, I have written more paraphrases of Psalm 23 than any other psalm.

Here’s one of those variations, suggested by a former minister who mused, during a memorial service, that Psalm 23 could have been written by someone looking back on a long and full life.

God has walked with me; I could ask nothing more.

**God has given me green meadows to laugh in,
clear streams to think beside,
untrodden paths to explore.**

When I thought the world rested on my shoulders,
God put things into perspective;

When I lashed out at an unfair world, God calmed me down;

When I drifted into harmful ways,
God straightened me out.

God was with me all the way.

I do not know what lies ahead, but I am not afraid.

I know you will be with me.

Even in death, I will not despair.

You will comfort me and support me.

Though my eye dims and my mind dulls,

You will continue to care about me.

Your touch will soothe the tension in my temples;

My fears will fade away.

I am content.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me.

All though life, I have found goodness in people.

**When life ends, I expect to be gathered
into the ultimate goodness of God.**

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It’s called HYMNSIGHT, and it’s for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
