

breaking up is hard to do

REPENTANCE

Is there anything worse than those relationships that “breakup” but never end? I knew such a couple. They said they were not dating anymore, but everyone who knew them was pretty confused, because most of us didn’t hang all over people we weren’t dating. Not usually. I mean I’ll go see a movie with a friend now and then, but probably not two or three nights a week—at home—until 2:00 am. And I’m certainly not going to repeatedly neglect my other friends to spend inordinate amounts of time with just one “friend.” But they weren’t dating anymore.

You know what I’m talking about, because everyone knows *that* couple—two people who keep resorting to each other to satisfy the cravings of old habits. It’s nauseating to everyone but the couple, of course, because they are blinded by the onslaught of emotions that follow a breakup. The drama is the stuff of soap operas. Unless these couples have friends who are honest enough to intervene, they have almost no chance of making a clean break. They simply can’t see their own face.

So it is with us as we seek a communal experience of redemption and growth. We have to break up with individualism and self-help, not in theory but in actual life. If we are going to move on from resorting to the old way of doing things just because it makes us feel better, we’ll need friends who will intervene and tell us the truth.

The Passover as well as the Last Supper were events that commemorated the inauguration of new communities—the people of God. The inauguration of our community began with an 800-word journal entry. It was two years ago during a time when I felt like my soul was dying. I had almost no desire for spiritual things. I would try to journal, you know, to force myself to talk to God. After months of forced conversation, one day I decided to read through the back entries. The only words I could seem to say and hear were, “Don’t give up.” The next day I was sitting in the Wired Bean coffeehouse in Ft. Collins, Colorado. I remember thinking that if I could not give up I would just start over. I opened up a brand new journal, ready to make a clean break from the deadness I felt. I was ready for a fresh start. I began writing, thinking that I would get everything off my chest and wipe the slate clean, so to speak. Instead, God taught me about the true nature of grace. This is what I wrote that day in the Wired Bean:

A FRESH START

I started a new journal today, the old one filled with ink and coffee stains and struggle. All the ups and downs of previous days and weeks are bound up, archived for no one to see. The complaining and wishing, the grand ideas that never came to be, and some that did, all of it rests on a shelf now, somewhere with the others, somewhere on a shelf, forgotten and faded. This one is fresh, clean like a white canvas, eager to be painted with brilliant color and depth, touched for the first time.

It’s the same feeling I get at the start of a new year, or sometimes a new day. The feeling that I get to start over, as if the thoughts and events and actions of yesterday or last year—or my whole life—were of no consequence any longer, as if I were not who I am

today largely because of days past, because of pages in journals now hiding on a shelf somewhere. I would like very much to think of those pages as something like a past life. People are always saying things like, "I was a real daredevil in my past life." I'm sure most people only believe in the current life they actually have. They must mean it like an excuse or a doctor's note, as if to say what's in the past is in the past, forgotten and faded. I guess if I could get a note from God excusing me from the lazy and selfish ways I have acted: that's about what I hoped for this new journal to feel like. I wonder if we think about grace this way. Does God look at this blank page and say—to Himself of course—"Ah, a new journal; a fresh start. Will gets to begin again. Gone are the vices of impatience, greed, envy, impure thoughts, and stupid comments. Those are chapters from another book. Will gets to write a new book now."

It sounds ludicrous to put it that way. But given a new start, things would certainly be "different from now on." I would be disciplined and consistent and organized, kind and gentle and a good listener.

Momentum is capricious. You can't trust it to carry you from this moment to the next, day to day, page to page. My best energy runs out long before my intentions are realized. My purest motives are undermined by bad habits and self-interest. I don't think I can just be someone that I have not been becoming. Too often I think of grace as a clean slate, a pardon from my past life, but that is more like neglect. Grace is not a redo. It is not like starting a new journal. Grace is the ink on those pages, the very presence of God walking me through it, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse, until death brings us together. Grace is the shelf bearing the weight of pages past, putting on dis-

play the way God holds everything together and works everything out just the way He wants it. Grace exposes my wishes to level the playing field between God and me, to be good enough. Grace does not hide from the messy reality of my ragged and duplicitous life, or in vain imaginations of starting over. How could it? That is precisely where grace intends to live and move, to renovate the broken stuff in my life, to help me work out this salvation with fear and trembling.

My life does not start over today. I am becoming who I will someday be. So I will embrace the reality that there were many pages before this one, as well as the hope that there will be more to come. This will not be easy. There is comfort in pretending, and there is sin that I have come to enjoy. I suspect there are destructive habits and attitudes that I do not even recognize because of my familiarity with them. All of it will have to be purged, but I will not merely gag myself. I would then just binge on self-righteousness. Genuine change feels distant, beyond my sight, but my hope is this: if by my own power I have formed my character as it is, and mostly under the rule of sin, will not Jesus, who has set me free from the law of sin and death, by His power transform it? Indeed He can and will. Nothing can stop Him, and I will certainly not try by trusting in my own efforts or intentions. I'll put the ink on the page, the confession of my ragged and redeemed life, and trust the Author of my faith to be the Perfecter as well.

“A Fresh Start” was the first entry I posted on the blog. It was my way of inviting others into this new life of honesty and grace, knowing that without others the revolution was doomed to fail. Bob and David and Brett responded, each of them ready to break up with self-seeking, superficial spirituality.

PASTOR COMPLEX

I don't know anyone who loves the church more deeply than Bob. Sometimes he expresses his love like the prophets of old, boldly announcing the sin of the people and the righteousness of God. But he is a compassionate prophet. I think he would trade his own well being for the well being of the church. He reminds me of Paul that way, when Paul said he would give up his own salvation for the salvation of the Jews. So when I read Bob's post, I was not surprised to see that the nature of his discontent was intimately connected to his passion for the church:

If we're honest, most of us realize that our churches or faith communities are not what they should be. What Jesus said would be an unstoppable force more often looks like a pitiful, hypocritical, shallow vestige of religiosity. But then again, there are times when the church has moments of greatness. Times when we are awed by the presence of God, brought to our knees by answered prayer, or moved by a demonstration of mercy to the poor and needy. The latter scenario is what makes us excited. But we've all experienced the former. Why are both so profoundly normal in our experience? How do we explain the tension? To ask this question is to inquire into the nature of the Kingdom Jesus talked about.

The kingdom of God is the rule and reign of Jesus in the hearts of people. It is spiritual. Churches, on the other hand, are "outposts of the Kingdom." They are places where seen intersects unseen. Churches are the places where you're supposed to be able to see Kingdom values at work. They are communities of apprentices who are learning how to follow the King and speak the language of the kingdom. But churches are not

the Kingdom. Don't mistake the two. Howard Snyder writes: "If the church has one great need, it is this: To be set free for the Kingdom of God, to be liberated from itself as it has become in order to be itself as God intends."

The shallowness and legalism and hypocrisy and deadness in our churches and faith-communities remind us that the church is not the Kingdom; in fact, it often isn't even reflecting the kingdom. But those moments of greatness—those moments when the church looks like we know it should—are the moments when the Kingdom is truly being expressed the way Jesus intended. This explains how, in the same day, God's people can make me totally depressed and completely ecstatic. I spend much of my time inside the walls of a mega-church, facing bureaucracy and lazy thinking and shoddy theology and passionless prayer and duty-driven obedience. And I think, "This is definitely NOT the kingdom of God."

And then I spend some of my time at prayer meetings, like the one we had tonight. Thirty college students crammed into the living room of a house to worship and pray together. But these are not a bunch of students who have it all together. No, these are Kingdom ragamuffins. These are people struggling deeply with sexual temptation (pornography, immorality, same-sex attraction); girls on the verge of eating disorders; guys whose pride drives them to be the center of attention; girls who are recovering from deep depression. This is part of the flock under my care. And I think, "THIS is the kingdom of God." These people are Kingdom-seekers, clinging to Jesus in prayer, because He's their only hope.

Oh, and then there's me: the pastor, the leader, the

professional theologian. I'm the guy who (just today) lied to some church members and talked behind a fellow pastor's back and yelled at my wife and was passive toward my kids and was unloving toward those under my care. I'm the guy who would rather run from conflict than enter into people's pain. I'm the one who showed up at prayer with no desire to pray and had to leave the meeting just to get right with God. That reality might not be church reality (what I *should* be), but it's Kingdom reality (what I *am*). That's my actual life. And that's the life Jesus came to transform.

The problem is that I can't control the imposed stereotypes that come with working at a church. For instance, I have a neighbor named Marietta. She is a middle-aged widow with big poofy hair and that old-lady-perfume smell. I like Marietta a lot, except when we talk about religion. She has the "pastor complex"—that guilt-driven reflex that spurs my neighbors to toss religious platitudes into the conversation. I can always tell when they're doing it. And it drives me nuts because it's so fake. It's even worse than when people stop cussing around me.

The other day Marietta and I were talking over the back fence about change. Both of our lives have experienced lots of change recently. And then, out of the blue, Marietta said, "Well, you know, the Good Lord knows what He's doing." And I wanted to say, "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. And who is 'the Good Lord' anyway? Do you mean Jesus? Or some made-up God in your imagination?" But I didn't say that, because I'm chicken. And because that's not a nice, neighborly thing to say. I know Marietta isn't trying to be annoying, and after all, she's just who she is. But her "pastor complex" makes reaching out to her

so much harder! Every good deed or kind word I offer only adds to her complex and makes her toss out more religious platitudes to ease her conscience. I know I'm supposed to love her like Jesus would. I'm just utterly confused as to what that looks like.

That's why I like my friend Dave. I met Dave when he was a British Lit major at the local university. Now he is a writer and lives in Fresno, but we still talk. Dave is one of the most intelligent people I've ever met. He called this past summer the "Summer of Joyce" because his goal was to read every book James Joyce ever wrote. I've never read anything by James Joyce. Dave carries around one of those little pocket notebooks (like Ernest Hemingway must have had) so he can write whenever the urge strikes him. He also composes every one of his term papers longhand on white paper with a blue Pilot G-2 pen. He says he thinks better that way.

I work at a suburban, white-bred, affluent mega-church in middle America. Dave was always an uneasy fit at our church. He attended because he said he experienced God there, and he liked some of the people. But he never really enjoyed the happy, mainstream Christian spirituality that our church reflected. All of his friends from school were gays or feminists or atheists. And he would often tell me that he felt he had more in common with them than with the people at church.

And that's why I like Dave better than Marietta—because Dave knows how to be real. Dave doesn't have "pastor complex." He just says what he thinks. He told me a few months ago that he was having a hard time believing that the Bible was inspired by God, because it seemed more like a book that was made up by a bunch of patriarchal white men to oppress everyone who

didn't agree with them. That's not something you're supposed to tell your pastor. Marietta would never say something like that.

My problem is that I'm a lot like Dave. Sometimes I think the Bible is the most utterly ridiculous book I've ever read. Sometimes I like God-hating atheists more than the fake religious people at church. I get the feeling that people at church would like me to be more like Marietta. They want me to smile and say, "The Good Lord knows what He's doing." That's safe...but it's not real. I heard a singer say, "A real me is more interesting than a fake somebody else." And Jesus loves the real me.

DEAR JOHN EVANGELICALISM

David, the elder among us, has mentored me in the area of breaking up. We used to meet for breakfast at Kerby Lane Café to talk about what it would be like to follow Jesus without all the religious baggage we had gathered along the way. We dreamt big dreams. Eventually the waitress would ask us if we would like to see a lunch menu. "No thanks," I would say. "But another cup of coffee would be great."

David described his life like this: "It's like I am ninety percent committed to Jesus, so there is much good in my life. I pass most of the checkpoints of Christianity: quiet time, moral, nice, faithful, some fruit in ministry. But the last ten percent is everything. The ten percent held back is reflected in the bankruptcy of my relationships. By holding back I am destined to finish along with those who've committed fifty percent and fifteen percent. I look better along the way, but the destruction in the end is more shocking."

I compare his predicament to the boyfriend and girlfriend who have been dating forever. They are relatively happy together, but they stay together because of habit and not love. As hard as it

may be, they need to break up. And that's just what David did. He wrote a Dear John letter. It's facetious of course, but breaking up is hard to do and humor helps us cope with loss. I'm sure David felt like he was losing something, like he was abandoning a familiar companion, leaving the comfort of the way things were. This is his letter, short and sweet:

Dear John Evangelicalism,

We have to break up. We had a good run while it lasted, but it's time for me to move on. This is hard. We've been through so much together, but I'm just not sure that this is a healthy relationship anymore. You've always been there for me. Whether it was obtaining eternal life, or dealing with sin, or depending on God, or studying the Bible, you were there to show me exactly what I needed to do. Through it all I've grown a lot and for that I am thankful. In showing me how to be a good Christian, you've been so sensitive to my need for control. No matter what I faced there was always something I could do to fix the problem. For the most part, I've really enjoyed that, but now I'm not so sure anymore.

It's not you; it's me. I'm the one with the problem. I know this may take some getting used to, but you'll be okay. Most people like to be in control, so I'm sure you'll find someone else. It's better this way. I'm a glorious mess. I look around and see lots of smiling faces and people with their acts together. As hard as I've tried to make this work, it just isn't working for me. I know that's embarrassing and I don't want to make you uncomfortable with my actual life.

Don't worry about me; I'll be okay. In a strange sort of way I'm looking forward to losing control, to not having all the answers, to making some room for

mystery, to facing messes beyond my ability to manage and cover up. I'm hopeful I might even find a trusting relationship with God someday. You probably want to know if I've had a quiet time today or if I've read the book on overcoming whatever it is I'm dealing with here. I appreciate your concern, but I need a break. Of course we can still be friends.

COMPLETELY CONSUMED

Brett's world is unique. He made one "B" in college, and that was for an elective photography class in his last semester. He declined a really great engineering job to spend a couple years working with our college ministry. Instead of executing his brilliance in a cubicle all day, he spends a lot of time working and hanging out with people like me, people who graduated from college in a previous decade. Being thrust into professional Christianity and relationships with people who have been around long enough to be bitter is the only way I can explain why Brett felt the need to make a break at such an early stage in his life. Or perhaps it was the lack of income:

I'm a consumer. There I said it. It feels good to admit, to stop thinking so negatively about everyone else in their big houses, with their big cars, eating their big meals, collecting as much stuff as they can. I'm that person too. I'm addicted to those same things, in a variety of forms, different though they may appear.

I'm a glutton of college football, of music I like to pretend is indie, of shallow friendships, and of Christianity. Actually, I'll call it spirituality, not Christianity. Spirituality is a trendier way to refer to Christianity, and I am a glutton of all things trendy: everything that entertains me and makes me feel good about myself.

It's okay to consume. We were created needing certain things: oxygen, food, shelter, and clothing. There are other things we take in that are not as foundational,

but no less important: listening to Patty Griffin, for example. (Though, in my experience listening to Patty Griffin is pretty foundational.) As a follower of God I need to read His Word, I need to pray, I need to worship—I need to take these things in—and I probably need to absorb the insight of a few John Pipers along the way.

There is no question that there is validity, necessity even, in these things. We must consume or we will perish. The gluttony happens when we try to consume too much. When we take everything in but contribute nothing. It's buying new music when you have yet to really hear the old. It's continually reading—books and magazines and newspapers—and never stopping to think or write down thoughts of your own. It's being in so many Bible studies that you don't have the time to actually study the Bible, so many that you don't have the time to actually do anything with all of the knowledge being thrown your way.

It's somewhat like trying to take a sip of water while standing under a waterfall. You'll get your sip of water, but you also might drown. There's just so much to do, so much to take in. I sometimes think that I'm drowning in Christianity. There is so much ministry to take part in, so many insightful Christian books to read, so many church functions to attend. There's the one-year Bible, perfectly segmented so that you can read through the entire thing in a year, which is fine in and of itself. But it's missing a few days here and there—suddenly finding yourself speed-reading through the Psalms in three days just to keep pace—when problems arise. At some point consuming all of these things becomes more about entertainment or feeling a sense of accomplishment than about relationship.

This is all backward; it is a life-draining mistake. Consumption, in its proper use, is a source for contribution. Both consumption and contribution find their value as means to enhance relationships. God blesses us so that we will be a blessing. He loves us, expecting that we will also love others, not just that we will feel really great about our-

selves. Myself. I keep switching to talk of “we” or “you” because the fault of gluttony carries less weight when it’s not just my own. It is my fault though; it’s my own shortsightedness, my own selfishness. The consumption problem is greater than me, but it starts just as much with me as with anyone else.

In my sobriety I’m reminded of a story Jesus once told. In Jesus’ tale, a man was leaving to go on a trip. Before the man left he called over three of his servants and entrusted them each with some of his talents (money). Two of the servants went to work and used the money to make more money. The third simply dug a hole and buried the money. When the man came back he was pretty happy with the first two servants, but angry with the third. Buried money doesn’t retain its worth; it loses its value.

I think it’s the same way with what God’s given me: the natural abilities I have, the ways I spend my time, and the experiences and things I gather in trying to take this world in. What I use in the empty pursuit of self tends to waste away and lose value, while what I invest in the outward (my relationships with others and with God) becomes of great worth.

I want this kind of life. Consuming to contribute, doing both for the sake of deeper community. It’s a better life, the long-lasting eternal kind of life. The temporary, insignificant, seen aspects of this world so often drown out reality. It’s all the stuff that looks great now but ends up rusty and moth-ridden at the end. Reality is still there, but it’s hidden behind all the eye candy. The better life is relational; it’s communal. Only in such a light is it actually better to give than to receive, to contribute instead of just consume.

YOU GOTTA' DANCE WITH THE GIRL THAT BROUGHT YOU

I had a professor that used to say this. I think he meant something like playing with the cards you've been dealt. How it came about that Bob and David and Brett and I would become a meaningful community is, like most things, a mystery. But there we were, writing our thoughts for each other to read, and in doing so we became a sort of recovery group, sharing the pain of breaking up and the wonder of new life together. We were not simply letting go of a lifestyle—nature abhors a vacuum—but embracing grace and honesty and genuine life change. Equally as important, we continued by embracing these things together.

That people learn best in community is not a novel concept, but it stands in contrast to the predominant models of discipleship today. Most people approach discipleship individually and privately. We read the Bible alone. We pray alone. We share our faith alone. Sometimes we confess sin to people, but only in controlled environments like accountability groups. Even among hundreds or thousands of people at church, it is possible not to talk to anyone. If we pursue life with Christ on our own, we are largely confined to our version of the story.

A major consequence of this privatized faith is that our discipleship becomes academic—a collection of facts—and our personal faith does not find consistent expression in the public activities and relationships of our day-to-day lives. Faith is not simply separated from works but life in general. What growth and change we do experience is often little more than self-help. I am not against bettering ourselves. I just think that Jesus intends our personal growth to benefit others as much as ourselves.

I don't want to imply that breaking up with the status quo will solve all your problems. In fact, breaking up can leave you feeling quite empty. Even after I felt so liberated that day in the Wired Bean—the day I learned about the nature of grace—it wasn't long until I found myself sitting at my desk, unmotivated, feeling the disappointment of another rut. This does not underscore the failure of repentance, but merely teaches us that repentance is both critical and progressive. Changing the trajectory of one's life always requires a clean break, reaffirmed through subsequent decisions.

Living a communal life requires such a decision. It cannot simply be the next new thing. It is a new way of living, a different path of growth, a different measurement of success. The current of Christianity is heading the opposite direction, and a U-turn is needed, not a merge. Bob and David and Brett and I were not writing about our desire for a better life. We were repenting of such desires and looking to God and each other for a different way of living altogether.

I don't know you, but odds are you need to break up. It's hard to do, but you must forsake the quest for importance and leave behind the comfort of measuring your faith by things that you can do in your own strength. And when you resort to those things, as you will, break up again. Get your reasonable friends to help you and remind you that you're better off without them. It's the only way.