

The Wounding of the Soul by God:
Attachment, Detachment and Spiritual Formation



*“I’ve been cut by the beauty of jagged mountains
And cut by the love that flows like a fountain
From God..
And I carry the scars, precious and rare..”
Bruce Cockburn, 1979*

I Introduction

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann¹ describes the royal consciousness that grew up in the time of David and then expanded in the time of Solomon. He describes the ascendancy of religion amidst the dynamics of Empire.² Brueggemann documents the movement from text to temple, from a free God to a static and controlled religion, the loss of transcendence and the end of prophetic imagination. In other words, he describes a time much like our own, where the politics of Empire dominate and marginalized voices are missing. Brueggemann describes this movement under three headings: the politics of oppression, the economics of affluence, and a religion of immanence.

In the west our churches are largely captive to culture. We box God and place him at our service, or market him as one more product for consumption.³ At the same time we neglect justice and join with our neighbors in the pursuit of wealth and comfort, in a world where 10% of the people consume 80% of the energy and wealth. How has this occurred? What is our response? In the face of Empirical hegemony, can we find wisdom from the margins? Are there voices, current and historical, that help us shape a faithful response?

Thank God: there are many faithful voices, both past and present, that assist in shaping our critique. Many of those voices remain on the margins; some are believers, some are not. They include Derrida and Foucault, James K.A. Smith and Kevin Vanhoozer. They include David Fitch and Walter Brueggemann, and dead mystics like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. Reaching further back still, they include the monastic writers: St. Gregory, Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross.

It is not in the scope of this paper to provide a sweeping analysis of culture, nor a thorough proposal for response to compromise. Neither is it in the scope of this paper to provide a critique of philosophical voices in the modern or postmodern movements. Instead I will limit myself to a brief description of the problem, an examination of biblical narratives that offer a foundation for reflection, and then a consideration of monastic writers who offer an alternative lens through which we may view the challenge of following Jesus under the dominance of Empire. We will employ St. Gregory, Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross as voices who stand on the margins and offer wisdom. I will describe the blessing of the desert, the necessity of detachment and the dynamics of continuing conversion. We'll talk about the formation of alternative cultures as a way of preserving a faithful *ekklesia*, and then we will conclude.

II Problem Introduced

Culture

We all participate in culture. The word "culture" is considered one of the most complex words in the English language. Its root derivation relates to working with soil, planting and harvesting, and the nurture of plants. The metaphor is that we are each "rooted" and planted in particular places among particular people, with their particular practices, and

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001) 30-34

² A more recent treatment of this theme, in the context of postmodernity, is Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed* (Downer's Grove, Ill: IVP, 2004).

³ Pete Rollins little book *How (Not) to Speak Of God* is an interesting response to this very modern position. While he doesn't frame his response as apophatic or kataphatic, he nonetheless stands within the tradition of spiritual writers who describe both the presence and absence, the darkness and the light, in our experience of God.

especially their particular ways of seeing the world: their structures of meaning and interpretation, their *Weltanschauung*.

As a result of our rooting, we are all “cultivated.” Culture is a cultivating force. The soils we grow in shape us, and we in turn shape them. Simone Weil stated her insight with characteristic brevity: “culture forms attention.” *Every culture is a cultivating process that forms people in a certain way.*

Culture forms attention. Consider the forming influences on western believers in the late 20th and early 21st century. We live in an information age, and are daily deluged with voices and data. The very volume of data which comes our way ensures that the influence of any one piece is greatly diluted. Part of our formation is this numbing, distancing that occurs as we float along the surface of reality, consuming sound bytes and factoids. “The conditions of post-industrial society are formed by the confluence of mass media, consumerism, and individualism. The result is a state of hyper-reality: inundation by pervasive access to imagery creates a state in which images are loosed from their meaning.”⁴

But cultivation and working with plants and soil is only one derivation of the word culture. A second, and particularly fascinating derivation, is *cultus*: worship. Worship is about assigning value or worth. We worship what we deem worthy. So if culture is a cultivating force, *culture forms us as worshipping beings*. In this time and place, we are formed within a market culture as consumers. Our ultimate attention is on things, and our relationship to them. We define ourselves by what we can purchase and what we own. This raises the question: *what is the good news* to a person formed in this soil?

In every context where the seed of the gospel takes root there are two processes which compete to form our attention. The good news proclaimed in the New Testament is about healing, shalom, justice, wholeness, and transformation. The good news says that God’s kingdom is breaking into our everyday reality. But there is another gospel which forms a different culture: a culture of violence, competition, and consumption, or as Brueggemann noted above: a gospel of *the economics of affluence and the politics of oppression*, a gospel of the tame god. This other gospel says that Caesar (substitute your own local deity here) will bring peace and prosperity. That gospel wants to form us into good citizens who don’t question Caesar, don’t care for the poor, and who literally “buy in” to the program.

Our common response to the problem of secularization enculturation is to educate. But we largely fail to perceive that to adopt the dominant methods of the dominant culture is to surrender our cause, because as Marshall McLuhan ably pointed out, *the medium is the message*. And the message is pluralistic, relativistic, and Cartesian. I am the sole arbiter of truth.⁵ But even if this were not a problem, to attempt to form believers as apprentices of

⁴ Peter Rohlf, “Theological Simulacra.” Online <http://coprinus.blogspot.com> Dec. 10, 2005. This idea comes from the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Mediated experience allows us to pretend to touch reality when we remain distant. It parallels the experience of theatre.

⁵ See in particular David Fitch discussion of this in *The Great Giveaway*. Fitch describes two sorts of worship environments in evangelical churches: the lecture hall and the rock concert (theatre?). The first setting is designed to stimulate thinking and personal reflection, and the latter is designed to produce feeling. The “lecture hall” setting deals with humans in a modern and Enlightenment fashion: individuals are capable of acquiring truths through propositions and words, and this will somehow lead to transformation. Postmodernity, however, has

Jesus individually is unhelpful, feeding into the illusion that my journey is discrete and individual.⁶ Yet the New Testament witness is that Jesus is a Body. Moreover, we are not formed as disciples of Jesus in two hours a week, but in something closer to one hundred and ten. We return to immersion in the host culture with only a vague perception of its opposition to the way of Jesus.

In his discussion of postmodernity and its shaping force, James K.A. Smith names several practices that form human beings into consuming animals. First, the success of capitalism depends on a consumer culture. Thus we have a class within the culture that has a vested interest in maintaining a society of consumers. It accomplishes this end with all the arsenal of weapons of mass media. Marketing is driven by investing products with social, sexual and even religious value. "In other words, marketing capitalizes on fundamental structural human desires."⁷ Smith points out that these mechanisms transmit values and truth not via propositions or by cognitive means but rather covertly, thus their power.

Second, the vision behind these formative processes is at odds with the gospel. The human *telos* sold by Disney, MTV or Nike has no relationship to love and mercy and welcoming the stranger. There is nothing of transcendence about it. How could there be, when the goal of a market economy is satiation? In a market economy the goal is to create desire, not to encourage the suspension of desire for the sake of justice or a coming kingdom? In the market economy all that matters is the eternal now. The possibility of a transcendent being who judges all this activity in light of a different *telos* must be avoided.

Thus I agree with Rodney Clapp, who in *A Peculiar People* argues that Niebuhr's typology of Christ and culture is unhelpful. Framed within the context of Christendom, Niebuhr's typology asks questions limited by that framework and doesn't allow us to see a broader diversity of response. With the collapse of Christendom, however, we have the opportunity to see the gospel and culture through an entirely new lens: *the kingdom of God is an alternative culture*⁸.

Consumption and Spirituality

wormed away at the process and in the new culture Christians are pummeled with images and symbol constantly. All of these things form perception, form values, shape thought and feeling. The hour long sermon or lecture does not form us, and cannot adequately respond to the powerful enculturation which the current generation experiences in a variety of settings day by day. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005) 105

⁶ See in particular the work of Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) 104

⁸ Similar to Clapp, *A Peculiar People*. Anabaptist author Bruce Guenther offered a critique of Niebuhr, arguing that "The definition of Christ must begin with what Friesen calls an "embodied Christology, one that places Christ in the context of his Jewish culture in first-century Palestine." One must begin with "a view of Christ as the concrete presence of God *in the world of culture*." The Jesus whom one encounters within the diverse documents of the New Testament offers a particular vision of life, a vision that sometimes conflicted with other cultural visions. The real tension, then, is not between Christ and culture but between competing cultural visions. Guenther notes that the key question for Friesen is how a cultural vision of life, identified "in the New Testament as the "good news of the gospel," can be brought into relationship with other cultural visions."

David Fitch writes,

Consumerism is a label given to a specific line of thought developed within postmodern sociologies (Marxism?), post foundationalist theologies. It says that capitalism follows an immanent logic which absorbs all activities into its orbit. As Zygmunt Bauman argues in chap. 2 of Liquid Modernity, the benign "producer capitalism" of the WW2 era has morphed into a "consumer capitalism." The producer capitalism produced basic goods often reusable and durable for everyday needs (producer capitalism) Consumer capitalism produces desire for desire's sake which can never be satiated. Consumer capitalism separates all into individuals and subverts all of life to the mode of satiation of desire, the pursuit of produced happiness. In modernity, religion and belief are relegated to the private, to the individual. The only legitimate organizing forces in society are now the State and of course the market. Left to these socializing forces, we are all shaped into consumers.⁹

It's a dark vision, this dystopia of market capitalism. It's as dark as the skies over Baghdad, or as dark as the slums of Washington, DC.¹⁰ So what? Does it matter if we are wealthy and comfortable? Isn't that merely a foretaste of the good kingdom God offers us? Doesn't God delight to offer us the good life, His shalom, as a reward for faithfulness?

It isn't within my scope to examine the roots of capitalism or offer a critique of globalization¹¹ and the resulting inequities. Neither is it within my scope to offer a critique of triumphalism. Let me simply state that the health and wealth gospel is a distortion of the message of Jesus. Let's consider the distinction Fitch offers above: producer capitalism versus consumer capitalism. Like Smith, the force of his argument is toward the production of desire and the satiation of desire, all toward the pursuit of happiness. The vision that is offered by our market culture is "the good life," translated into comfort and wealth. But at what human cost? At what environmental cost?¹²

For our purposes the question must be: *what and whom do we worship?* In a consumer culture, self and personal happiness is at the center. In a gospel shaped culture, the well being of the other is at the center. The goal of a consumer culture is satiation: to provide goods and services enough to make everyone happy today, and to continue to generate desire for the new and the improved so that consumption continues and profits increase. The goal of a kingdom culture is to produce people who love, and who will sacrifice their own good for the good of others; whose vision is set on a heavenly kingdom, and who

⁹ David Fitch. "Is the Consumerism Critique Legit?" Online at <http://www.reclaimingthemission.com> Nov.25, 2007

¹⁰ Recent statistics reveal that the American capital of Washington, DC now has the highest confirmed number of HIV positive persons in America.

¹¹ Dan Russ in his speech "Babel: The Fear of Humanity and the Illusion of Divinity," said at [Dallas Institute](#), "I invite you to consider with me tonight the proposition that globalization, with all of its sophisticated complexities and potential enhancements, is, at the end of the day, a euphemism for technological imperialism which seeks to subjugate the diversity of humankind and to make it after the image of those who control the technology."

¹² [Noam Chomsky](#) is a linguist bent on unmasking illusions. One of the illusions Chomsky takes on is that democracy still exists in the west, gone since GATT and the rise of multi-national corporations. He appears deeply convinced that the invasion of Iraq was about power and oil. He argues that popular media is aimed at manufacturing consent. Chomsky and Walter Brueggemann would be on the same page around the politics of oppression and the economics of affluence. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books, 1988.

live in such a way as to bring that kingdom to earth. The kinds of people the gospel produces "count others better than themselves."

Worship is a way of seeing the world in light of God. Abraham Heschel

This is not a new dualism. I am not attempting to oppose matter and spirit. Rather, I recognize a priority in God's loving purpose, and acknowledge that his concern is the welfare of all, and not just a privileged few. We must go beyond fair trade to examine the very structures that support our consumptive lifestyles. To this end we need a disciplined people, and practices which are counter-consumerist. We need an ethic that is both aesthetic and ascetic. We need to recover an urban monasticism.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means living on the edge. He didn't seek power or privilege. He hung out with the poor and the marginalized. Instead of seeking status, he intentionally stepped down in the world. Benjamin Roberts wrote,

"Let us come back to the spirit of the Gospel. Let us get down so low at the feet of Jesus as to forget all our pride and dignity, and be willing to worship with the lowest of our kind, remembering that we are the followers of Him "who had not where to lay His head."

Howard Snyder in *Decoding the Church* argues that, "Apostolicity is rather abstract and easily loses its tie to the actual life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Serving the poor is concrete action, not abstract concept. It is done or not done: claims of apostolicity ring hollow if the church is not in fact good news for the poor."¹³

The challenge is to break our addiction to the culture, even our addiction to church and temple. The recovery movement has taught us how to break free from addiction. We need supportive communities, friends who will hold our feet to the fire, love and encourage us as we seek to live out the disciplines of a committed life. Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Savior, remarks:

Most of us are living, to some degree, as addicted persons, striving anxiously after power and money and prestige and relevance, trapped in the turbulence of wanting more. These addictions are so subtle for most of us that we have the illusion of being free people when in actuality we are immersed in society's expectations.... We forget that Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.'¹⁴

In the gospels the way up is the way down. That Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, should come to earth as a vulnerable baby, and suffer and die to redeem humankind, calls us to consider our wisdom as foolishness, and to embrace the foolishness of the cross. Instead of fullness, we should advance emptiness as a cause. Instead of plenty, we should exalt the poverty of Jesus. Perhaps then we could be free for the kingdom. As Bono writes in *Wave of Sorrow*,

*Blessed are the meek who scratch in the dirt
For they shall inherit what's left of the earth*

¹³ Howard Snyder, *Decoding the Church*. Baker Book House, 2002.

¹⁴ Gordon Cosby, Quoted in *Cutting Edge Magazine*, 2002. Jeff Bailey.

*Blessed are the kings who've left their thrones
They are buried in this valley of dry bones*

*Blessed all of you with an empty heart
For you got nothing from which you cannot part
Blessed is the ego
It's all we got this hour*

*Blessed is the voice that speaks truth to power
Blessed is the sex worker who sold her body tonight
She used what she got
To save her children's life*

III The Biblical Narrative: Stories of Transformation

Strangers in a Strange Land

In these days we are called to live as strangers in a strange land. If we choose to live this way, we will find ourselves excluded from the center of cultural life. But perhaps then we can pay attention to the divine drama that occurs around us in everyday, ordinary, incarnational ways. Our faith will be more about conversations and less about events, more about smallness and less about big buildings, more about ordinary people living kingdom lives, and less about charismatic leaders. We might meet Christ in the stranger. As we find God in the ordinary stuff of life, we will see small miracles. Life on the fringes can be vital and dramatic life, but only if we reshape our perspective; only if we turn off the TV; only if we sometimes forego the next upgrade, the latest shiny toys.

How do we choose to act against our nature? We constantly want to be the center of our worlds, our own gods. Our instinctive stance is self protection, comfort, and satiation. We want more.. and faster... and better... What kinds of alternative, counter-consumer practices can save us?

The traditional answer to this question is at least two-fold: prayer and reflection and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Prayer and study and reflection are disciplines of attention. In order to be effective, they must be followed by another discipline: the disciplines of service and love. We must partner with God in his redemptive mission in the world. We must, like him, be vulnerable and available. These kinds of choices are counter-cultural and counter-consumer.

A fourth component is also critical: that of community. Although I often have good intentions, I find it much more likely that I practice my beliefs if I have shared my commitment with someone. Intending to pray at 8 AM it's one thing: if I intend to meet with two others to pray, it's another. When we share purpose and share practice, we are far more likely to experience the fruit of our intentions. *We are formed*, not by our good intentions or our correct values or right belief, but *by what we practice*.

There are a number of biblical stories that show us what it is to partner with God in mission, and that describe counter-cultural practices. Chris Erdman retells the story of the wedding at Cana in his article, "Refilling Stone Jars." Chris notes that the party is over for the church in our day: we are out of wine. The hosts themselves may never have found out; but those on the fringes knew and as a result witnessed a miracle.

Those hosting the party thought they were in charge—hosts can be denominational executives, the General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, and Sessions; hosts can be power players in the congregation; hosts can be pastors; hosts can be dominant cultures. The point is, regardless of who the hosts are, they may be so busy with their “hosting” of the party and with their anxiety over its premature ending, and so angry over the loss of their privileged position of power, that they miss a holy transaction.

This is good news for preachers like me. It lashed me to the mast, and stops my ears against the siren voices. I’m told that hosts—the big important people with much to do— don’t know where the new wine comes from (v. 9). I’m told that all this grace is transacted quietly, out-of-the-way, hidden from the main attraction of the day. Neither hosts nor guests are privy to the work of Jesus and his servants— those little preachers like me who carry the Word week in and week out.

There is gospel here. It hints at the Incarnation itself: an infant, born to an unwed mother, far from the busyness and self-importance of the hosts, the Palace politicians and Temple priests. I like to think that the Christians who early listened to this story liked it very much. And I think the Johannine writer wanted them to like it. Hearing it, they recognized that the wonderful thing taking place in and through Jesus Christ happened with hardly a ripple in the vast ocean of the Roman Empire. Water was becoming wine, God was on the move, a new day was dawning, God’s converting power was making old things new, and neither the High Priest in Jerusalem nor Caesar in Rome were in on it. But they were, these little Christians, most of them poor and insignificant. The little preachers “who had drawn the water *knew*,” . . . *they knew!*¹⁵

Other stories further describe the kingdom reality in contrast to our expectations and distorted expectations of Messiah. We aren’t much different from the Jews of Jesus time, who all had their own ideas of what Messiah would bring. Their dreams of personal comfort and personal aggrandizement, in other words of a domesticated God much like Santa Claus, whose only purpose was to make them happy, were confounded by the man from Nazareth.

Nearly all the parables of the kingdom demonstrate a very different political, economic, and social reality than we would expect. The mustard seed is the least of all seeds, yet grows up to become a huge tree. In the gardens of Israel the mustard seed was far from rare: rather, it was ubiquitous. It was and is a scourge, infesting gardens like a weed. No one wants it. But in Jesus story it becomes the foundation of the hope of a new world.

The kingdom coming as leaven in a lump is similarly scandalous. Leaven is an eastern metaphor for something that goes out of control. “Beware the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees,” warns Jesus. At the Passover feast it is unleavened bread that is sought and that memorializes the work of God in deliverance from Egypt, a deliverance that not only dethroned the oppressive regime of Pharaoh but that in the same moment created a new nation who became the bearers of the promise which we inherit. The metaphor of leaven suggests that the growth of the kingdom is beyond our control, and will not always be welcome. It “infests” the world and challenges conventional wisdom. It confronts our categories and our comfort, disembods us calls us to reorder our lives around different priorities.

¹⁵ Chris Erdman, “Refilling Stone Jars,” GOCN Vol13, September/December, 2001

It is to the exodus story to which we now turn as paradigmatic: representing something so fundamental that the loss of memory we experience apart from this story makes it really impossible for us to understand all that follows, even to the coming of Jesus.

The Exodus and the Desert of Sinai

Moses wanted to turn a tribe of enslaved Hebrews into free men. You would think that all he had to do was to gather the slaves and tell them that they were free. But Moses knew better. He knew that the transformation of slaves into free men was more difficult and painful than the transformation of free men into slaves... Moses discovered that no spectacle, no myth, no miracles could turn slaves into free men. It cannot be done. So he led the slaves back into the desert, and waited forty years until the slave generation died, and a new generation, desert born and bred, was ready to enter the promised land.¹⁶

Israel was called out of bondage in Egypt, and called toward the land of Promise. But they had to first pass through the desert. Why? Was this transition merely a place on the way to somewhere else? Or did God have something very specific in mind as he moved Israel from Egypt to Palestine?

Scholars suspect that the oral tradition was written while Israel was in another captivity in Babylon. If this is true, then it was while living in exile that Israel was doing theology: talking about issues of faithfulness while living in a foreign land. Israel's most creative theologizing was done when they were a marginalized people, remembering the events that shaped their national identity.

Do we really have to work this hard? Can't we find all we need in the New Testament? The God of the Old Testament, the God of Sinai often appears distant and forbidding. Jesus seems so accessible. Isn't He all we need?

This common division – between Jesus and Yahweh – grows out of good intentions, but is founded on a split between law and grace that can't be sustained. Let's consider briefly the relationship of the Old and New Testaments.

The Old and New Testaments are related on the basis of covenant. The promise given to Abraham is for a deliverer who finally arrives in Christ. We inherit those promises, as the book of Romans makes clear, pointing to Abraham as the father of faith (Gal.3:29). The basis of the promise is a covenant. When Jesus celebrates the Passover with His disciples he says that His blood is the blood of a new covenant. Many aspects of Jesus' teaching recall aspects of covenant thinking. The parables are all about the kingdom –or reign -- of God. (Every Old Testament covenant presupposes that God is the king of Israel.) He presents his teaching as a new law which at once fulfils and surpasses the law of Moses (Mt. 5).

Paul is similarly attuned to Old Testament symbols and narratives. It is these narratives that sound the themes that repeat throughout scripture. In his paper, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," NT Wright notes that the symbolic world of Judaism focused on temple, Torah, land, and racial identity. These symbols were enlivened by the festivals and fasts, cult and sacrifice, domestic taboos and customs. The narrative framework which

¹⁶ Eric Hoffer, diary entry, May 20, 1959. Source Unknown.

sustained symbol and praxis had to do with the history of Israel: specifically, its' continued state of "exile" under Roman occupation and the ways in which Israel hoped for intervention by the God of the exodus.¹⁷

Both baptism and the Lord's table connect to the fundamental story of Israel's redemption: the exodus event. Paul understood baptism in terms of a new exodus. He makes this link in 1 Cor. 10:2, speaking of the wilderness generation being "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Paul brings out the parallel between Israel's experience and that of Christians, the new exodus people, and then stresses the obligations as a result. In Romans 6 "slavery is abandoned and freedom gained by passing through the water, reenacting the death of Jesus which was already interpreted in terms of Passover imagery."¹⁸ Now in Corinthians Paul calls us back to those ancient memories. In 1 Cor.5:7,8 he makes a direct link between Passover and the sacrifice of Jesus: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us join the feast." The meaning is clear: we are that covenant people who were delivered by the blood of the lamb. Our remembrance is as old as Israel's memories, and our deliverance is as new as God's future.

But is this really so radical? If we don't perceive the radical call of this movement, it is because we are compromised people who participate in a compromised community. We no longer perceive the surprising newness of God because we are too much of this world. Like Israel in Egypt we have forgotten who we are. Walter Brueggemann elsewhere asks,

How do we not yield these radical convictions? I submit that it is in this: these subversive alternatives of God/church/world must be kept close to the eucharistic table where we eat and drink in covenant. The cup which is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood (Luke 22:20). Whenever we eat this bread and drink this wine, we engage in a subversive minority report. Precisely because of being broken and poured out, this bread and wine will never be fully accommodated to the interests of the old age. The world wants the bread unbroken and the wine still filling the cup. The world yearns for unrisking gods and transformed humanity. But in our eating and drinking at this table we know better. We will not have these subversive alternatives rendered void.¹⁹

Both the Passover and Israel's descent into the water (water that became the permanent resting place of Pharaoh's army) become sacramental events in the life of the church. These are matters of life and death, of escape from slavery and birth as a nation of free men and women. Baptism and the Lord's table are calls to memory and covenantal renewal – to find again and reestablish our identity as the people of God, living in dependence on Him. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal.5:1). We are free because God is radically free. And he is good, but He is not safe. Exodus and Sinai teach us that God is radically other, and is not like the Baals, standing at the service of humankind and subject to our whims if we use the right words.

In Moses pastoral address in Deuteronomy 10:14,15 we read

¹⁷ NT Wright, *Romans and the Theology of Paul*. In *Pauline Theology*, Volume III, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 30-67.

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans." In *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2002) 534.

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, "Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm." *The Christian Century*, November 12, 1980, pp. 1094-1099

*To the LORD your God belong the heavens,
even the highest heavens, the earth and everything
in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors
and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants,
above all the nations—as it is today.*

Israel is led into the desert because only in this way can she learn that God is radically free. Moreover, in the harsh conditions of the desert she learns radical dependence on God. Daily she is fed by God, given water by God, and delivered from her enemies by God. By day she is led by the cloud, and by night by the pillar of fire. God leads Israel into the desert to woo her. Exodus is a great romance. The Lord will allow no other lovers for Israel. Perhaps Exodus should only be read in concert with the Song of Songs. In 8:5 we read, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” Israel learns to lean on God after her sojourn in the desert. Moses continues in Deut. 10:20,

*Fear the LORD your God and serve him.
Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name.
He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you
those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes.
Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all,
and now the LORD your God has made you
as numerous as the stars in the sky.*

Such increase in numbers brings power, and we are always tempted to use power for our own benefit, or at least to avoid the daily dying that can birth Christ in us. Likewise wealth brings power, enabling us to delay or avoid outright the journey toward God. This is why Yahweh warns Israel in Deut. 6:10-12,

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

This is the great value of the desert; it purges us of wrong motives and wrong attachments. In the desert we detach from things and from self in order to become attached to God and His kingdom. Only after forty years in the desert is Israel ready to enter the land of promise. But what are the mechanisms God employs for this purpose? St. John and St. Gregory describe the process in terms of the wounding of the soul.

IV The Solution Advanced: Compunction and the Faithfulness of God

*Judge for yourself if a fire isn't safe,
When cities fall before her face.
Yet a flower can endure the course of a storm
by bowing to the tempest's rage.
Oh love — more fierce than all the rest.
Oh raging joy within my breast..*

*Burning ember, I remember love's first light in me
I was cold then, like a stone when
I saw your flickering.
Burn forever, let me never
Curse the pain you bring.
Somehow I know I will be whole
in your burning...²⁰*

Steve describes some of the thought that went into this song:

At the time I was reading the diary of Father John of Kronstadt – a Russian Orthodox priest from the late 19th century who understood that the human person was much like a cold piece of iron which, when left in a fire, has the capacity to take on the qualities of that fire - heat / light. His encouragement was for us all to lay our lives in the fire of God's divine love by which we become by grace what God is by nature insinuating that anything less is beneath our dignity as human beings.²¹

Steve recognizes the essential truth that we deeply desire God, and yet something else in us resists His will. We are broken vessels, and our very nature has been damaged by sin. We desire what we should not want, and we want what we should not desire (James 4:1-3). Moreover, we continually seek to be the center of our own worlds and the principle of our own acts. We want to be like God, but we are not gods, and our attempt to sit on the throne of God makes us into devils. We seek to maintain our freedom, but end up ruling in Hell.

God, however, in His gracious mercy, doesn't leave us in this dismal and hopeless place. Instead, he begins the cooperative work in us of purifying our desires (James 1:2), so that our desire and His become one. His goal is to turn our darkness into light, and to raise us to Himself, the Source and Goal of all life.

However, this is often a painful process and a living battle. How can that which is created of earth reach upward to heaven? This is an impossible task were it not for grace. As Bono of U2 has opined, "grace makes beauty out of ugly things." Another mystic/poet who has acknowledged the inner battle for the soul is Bruce Cockburn. In one of his early songs he sings,

*I've been touched by the beauty of jagged mountains..
and cut by the love that flows like a fountain from God.
And I carry these scars, precious and rare..*

There is something in contact with the divine that leaves an imprint on the soul. It is as if the soul tastes food that is exotic and unique, and is then spoiled for anything else. It is as if we touch a beauty beyond any we have ever known, and are never again satisfied. The bread that comes down from heaven creates a hunger that can be satisfied in no other way. Similarly, St. John writes,

*O shorten the long days of burning thirst –
No other love allays them.
Let my eyes see your face,*

²⁰ Steve Bell, "Burning Ember," from the CD *Burning Ember*. Signpost Music, c.2001

²¹ Steve Bell, a private conversation in the spring of 2006. Len Hjalmarson.

*Treasure to daze them.
Except for love, it's labor lost to raise them.*²²

The mystics, beginning with St. Gregory, spoke of "compunction." The word was originally a medical term, and described acute attacks of pain. Translated into the spiritual life, it describes a pain in the soul, pain that arises from two causes: the existence of sin, and the existence of our hunger for God. Compunction is an act of the Spirit in us, an act by which God awakens us. But this awakening is painful, like the thawing of a frozen limb, or the renewed use of a limb which is mortified. We are pierced by love, and the attention of the soul is recalled to God.²³ That most well known writer, St. John of the Cross, describes the process in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

*How manage breath on breath
So long, my soul, not living where life is?
Brought low and close to death
by those arrows of his?
Love was the bow. I know. I've witnesses.*

*And wounds to show. You'd cleave
clean to the heart, and never think of healing?
Steal it, and when you leave
leave it? What sort of dealing,
to steal and never keep, and yet keep stealing?*²⁴

The most prominent characteristic of the poems of compunction are paradox. We attempt to describe spiritual truth in human language, and end up with apparent contradictions. Steal and keep stealing; wounds of love; these categories are paradoxical, but not unfamiliar in our experience. Any lover knows the wounding of the soul, a desire that seems insatiable, the experience of awakening as if from sleep when suddenly all the world seems new. Suddenly the ego is suppressed and we think of nothing but the good of the one we love. Our own needs seem unimportant. The beloved is all in all. What but love can wean us away from the things of this world? This was the essence of the monastic testimony, that "God is not known if not loved." Bernard of Clairvaux writes,

Your blessings and love are like hands and feet to help me gently move toward You and Your absolute and sovereign love. But such an experience is not to be enjoyed with unmitigated pleasure. Instead, it is one of yearnings, struggles, and frustrations, mixed with bitter sweetness..

So when my eyes of introspection get confused, dim, and even blind, I pray that You will open them quickly; not in shame as Adam's eyes were opened. Rather, may they be opened to behold Your glory (Exodus 33:18). Then, forgetting all about my own poverty and insignificance, my whole being may be able to stand up, to run into Your embrace of love, and see You whom I love, and love You whom I have yet to see...²⁵

²² St. John of the Cross. *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*. "Spiritual Canticle." Translated J. F. Nims. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 5

²³ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 30

²⁴ St. John of the Cross. Op Cit. 5

²⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1983) 112.

How is this action accomplished in us? According to St. Gregory, by tribulations, suffering, and above all, by temptation. Permission to tempt man is given by God for reasons of wise providence. It encourages the purification of intention, and it promotes humility. The ultimate role of compunction is to bring the soul to a deep longing for heaven.

Compunction is also related in St. Gregory to the gift of tears.

Two kinds of tears symbolize the two forms of compunction: the lower stream, *irriguum inferius*, is the stream of repentance.; the higher flood, *irriguum superius*, that of desire. Tears of love always accompany tears of penitence.²⁶

Tears and the pouring out of the soul in repentance and desire result in an emptying that creates space for God to fill us. In a sense, we become increasingly empty of self, which makes room for the Spirit. Gregory uses the image of a wings and an eagle: we must fly, soar and ascend to God. Bernard of Clairvaux writes,

For the more He pours His love into their souls, the more capacity they are given to go on loving. He satisfied, but He never surfeits. The satisfaction always increases the desire, instead of diminishing it...²⁷

The motive that prompts the journey is desire. Out of our pain we rise to God. Pain detaches us from the world and from self so that we may attach to God.

*Souls beyond selfhood caught
Know, not knowing, there
Burst the mind's barrier.*²⁸

But if desire is ardent, it is also patient. Desire is concerned with progress, but it is rewarded with Presence, and so it is fulfilled even as it grows more intense. Possession of God does not satiate, but rather serves to increase desire. Bernard of Clairvaux writes,

The satisfaction always increases the desire instead of diminishing it, but it does remove worry and anxiety. For this love, as I have said, who is loved fills him with delight. He relieves him of all distress in desiring and all jealousy in zeal. As the apostle says, he enlightens them "from glory to glory" so that in light they will see light (Psalm 36:9).²⁹

The result is an inexplicable peace (peace such as the world cannot know) because desire is itself a possession in which fear and love are reconciled. In this desire the joy of the Lord is also found, and through it union of the soul with God. As Bernard is fond of pointing out, to desire God is to have already found what we desire. Love gives unity to all.

It seems irresponsible not to address the classical experience of the dark night of the soul. Let it suffice to say that this experience of desolation, where God withdraws the sense of His presence to purify the soul of its reliance on feelings, is well documented in Christian biography. We learn to seek God for Himself, and not for any benefit to self.

²⁶ Leclercq, Op Cit. 30

²⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, Op Cit. 115.

²⁸ St. John of the Cross. *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*. "Deep Rapture." Translated J. F. Nims. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 29

²⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, Op Cit. 115

The question we close with is this: what will keep us committed through the pain of transformation? When the light of God seems more like darkness, and we are no longer convinced that He is merciful or just; when the path is difficult and we are tired; when we feel alone and our friends desert us – what keeps us on the path?

V Culture and Compromise: A Map for Faithful Exiles

Love and Knowledge

We tend to think of the Old Testament as presenting a religious path to knowledge, and the New Testament as presenting a relational path. It's a false dichotomy. "Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4). It's true that the Old Testament word doesn't have the connotations of romantic love we associate with the word. It is more like "covenant faithfulness," and is closely tied to action. But knowledge is another matter. Knowledge, in the Hebrew conception, is linked to sexual intimacy and to union.

Love is a path to knowledge, and the only path to a certain kind of knowledge. We understand this truth readily by analogy. I can describe my wife to a third party. I can show them pictures. I can tell them stories of our relationship and life events. Perhaps I may show them a movie clip on my PC. Finally, they might meet her. But until they come to a place where they would give everything for her, they haven't loved her.³⁰ And until they love her, they haven't touched her soul. God is love, and until He is loved He is not fully known. This is why the gift of the Spirit is so important, and why apart from the wounding of love conversion is incomplete.

It's difficult for those of us in the sensual, material world to conceive of any reason to limit our experience or pleasure. We readily embrace an aesthetic posture; we are less ready to embrace an ascetic one. I'm not convinced they can easily be separated. The aesthetic and ascetic may really be two sides of a single coin. Those who want to know God will know him both positively, and negatively, both in the experience of light, and the experience of darkness. They will know Him in the desert places, and on the mountain tops. God is present to us in all these ways, and physical geography just like weather becomes analogical language for spiritual experience.

Love is its own kind of knowing. Somewhere Eugene Peterson writes about love that it is our first language, the language of attachment, but a language we often lose as we become instrumental and interested in effects. Most of us need to relearn the language of the heart to remain whole human beings. While we can know God with the mind, God is Personal, and He is not fully known unless He is loved. The call to contemplation is the call to know God beyond our senses and beyond our intellect; to directly apprehend Him with our spirit so that "deep calls to deep."

But this isn't easy with the attractions and distractions of western culture. We play to our strengths and our fleshly appetites. These things bend our attention to the earth and to the moment. They also feed our ego and tend to keep us self-absorbed. But God is Other, and His arms open wide. Ours must do so likewise. And He is jealous for our love, knowing

³⁰ I am remembering here Donald Miller's recitation of Romeo and Juliet in the last chapter of *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2004) 215.

that our highest nature is spiritual, our final fulfillment and rest found only in Him. When we raise our eyes heavenward, our entire being is lifted up.

The contemplative call acknowledges this, and readily trades earthly attractions for spiritual life. The contemplative is not content to skim along the surface of things, but seeks depth, and that requires focus and intention. A Zen story illustrates the place of discipline, and even asceticism, in the spiritual life. A disciple comes to his master with a question:

Master, what can I do to become enlightened?
Son, as much as you can do to make the sun rise.
Master, then of what use are all these disciplines?
So that when the sun begins to rise, you do not miss it.

Thank God, we have a faithful Father who will draw us to Himself. His intention is to deepen our thirst and purify it so that no other water will satisfy. His intention is to give us Himself, if that is what we truly want. Compunction is the wounding of the soul by God, renewing it in the image of its Creator, until "deep calls unto deep."

Attachment and Detachment

In our busy world we are driven more often than we make choices. We are compulsive about the need to acquire status, power, and security. We feed this false self more than nurturing the true self. Our identity, for the most part, is found outwardly rather than inwardly where we hear the voice of love. In *Lifesigns* Henri Nouwen writes,

"There are two houses in this world: the house of fear, and the house of love.
"We are so accustomed to fear that we do not hear the voice that says, "Do not be afraid..."
Yet it is this voice that announces a whole new way of living..."³¹

So we become attached to this false self, and we strive to maintain it in the face of all challenges. When we cannot maintain it, when our attempts to acquire position, friendship or things are thwarted, we become depressed or angry. We do not know the peace of Jesus, or the identity and security He offers. Elizabeth O'Connor writes,

"Greed in the world today is the greatest contradiction of our interdependence and of the understanding of ourselves as a global community. But.. sometimes I watch myself in the act of taking more, and it has made me afraid. I do not want to be robbed of the revolutionary vocation that I have as a Christian, and I am quite confident that this is what greed does to us. In the end it leaves everyone poor. I give more attention these days to what the saints say about "self-denial," as well as more attention to what modern psychology says about the "realization of potential." These two concepts are better fellow workers than we have thought. There is no realization of self-potential without community, and no community without self-denial."³²

So long as we maintain this false self we are not free for the kingdom. Our lives will revolve around a small and dying center – ourselves – instead of around the life and freedom of Jesus. And the seed, failing to fall into the ground, will not bring forth fruit.

³¹ Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns* (San Francisco, CA: Doubleday, 1986) 10.

³² Elizabeth O'Connor, *The New Community* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976) 21.

The answer, argues O'Connor, is to consent to death. One of the founding members of the Church of the Savior, she speaks from experience. She points to self-denial as the ground of continuing conversion. Elsewhere she refers to St. Benedict's concept of *Conversio morum*. She interprets the *Conversio* as "a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort or another – a commitment to become a completely new man. No matter where one attempts to do this, it remains the essential thing."³³ Merton writes,

"..the vow of *conversio morum* is a vow of renunciation and penance, a vow to abandon the world and its ways in order to seek God... It is the vow to obey the voice of God, to place oneself under a Rule and an Abbot in order to follow the will of God in all things...

There can be no doubt that one of the most important aspects of *conversatio morum* is the persevering determination to bear with patience and courage all the trials one may meet in the monastic life.. It is in a sense precisely to these trials that one has been called by grace, so that fidelity to grace demands this acceptance.³⁴

The call to be Jesus apprentices is the call to discover a whole new way of being, one that does not depend on outward position, possessions, or approval. "The only thing that counts is the new creation!" (Gal. 6:15 NEB). We continually die to these things in order to be found in God and free for the kingdom. The question remains: how do we make these choices? What alternative practices and commitments will assist us in becoming more like Jesus?

Forming Culture: Shared Purpose, Shared Practice

"Let my people go so that they may keep my pilgrim-feast in the wilderness" (Exodus 5:1 NEB).

God is always seeking to free us from bondage. The way to fight oppression in the world is to begin leaving the Egypt of our own slavery. When we become free, we will have the power to free others. As Buber put it, "the wise man will become a teaching."

Unfortunately, most of us are lazy or self-centered, or both. We want Jesus: but on our terms. We want him as one more spoke on the wheel of life, not the center that conditions and shapes everything else. When we realize that He isn't satisfied to fit into our agendas and our busy lives, we make some small steps toward growth, but we don't keep at it. We fall back into old patterns and give priority to the urgent things, instead of the necessary things. Like water, we seek the path of least resistance. With so many distractions, the necessary things are pushed aside. Our attention is divided. We cease living from a quiet center and we limit the life of God in us. But God wants to be our constant source so that living water can flow out from us into the world. Jean Vanier writes,

The more we become people of action and responsibility in our community, the more we must become people of contemplation. If we do not nurture our deep emotional life in prayer hidden in God, if we do not spend time in silence and if we do not know how to take time from the presence of our brothers and sisters, we risk becoming embittered. It is only to the extent that we nurture our own hearts that we can keep

³³ Ibid., 57

³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (New York: Andrews McMeel, 1971) 149

interior freedom. People who are hyperactive, fleeing from their deep selves and their wound, become tyrannical and their exercise of responsibility only creates conflict.³⁵

What is the secret of abiding? What is the secret of continuing conversion? We may fool others that we are committed to Christ and His kingdom and that we are growing in God, but we can't fool ourselves. The only way to move deeper is to do it intentionally. We need shared disciplines of study and prayer and community and service. Those shared disciplines are usually grouped together and called a "rule of life." Andy Raine of the Northumbria Community writes,

Rule then is a means whereby, under God, we take responsibility for the pattern of our spiritual lives. It is a 'measure' rather than a 'law'. The word 'rule' has bad connotations for many, implying restrictions, limitations and legalistic attitudes. But a Rule is essentially about freedom. It helps us to stay centred, bringing perspective and clarity to the way of life to which God has called us. The word derives from the Latin 'regula' which means 'rhythm, regularity of pattern, a recognisable standard' for the conduct of life. Esther De Waal has pointed out that 'regula' 'is a feminine noun which carried gentle connotations' rather than the harsh negatives that we often associate with the phrase 'rules and regulations' today. We do not want to be legalistic. A Rule is an orderly way of existence but we embrace it as a way of life not as keeping a list of rules. It is a means to an end – and the end is that we might seek God with authenticity and live more effectively for Him.

Being bound to a Rule of life could be very restricting, but it is a voluntary and purposeful restriction. It excludes other possibilities in order to be focused on what is chosen. There are new and demanding priorities, but there is also much joy.³⁶

Much of my journey these past six or seven years has been an attempt to discover an interpretive community that is both deeper and wider than the communities I have experienced, a community that is discerning of the times, and responding creatively to the voice of the Spirit. At the same time I have been looking for roots - something larger than an individual community, more enduring, and built around shared purpose.

Many of us have felt so alone, and intuited our need for company. It is difficult to move to new places alone; perhaps impossible, because we are a people and called to show forth together a new way of living. Elisabeth Fiorenza wrote, "If we dream alone, it remains merely a dream. If many dream together, then it is the beginning of a new reality..." There is a need to recover biblical practice in faith communities where believers dwell in the biblical story. These practices should form a rhythm of inward and outward movement, embracing community and mission, integrating life into a seamless fabric. As Robert Bellah wrote,

We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions, but through them. We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning.³⁷

³⁵ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) 139.

³⁶ Andy Raine, Northumbria Community Online <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org>

³⁷ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 84.

If we fail to move together in community, we risk reinforcing the individualist and fragmenting ethos, which only makes us weaker and more vulnerable to the consumerist imperative. Yet we have often sought in vain for encouragement in our own locations. The level of enculturation, and sometimes of fear of change, or fear of commitment, often precludes the ability to consider new perspective. Consequently, visionaries and poets sometimes find themselves alone.

Thank God, the Internet and new networks have supplied us with community we lacked. Our foggy vision has begun to clear. As a new consensus emerges, we find ourselves both shaping -- and being shaped by -- new perspective. At some point we hear the Spirit calling us to a new level of commitment. As we understand faithfulness in new ways, we have to discover, and commit to, new practices, or else admit that following Jesus is impossible and give up.

And these new practices must be communal in nature; they must be shared. If they are not shared when we grow tired or discouraged we will stop practicing and find ourselves back where we started. Jesus sent them out two by two in Luke 11 because "when one falls the other can help him up."

But there is another reason that practices must be shared. It is because Christ is a body, and the kingdom is not merely a set of values and practices but a culture: a special kind of soil. Culture is a cultivating force. If we want to build not just strong individuals but strong ecclesial centers, cities set on a hill – if we want to build faith communities that endure, they need more than alternative values, they need to be rooted in alternative practice. If we are formed as a peculiar people, much that we work so hard at now will become second nature to us, who are so fragmented and divided. A strong wall is formed of bricks tightly fit together.

Some of those alternative practices are already given to us, though we have not seen their radical nature. Baptism and the Lord's table are two of the practices given to us by God.³⁸ Other practices existed before the time of Jesus and were continued by the Church: prayer, meditation, and the study of Scripture. A neglected but critical practice is mission, and related, hospitality. Still other practices might include feasts around Pentecost and Easter, or practices associated with the Jubilee. The Church is the only institution which exists primarily for its non members. Reg McNeal writes,

The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus did not teach his disciples to pray, "Thy church come." The kingdom is the destination.³⁹

There are many faith communities which have been formed around the *missio Dei*. These include the Church of the Savior, and Rutba House. More recently Life on the Vine in Chicago has initiated a missional order, and the ALLELON association is in the process of initiating a missional order. I attended a meeting to discuss this intention in October of 2007 at Seabeck, Washington. With us in those meetings was a brother from the Northumbria

³⁸ Please note that I am not talking about the practice of sharing crackers and a sip of juice in a large meeting, but about the political reality expressed behind the meal, and found also in Acts 4:32 and 2 Cor. 8.

³⁹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001) 28

Community. A summary of the rule of life of that community follows. This particular rule is ordered around two practices: availability, and vulnerability.

We are called to be **AVAILABLE** to God and to others:

Firstly to be available to God in the cell of our own heart when we can be turned towards Him, and seek His face;
then to be available to others in a call to exercise **hospitality**, recognizing that in welcoming others we honor and welcome the Christ Himself;
then to be available to others through participation in His care and concern for them, by praying and **interceding** for their situations in the power of the Holy Spirit;
then to be available for participation in **mission** of various kinds according to the calling and initiatives of the Spirit.

We are called to intentional, deliberate **VULNERABILITY**:

We embrace the vulnerability of being **teachable** expressed in:
a discipline of prayer;
in exposure to Scripture;
a willingness to be accountable to others in ordering our ways and our heart in order to effect change.

We embrace the responsibility of taking the **heretical imperative**:
by speaking out when necessary
or asking awkward questions that will often upset the status quo;
by making relationships the priority, and not reputation.

We embrace the challenge to live as **church without walls**, living openly amongst unbelievers and other believers in a way that the life of God in ours can be seen, challenged or questioned. This will involve us building friendships outside our Christian ghettos or club-mentality, not with ulterior evangelistic motives, but because we genuinely care.

VI Conclusion

How does one heed God's will? By disengaging from those things that distract us from the divine presence: our idols and addictions..⁴⁰

I'm increasingly uncomfortable with current images of God found in books and workshops that mix popular psychology with a theology wholly devoted to self-realization. I really don't want a God who is solicitous of my every need, fawning for my attention, eager for nothing in the world so much as the fulfillment of my self-potential. One of the scourges of our age is that all our deities are house-broken and eminently companionable. In a society that emphasizes the limitless possibilities of the individual self, it comes as a strange freshness to be confronted by an unfathomable God, indifferent to the petty, self-conscious needs that consume us.⁴¹

We who live under the hegemony of Empire are continually tempted to make God in our own image. This destruction of His freedom would enable us to pursue our private agendas of comfort and wealth without criticism or interruption. A religion of immanence is well suited to the climate of producer capitalism.

⁴⁰ Robert Inchausti, *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991) 70.

⁴¹ Bendon C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007)

However, there is a Voice that calls us deeper...

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time..⁴²*

There is a voice that beckons even as we sit in our comfortable living rooms or drive in our air conditioned cars. There is a voice that is not tame, but wild and free, and it calls us to risk everything for a city we have not seen and a beauty we have yet to discover, even while we live as satiated beings. It is God's work to so wound our souls, that we are never satisfied in this world. This wounding enables us to detach from earthly things, so that we live into a heavenly vision. It is the work of God to call us out, so that we may re-enter as men and women who are free for the kingdom, dreaming of a new world and working for its arrival.

We who know ourselves to be called by God continually look for ways to fulfill our vocation, immersed in the ordinary things of this world for the sake of a world yet to come. The witness of Bernard, Gregory, St. John and many others is that God is at work in us to will and to do for His good pleasure. It is He who empowers us to make this pilgrimage, and He sends us out together with others so that we do not grow weary. Where we could regard an ordered life as a limit on our freedom, we discover that there is no freedom without limits in this world, and we bind ourselves to a rule as drowning men hold to a lifeboat in a stormy sea. We embrace alternative practices because they allow us to immerse ourselves in the life of God, who gives Himself for the sake of the world.

*And the river runs wide
And the river runs deep
And I spit in the eye
Of safe company
When I dive right down
To the undertow
Well, the deeper I drown
Lord, the higher I'll go.⁴³*

Those who are scarred by the love of God are never fully home in this world. The witnesses to this truth are many, and are scattered throughout history. One in particular expressed his longing this way. I close with St. Brendan's prayer.

Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home?

Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at your mercy, without silver, without a horse,
without fame, without honor?

Shall I throw myself wholly upon you, without sword and shield,
without food and drink, without a bed to lie on?

⁴² T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," V. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1943)

⁴³ John Mellencamp, "To the River," from *Human Wheels*

Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land,
placing myself under Your yoke?

Shall I pour out my heart to You,
confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness,
tears streaming down my cheeks?
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach,
a record of my final prayer in my native land?

Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?
Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean?

O King of the Glorious Heaven,
shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

O Christ, will You help on the wild waves?

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