



Living in Truth

... yesterday, today and forever ...

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A sinner's story: from death to life

By Austin Penner

Four years ago, I was without hope and without God in the world—until I was adopted by the King of the Universe. I pray this story encourages God's people and stirs faith in His redemptive power, grace, and zeal to pursue His lost sheep. This is the story of how He redeemed my life from the pit and set me apart to proclaim His Son. Originally nearly 7000 words, may this condensed version reveal God's glory and stir you to worship Jesus Christ -- the "friend of sinners."

Early Life

I was born in 1994 in Sherwood Park, Alberta, the second child of a teen single mother. My biological father left before I was born, and so did my half-brother's father. With two boys and no support, my mother made the difficult decision to place me for adoption.

At six months, I was welcomed into a loving family. My adoptive parents, who also adopted my brother from another single mother, gave me an incredible childhood. I grew up playing organized sports, exploring my creativity and living a suburban life.

Despite these gifts in abundance, I was always a pretty sad kid. I lived in my head and walked to my own beat.

Faith was not central in our home, though our extended family carried Catholic, Mennonite, and United traditions. My parents' approach was open-handed: "You'll figure it out one day." Still, as a child I asked the big questions: *What happens when we die? Who is God? Who is this blue-eyed Jesus hanging on my grandmother's wall?* I never embraced atheism—it never felt true. Sports, especially baseball, kept me grounded while rock and hip-hop music, skateboarding, and friendships exposed me to new influences.

Around the age of 11, curiosity led me into pornography, which soon became an addiction lasting 14 or so years. By 13, I tried drinking and smoking weed. At 14, I tried mushrooms, and remember burying my face in the couch while listening to Ms. Jackson by OutKast on repeat, while flittering colours in my closed eyes came together to form Jesus on the cross, prompting me to cry out to my friend: "*Bro, I just saw Jesus in the couch!*"

Even then, God dropped breadcrumbs—not of approval but pointing toward redemption. High school brought average academics, deepened drug use and psychedelic trips that left me convinced there was more beyond the material. I tasted counterfeits of love and transcendence, yet refused cocaine for years, swearing I would never touch the drug I was told my biological father used.

Through it all, baseball anchored me as my friends started drifting further. By God's providence, it gave me direction and kept me from being completely swept away.

Baseball Dreams and Crisis

In Grade 12, a "BC College Exposure" baseball trip brought me to Vancouver Island University (VIU) in Nanaimo. I fell in love with the city and signed with the team after the coach offered me a spot, having watched a strong pitching performance. The following four years I played university ball, rising from closing pitcher to ace starter. Those years were full of triumph and wandering. Off the field, away from parental oversight, drugs and New Age spirituality filled the void. I explored mantras, meditation, yoga, crystals, and the "law of attraction." A couple years into student life, I discovered stimulant medication from some teammates. For an undiagnosed ADHD mind, it felt like magic—focus, energy, inspiration. But what could have been

medicine became another drug. I craved the rush and abused it recklessly.

After four years of ball, scouts passed me by and my lifelong dream of professional baseball ended. After my final game I pitched in Kelowna at CCBC Nationals, (our annual league championship), we lost, and travelled home the same day. At a house party with teammates that night, I broke my vow to never touch cocaine. The rush overrode any sense of guilt over the decision.

Finishing my degree, my vices shifted to alcohol, cocaine and stimulants. My “spirituality” faded into a shallow belief in angels that I invoked to protect me before dangerous binges.

Music and Nightlife

With baseball gone, music took center stage as I tried to piece together my identity. I had been producing hip-hop and electronic tracks since 2012 and DJing since 2014. Gigs grew, doors opened, and by 2017, I had a residency at LevelTwo Nightclub. Free drinks, drugs, and late nights became my lifestyle as I gained a name for myself in the scene.

By day I worked landscaping. My boss, a quiet Christian, saw leadership potential in me and showed me patience and care. Looking back, I see how the Holy Spirit used him to keep me tethered even as I spiralled.

By 2020, I was a functional alcoholic—living for the party at night and grinding through work by day. On March 14, 2020, I DJ’d a packed “Pre-St. Patrick’s Day” party—the last club night before COVID-19 shut everything down. A couple months later, my girlfriend of nearly seven years and I split up.

I moved into a house with seven roommates from the club scene. Outwardly I was “dad” of the house, working hard labour while they stayed home finding ways to turn their CERB money into profit with crypto and stocks. Inwardly, I was drinking heavily daily, binging cocaine monthly and burning out.

The COVID mask for the studio sessions with friends was nothing like the mask I put on over my inner world and numbed by vices. Caffeine, work, liquor store, drink, vape, music, porn, sleep. Rinse and repeat. I was on a fast track to death.

Rock Bottom

In early 2021, I started dating a bartender friend who brought hope into my life. She was worth laying off the drugs for. But I couldn’t quit drinking. In the end, my selfishness and addiction unraveled the relationship, and on June 1, 2021, she ended it.

That was my breaking point.

God used this point in my life to let me unravel—finally done in by the consequences of my self-destructive behaviours.

The shame was unbearable. I binged cocaine, blacked out on Xanax and drank vodka sodas like water. I couldn’t eat, and my weight plummeted. My mom was horrified when she saw me that summer, drinking beer for breakfast and vaping for lunch.

I contemplated ending it all.

In desperation, I began therapy and was prescribed antidepressants. My boss drew closer, offering early-morning coffees and space to talk instead of condemnation. Meanwhile, strange synchronicities began occurring daily. Slow at first, but then pouring out like a fountain from some unseen source—repeating numbers on clocks and license plates, strange encounters with animals, songs that seemed to speak directly to me. My old New Age mindset framed these as messages from the “Universe,” but I felt increasingly pursued. These moments provided a sense of hope and assurance that I wasn’t alone.

God’s Pursuit

One day, after therapy, I broke down in my truck. Through tears, I noticed repeating numbers on my odometer and then looked out the window at a Lutheran church sign:

“THE PROOF OF GOD’S GRACE IS THE EMPTY TOMB.”

A strange peace and curiosity covered that moment. I didn’t know what it meant, but Jesus was coming into view.

Soon after, I tried to watch porn for comfort but felt strong conviction—and for the first time in 14 or so years, the chain broke.

Days later, my taste for alcohol vanished. On Sept. 18, 2021, I miraculously drank my last beer while house-sitting at my friend’s condo. I was finally free from these soul draining vices.

As our coffee meetings continued, my boss shared his faith with me and stories of his struggles. For him, the “warrior” mentality kept him fighting through his hardest seasons. He shared the “Armour of God” passage with me from Ephesians 6, and whatever that was—I was desperate for it. Around that time, a hip-hop lyric was stuck in my head:

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

What was this from? A quick search drove me to Psalm 23, which I clung to and memorized. My language shifted from “Universe” to “God.” Instead of drinking, I spent nights driving thousands of kilometres aimlessly, journaling prayers and crying out. I still couldn’t wrap my head around Jesus at the time, but “God” was becoming a clear reality as He graciously drew me in and used these moments to bring me to His Word.

I downloaded the Bible app and began to read, and over the next month the Spirit was at work convincing me of its truth and the beauty of Christ.

Fast forward to December 6, 2021, it all came to a head.

Encounter with Christ

That night, staring at a crucifix I pinned on my wall that my friend gifted me, I wept and prayed. I poured it all out. I had been fighting *so hard*. Searching *so hard*. Grieving *so hard*. I was exhausted from

trying to control whatever it was that was happening to me.

Then, I heard His voice. It was as if it came from behind me, enveloping my whole being. Through the whole experience my chest strangely burned as if a fire was inside of me. When I reflect on it now, I think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

I was suddenly washed over with the word: “REST.”

I had never known rest. My whole life I had been running to an unknown destination.

Then came another word:

“40 DAYS AND 40 NIGHTS.”

I didn’t know what it meant then, but a Google search showed it pointed to seasons of testing, including Jesus’ wilderness temptation. After this experience, I fasted four days, quit vaping as God gave me strength, and feasted only on Scripture and prayer. On the last morning of the fast, while starving and tired I prayed in the shower: “*God, I just want Your wisdom.*” He delivered. That same day, a single letter typo in my web browser (hotmaik.com instead of hotmail.com) led me to an old dispensational website full of Bible studies and a clear call to repent. Fear of God gripped me. I confessed every sin, pleaded for forgiveness, and fully surrendered my life to Jesus.

Between the thousands of pages of doctrine and topics—from spiritual warfare to picking a church—God’s word was illuminated with clarity and power. I downloaded the Dwell Bible App and devoured audio Bible books every hour of the day.

For the record, my eschatological framework is now amillennial—but you can’t fault the dispensationalists for going hard in their early 2000s evangelistic website game. Weeks later, at Christmas, my family saw the change. Their broken addict son was now praying at the dinner table and invoking the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

New Life

On January 16, 2022, I walked into St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Nanaimo,

a week after I baptized myself in the ocean by full immersion while invoking the Triune name. The website was *insistent* on immediate baptism and I didn't want to miss a beat. Not knowing "protocol", I did it myself in the fear of God. (Later I would be baptized by the church in the same spot in April 2023.)

That first service, Rev. Jeremy preached on John 3 and the new birth. He spoke of God meeting people at rock bottom. He wove in the 12-step program that supports addicts. I wept through worship. Afterward, I told him I had a story to share. Over coffee, I poured it all out. He prayed with me, and for the first time, I came under true pastoral care. And here's the thing: A couple weeks later the Spirit nudged me to look at my calendar. 40 days after my December 6 encounter, I walked into church. I couldn't make that up. That Sunday morning marked day 41: a new beginning and a call into ministry. I felt like I came home for the first time. First into the arms of Christ, and second, into the arms of His people. His love poured into me and daily I begged the Lord to do whatever He wanted with me, for His glory until the day I die.

Back Into the Fire

Fast forward to Spring 2022 - clubs reopened, and my manager invited me back to DJ.

There were two things that made the job offer a struggle to accept. The first was my commitment to follow Jesus in sobriety and in the church. The second was that my ex-girlfriend who I hadn't spoken to since the breakup was also returning to work in the same club, which scared me.

After prayer and discerning with Jeremy, I felt strongly that God wanted to throw me back into the fire. But this time it would be different. *This time it would be for Him.*

Most of my friend group consisted of unbelievers in the club scene or that were connected to it. My ex and some gay friends were also hurt by the church and I had a deep desire to show them the love and beauty of God. I didn't know how I would do

any of that, but I sensed returning to the club had a role in it.

Back in the booth, I played new music, free of degrading tracks. The bar miraculously no longer tempted me. I saw partygoers differently—not as objects or annoyances, but as sheep without a Shepherd, like I once was.

As the gigs continued, I was increasingly driven by a burning desire for my friends, and clubbers to know God.

While praying with Jeremy about what the club offered regarding God's call, we discussed a "Gospel Theme Night" mixed into the club's many themes, to hosting Bible studies for my friends. We marinated in the discernment process for weeks.

One night while in prayer, I saw an ad for "church planting" resources on my phone. I had never heard that term and I investigated it with curiosity. The next day, Jeremy and I were praying in the church's quiet room, and during our discussion we both had the same word: *"Church plant"*.

We were both trying to wrap our heads around the concept. *How do we plant a church in a club? What would we call it? What would it look like?*

The Spirit was at work. I began drafting the pitch, and Jeremy reached out to some PCC connections. We got in touch with Andrea Perrett with Cyclical Vancouver, whose organizational ethos was *"leveraging shrewd risk-taking opportunities"*. How fitting.

Doors blasted open from there. We got the pitch ironed out: every second Sunday at 6 p.m. in the club. DJs, Christian dance music, hip-hop and a Christ-centred sermon in the middle. Club staff running the bar for those who want to responsibly consume a drink or two. A space for those who left the church, were hurt by the church or never been. It almost sounded like a youth group for adults.

I asked my club manager, a long-time friend, if he was willing to meet so I could discuss our idea. In the pitch meeting my manager's response was: *"Dude, yes. How can we support you?"*

In God's favour, providence and wisdom, we nailed down a venue agreement, a rough launch date, and the ministry name. My friend from the condo and I designed the logo, I roughed out a website, Instagram account and invite list for the launch while Jeremy poured in his wisdom, connected us with funding sources, and Andrea coached us all through it.

We were really doing it.

By September 18, 2022—exactly one year after my last drink—we launched UpperLVL Worship in the club.

From the same booth where I once glorified sin, I now proclaimed Christ. Now, three years into it, God has brought forth several baptisms, young adults coming to faith, prodigals returning home, new emerging leaders, Christian DJs, and bartenders and clubbers alike going home with Bibles.

The Spirit has expanded our efforts with a nightclub evangelism “Care Team” that serves their peers with water, Tim Hortons goodies, and prayer outside bars, and now a fledgling street ministry to the homeless. My DJ experience and music production skills now given to Christ, have created a unique signature sound full of custom worship DJ mixes. By God's grace, I pray to one day blast them all at festivals full of thousands of people who need to hear the Good News, in the bass-infused language they can understand.

Through this ministry, Kingdom Kids who were once slaves to sin are now serving their friends on the other side—beckoning them to enter the narrow gate.

This is Spirit-led, Gospel contextualization.

Expanding the Call

As UpperLVL grew, God opened doors through University Christian Ministries (UCM) at VIU. Soon, I began ministering to students, launching Red Frogs in Nanaimo (a global harm-reduction ministry), and became employed by Mission Canada of the PAOC. They graciously recognized my call, even as I remained rooted in the Presbyterian Church.

Despite my past, Jesus called me to minister to the club scene with a growing nightclub church plant. He's called me to minister to students at VIU where I am an alumnus—now one of the most liberal institutions among BC universities with an anti-Christian sentiment among some of the most prominent gatekeepers.

It's hard ground to plow, so please pray for us.

Now, by God's grace, I'm pursuing my Master of Divinity and am a candidate for ordination in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In long seasons of loneliness since coming to faith, a daily prayer of my heart was to become a husband and a father. In the meantime, I was praying and searching for a cat to keep me company at home.

In April of 2024, after another night of tears asking God for a wife that I could serve Him with, the next morning I got a text from a church friend asking if I'd like to meet her friend Heidi, who was raising her five-year-old son alone.

God placed His hand on us and brought us all together. In March of 2025, Heidi and I were married, and when she and her son moved in, they brought their cat too.

Now: Husband. Father. Cat-owner.

God has a way of bringing things full circle. If you told me five years ago that this would be my life, I honestly don't know what I would say. If you saw me five years ago, you likely wouldn't believe it. But this is grace.

I deserve none of it. God doesn't owe me anything. But the heart of the Son of Man is *“to seek and save that which is lost.”* (Lk. 19:10)

Conclusion

My entrance to ministry has taken me through the messy parts of the church: denominational debates, unbiblical extremes and painful divisions. Yet through it all, Christ's Spirit has kept me grounded in His Word, zealous for truth and compassionate for the lost.

In my personal time over the years of devouring Scripture and teaching from Keller, Spurgeon, Sproul, Piper, MacArthur, Washer, Edwards, Luther, Augustine and many others, I've wrestled with theology—Calvinism and Arminianism, spiritual gifts, eschatology, gender roles, human sexuality and church unity.

Now, if I had to describe where God has led me in theology and practice: Reformed, theologically conservative, a moderate egalitarian, charismatic but not chaotic, evangelical but not “political”, missional but not forceful . . . I could go on. But this reflects His shaping of me, working in me a love for sound doctrine, Spirit-filled life, and compassion for Gen Z in clubs and campuses.

I sense a call to the mainline church: to preserve truth, to be part of renewal and to preach the unadulterated gospel in a world opposed to it, within a modern church that at times is afraid to stand in opposition to a culture in decay.

I once lived a life revelling in sin, pleasure, and deception, but with cords of love, He

called me to repent. He loved me *even when in the mud*. He cleaned me up and sent me to witness for His Son in the places I once served the flesh—now awakened to the reality that sin is awful, and this world is full of lies from the pit of hell.

Our glorious God is a calling, cleansing and sending God – and my testimony affirms that. He sends me—and us— out there with an unchanging Gospel that can change the most vile and wicked sinners like me, into a servant of righteousness through Jesus Christ.

My task—and ours—is to walk in total submission, working out our salvation with fear and trembling, as the Spirit leads. God is shaking up the church. Through it all, we can be reminded that Jesus promised to build it, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

And by God's grace, we are shaking up club culture. I'm honoured to be on the front lines where God doesn't need me, but He is choosing to use me: *His adopted child*. Glory be to God alone.

Bavinck in brief: Gospel and social action

By Robert K. MacKenzie

While Herman Bavinck (1856-1921) is best known as a Reformed theologian, his interests and expertise ranged much further than that area. He was sought after as a speaker at academic conferences in the fields of psychology and of teaching and learning theory, or pedagogy. And he also served in the Parliament of Holland, being deeply concerned with government and society.

Bavinck's views on social practices and politics are outlined in three chapters in a collection of articles that he himself chose shortly before his death. The translated collection, entitled *Essays on Religion, Science and Society* (Baker, 2011) features studies on a broad range of subjects (see the guide elsewhere in this issue), of which

these three chapters (7, 8 and 15) on social ethics are considered by its modern editor John Bolt to be highlights of the volume (p. 10). We will look at the 24-page seventh chapter, “Christian Principles and Social Relationships.”

Two views: Of the many opinions held by Christian thinkers and activists concerning what constitutes the primary aim of the Gospel, Bavinck begins by outlining two contrasting views from his day. The first sees Jesus as a social reformer whose Gospel message was directed to the poor, the oppressed and the wretched of the Earth. He battled “...against the patricians, the profiteers, the priests: and in that battle he perished.” Likewise, in our own time, to follow Jesus and spread the Gospel means

that the church must abandon its fine buildings and "...go out into the highways and byways of life and seek those who are lost. Christianity must become socially minded or else it will perish" (p. 120). To illustrate the second position, he points to a German politician who became disillusioned with the characterization of Jesus as a radical social reformer (although Jesus was still important for morality) and adopted the view that politics had an independent life of its own, with its own rules. Bavinck sums up the view this way: "Politics, for instance, has nothing to do with moral principles; it is only concerned with the interests of the state and the people. As such it ought to be pure '*Realpolitik* [politics based on practical and material factors].'" Bavinck adds that some go even further than simply separating religion and politics, arguing that Christianity is not only "completely indifferent toward culture," it can even be "hostile to it" (121). In addition, regarding Jesus' teaching, it was contended that the social structures and practices in his day were much too different from those in ours, rendering it irrelevant today. His message was a product of its own time with no application to contemporary social practices. Of course there are many variations on these two views. Regarding the first, only a few weeks ago I heard a message in church on the Sermon on the Mount that attempted to show that the real meaning of Jesus' preaching lay in the social background context of his imagery rather than in God's patterns, and that it was intentionally subversive of its contemporary culture. (The main thing that I got from the message was that Jesus was a remarkably inept social crusader if he relied on such background subtlety to get his critique of his society across to ordinary folk!) With respect to the second outlook, Christian proponents of today's Benedict Option, among others, are opting for a retreat from society at large as much as possible, while governments such as that in Quebec are actively preaching that religion has no place in the public square, only in the hearts of individuals.

So we are faced with several questions. Is the Gospel primarily a message about building an ideal human society? Or is it so "religious" that it has no relevance to practical, everyday political and social structures and even liberates Christians from them? What does the Bible have to say on the subject of the Gospel and social action? Bavinck proceeds in this essay to summarize the relevant teaching in the Scriptures, which he takes as God's revelation to humanity. While conceding that the Bible by no means explains everything in this regard, nevertheless its "main issues can be spelled out clearly enough so as to give us a solid and practical result" (p. 121).

Key themes: Bavinck organizes his observations of the Biblical evidence under three key themes. First, that God willed at the time of creation that human society should be based on a framework of fundamental concepts or ordinances, none of which is optional for humanity if His will is to be observed. Second, that both religion and civil government are God-ordained as separate, independent areas of human responsibility. They have their own particular social arrangements within the overall creation framework, and are always open to internal development in God's providence as the centuries pass. And third, that Jesus' Gospel message of spiritual rebirth was directed at individuals and not civil society. Nonetheless, once men and women were regenerated by faith, their Christian moral beliefs and behaviour could be a leavening force in the world to make it more like what God intended it to be.

(1) God-given social structures: His review of the first chapters of Genesis provides him with information on God's order and purpose regarding the world and social relationships. The Scriptures, he contends, because they are God's special revelation of his will, offer us something that science, which deals only with observed phenomena, cannot. This revelation of God's will in Creation is of fundamental importance because "what it teaches about the origin of

creatures determines our entire worldview” (p. 121).

Bavinck lists seven principles that he derives from the opening chapters of Genesis: first, all things, including both spirit and matter, are created by God; humanity is distinguished from all creatures by being image bearers of God; the two genders, male and female, were willed by God, and marriage was immediately instituted; marriage implies family, the family implies society, and implied in society is “the unity, community, and cooperation of the human race;” difference and inequality were part of God’s plan; humans are called to work, and “cultural work has a divine origin”; and finally, labour and leisure alternate, with serving God and entering into his rest rather than labour alone being the ultimate goal of humanity. “The origin of man determines his destination: [being] from God, he has to return to God; God is the highest good for man and humanity” (121-122).

Of course, sin is also a feature of the opening chapters of Genesis. For Bavinck, sin is what distorts the original divine framework and it is sin that must be resisted. The ordinances themselves must not simply be overthrown by revolution. Social structures stand in need of reform to combat the corrupting power of sin, and this since the time of the first sin by Adam and Eve. It is the continuing dependence upon God’s grace, especially in the regeneration of the human spirit, that empowers people for this work of reform.

God calls humans to a humble acceptance of the creation framework for the world, even with its sin. The Gospel does not do away with His will for human society in this world.

(2) Independence of religion and civil society: Bavinck’s second theme is derived largely from his study of God’s people, the nation of Israel. Israelite society was based on two institutions, one civil and one religious.

The religious leaders did not normally govern the nation; that was left to elders,

judges, kings and other ruling bodies.

Governmental leaders protected and led the nation, fostering its religion without themselves having charge of its conduct.

Religion, in its role, did not seek to rule the everyday life of Israelites, enforcing its will on them by coercion. The priests upheld the religion of God through their sacred observances, and did not normally take part in matters of governing. As for the prophets, while they were vocal in their criticism of Israel’s people and its leaders, they did not seek to overturn their society’s structure or themselves to lead in its governance. Their role was to call Israel to reform itself in both civil and religious matters in keeping with God’s express will as found in the Scriptures. Their focus was not at heart on doing away with corrupt, sinful practices.

They were instead dedicated to showing the people how to live lives that respected and upheld God’s laws, which would then lead to social and religious reform.

Having established the value and independence of civil society, Bavinck stressed that respect for human institutions was something that was fundamental to a Christian’s way of life. It was a way to bring glory to God and to witness their faith in Christ. And it was not only divine ordinances such as family and government that had to be respected. Such deference extended even to the legally-protected and tolerated human institution of slavery that was widespread during the Biblical period. Bavinck explains that slavery, involving household as well as field agricultural slaves, was not an institution that Israelite prophets or early Christianity criticized and opposed with social action. Slavery was not ordained by God. However, it was present in Israel and regulated in the Old Testament laws, where punishments for mistreatment of slaves and various procedures for their redemption and indenture were specified. In the New Testament, it was accepted as a normal practice, although if one could avoid it and be free, that was commended.

Christian leaders did not call for its abolition. Nor did they permit believers to claim that their freedom in Christ freed them from

slavery. Just as they were to pay their taxes, honour their political leadership, continue to live with a non-Christian spouse, associate socially with non-believers and not seek to become circumcised or uncircumcised, they were to remain in their bondage unless they had a legal way to end it. Their continuing duty was to both their earthly master and to their heavenly lord while they were in service, just as their Christian master's duty was to treat them fairly and with respect in fear of the Lord, his or her master (135-137).

Freedom was to be found in Christ in the church, where all people were equal and in joyful bondage to Christ. In Him there were no gender or social distinctions. If anything, God had a preference for those who lacked the rights and the material wealth of this world: "...if there is any preference, then the poor, the ignoble, the unlearned, the oppressed are the ones who are considered first for the Gospel. God chooses the poor, the despised, and the ignoble, so that no one should boast before him" (p. 140).

It should be said that Bavinck's social views are not as conservative as they first appear. He does not, for instance, think that what is said about the social practices in Bible times is a pattern for our own time. He allows for organic development as the centuries pass in society's governance and in relationships such as marriage and labour relations. They "each have a certain measure of independence, which they owe to the will of God as it manifests itself in their own nature. In time, by God's providence, they develop and are changed in accordance with their nature." In his opinion, "the gospel fully honors this development, today as well as in the time of the apostles" (142-143).

And Bavinck rejoices that the Gospel has indeed brought about positive change in society: "What a revolution this gospel brought about in the ancient world, it gave a reforming power to humanity!" The Gospel is "not only a pearl, but it is a leaven as well." But Bavinck cautions that even though history has shown that the Gospel

has exerted a beneficial influence on civilization, even if there had been no leavening effect on society at all, the formation of the new spiritual and holy Christian community "would still be and remain something of everlasting worth" (141).

(3) Redemption rules! The third fundamental theme in Bavinck's essay concerns Jesus' attitude to social change. He is convinced that the social environment of Jesus was not of significant importance to him. Jesus accepted it as a given and was willing to work within the Roman imperial and the Jewish national ruling systems. His calls for change were aimed at individuals and not at social structures. Jesus called for a spiritual revolution in their attitude to God and his Kingdom, declaring that this was of the utmost consequence. Social revolution was not his aim. A new life in Christ begun with redemption from sin was the heart of Jesus' message of good news.

Bavinck illustrated his view by pointing to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. It was not a call to imitate Christ, nor an impossible ethic. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) reveal Jesus' value system, whereby he "tells us who, in his judgment and in the judgment of the Father, are blessed." Jesus' subsequent exposition of attitudes with regard to the commandments of the Old Testament was also evidence of his interest in inner spiritual change on the part of individuals. "Jesus emphasizes the disposition of the heart, inner conformity with the law, and internal *spiritual* righteousness when he explains each commandment over against the Pharisees" (132-133).

Bavinck's interpretation of the Sermon the Mount is similar in some ways to that advanced by Joachim Jeremias in a study on the Sermon later published in English in booklet form (Fortress, 1963; see also on the Internet the text of the 1961 Ethel M. Wood Lecture). Jeremias also rejected standard interpretations of the Sermon, advocating for a view that followed the preaching/teaching (*kerygma/didache*)

pattern of ancient Christianity outlined by C.H. Dodd. That is, that the interpretation of this teaching only makes sense if one assumes a prior preaching of the new life in the Kingdom of Heaven that gives rise to it. Bavinck asserts of Jesus that "...he never stood up directly for the poor and oppressed, the widows and orphans, the slaves and the day laborers *as such*. He never urges improvement of their lot or pay increases, life insurance or pension plans." His words were "directed to his disciples and indicates how they are to conduct themselves in their private lives." But Bavinck does not deny that Jesus' teaching has the power to make society better: "...one can learn something from his teaching for the organization of state and society" even if "Christ's teaching is totally of a religious-moral nature" (130-132).

Conclusion

The case that Bavinck presents to us from his study of the Bible is compelling. He argues that we are constrained in our response to what we think is wrong with society by the limits that God's will for His creation have imposed upon us. We must work within certain social relationships such as government, marriage, family and labour relations and not altogether reject them and their power over us. Christian witness,

following Christ, calls us to humility and patience in our social relationships. The Gospel is not the good news of revolution in society. It is instead the good news of the change that's possible in the heart of individual humans. Regeneration in Christ by the Spirit prepares us to confront sin in our local and worldwide communities. Social action is not forbidden by God, but it is not foremost in the Christian faith or the Gospel. The Gospel of repentance and faith is primary. Yet society is forever open to change. By modelling and sharing the ethics and community values of the Christian fellowships as outlined in the Scriptures, believers can, under God's providence, improve the lot of their fellow citizens. Bavinck is firm in his view and he defends it eloquently. He summons his talent as a preacher in the concluding pages of the essay to declare: "In itself the gospel, the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven and his [God's] righteousness, is the good news of reconciliation and redemption from sin through the blood of the cross. This is the gospel that must remain, first in church and missions, but also beyond, everywhere. It may not be robbed of its contents or dissolved into a political or social program. Only in this way can the gospel be maintained in its everlasting, all-surpassing value" (142). One can only declare: Amen to that!

Quebec: an unholy mess of secularism

By Rev. Joel Coppieters

MONTREAL – The announcement that Quebec Premier François Legault was preparing a bill for the fall legislative session forbidding prayers in public spaces may have come as a shock to many, but for Christian churches in Quebec it's only the tip of the iceberg, and just the latest in a long list of measures that are increasingly making ministry difficult in the province. As is the case with the proposed prayer ban, many of the other municipal and provincial

measures that are hindering churches have come as responses to outlier situations.

In Quebec, the municipal tax exemption on religious buildings – including churches, manses and monasteries – is governed by a provincial law that is enforced by municipal authorities who have been applying it increasingly stringently because of perceived abuses in the system. To qualify for the exemption of municipal and school tax exemptions, the building must be owned by a recognized religious organization and must be actively used for ministry. There

are additional restrictions with manses. The law stipulates that each congregation can only claim a single manse exemption for the home where its principal clergy resides and must provide proof that religious activity is carried out at that location: prayer, counseling, small group Bible studies, sermon preparation, etc.

About a decade ago, several apostolic congregations in the northeast of the city were discovered to have claimed dozens of manse exemptions for each church, citing their theology that many members held apostolic office. The exemptions office used that abuse to tighten restrictions and increase its policing of the application. Instead of simply justifying the manse exemption the first time it is claimed, congregations must now refile the onerous exemption application every two years. In addition, the exemptions office holds that to properly own property, a congregation must be legally incorporated. Since most Quebec congregations are not incorporated and simply own their property through their trustees, this is disqualifying an increasing number of smaller evangelical churches from a benefit historically given to most Roman Catholic and mainline congregations whose manses are typically attached to the church building and part of the same real estate unit.

The exemptions office has also applied the “active religious use” clause increasingly stringently. If a clergy person retires on June 3, but his replacement does not move into the manse until Sept. 1, the office calculates a per diem rate and charges all applicable municipal taxes and school taxes for the number of days when the manse was vacant.

A series of perceived abuses of church building tax exemptions also sent the exemptions office into overdrive to claw back what they perceived as lost tax revenue on the actual church buildings. Again, the prompting events were several outlier cases. A large Roman Catholic cathedral in the heart of the city was

generating a quarter of a million dollars a year by renting spaces to business and commercial clients in its downtown parking lot from Monday to Saturday. They continued to claim a religious use tax exemption for the parking lot because parishioners parked there for Sunday services. The exemptions office moved to separate the parking lot from the church building, asking for a change to commercial zoning and asking the church to obtain a permit to operate a commercial parking lot, along with the full payment of applicable business taxes. Several other congregations were found to generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in rental revenue from their buildings, with only a few thousand dollars in offerings from Sunday services. The city has argued that these entities are no longer churches that raise a little revenue on the side with rentals, but more like commercial landlords that generate most of their revenues from rent, while hosting a little prayer service on Sunday mornings. (Incidentally, there have been worrying signals that the CRA is also proposing reconsidering the tax status of religious institutions raising considerably more in business income than donations.)

In response to these perceived abuses, in 2015, inspectors from the tax exemptions visited (by their own admission) more than 800 of the 1,189 tax exempt religious properties in the greater Montreal area, camera in hand to document the use made of each room in the building to see what proportion of the building was actually used for religious purposes. Square foot calculations sought to estimate what proportions of the building were primarily used to generate rental revenues or for purposes other than religious activities. The proposal was to calculate the non-religious use proportion of each church building that should be charged municipal taxes. Churches and community groups strongly objected that the spaces in church buildings used by Scouts, ‘AA’ meetings, community choirs, foodbanks and other activities might not be overtly religious in nature and might

in some cases yield small amounts of rent, but they were being used for the good of the wider community. The proportioned municipal tax bills based on those calculations have never been instituted, but the increasing pressure towards secularization is making the religious use municipal tax exemption an increasingly hot potato that gets bantered about at each municipal election, including the one scheduled for November 2025.

(Parenthetically, the city of Montreal has calculated that if each one of the 1,189 religious properties on the island were fully taxed at the appropriate business value, the revenues generated would add about \$34 million to an annual budget that is already well over \$2 billion.)

While the proportional use tax calculation is still just an idea, the City of Montreal has already enacted several other changes in its application of the tax exemptions legislation that have already made it much more difficult for congregations to purchase or rent places of worship.

During the economic depression of the 1990s and the early 2000s, dozens of congregations that could not find suitable places of worship elsewhere, seized the opportunity to purchase unused commercial and industrial buildings in the Montreal North borough of the city at rock bottom prices. At first the borough was glad to see derelict buildings being rehabilitated and getting a second life, but this has now created a problem. Several small stretches of streets in the borough now have six or seven large churches in close proximity to one another, and to which people come from all over the rest of the city. For two or three hours each Sunday morning traffic and parking are horrendous as thousands of cars from other areas of the city descend on several city blocks, but the area is a ghost town the rest of the week. In response to these crisis areas, and the perceived continued loss of tax revenue, the city administration has placed a moratorium on any new places of worship on the island.

The effect of this moratorium has been compounded by several other measures. It used to be that when a congregation closed, as seems to be happening more often as mainline Protestant congregations dissolve and Roman Catholic parishes are consolidated, the place of worship status was kept on the building until it was actually sold for another use. In other words, an empty church was still deemed to be an empty church until it was actually sold to a developer to be turned into condos, a shopping mall or a parking lot. This would give the church an extended window of time to negotiate with other congregations or with community groups to keep the building in the non profit sector. Churches and community groups are typically not ready and flush with financing and typically need to get board approvals and congregational votes that can slow the process when they seek to purchase a new building. However, the tax exemptions office has now decided that as soon as the congregation dissolves and stops holding services, since the building is no longer actively used for religious purposes, it becomes a fully taxable property: property taxes, business taxes, school taxes, etc. Since financial constraints are often a key part of the reason for the closure, the remnants of the dissolved congregation, the Presbytery or the Diocese, need to sell the building as quickly as possible to avoid the impending immediate tax bill. This typically means that the buildings of dissolved congregations are quickly sold to the first developer with an open chequebook and forever lost to the community sector or to church use. Once that building loses its place of worship status, the moratorium means that it is not replaced and the total number of worship locations available on the island continues to decrease each year.

All these compounding effects mean that there are now literally hundreds of churches on the island of Montreal that have little hope of ever owning a building zoned as a place of worship. They resort to renting facilities. Unfortunately, the many provincial

secularism legislations already enacted prohibit religious events from taking place in public schools and in municipal facilities like arenas, libraries and parks. Concert style venues, auditoriums and convention centers that get any public funding at all are also forbidden from renting for religious purposes. This prohibits local churches in Quebec from renting virtually any of the properties that have suitable meeting space. (In 2024, a religious organization that had rented the convention center in Quebec City saw the contract cancelled several days before the event started when the provincial government realized their stance on abortion and the religious nature of the organization.)

With such a shortage of space, just about every available place of worship on the island now houses multiple congregations, trying to make the most of tight meeting space and juggling often difficult Sunday and Saturday schedules with multiple congregations overlapping as they leave and arrive. Worse yet, since the only available meeting space for congregations is in the existing church buildings in older parts of the city, it is virtually impossible to plant new churches in new housing developments and new neighbourhoods close to the people that need to be reached.

But finding a suitable place of worship, to buy or to rent, is now only half the battle. Up until very recently, if a congregation had a building zoned as a place of worship, it was at least free to use it as it saw fit for services, within reasonable respect for the neighbourhood. In recent years more Montreal boroughs have been tightening parking regulations on side streets and imposing noise restrictions. Meter parking in Montreal had historically been free on Sunday mornings until 1 p.m. in recognition that many people were parking at that time to go to church, but that is beginning to change as Sunday increasingly becomes just another shopping day for the city to generate parking revenues.

And noise restrictions are now seeing many boroughs requiring permits for concerts, drama presentations and other events held on church property. This was brought to a head on July 26, 2025 when the concert by American artist Sean Feucht was blocked from several venues and eventually hosted in a local church. The church was asked by the city to cancel the event and then issued a fine of \$2,500 for holding a concert without a permit. Worried about the precedent created, churches have complained to the city administration that they have been holding religious concerts in their church buildings for years without the need for a permit. The city administration has underlined the unusualness of the event, but the fact remains that a significant precedent has now been set. Will special Christmas concerts, Easter cantatas or other events that draw a crowd larger than the average Sunday morning attendance and are held on another evening of the week now need a permit? The mayor of Montreal's explanation that her administration principally objected to the message being communicated by Feucht is hardly any more comforting. Churches are now wondering which member of the city administration staff needs to vet the contents of the music used at special events held in their buildings.

So in one sense, to many Christians in the province, this new proposal of banning public prayers is just a further step in the ongoing process of state secularism, but there is a feeling that a line has now been crossed. Several groups have already strongly opposed the ban, including the Catholic Archbishop of Montreal who has described it as an affront to fundamental freedoms. It is clear that the ban would make illegal a number of traditional Roman Catholic public events, including the annual Marche du pardon (the pilgrimage of forgiveness) that winds its way through the streets of Montreal each Easter with prayers and hymns following the stations of the cross. It would also outlaw the many Remembrance Day services held at

cenotaphs in public parks across the city which often include Scripture readings, hymns and prayers. There is a general understanding that this proposed ban, which came in response to Muslim demonstrations that have repeatedly blocked downtown streets with prayer vigils, is a political move by a provincial government that is headed into an electoral period with a major deficit in the opinion polls and looking to score brownie points with its traditional base.

The increasingly secularist context of the province is making life increasingly challenging for existing congregations in Montreal, and in the province of Quebec as a whole, and as we have seen, it is making it well nigh impossible to plant the new congregations that would be needed to effectively reach new neighbourhoods with the Gospel. We continue to invite our brothers and sisters across the country to stand with us in prayer, both private – and public!

Creative licence caution

By Rev. Andy Cornell

There are many excellent television shows online these days that have a solid Biblical foundation. (I might even call this the Golden Age of Television.) *The Chosen* and *House of David* are two outstanding examples. The producers are Christian believers who have a solid track record, having made outstanding contributions to the entertainment industry with top-quality shows and movies with a message of hope.

What could go wrong by watching them?

A pastor recently confided that a small group in her congregation was deeply divided over whether to view and study *The Chosen*. Some members are enthusiastically pitching it while others say they'll stay home if it's on the menu. Social media is awash with posts from believers who question the veracity of these shows due to the amount of extrabiblical material. Some point to the fact that two of *The Chosen*'s executive producers are Mormon. Are these shows good for the Kingdom or are they potential lures into falsehood and apostasy?

I had to admit, when I started watching them, I was thoroughly taken in. I looked forward to the next episode with the same enthusiasm I had for such secular masterpieces as *House of Cards*, *24*, and

The Sopranos. I am eagerly awaiting the next season. And yet, I understand the dilemma.

I knew from the start that these shows would bring a measure of creative embellishment. They are not *The Gospel of John*, the 2003 film which told the story word for word based on the *Good News* translation with nothing added or omitted. With *House of David*, there is a disclaimer on the screen prior to each episode which states that "some of the events depicted in this series may not accurately represent all historical and biblical facts or figures. While we have made efforts to portray certain aspects of history authentically, creative liberties have been taken for storytelling purposes." I read it the first time and said to myself, "yeah, yeah, whatever." For subsequent episodes, I glossed over it (like I skip the recap if I don't need a reminder) and settled in for the show. Bring it on – the characters! the imaginative backstories! the dialogue! and all the stuff that might have happened behind the scenes that's not necessarily captured in the pages of Scripture. Based on a true story is all that matters. I know Scripture well enough to know what's fabricated. I just took it all in.

In late August, I dropped onto the couch to watch the final episode of the first season of *House of David*. It was the second of two

parts devoted to the story of David and Goliath. I had some time to kill while I awaited the arrival of my watch partner, so I opened my Bible app to 1 Samuel 17, which tells the tale, and gave it a read. It took less than five minutes. It dawned on me that this single chapter had been presented over two 60-minute episodes. The producers didn't stretch that short read by just adding scenery. They did it by adding subplots, lots of them. There's David's meeting with King Saul, the extra drama on the battlefield and David's forbidden romance with the King's daughter Michal. (The romance would actually come later.) All of it was completely possible and believable. Strictly speaking, it's not biblical at that moment.

Of course, every episode has significant injections of bonus material. While Scripture is clear that David was a bit of an outcast among his brothers, the producers jumped to the conclusion that he was actually illegitimate. His mother, who died young, was a powerful source of inspiration for young David. His father too. The plot resulted in several compelling and emotional scenes. As I was thinking about all of this, it hit me that the stories and characters which were among the most compelling in both of these shows were extrabiblical. In *The Chosen*, I was fascinated by Mary Magdalene's forays back into the dark underworld she once inhabited. I was charmed by the love between Thomas and his fiancé and the friction with his future in laws. The unlikely bond between Simon Peter and the Roman Centurion Gaius was especially compelling. An added bonus was Gaius' own family dynamics. I started to accept that while some characters and stories are made up, they could have been true and so why differentiate between what's explicitly in the Bible and what's not?

I had a sense that I had stepped into a danger zone. The Lord's words jumped to mind: "Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God" (Mark 12:24).

Way back in journalism school, one of our professors loved to quip, "Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story." It was said in jest. But the point was to be wary and question everything. If something or someone were especially attractive, get multiple sources. In other words, don't get sucked in.

Was I getting sucked in? I wondered if there was a danger of accepting the extrabiblical as fact. And then, what's to stop me from reading between the lines elsewhere in Scripture? I am a firm believer that doctrine does not need to be changed. We are not to add or take away from Scripture. Doing it for entertainment is no excuse. Further, I could easily see a casual viewer – i.e. someone who is not paid or called to teach and preach – taking the shows as gospel truth and perhaps even quoting the fictitious characters as if the quotations were true. Not everyone is going to watch these shows with an open Bible at the ready.

As followers of Christ, we are invited to cling to the truth. Just the facts. Isaiah wrote, "All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own" (Isaiah 53:6). All of us. As sinners, we all operate, to some degree, under the spell of Satan, the corrupter. There's nothing we can do about that. What we can do is to be aware and prepare. Be aware by assuming that nothing that is produced by human hands is perfect. Everything we produce on this side of the Kingdom is corrupt to some degree. A pastor may spend days preparing a message and deliver it with great care and prayer. But pastors aren't perfect. And neither are Bible-believing producers. While we are commanded to obey authority, it's OK to check what you hear from the pulpit or from the tube.

Then prepare. I am now in the habit of watching with a remote in one hand, near the pause button, and an open Bible in the other. Being aware and prepared might as well be watchwords for life, especially with the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence.

I may be taking a hard line, but as believers, we must take great care to place barriers and boundaries. We are to be as innocent as doves and as shrewd as snakes – always to have our eyes and ears open.

The good news is that watching *The Chosen* and *House of David* with open eyes and an open Bible has actually deepened my biblical awareness and knowledge. And I pray that it's brought me closer to the Lord.

So – by all means watch these and other biblically-based fare. Watch them at home or in small groups. Use them as a way of attracting non-believers to church. But do so with open eyes and open Bibles. And feel

free to invite the Holy Spirit into your presence. But don't be like foolish sheep. Don't stray from God's path. Let's keep our eyes on the Shepherd. The apostle Peter – possibly in references to the prophecy of Isaiah – wrote: "Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25).

The Lord is my Shepherd, the guardian of my soul, my light in a dark place. Into everything I do, everything I see and experience in life, I invite Him to show me what is real and what is not. May the path be narrow and the destination clear. Amen.

The art of healthy dust shaking

Jesus sent out these twelve after giving them instructions: "Don't take the road that leads to the Gentiles, and don't enter any Samaritan town. Instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Don't acquire gold, silver, or copper for your money-belts. Don't take a traveling bag for the road, or an extra shirt, sandals, or a staff, for the worker is worthy of his food. When you enter any town or village, find out who is worthy, and stay there until you leave. Greet a household when you enter it, and if the household is worthy, let your peace be on it; but if it is unworthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone does not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. - Matthew 10:5-15 (CSB)

By Douglas Cameron

We've all been there at one time or another. There isn't a person alive who hasn't had to decide if, when, and how to shake the dust off their feet and move on. A friend of mine was once told by an employee of a now defunct big box store to move his car because he was "holding up the whole f\$%^ing world". (He had not realized that he was blocking traffic at that moment.) He wouldn't have minded being asked to move his car; but he did not appreciate the manner in which this employee addressed him. He decided at that moment to take his business elsewhere as much as possible

thereafter. He shook the dust off his feet and moved on.

Whether it's cutting ties with a store or business, ending a business partnership, allowing a friendship to die, walking away from an abusive relationship or from a marriage that has been terminated, or _____ (fill in the blank), we've all found ourselves having to shake the dust off our feet and move on. Sometimes others have made the decision for us, and we've had to figure out how to respond. Sometimes we've made the decision and had to figure out how to follow through. But we've all been there wrestling through this

more-or-less gut-wrenching process of shaking the dust off our feet and moving on.

When Jesus told the disciples to shake the dust from their feet, he had a very specific situation in mind. Perhaps before we go any farther, we should take a closer look at what He said and what He meant by it. You can find this account in Matthew 10:5-15.

There are two things we should notice about this passage in Matthew. We'll take them one at a time.

1. Notice that Jesus gave the disciples two different instructions when He sent them out on this missionary journey—one right after the other. In verses 12-13, Jesus said, "Greet a household when you enter it, and if the household is worthy, let your peace be on it; but if it is unworthy, let your peace return to you." Then He instructed the disciples to shake the dust off from their feet if anyone would not welcome them or listen to their words.

Jesus began by telling His disciples to "*Greet a household when you enter it, and if the household is worthy, let your peace be on it; but if it is unworthy, let your peace return to you.*" (Matthew 10:12-13)

So, what exactly is a "worthy" house? Perhaps Luke can help us out here. According to Luke, Jesus said something very similar when He sent out the 72 a little later. Jesus said,

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.' If a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. (Luke 10:5-6)

Perhaps, then, the worthy home is the home in which a person of peace resides while the unworthy home may be the one in which there is no person of peace.

Either way, we're talking about two very different "if" conditions here. "If (the house) is not worthy" ("If a person of peace is not there") is not the same as "if anyone does not welcome you or listen to your words". A

worthy person—a person of peace—may choose to be in relationship with you, but not to welcome your message or listen to your words.

We aren't called to shake the dust off our feet against those who are unworthy. We are simply called to allow our peace to return to us. Notice, also, that in Luke's account it becomes very clear that even the decision about whether your peace will rest on someone is out of your hands. "If not, it will return to you," (Luke 10:6) is passive. No action is required, on your part, to make this happen. It's not your decision.

Consider, also, that Jesus would almost certainly be thinking of peace from a Hebrew mindset. For Him, peace is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is the presence of shalom.

I love Cornelius Plantinga's definition of shalom: "*The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.*" (Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin, by Cornelius Plantinga)

At its core, shalom is about relationships—relationships with God, relationships between one another, and relationships between one another in the presence of God. Justice, fulfillment, and delight characterize such relationships precisely because God is central to them and forms the core of them.

Is there such a thing as a perfect shalom relationship? Not in this life, from what I've observed. But can one be a person of

shalom without perfectly embodying shalom? Absolutely, otherwise Jesus wouldn't have spoken of such a possibility.

I sense that this is an extremely important principle. We are to remain people of peace—people of shalom—regardless of whether the people we interact with reciprocate the goodwill. As people of shalom, we will always be open to relationships—even with those who sharply disagree with us. As people of shalom, we will always seek to avoid harbouring judgment and animosity in our hearts toward others, and we will always keep the door open to future relationships.

We may need to shake the dust off of our feet if they refuse to welcome us (Matthew 10:14), but we must avoid making judgments about whether or not this person deserves our time and attention – or God's love and care. Don't reject the person or burn your bridges with him or her, simply because it's time to move on.

2. Notice the context of Matthew 10:5-15. Jesus was sending His disciples on a mission with clearly articulated goals: they were to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom of God to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And they were to use the power He had given them to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, [and] drive out demons", thereby demonstrating the very presence of the Kingdom of God that they were proclaiming. Finally, notice the very specific conditions under which they were to shake the dust off their feet. This very specific action was to be taken "if anyone does not welcome (them) or listen to (their) words".

They were on a mission, not a holiday. They had a purpose, goals to achieve. They were charged with proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and while they were given some incredibly powerful tools to accomplish their purpose (the ability to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, (and) drive out demons"), they still had only 24 hours in a day to divide between sleeping,

eating and preaching. They didn't have an unlimited supply of time in which to use the limitless resources available at their disposal thanks to their commissioning from the Lord.

Therefore, if someone was stubbornly refusing to listen to what they had to say—if one of the towns or potential hosts didn't really want to engage with them as they proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God—it didn't make much sense for them to use up a lot of time with them. They're just not ready yet.

So, shake the dust off of your feet and move on. Go somewhere else where you can be more productive for the Kingdom.

There is one rather troubling aspect of this passage that we simply cannot ignore—the very last verse: *"Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."* Frankly, that comes across as incredibly judgmental – and it is. But let's be very careful here. Read verses 14-15 together. *"If anyone does not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."* Now reread those two verses. Did Jesus instruct his disciples to pronounce judgment on those houses and towns that refused to welcome or listen to them? Or was He simply making an observation?

This is another situation in which Luke's account of the sending of the 72 can help us. According to Luke 10:10-12, Jesus said, *"When you enter any town, and they don't welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'We are wiping off even the dust of your town that clings to our feet as a witness against you. Know this for certain: The kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town."* Notice that the disciples were told to declare that the wiping off of their feet was a witness against the people of that town. They were also told to

declare “Know this for certain: The kingdom of God has come near.” That’s it. That’s all they were to say. The declaration that “on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town,” is an observation Jesus makes. It’s not part of what they were to say to the people of that town.

This is incredibly important when it comes to shaking the dust off of our feet and moving on. It is so easy for us to cling to judgment and pronounce judgment on behalf of God. We’re so tempted to declare that, “God is going to judge you for rejecting me!” Sometimes we’re tempted to say this directly. Sometimes we’re more subtle about it. And even when we don’t say it using our outside voices, we’re holding onto that thought in our hearts. But Jesus didn’t tell His disciples to pronounce His judgment on the people of the household or the town that they’re leaving as they’re shaking the dust off of their feet. He simply told them to declare that “The Kingdom of God has come near” them. Notice also that these disciples were being sent out by Jesus Himself—in the flesh. They had absolute certainty that it was Him who was commissioning them to speak on His behalf. Very few of us—if any—have such a close relationship with Jesus that we can be absolutely certain that what we believe we are saying or doing in His name is actually and perfectly in accordance with His calling and His command. As Paul wrote in 1

Corinthians 13:12, *“Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known.”*

We would do well, then, to refrain from pronouncing judgment on another (even with our inside voices), no matter how confident we are of the position we are taking. In fact, I would suggest that we even be careful about declaring “The Kingdom of God has come near.” The disciples knew that they were commissioned by the Lord to speak. They knew that the Kingdom of God had come near to those with whom they spoke. Can we be so sure of the perfection of our own words and actions that we can say those same words? Perhaps. But perhaps it would be wiser to offer such an observation (if at all) with an open hand, keeping open the possibility that I might be wrong—keeping open the possibility that the Gospel truth I am speaking may be mixed with error, and that what I perceive to be the error of your ways may contain some truth that I do not yet recognize. The Kingdom of God may have come near to me in your words and your message, even as I believe that the Kingdom of God has come near to you through me.

So, speak those words—The Kingdom of God has come near—in a spirit of grace and humility, not judgment, as you shake the dust off of your feet.

Fasting: Spiritual muscle for leaders at war

By Rev. Matthew Ruttan

Fasting. In some ways, it is the much-neglected black sheep of the spiritual disciplines. In a world of self-indulgence, self-denial can seem like that unpopular cousin no one wants to come to the party.

It’s safe to say that fasting is not fashionable. Nor is it normal. In North America we are not accustomed to sacrifice.

It’s more common to focus on getting things instead of giving things up. Self-satisfaction is in; self-control is out.

And yet, God in his goodness (not badness) has given us the practice of fasting. He has given it to his people for their own good. Athletes go to the gym. Saints fast. Among other things, it strengthens spiritual muscle, discernment and focus—qualities which are ever-needed for Christians at war in a dizzying and distracting world.

This article isn't only about fasting, but the importance of fasting for leaders in the church of Christ today. Yes, fasting is long overdue at the table of our attention.

Background

Jesus assumed his disciples would fast. In the Sermon on the Mount he discussed fasting directly in Matthew 6:16-18. He said: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Notice how he said "when you fast..." He is not commanding that they do it; he's simply giving them instructions about when they do it. His assumption was that it was something they would normally be doing as God's people.

The comment about oil and washing faces refers to common practices about cleanliness. We are to follow our usual washing customs so that we don't look different. Our goal isn't to draw attention to ourselves, but to focus on God.

Another text we could look to is Matthew 9:15. Jesus spoke of a day in the future when he would no longer physically be with his followers. He looked into the future and pointed out that they would fast during those days. (For the record, we are currently in those days.)

According to Stephen Um, the executive director of The Centre for Gospel Culture, the Bible references fasting about 77 or 78 times. To put that in context, it mentions baptism 75 times. Fasting was practiced by many people in the Bible including Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul and, of course, Jesus.

There are times when individuals fast, and there are times when groups fast. There are examples in the Bible, and there are examples from history. In Ezra 8:21 the prophet calls for a fast among the people so that God would grant them a safe journey, and in 1756 the British king called for a day of prayer and fasting in light of the threat of French invasion.

What is it?

In *A Spiritual Formation Primer*, Richella Parham defines fasting like this: "Fasting is, in simple terms, the voluntary denial of some normal function to allow for intense spiritual activity."^[i]

Fasting is normally from food, and sometimes, from liquids. Today, it is increasingly popular to fast from things other than food, perhaps the news or social media. While this is fine—and I myself have sometimes done this—it is not really what I'm talking about in this article. The Biblical practice of fasting has to do with depriving the body of food for a greater spiritual purpose.

A modern rule of life called *The Rule of the Word* includes this direct word about the purpose of fasting: "When you fast you remind yourself of your dependence on your Father, remind yourself of the goods you normally enjoy in his creation, and focus yourself on our Lord Master Christ the Living Word. This is beneficial not only because of the pure joy of fellowship with him, but because it aids in your spiritual discernment and prayer."^[ii]

We should also be clear that when we fast, we are not doing it to earn anything. Nor are we trying to pressure God. Instead, as we are instructed in *The Second Helvetic Confession*, "we deprive the flesh of its fuel so that it may the more willingly and easily obey the Spirit." (Chapter 24) This allows for more intense spiritual activity.

Different kinds of fasting

A “partial” fast is when you modify (lessen) your usual diet, usually for a day, but maintaining liquids. I think this is most appropriate for beginners and for those with limited experience with fasting.

There are also “normal” or “absolute” fasts. A normal fast is going without food but still drinking water. An absolute fast is going without both. Both of these are very serious and I wouldn’t suggest them if you’re new to fasting. It’s wise to pray and think deeply about these things. Each person should also consider their personal health and consult a physician if they are unsure about their fitness for fasting. Richard Foster warns: “It must be underscored that the absolute fast is the exception and should never be engaged in unless one has a very clear command from God, and then for not more than three days.”[iii]

Motives

With respect to our motives, we should strive for purity. In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote: “God does not greatly esteem fasting of itself, unless an inner emotion of the heart is present, and true displeasure at one’s sin, true humility, and true sorrowing arising from the fear of God.”[iv] Having pure motives isn’t an idea that comes directly from Calvin, of course. It comes from Jesus as per Matthew 6:16-18. We are engaging in a heightened level of spiritual activity under God alone. As a result, we don’t brag, boast or post to others about what we are doing.

In his sermon *On Prayer and Fasting*, the church father Augustine said: “Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity. Enter again into yourself.” Those, my friends, are beautiful things.

Leaders

As I survey the landscape I can’t help but wonder if Protestantism has, in some ways, and in some quarters, become spiritually flabby. It has been said that the doctrine on which the churches stands or falls is justification by faith alone. Fair enough. But this laser-like focus has often made us suspicious about spiritual practices. After all, they don’t earn us favour with God, right? Right. But that doesn’t mean they don’t have significant value or power. Consider the case of the boy with an evil spirit (demon) in Mark 9.[v] The disciples weren’t able to cast it out. “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” they asked. Jesus replied that this kind could only be cast out by prayer and fasting.[vi] The disciples were either not fasting at all, not fasting enough, or not fasting in the right way. It also suggests that Jesus fasted regularly (as already discussed), or at least that the quality of his fasting was such that it afforded him a heightened level of spiritual strength to effectively combat the demonic. Among other things, this passage teaches us that fasting contributes to one’s spiritual muscle and therefore enables him or her to do things they can’t otherwise do because of their own insight or strength. Although Jesus, as the Son of God, had resources many of us don’t, his statement was intended as a teaching moment for the disciples. Prayer and fasting open the door for God to work through his people in a special way. This is a message that leaders in the church of today need to hear. We are at (spiritual) war. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:12. But it is still a real battle. In fact, the battle is more ferocious (not less) because of its spiritual nature. It is tempting to think that the victory lies in becoming better at technique or strategy. If only we have the right music or apologetics program. If only we had a crackerjack youth outreach or flashy online presence. As helpful as those things can be, they are not necessarily the main priority. In fact, they can even distract from it if we’re not careful.

As you engage in fasting, you start to see yourself more clearly. You see how weak you really are. You see how low and dependent you are on the Most High. You start to see and hear from God with greater clarity. You start to see and perceive what is truly happening in the unseen realm. In this is an invitation to trust the Lord with more abandon and depth. His reality starts to invade your own.

Self-denial is not unrelated to carrying a cross. When the desires of the flesh are chastised, the doors of our hearts are widened to receive the Lord of glory in greater fullness. ‘Father, welcome. Now that my own will is demoted, how can I more acutely promote yours?’ When I speak with others about fasting, there is a word that often comes up about one of its key benefits: Clarity.

Brothers and sisters, let’s not fast from fasting. God in his goodness (not badness) has given us the practice of fasting. He has given it to his people for their own good. Athletes go to the gym. Saints fast. Among other things, it strengthens spiritual muscle, discernment and focus—qualities which are ever-needed for Christians at war in a dizzying and distracting world. By God’s grace and through faith in Christ we are on the winning team. But that doesn’t mean we

can be passive or lazy. There are weights to lift and quivers to fill.

With fasting, your spiritual muscle will grow as you do battle in the name of Christ, and as you do kingdom work to the glory of your Father. In the words of both Moses and Jesus: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3; Mat. 4:4).

[i] Richella Parham, *A Spiritual Formation Primer* (Renovare, 2014), 97.

[ii] Section 14.1, accessed at:
<https://theruleoftheword.life/>

[iii] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 43.

[iv] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion—Volume 2*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1960), 4.12.18., p. 1245.

[v] Evil spirits (demons) are disembodied spirits who have rebelled against God.

[vi] Some manuscripts say “prayer,” some say “prayer and fasting.” It may be of interest that many modern deliverance ministers and exorcists speak to the importance of fasting in addition to prayer for cases of more severe demonization.

Reflections on faithful church life

By Muriel Barrington

We first came to Ottawa and the newly-established St. Paul’s church in the late 1950s. It was a time of rapid growth for organized Christianity in all its denominations. Unlike today, the Christian faith was welcomed then as a beneficial influence on Canadian society as a whole.

A relative of mine by marriage, Bill Duffy, was called as the first full-time minister by St. Paul’s. He was an energetic man who

had been, like me and my husband Ron, very active in Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Ron, for example, helped to organize the visit of the famous Biblical scholar John Stott to the University of Toronto campus.

Bill’s background in IVCF stood him in good stead when he began his ministry. The enthusiasm of IVCF’s activity and the building of relationships among those involved carried over into church life after university. Attracting and keeping new

members and adherents at the new Ottawa church required personal contact, which was one of Bill's strengths. He was a people person. Visiting was built into his ministry, with the aim to visit every congregant at least once a year. The inter-denominational nature of IVCF also made it easy for him to approach and connect with non-Presbyterians who loved the Bible and were looking for a faithful ministry for themselves and their family.

To build up newcomers in the faith, Bill offered teaching at Sunday evening services. They were popular with members and even with people from other churches who often joined in to benefit from the training in Christian doctrine and living. Christian camping, such as that provided by IVCF's Pioneer camps, was an effective way to reach and teach children. Strong ministries of this kind built up a solid congregation.

I am grateful that the faithful Biblical teaching has continued with the ministers who followed Bill, as well as the many gifted lay leaders with whom the church has been blessed.

From its early years onward, St. Paul's committed to support various mission efforts in as personal a way as they could. They would keep track of the work being done and those engaged in the missions, supporting them in their challenging labours. One of the first missions with which they partnered was conducted in the backwoods of Indonesia. This kind of active involvement in missions continues to the present day, having expanded greatly from that first small attempt to serve in this way. We all benefited from sharing in the Lord's work in local and in distant places.

The careful attention to people and solid teaching bore fruit at St. Paul's in a fairly big way in terms of its wider ministry. Some 14 members went on to be ordained as Presbyterian ministers and others served in leadership roles in different denominations and church-related ministries. And some

married ministers, as did my daughter! The son of one of our ministers, Brian McConaghy, in 2025 is celebrating 35 years of service in Cambodia through Ratanak International, which he founded in response to the devastation caused by the "Killing Fields." Ratanak ministers to women and men exploited for gain by human traffickers.

Strong lay leadership by women and men in the areas of mission, education and social outreach programs such as recovery groups also strengthened the bonds of fellowship within the congregation. Teamwork was essential.

Of course, the strength of a church is the Lord's doing and not ours. That's why there is always hope for the future.

Muriel Barrington, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, has been a member at St. Paul's Ottawa since 1957. Over the years, he has been involved with the PCC's Life and Mission committee and is a big supporter of IVCF, among other groups.