

In Search of Authentic Faith

My Spiritual Pilgrimage

By Eric A. Kouns

In his book, *Soul Survivor*, author Philip Yancey describes the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, as engaged in a “relentless pursuit of authentic faith.” Few will ever compare me to Tolstoy, and I am not altogether sad about that, but I would not mind sharing that description. For most of my life, I too have been on a relentless pursuit of authentic faith.

Chapter One: Evangelical Roots, 1966-1981

The Call

Born in Charleston, West Virginia, to Christian parents who were active members of a rural Baptist church, I came to faith as a child and was baptized at the age of eight. When I say I “came to faith,” I mean that I acknowledged that I was a sinner in need of God’s forgiveness which was available to me because Jesus Christ, the Son of God in human form, died on the cross and arose from the dead to make it possible. I confessed my sins to God, He forgave me, sent His Holy Spirit to live in me, and I, through the act of baptism, publicly declared my faith and my intention to live my life for God.

I am the oldest of five children. My father served in the Marine Corps in WWII and worked as a printer for the Charleston newspapers while I was growing up. My mother was a homemaker in every sense of that term, a godly, hard-working woman whose example and influence shaped my life during my formative years and continues to affect me to this day. She died in 2007 at the age of 82, and I still miss her every day.

My parents instilled an ethic in me, the essence of which was captured in the text of an embroidered sampler which hung on our living room wall. It said...

*If a task is once begun, never leave it 'til it's done.
Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all.*

I have tried to live my life according to that motto. I have sometimes been wrong-headed, but I have never been half-hearted. That has characterized my Christian commitment as well. As a youngster I determined that, if I was going to be a Christian, I would be as good a Christian as it was possible for me to be. Only later did I come to realize that that was exactly what Jesus intended and expected me to be, and that the biblical term for that kind of devotion was *discipleship*.

As a young adolescent I asked, of my parents and my pastor, many of the typical questions about the existence of God, the merit of non-Christian religions, and the meaning of life which young adolescents often ask. Although I found many of their answers inadequate and unsatisfying, I never really doubted that there *were* adequate answers, and I assumed that I would eventually find them.

Over the years I have found answers to many of my questions. Some of the answers raised additional questions. My Christian faith has not resolved every uncertainty nor dispelled every doubt. A lifetime of seeking answers and searching for truth, however, has left me with a

confidence in God strong enough to sustain me through times of doubt and uncertainty of which there have been many, particularly in recent years.

In 1966, while I was a senior in high school, I sensed a movement of God's Spirit within me which I identified as a "call" from God to devote my life to Christian ministry as a vocation. My tradition had taught me that, while you could *choose* to become a doctor or a lawyer or a mechanic, you had to be *called* to the ministry. I now believe that those other occupations are legitimate callings too, but I remain convinced that ministry as livelihood should be undertaken as a response to God's call, truly a *vocation* and not merely a job.

More than forty years have passed, and I have never doubted the genuineness of that call. It has been regularly affirmed by the people of God and confirmed through life experience. With Paul I, too, can say that "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry." (I Tim. 1:12 KJV)

Early Education and Ministry

Upon graduation from high school in 1967, I enrolled at Appalachian Bible Institute (now College) in Bradley, West Virginia, and graduated with a diploma in Bible and pastoral studies in 1970. Given my upbringing in conservative, evangelical (read *fundamentalist*) Christianity, I had seriously considered only colleges in that tradition, and ABI was a logical choice for a variety of reasons, not least of which was its location just sixty miles from my home in Charleston.

At the time of my graduation from Bible college, my career-path was influenced by three basic assumptions. First, I assumed that my three-year Bible college diploma marked the end of my formal education. Second, I assumed that the primary context for my ministry would be the pastorate. And third, I assumed that my commitment to fundamentalism was unassailable. In each case I was wrong.

Following Bible college I served a one-year internship as associate pastor and youth minister in a Baptist church near Charleston. That was followed by two years of travel as an itinerant evangelist, preaching mainly in churches throughout West Virginia, Ohio and Virginia. I also worked part time as an announcer in a Christian radio station in Charleston. During these years my role models were the luminaries of American fundamentalism, many of whom I actually met (including a dinner meeting with Jerry Falwell in 1971, when he was a speaker at the year-end Bible conference at ABI). At the same time, however, I was coming under the influence of other evangelical thinkers, such as Francis Schaeffer and John R.W. Stott, who were challenging some of the assumptions upon which fundamentalism was founded. My departure from the tradition in which I was raised had begun.

In early 1973, while preaching in a series of meetings for youth sponsored by the Union Mission of Fairmont, West Virginia, I met Shirley Clairmont, a mission staff member and a graduate of Practical Bible College (now Davis College) in Binghamton, New York. We were married later that year, and, as you might imagine, nothing has affected my life and ministry as profoundly or as positively as our marriage. I thank God every day for bringing this woman into my life. Her tireless support and her commitment to vocational Christian service have been a constant source of encouragement. Her gifts of compassion and hospitality effectively complement my own gifts of teaching and prophecy. She is, by far, the most selfless, generous person I have ever known.

Leaving Fundamentalism

In early 1974 we moved to Mansfield, Ohio, where we served two years in the pastorate of an independent, fundamentalist congregation. Soon after we arrived in Mansfield I met Ray Nethery, a leader in a local ministry, generally known around that area as Grace Haven Farm,

consisting of a residential study center (on the order of Francis Schaeffer's *L'Abri*—the main building was even designed to resemble a Swiss chalet), a bookstore, a small restaurant, and a local church called Grace Fellowship. Ray had been an associate of Bill Bright's in the early days of Campus Crusade for Christ. His own search for an authentic faith had led him away from that ministry and into association with six other brothers, all of whom had previously served with Campus Crusade. Disillusioned and frustrated with American evangelicalism, they determined to establish a network of churches that more nearly reflected the spirit of first-century Christianity. Their vision was just beginning to take shape when I became acquainted with them, primarily through the summer conferences at Grace Haven at which they served as the principal speakers.

Perhaps the best known of the seven was Peter E. Gillquist, an editor with Thomas Nelson Publishers and author of books such as *Love is Now*, *Let's Quit Fighting About the Holy Spirit*, and *The Physical Side of Being Spiritual*. Pete's books challenged me to re-think many of my long-held beliefs about the character of evangelical Christianity and the purpose for the church. He would eventually gain prominence as a founder, along with all of the original "group of seven" except Ray Nethery, of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, a small denomination which would later align with the Antiochian Orthodox Church, one of the jurisdictions of Eastern Orthodoxy. The more I identified with Pete, Ray, and the ministry of Grace Haven, the more estranged I became from my fundamentalist upbringing and the congregation I was serving. I resigned that pastorate in the fall of 1975.

Houghton and Wheaton

While still serving the church in Mansfield, I concluded that my Bible Institute education was insufficient preparation for ministry in the late twentieth century. In the spring quarter of 1975, I took three courses at Ashland Theological Seminary. That experience convinced me that I should complete a liberal arts undergraduate degree before I undertook further work at the graduate level.

In January 1976 I enrolled at Houghton College, a Wesleyan school in western New York State, and graduated with a BA in religion and communication in May 1977. While at Houghton I began reading periodicals such as *Sojourners*, *The Other Side*, and the satirical *Wittenburg Door*. I no longer considered myself a fundamentalist, and my openness to the perspective of publications representing the "left wing" of American evangelicalism illustrates how far I had departed from my theological and ecclesiastical roots.

During my last semester at Houghton I was called to the pastorate of a rural, independent congregation which had been served for the previous ten years by a Houghton faculty member. An associate pastor had introduced charismatic gifts to the congregation with mixed reception. The church split, and I was called to pastor the non-charismatic remnant. Although the congregation had rejected the most extreme elements of the charismatic movement, it remained open to contemporary music and worship styles. By this time I had begun reading books by evangelical leaders in "church renewal" such as Larry Richards, David Mains, and Gene Getz. They had convinced me that church ministry should focus on "body life," not simply formal meetings for evangelism or teaching.

After two fruitful years of ministry in that church, and with the blessing and encouragement of the congregation, we made plans to move to Wheaton, Illinois, where I had been accepted as a student in the MA in New Testament program at Wheaton Graduate School. We shelved those plans, however, when my wife experienced some health problems, eventually requiring minor surgery, and we were diverted, for one year, to Middletown, Connecticut, where I worked for a Christian radio station. The station's major constituency, represented by the independent congregation which we attended, was mainstream, conservative evangelicalism. By the time we finally did move to Wheaton in early 1980, I was fairly certain that, despite the

influence of Pete Gillquist, Houghton College, and the “church renewal” movement, conservative evangelicalism would likely be the context for my future ministry. Once again, I was wrong.

Chapter Two: Among Mennonites, 1982-2008

Exploring Anabaptism

At Wheaton I was re-introduced to the “radical” perspective of *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*. There I also read of the historical movement known as Anabaptism, with its strong emphasis on faithful discipleship, including a commitment to peace and nonresistance. In a class in Contemporary Theology I read a book called *The Politics of Jesus* by the prominent Mennonite scholar, John Howard Yoder. I found his arguments compelling and ultimately persuasive. I embraced the position of “biblical nonresistance,” which I maintain to this day, and as a practical evidence of my new commitment I became a charter member of the Student Peace Coalition at Wheaton College.

Sixteenth-century Anabaptism fascinated me. I was intrigued and challenged by the testimony of these Christians who endorsed the theological convictions of the magisterial reformers but insisted that *orthodoxy* (correct belief) should issue in *orthopraxy* (correct behavior). The nature of the Christian gospel demanded changed lives as evidence of its reality. Becoming a Christian was not merely a matter of believing the truth. Authentic faith would produce a genuine transformation in the life of the believer.

I grew up with a deep respect for persons, especially Christians, who refused to compromise their convictions even when standing firm cost them dearly. I remember, as a child, sitting on the living room floor with my brothers and sisters while my mother read to us from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* the stories of persons who lost their lives while standing up for their Christian convictions during the first centuries of church history. The history of Anabaptism is likewise the story of people with the courage of their convictions. When the early Anabaptists concluded, from their study of the Bible, that baptism should be administered to those who had made a public confession of faith in Christ, they “re-baptised” (which is what “anabaptist” means) those who had been baptised as infants. As a result many were subjected to torture and even death at the hands of other Christians who misunderstood the motives and intentions of the Anabaptists. I admired that kind of courage and determined that my testimony would reflect a commitment to faithful Christian discipleship, whatever the cost, like that of the Anabaptists.

Through my study of historical Anabaptism, I learned that groups such as the Mennonites and related denominations traced their origin to that sixteenth century movement. At the time, however, I did not feel compelled to identify officially with any of those groups. I was an evangelical Christian who was completely convinced that American evangelicalism could be enriched by exposure to the examples of authentic faith in historical Anabaptism. A renewed emphasis on faithful discipleship, including a commitment to peace, justice, and simplicity, might very well serve as a needed corrective for an evangelicalism which had become too comfortable in its accommodation to contemporary American culture.

Ministry Among Mennonites

In November 1980, during my second term of study at Wheaton Graduate School, our daughter was born two months prematurely. Because we were underinsured, and Sarah Beth's hospital and doctor bills were enormous, that event and its consequences taught us a great deal about trusting God in the middle of overwhelming circumstances. It also led us to reconsider my career goals. We determined that we should relocate closer to our extended family and that I should undertake a full seminary program, leading to the MDiv degree, rather than the MA which

I was pursuing at Wheaton. Accordingly, we moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, and I enrolled at Eastern Mennonite Seminary.

A few years earlier I would not have considered a Mennonite seminary, but my study of Anabaptism at Wheaton changed my attitude in that regard. In addition, from reading the EMS catalog I was convinced the school was doctrinally evangelical. Its president, Myron Augsburger, was well known in evangelical circles. Located just two hours north of my parents' home, EMS seemed an altogether logical and satisfactory choice.

Even though I was taking my seminary studies in a Mennonite school, I did not expect to find a place of ministry among Mennonites. I still believed that my exposure to historical Anabaptism would enhance my effectiveness among evangelicals and help to bring a measure of needed corrective to that tradition. In the summer of 1982, however, following my first year of seminary, I was called to the pastoral staff of a large Mennonite congregation in Harrisonburg, and the Anabaptist/Mennonite community would be the primary context for my ministry for the next twenty-six years. In 1987 we moved to Louisville, Kentucky, so that I could take some graduate work at Southern Baptist Seminary. We returned to the Harrisonburg area a year later, and in 1989 I became pastor of Trissels Mennonite Church near Broadway, Virginia.

When we first arrived in Harrisonburg in 1981, I was an evangelical Christian with interest in Anabaptism. A decade later, as a Mennonite pastor, I was even more firmly committed to the Anabaptist distinctive of faithful discipleship, but I was still an evangelical, my roots deeply planted in doctrinal orthodoxy. Like most theological conservatives in the Anabaptist community, I was convinced that historical Anabaptism was a product of the Protestant Reformation and shared the orthodox doctrinal heritage of that movement. (I based this conclusion, along with most of my perceptions related to the character of historical Anabaptism, on a booklet titled *The Anabaptist Vision*, written by Harold S. Bender. That essay was Bender's 1943 presidential address to the American Society of Church History and summarized his view of the heart of Anabaptism and its contributions to contemporary Christianity.) I was troubled by what I perceived as erosion of that orthodox foundation within contemporary Anabaptism, particularly its two largest North American denominations, the Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC).

The EAF Years

In early 1992, while still pastor at Trissels Mennonite Church, I began meeting regularly with a group of likeminded Mennonite leaders, mainly pastors from Pennsylvania. We determined that a voice was needed, within contemporary Anabaptism, calling the tradition back to its historical and theological roots, and that fall we formed the Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship. EAF was not a denomination but rather a loose-knit, nationwide network of pastors and other church leaders from the Anabaptist tradition concerned that the doctrinal foundation of contemporary Anabaptism was being undermined by the growing influence of theological liberalism. As "a voice for spiritual renewal" within the Anabaptist community, EAF employed the unofficial motto: "Reclaiming the evangelical heart of our Anabaptist heritage."

When EAF was chartered in October 1992, I was named Executive Secretary. The following summer I left the pastorate in order to serve full-time with EAF, continuing in that role until the fall of 2001. EAF members represented five or six denominations with Anabaptist roots, but the majority came from those two Mennonite groups (MC and GCMC) which merged in 2001 to form the Mennonite Church in the USA (MCUSA). EAF closed shortly after that merger was finalized since most of our MC and GC members opted not to be part of the new denomination, and we could no longer claim to be a voice for renewal within that communion.

All of my efforts in EAF were directed toward strengthening the testimony of contemporary Anabaptism through a reaffirmation of the evangelical character of its foundational theology. Those efforts were not well received, however, by many in positions of leadership and influence in contemporary Anabaptist circles. Some questioned my comprehension of historical Anabaptism and doubted my commitment to its distinctive elements. Others suggested my motives were suspect, that I was really more interested in directing unhappy Mennonites toward mainstream evangelicalism than in renewing Anabaptism. In both cases, my critics were wrong, and at the time I was troubled that they so completely misinterpreted what I was doing and why I was doing it. Today I better understand why they perceived me as they did. Had I been in their shoes, I likely would have reacted the same way.

More than a decade ago, in a book called *Leaving Anabaptism*, Calvin Redekop recounted the evolution of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren into the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches, leaving behind almost every vestige of their Anabaptist identity in the process. Their story led Redekop to conclude that, when any group with Anabaptist heritage determines to emphasize the evangelical character of their doctrinal foundation, they eventually abandon their Anabaptist connections in favor of stronger ties with mainstream evangelicalism. More recently, similar stories of other groups with Anabaptist roots substantiate that conclusion.

EAF sought to “reclaim the evangelical heart of our Anabaptist heritage.” In retrospect, I now believe that most EAF members were far more interested in evangelical theology than in the distinctives of Anabaptism. Today most of the former MC or GC congregations whose pastors and other leaders were members of EAF are virtually indistinguishable from mainstream evangelical churches. There is little of the character of Jesus’ call to radical discipleship in their ministries or mission statements. Many continue to acknowledge their Anabaptist heritage and claim to identify with evangelical Anabaptism, but while they are evangelical in doctrine, most are decidedly not Anabaptist in practice.

Correct Doctrine is Not Enough

When I formally embraced historical Anabaptism and joined an MC congregation in 1982, I did so at the expense of relationships within my family. My parents and most of my siblings profess Christian faith, but they emphatically reject the idea of biblical nonresistance and find other elements of radical discipleship unpalatable. Identification with historical Anabaptism was costly for me. I was not simply “an evangelical in Mennonite clothing.” I may not have Mennonite pedigree, but I was committed, unequivocally and unreservedly, to the radical distinctives of historical Anabaptism. Whereas I once enthusiastically and uncritically identified with American evangelicalism, I came to question much of what that tradition has become.

I noted earlier that I have sometimes been wrong-headed but I have never been half-hearted in my pursuit of authentic faith. My experience with EAF is an example of that. For the nine years I was Executive Secretary of Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship, my strong emphasis on “doctrinal precision” built walls between believers and so contributed to divisiveness in the Body of Christ. I know that the truth of the gospel sometimes drives a wedge between Christians and those outside the Kingdom. I fear, however, that I may have encouraged division and separation *between genuine believers* simply because some of them didn’t articulate their convictions exactly as I did.

I now believe that, while doctrine is important, **correct doctrine is not enough**. Paul told Titus (2:1) to “speak the things that are fitting for *sound* doctrine.” Sound doctrine is truth which contributes to spiritual health and wholeness. When an insistence on uniformity in doctrinal articulation, particularly a focus on *orthodoxy* without an equal emphasis on *orthopraxy*, builds barriers to fellowship between genuine believers, our doctrine may be correct—accurate, exact, precise—but it is not *sound*.

The RBC Years

In November 1992, while still pastor at Trissels Mennonite Church and just after EAF was chartered, I was invited to present a week-long series of lectures on contemporary Anabaptism to pastors at the annual Leadership Seminar hosted by Rosedale Bible College near Columbus, Ohio. RBC is a two-year, undergraduate-level school owned and operated by the Conservative Mennonite Conference, a small, theologically conservative Mennonite denomination not affiliated with Mennonite Church USA. Accredited by the Association of Biblical Higher Education and authorized by the state of Ohio to grant the Associate's degree, RBC offered an academic program of exceptional quality for a school of its size and relative obscurity.

Until 2007, RBC's academic year consisted of five six-week "terms." During each term students would generally take two courses, each of which met every day, for a total of six semester hours of credit. It was an intense schedule, but it allowed the school to engage adjunct professors who could more readily come to the Rosedale campus for a six-week teaching stint than for a 15-week semester. My series of lectures in 1992 had been so well-received that, beginning in 1995, I was hired to teach two courses each year during the fourth term (February and March) of the school year. I did this for six years.

In 2000 the RBC administration asked me to increase my teaching load from two to six courses (still technically part-time) per year. This meant that we would have to relocate to Ohio and I would need to scale back my involvement with EAF. The EAF board approved the change, and that summer we moved from Virginia to central Ohio. When EAF closed in 2001, RBC increased my teaching load to eight courses per year, the heaviest of any instructor. I also became the only full-time faculty member whose job consisted exclusively of classroom instruction. All the others carried a lighter teaching load along with some type of administrative responsibility.

I never expected to fulfill my call to vocational ministry in a Bible college classroom. One of the reasons I left the MA program at Wheaton to take the MDiv at Eastern Mennonite Seminary was the sense that I had been called to congregational ministry, most likely the pastorate. I have been a pastor, and I found the experience both challenging and rewarding. I have served the broader church as a parachurch administrator, and there the challenges and frustrations outweighed the rewards. Then, for fourteen years, I was a Bible college instructor, and after a tentative beginning I came to feel very much at home in the classroom.

Indeed nothing else I have done over the course of my career has brought as much satisfaction and joy as the privilege I had to contribute to the education and spiritual formation of hundreds of students who took at least one of my courses at RBC. I took my job as a teacher seriously and sought to increase my effectiveness in that role with each passing year. Although my compensation package extended only to the months when school was actually in session, I routinely used summers to read extensively in a variety of disciplines and to revise my course syllabi. Since I taught eight courses per year, I had no time during the school year to do this, and yet it was absolutely essential if I was to grow in my effectiveness as a teacher.

The hard work paid off. I am a far better teacher today than I was when I started teaching at RBC in 1995. I think more clearly and communicate more effectively. I also recognize that teaching is far more than merely transmitting information. "The mediocre teacher tells," I once read somewhere. "The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." I don't know if I am a great teacher. That assessment is best left to others, such as my peers and especially my former students. But if the scores of notes and letters of appreciation, affirmation, and commendation which I received over the years are any gauge of

effectiveness, I am a pretty good teacher and was an asset to RBC. For me to deny or downplay that fact would reflect a false modesty that is inconsistent with genuine humility.

Re-Thinking Evangelical Anabaptism

As a full-time instructor at RBC, I began to reconsider the idea of “evangelical Anabaptism” from several perspectives. Although I had devoted more than a decade of my ministry to the advancement of that concept, by 2004 I had concluded that the idea was too nebulous and the terms too ambiguous to be helpful. I wrote to several former EAF associates telling them of my intention to abandon the term “evangelical Anabaptism” in favor of something more generic and more widely applicable such as “biblical discipleship.” Then two things happened which resulted in a renewal of my commitment to the idea of “evangelical Anabaptism.”

First, I was assigned to teach a course called Peace, Justice, and Simplicity in the fifth term of RBC’s 2004-05 school year. As I prepared for and then taught that course, I gained a fresh appreciation for those worthy tenets of historical Anabaptism—including biblical nonresistance—which had attracted me to this communion more than twenty years earlier. Second, in the fall of 2005 RBC hired Dan Ziegler to serve as president. Dan believed the term “evangelical Anabaptism” fairly described the point of focus for RBC which distinguished it from virtually all other Bible colleges in America. The term “evangelical” linked RBC to the broader community of believers who embrace the orthodox theology expressed in the historic creeds of the church. The term “Anabaptism” tied us to that historical tradition with its emphasis on faithful discipleship as evidence of believing faith. For Dan, the designation “evangelical Anabaptism” held in balance two important dimensions of genuine Christian faith—*knowing* Christ (“evangelical”) and *following* Christ (“Anabaptism”).

During the 2005-06 school year, Dan’s first as president, the faculty, staff, and trustees of RBC devoted considerable time and effort to institutional self-examination and the composition of a new vision statement for the school. The fruit of those efforts is a statement which declares that “our vision as Rosedale Bible College is to be a center for the advancement of an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith.” Recognizing the difficulty many might have in defining the phrase “engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith,” the RBC faculty spent a week during the summer of 2006 composing a fairly comprehensive definition statement which we made public during the first Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium held on the RBC campus that November.

While the statement defining “evangelical Anabaptism” from our perspective was generally well-received by those attending the symposium, several noted a significant omission. The statement included virtually nothing related to the purpose and function of the local church and the church’s vital role in the embodiment of the marks of “an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith.” That omission was more than a mere oversight. It pointed up a serious theological flaw in our concept of evangelical Anabaptism and a major obstacle to the practical implementation of the idea.

The Agent of the Kingdom

Victor Hugo once wrote that no army is as powerful as an idea whose time has come. A timely and powerful idea produces effects which lead to the inescapable conclusion that the idea really works. The concept of “evangelical Anabaptism,” however, suffers from the potentially fatal lack of visible, empirical models that prove the idea can really work. And the more its proponents advance the idea of “evangelical Anabaptism” without corresponding evidence of its effectiveness in shaping and energizing churches and individual believers, the sooner it will be regarded as inconsequential, unhelpful, and irrelevant.

The strength and significance of any “movement” within contemporary Christianity is demonstrated by the congregations it produces. Want to judge the value and effectiveness of the “purpose-driven” approach to Christian living? Check out churches which intentionally subscribe to that idea. The same with churches which identify themselves as “seeker sensitive,” “Spirit-filled,” or “emergent.” At present, most observers of churches aligned with evangelical Anabaptism would find little there to distinguish them from mainstream American evangelicalism. The “movement” suffers from a major inconsistency right at the heart of its self-identity. Even though the idea of the church as a worshipping community is vital to our definition of evangelical Anabaptism, in too many cases we really don’t “do church” very well.

I believe this fundamental inconsistency arises from the fact that our churches are influenced too greatly by contemporary American evangelicalism which, very often, is gaudy, slick, superficial, plagued by consumerism and consumed with success. But these characteristics are only the symptoms, not the root of the problem.

I agree completely with David Wells, who wrote in *God in the Wasteland*—

The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church’s resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, His grace is too ordinary, His judgment is too benign, His gospel is too easy, and His Christ is too common. (page 30)

I still believe that the best description of the purpose for the church in the world is that put forward by George Eldon Ladd more than a generation ago: ***the church is the agent of the Kingdom of God.***

The church is where the distinctives of the Kingdom are supposed to be cultivated, where we learn how to live by Kingdom values in the face of pressure—from the world, the flesh, and the devil—to succumb to the influence of the prevailing culture. The place where we encourage one another to hang tough, be consistent, don’t surrender, don’t lose heart.

The church is the place where we embrace and comfort and bandage and console those who are battered and bruised from their confrontation with a hostile culture—a culture under the control of a power opposed to God and intent on frustrating every attempt on the part of the citizens of the Kingdom to live according to the priorities and directives of the King.

The church is supposed to be a living example of the gospel of the Kingdom. As Lesslie Newbigin has written:

The church is not an end in itself. “Church growth” is not an end in itself. The church is only true to its calling when it is a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the Kingdom. (*Mission in Christ’s Way*, page 12)

I wonder how many Mennonite pastors (or pastors in any communion, for that matter) perceive their role, in large part, as fostering an environment where the values and priorities and principles of the Kingdom of God can be lived out.

“True Evangelical Faith”

And what are the values, priorities, and principles of the Kingdom? I believe they are those attitudes and behaviors which Menno Simons described as evidence of “true evangelical faith.” Menno was a Roman Catholic priest who was influenced by the “radical Reformation” and rose to become one of the most prominent leaders in the fledgling Anabaptist movement. The Mennonite Church takes its name from him.

Most Mennonites are familiar with the quote, attributed to Menno, sometimes lettered on a plaque and displayed as a wall-hanging (and identified in bold italics in the quote below). The

truth is, however, that the familiar version of Menno's quote is but a brief excerpt, and a subjective excerpt at that, of Menno's words in this regard. Consider some of the broader context, found in Menno's work called "Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing," from which the familiar, but abbreviated, form of the quotation is drawn.

If you sincerely accepted and believed the divine goodness, mercy, and boundless love of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ toward you, namely, that by His burning love, He became a humble mortal man for you; came down from high heaven into the lower parts of the earth; in love taught and preached unto you the eternal kingdom of God; in love performed miracles, in love prayed, suffered tribulation, anxiety, arrest in prison; in love was beaten, mocked, derided, spit upon, scourged, crowned with thorns, drank gall and vinegar, was blasphemed, crucified, dead and buried for you; in love was raised up, has ascended to heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and by His crimson blood became your faithful servant, Intercessor, Atoner, Saviour, Mediator, and Advocate; if you believe that by love He sent to you and to the whole world His faithful servants, His holy apostles, with the Word of grace—if you believed all this, you would doubtlessly love Him in return, Him who has shown you such great love and grace without any merit on your part. And if you would return the love with which He has loved you and yet loves you, you would, believe me, not tire of seeking and following Him, so that you might live unblamably according to His blessed will, and walk all your life in His divine commandments. As He Himself says, He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me.

Behold, beloved reader, in this way true faith or true knowledge begets love, and love begets obedience to the commandments of God. Therefore Christ Jesus says, He that believeth on him is not condemned. Again at another place, Verily, verity I say unto you, He that heareth my Word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. John 5:24. For **true evangelical faith** is of such a nature that it **cannot lie dormant**, but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it dies unto flesh and blood; it destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; it seeks and serves and fears God; **it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute**; it aids and consoles the sad; it returns good for evil; **it serves those that harm it**; it prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes, and reproves with the Word of the Lord; it seeks that which is lost; **it binds up that which is wounded**; it heals that which is diseased and it saves that which is sound; **it has become all things to all men**. The persecution, suffering, and anguish which befalls it for the sake of the truth of the Lord is to it a glorious joy and consolation. (*The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, pages 306-307)

There is very little in that description of "true evangelical faith" which resembles contemporary American Evangelicalism. But it does sound like an agenda for Kingdom citizens—an outline for Kingdom discipleship. It sounds like a kind of evangelical Anabaptism which I could embrace with enthusiasm. And most important of all... it sounds very much like Jesus.

But Can It Work?

RBC's vision is to be "a center for the advancement of an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith." Its effectiveness in that endeavor depends largely on its ability to inculcate in its students and graduates an unshakable commitment to the principles and distinctives of evangelical Anabaptism. This cannot be accomplished through books and lectures alone. It requires a model. It demands a laboratory. Students deserve, and have the right to expect, some visible demonstration of the principles of evangelical Anabaptism at work in a congregational setting. It is vitally important that RBC students be exposed to a congregation intent on cultivating the unique distinctives of evangelical Anabaptism—a church equally committed to both evangelical orthodoxy and radical discipleship.

Where will they find such a congregation? It will have to be planted. In fact, if evangelical Anabaptism is to prove its value to the Kingdom of God and its viability in the

postmodern culture of contemporary America, it will need to energize and empower the planting of scores of new churches across the country in the next decade.

I was willing, even eager, to be involved in such an endeavor, and I said as much to the RBC administration. Such an enterprise would have served the dual purpose of providing visible evidence of the viability of evangelical Anabaptism (consistent with RBC's definition) as well as strengthening RBC's academic program by offering a laboratory in which students could gain hands-on experience in the application of the distinctives of evangelical Anabaptism in the life of a local congregation. As I envisioned this effort, it would have begun on the RBC campus and then, after it was well-established, it would either move to Columbus (likely the vicinity of the OSU campus) or commission a "daughter church" to take up that vision. It is unthinkable that the idea of evangelical Anabaptism could ever make a significant impact on the contemporary culture without an intentional presence in urban America. RBC has a major American city and the nation's largest university on its doorstep. What an opportunity.

I will not be involved in the development of such a congregation, however, at least not under the auspices of Rosedale Bible College. May 2008 marked the end of a significant chapter in my personal and professional pilgrimage. Near the close of the fall semester of the 2007-08 school year, the president of RBC informed me that my contract would not be renewed after that academic year owing to my failure to comply with an RBC bylaw which requires all full-time faculty to attend a Mennonite church. As I will explain below, the course of my pilgrimage in pursuit of authentic faith had brought me to a place where it was no longer possible for me, in good conscience, to comply with that requirement. And so, after fourteen years of service as a member of the faculty, my association with Rosedale Bible College came to an end.

Chapter Three: The Anglican Adventure, 2009-Present

An "Ancient-Future" Faith

I was baptized at age eight in the muddy water of the Coal River near Charleston, West Virginia. Until I was in my mid-twenties and a Bible college graduate, my perception of Christian faith and practice was mainly shaped by protestant fundamentalism. As a young pastor in central Ohio, my horizons were expanded, and I came to see that the vision of the Kingdom of God which had been taught to me throughout my formative years and even in Bible college was obviously too narrow and restrictive, and I had to abandon it in favor of a vision more in keeping with the gospel of grace. I came to understand the Kingdom of God as a far broader and more inclusive reality than I had previously been taught, and I moved from fundamentalism to the "kinder and gentler" experience of American evangelicalism.

Then, as a student at Houghton College and later at Wheaton Grad School, I came to believe that evangelical Christianity had imbibed too deeply of American culture and looked more like the prevailing culture than the Kingdom of God. I began to look for a community of Christians who believed that the discipleship to which Jesus called us was of a more radical and counter-cultural character. I was encouraged by the historical example of the Anabaptists, the "radicals" of the Reformation, who had strongly influenced my own Baptist tradition, and whose legacy was preserved, at least in theory, in groups such as the Mennonites. My pilgrimage in pursuit of authentic faith led me to complete my MDiv degree in a Mennonite seminary and to devote a quarter century of my life to ministry among Mennonites.

Each step of my pilgrimage has required me to jettison some elements which I determined to be inconsistent with authentic faith, but I never abandoned my commitment to orthodox doctrine or salvation through faith in the work of Jesus on the cross.

About ten years ago I began moving into yet another stage of my continuing pilgrimage... a further step in my relentless pursuit of authentic faith. My soul began to hunger for something which my sojourn among Mennonites had not provided. I began to read the early church fathers and to explore the character of Christian worship in the first centuries of church history. I gained a new awareness of the place of mystery and reverence in worship. I found meaning in the Daily Office, as a way of structuring my Bible reading and prayer time, and in the seasons of the church calendar, which is based on an annual review of the earthly life of Jesus, as a guide for devotional life and discipleship. I gained a fresh appreciation for the importance of the Eucharist (Communion) in the church's worship, and I began seeking an experience of holistic spirituality which was not focused on conversion alone or doctrine alone or ethics alone.

Along the way, owing in part to a growing awareness of my Irish heritage, I came to appreciate the benefits and influence of Celtic Christian spirituality. With its Trinitarian foundation, its emphasis on community, and its sensitivity to nature as a beautiful expression of the creative power of God, Celtic spirituality offers a needed corrective to the materialism and individualism which characterize so much of contemporary Christianity.

Becoming Sacramental

In addition I read a great many books which encouraged me to drink long and deep from the stream of the ancient traditions of the church which had enriched so many believers from so many different theological families over the centuries. One of the most influential of these was a short book by the late Robert Webber called *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*. As I read Webber's story of his own passage from mainstream Evangelicalism to Anglicanism, I gained a new perspective on the word "sacrament" and its place in the life of the church. The more I read, the more I realized that Webber's story, and those of the other six "pilgrims" whose stories are told in that book, was also my story. For example, I completely concur with Robert Webber when he wrote that...

the primary meaning of "sacrament" is that God works through his created order, through visible and tangible signs. For example, signs like water, bread, wine, oil, and the laying on of hands are visible and tangible meeting points between God and his people. They are the points of intersection between God's action and human faith. I haven't always believed this. There was a time when I would have tossed this idea out as heretical. I would have insisted that God always communicates spirit to spirit—his spirit with my spirit. I would have dismissed any hint of a visible or tangible sign of this meeting as dangerous and non-biblical. But I changed my mind for two reasons.

First, I have become sacramental because of the incarnation. I've always believed that God became human. But not until (a few) years ago did I begin to wrestle with the implications of the incarnation. The incarnation affirms that God became one of us. He entered into our flesh and blood experience....

...The point, of course, is that God became present to his world not in a spiritual, bodiless, timeless, spaceless way. Rather, he became human in flesh and blood, in time, space, and history. The Incarnation affirms that God acted through material creation to give us his salvation.

...The (early church) fathers never argued for salvation by the sacraments. Rather, the sacraments of water and bread and wine, they said, are the visible, tangible signs of Christ's saving action. The purpose of the sacrament is to signify Christ and thus provide a sign of his encounter with us....

I also discovered that the idea of sacrament relates to the church. Although all of life is sacred, there is something in life that has the specific function of taking us to Christ, and that is his church. The church is the sign of Christ's redemption; it is the mother of those who would have God as their Father. In the womb of the church we are born to eternal life, and in the arms of the church we are nurtured and carried to safety. So the church, that community of God's people on earth, is sacramental because it takes us to Christ.

And God has given the church specific signs through which he acts to save us, to help us, and to lead us in faith. The two most important signs, clearly taught by Jesus, are baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism is the sign of our entrance into the church, and the Eucharist is the visible reminder that the only way to God is through the broken body and blood of his son Jesus Christ. By receiving the bread and wine, we are continually fed and nourished, for they bring Christ's action on the cross to us again and again. His work is not repeated. Rather, the application of his work continually made real as we, in faith, add our "Amen," our "So be it," our "Yes" of acceptance to his recreating and renewing work....

I am persuaded by my own experience and my study of the use of sacraments that they provide us with a way to truly touch people with the power of Christ...

God communicates to us through visible and tangible means. He came to us in an enfleshed form. He was made man and lived among us. Now he continues to act in our lives through those symbols we call sacraments. I can only testify to the power of that experience as one that continually keeps me in Christ and in the church.

[From *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* by Robert E. Webber, pp. 47-56]

For more than five years after we moved to Rosedale in 2000, Shirley and I tried to relate to one or another of the Mennonite churches in that area in hopes that, somehow, we could combine our commitment to Anabaptist discipleship with our growing sensibilities in the areas I have just described. I still believe that combination is possible, but our efforts in that regard proved futile and frustrating. Ultimately we determined that we had to relate to a church that respects our convictions in the area of discipleship while it also nourishes our spirits in an expression of worship which not only rehearses the entire gospel story every Sunday but also involves all of our senses in the process.

When I embraced the Anabaptist distinctive of biblical nonresistance, I lost my family, which is still rooted in "God and country" fundamentalism. I didn't realize that, when my "relentless pursuit of authentic faith" led me to embrace a liturgical approach to worship—which, I maintain, is fully compatible with radical discipleship—I would lose my job in the process. But when I think of the sacrifices made by our Christian forebears in their pursuit of faithfulness, mine is a small sacrifice indeed.

A Time of Testing

My fourteen-year tenure as a member of the RBC faculty came to an end with Commencement in May 2008. Two weeks later my wife discovered a lump in her left breast which turned out to be malignant. (When it rains, it pours, right?) For the next year our energies were focused on her treatment, which included surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. The experience drained us—physically, spiritually, and financially.

The situation was complicated by the fact that my health insurance coverage ended with my termination by RBC. For that reason, Shirley needed to continue to work full-time throughout the long months she was in treatment in order to maintain insurance coverage through her employer, Rosedale Mennonite Missions (RMM). In retrospect, we are grateful to RMM beyond our ability to express in words. Their generosity in so many ways made it possible for us to survive those dark days and to emerge from that experience with our faith strengthened and our confidence in God reinforced.

Nietzsche once wrote that what does not destroy us makes us stronger. That is certainly our testimony as we look back over the past four years. During that period of time my mother died, and our daughter and infant grandson left an abusive relationship in Virginia to move in with us until they could regain some sense of normalcy in their lives upon relocating to central Ohio. My longtime relationship with RBC ended, and my wife underwent treatment for breast cancer. That's the bad news.

But there is a lot of good news too. For one thing, owing to the faithfulness of God and the generosity of godly friends, we remain financially solvent, without significant debt, even though I have been unemployed for 2½ years. Further, Shirley's treatment was successful, and follow-up exams have shown no evidence of cancer.

Perhaps the best news I can report has to do with the spiritual growth and restoration of faith which the past four years have produced in me. Much of this relates to and arises from our decision to identify with the Anglican Communion.

Encountering Anglicanism

In July 2006, our search for a place to worship in the liturgical tradition led us to visit St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Westerville, Ohio. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church had just been held in Columbus, and we were well aware that the Episcopal Church (TEC) was caught up in many of the same issues we believed were undermining the integrity and effectiveness of the Mennonite Church. We did not intend to become Episcopalians, however, and we had heard that St. Matthew's was not a typical Episcopal congregation. We loved the liturgical worship at St. Matt's, and the beautiful building and its warm congregation kept drawing us back.

Through the summer and fall of 2008, we watched from the periphery as the congregation wrestled with the question of what their ongoing relationship to TEC should be. Ultimately they decided, by overwhelming vote of the membership, to sever their ties with TEC and the Diocese of Southern Ohio. The diocese asserted its right to retain the building for use by the minority of the congregation which elected to remain in TEC. The majority then needed to find a new denomination with which to affiliate and a new setting in which to worship. In both cases, God made provision in remarkable ways.

In early 2008, the departing congregation named itself St. Andrew's Anglican Church, affiliated with the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA), and relocated to Lewis Center, Ohio. All of this took place just as my tenure at RBC was ending and Shirley's cancer treatment was beginning. For a few months our attention was focused more on her health needs than on the question of our church affiliation. By early 2009, however, we were ready to make our commitment to Anglican Christianity and to St. Andrew's Anglican Church. On April 19, 2009, we received the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Martyn Minns, and our pilgrimage among Anglicans officially began.

A Covenant and A Pattern

I have already described how I received a call from God to devote my life to vocational ministry when I was in high school. I have sometimes characterized that call in this way. God and I entered into a covenant. In response to His call, I pledged to use my gifts and abilities in the service of the Kingdom of God, and He promised to care for me and meet my needs. As I understood it, this covenant was unconditional and irreversible.

At the time of my Confirmation, I had been involved in vocational ministry of one sort or another for more than thirty-five years, during which a single pattern had repeated itself time after time. Whenever God wanted to move me into a new sphere of service, He made a group of His people aware of my gifts. They then affirmed those gifts, invited me to serve among them, and God gave me peace to accept their call. I have never applied for a job. Until recently I had never even compiled a resume. There have been a few times when God led me to leave one ministry before He made it clear where I was to go. Those times of waiting have tested my faith, but God has always opened the next door according to His perfect timing, and in the waiting periods He has taken care of us.

I assumed that the same pattern would play out in my current situation. In time, when I look back on this experience, I may understand how it conformed to God's established pattern. Many things are different this time, however, as we have made an intentional move into a new tradition. I have no ministry track record in Anglicanism, no list of contacts, no network to rely on. Still, it seemed to Shirley and me that, if God had led us to Anglicanism, it was with the intent of using my gifts in service to the Kingdom in this communion even as He had done in so many different situations before.

It soon became clear to me that ordination in the Anglican tradition would be different from my experience in the free church tradition. There I was already involved in ministry when the people among whom I was serving convinced me that ordination could enhance my ministry effectiveness. As I embarked upon my pilgrimage among Anglicans, I sensed that the sequence of events leading to ordination would be different for a variety of reasons, both theological and practical.

First Steps on the Path to Holy Orders: Discernment

In the early summer of 2009, I met with our Rector, Father Ron Baird, to discuss the question of my pursuing Holy Orders as an Anglican. Fr. Ron laid out the standard procedure from initial discernment of call to ordination and ministry assignment. He made it clear that, while my extensive experience and previous ordination in the free church tradition might allow for some flexibility in certain aspects of the preparatory process, for some very important reasons, I would need to move through the process pretty much according to its normal sequence. Some adjustment to the established requirements might be reasonable and justified, but the seriousness of the vocation and the integrity of the process required that every element be approached honestly and not arbitrarily omitted.

Accordingly, I met with a Parish Discernment Group from St. Andrew's throughout the fall of 2009. Their letter of support and affirmation was to have been sent to our Vestry in December, but I asked for a delay in order to explore a few questions which remained in my mind. For example, I needed some time to explore the possibility of ordination through the Anglican Mission in the Americas (the AM) rather than CANA.

For at least ten years, orthodox Anglicans in the US had been looking for an affiliation which would enable them to sever ties with TEC while remaining part of the Worldwide Anglican Communion. Many were finding fellowship and episcopal (Bishop) covering in association with Anglican provinces outside the US. CANA, for example, related to the Anglican Church of Nigeria. The AM had a similar relationship with the Church in Rwanda.

In June 2009, many of these disparate groups, along with bodies such as the Reformed Episcopal Church, which had left TEC many years ago, came together in official union to form the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). While CANA identified fully with ACNA, and its parishes were charter members of the new province, the relationship between ACNA and the AM was a bit more tenuous. (In the summer of 2010, the AM declared itself in "ministry partnership" with ACNA rather than a full member.)

I knew of the AM's commitment to church planting and was aware of their efforts to plant a church in the Columbus inner city. In January 2010, I met with that church planter and then attended the AM's Winter Conference in North Carolina later that month. While in Greensboro, I had a long talk with the AM's Network Leader for central Ohio, the Rev. Joe Boysel. A few weeks later I met with the Rt. Rev. Doc Loomis, the AM's Missionary Bishop for its Heart of North America (HONA) Region. Doc told me that I could be used to plant a church affiliated with the AM on the west side of Columbus. I was almost persuaded I should move in this direction.

In early May, representatives from parishes associated with CANA in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana met together at St. Luke's Anglican Church in Akron, Ohio, to form the Anglican Diocese of the Great Lakes (ADGL). In June, this new diocese was officially recognized by ACNA and CANA's jurisdiction over these parishes ceased. The diocese chose the Rt. Rev. Roger Ames, Rector at St. Luke's and formerly Suffragan Bishop in CANA, to serve as its Bishop.

Along with several others from St. Andrew's, Shirley and I attended the ADGL's Constitutional Convention at St. Luke's in May. That meeting was pivotal for us. By this I mean that the ADGL meeting resolved for us the question of affiliation. We left that meeting convinced that we wanted to identify, fully and formally, with ACNA. Since the AM's primary loyalty is to Rwanda and not to ACNA, the identity with ACNA that we wanted to cultivate would not likely be possible in the AM, at least not at present.

Following the ADGL Convention, Shirley and I decided that I should ask Fr. Ron Baird to present the letter of affirmation from my Parish Discernment Group to the Vestry and to allow me to re-enter to process toward ordination. He was quick to comply, and since June I have been working to complete requirements prerequisite to ordination as a Deacon. On November 4, I met with Bishop Ames, and he approved my status as a candidate for ordination. As I write this in late November, I am anticipating ordination to the diaconate in January with ordination to the priesthood to follow later in the spring.

Academic Preparation for Holy Orders

I have nine years of post-secondary education, including an MDiv degree from an accredited seminary, but all of my training for ministry has taken place in institutions identified with the free church tradition. There are areas of study related to the Anglican tradition where my knowledge is sketchy. With Fr. Ron's guidance, I am currently taking steps to remedy that as part of my preparation for ordination.

Last summer, I enrolled in a Distance Learning program in Anglican Studies at Nashotah House Seminary in Wisconsin. Following a week-long intensive on Nashotah's campus in July, however, I withdrew from that program. Nashotah's strong Anglo-Catholic focus simply did not provide, for me, the most beneficial academic environment in which to "make up what is lacking" in my knowledge of the Anglican tradition.

I did complete the extensive reading for the course called Anglican Heritage in which I had been enrolled at Nashotah. I subsequently ordered materials for three courses, on CD and DVD, from Cranmer Theological House, a seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Those courses, which I will be taking on an audit basis, include Patristics (which I have completed), Moral Theology, and Liturgics. These courses, coupled with the other graduate work I have taken plus the preparation for fifteen different courses which I taught at RBC, should provide a sufficient academic foundation for my future ministry as an Anglican priest.

A Different Paradigm

Some may wonder how a man who grew up in the Baptist tradition, with its emphasis on congregational autonomy and believer's baptism, can now submit to episcopal (Bishop) authority and practice paedobaptism (the baptism of infants and young children). I cannot address those issues here in depth, but I can say that I do not denigrate the tradition in which I grew up and where I spent thirty-five years of fruitful ministry. When I became an Anglican, however, I chose to embrace a different paradigm for understanding the nature of the church, spiritual authority, and those practices I formerly regarded as "ordinances."

I am now a sacramentalist. I have come to believe that physical expressions such as baptism and communion are far more than just a “memorial” of Jesus’ death or a testimony to personal faith. Each is, rather, an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Regarding baptism in particular, when I think of it as the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision, I have no problem administering it to children of believing parents as a visible sign of the Kingdom community in which the child will be brought up.

Of Mystery and History

I want to close this survey of my spiritual pilgrimage with one more reference to the book by Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, from which I quoted earlier. In describing his journey from Evangelicalism to Anglicanism, Webber noted “six aspects of (Christian) orthodoxy that were not adequately fulfilled” for him until he identified with the Anglican tradition.

Again I will allow Webber to speak for himself while observing, as I do, that his experience and mine are common at virtually every point. Webber wrote...

For me, Anglicanism preserves, in its worship and sacraments, the sense of mystery that rationalistic Christianity of either the liberal or evangelical sort seems to deny. I found myself longing for an experience of worship that went beyond either emotionalism or intellectualism. I believe I’ve found that for myself in the Anglican tradition. I also felt a need for visible and tangible symbols that I would touch and feel and experience with my senses. This need is met in the reality of Christ presented to me through the sacraments. These three needs—mystery, worship, and sacraments—are closely related.

At times I felt like an ecclesiastical orphan looking for spiritual parents and a spiritual identity. I am now discovering my spiritual identity with all God’s people throughout history by embracing the church universal and a holistic perspective on spirituality. These three needs—historic identity, an ecclesiastical home, and a holistic spirituality—are also closely related. (pp. 15-16)

He goes on to say that he is “not sure one has to become an Anglican to satisfy these longings,” but he makes it clear that, for himself and the others whose stories are told in the book, “the Anglican church is a refuge, a home, a place where and intuitive and inclusive Christianity is taught and practiced.” (p. 16)

That is my testimony as well.

In Conclusion

A Man for All Seasons (1966) is a glamorized movie portrayal of the life and death of Sir Thomas More, who opposed Henry VIII when the king broke from the Catholic Church in sixteenth century England. In one memorable scene, More is approached by a young man seeking More’s consent for the man to marry his daughter. Although he will eventually give the couple his blessing, More refuses the suitor’s first request because of what More perceives as the young man’s spiritual instability, since the man has recently converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism. Addressing the young convert, More says, “A year ago you were a fervent (Catholic) churchman. Today you are a devoted Lutheran. I shall pray that, when your head finally stops spinning, your face is at least toward the front.”

In this essay I have summarized a spiritual pilgrimage with some twists and turns along the way. Some may read this account and conclude that I am, like Thomas More’s future son-in-law, “spiritually unstable,” always seeking a new experience, a new spiritual home. I prefer to believe, however, that I have followed God’s direction in my honest pursuit of authentic faith. My pilgrimage, while circuitous by times, has been, to quote Eugene Peterson, “a long obedience in the same direction.” I remain committed to the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” and to the orthodox formulation of that faith contained in the historic creeds of the church.

I am further committed to the covenant which God confirmed to me when he called me into vocational ministry more than forty years ago. As evidence of that, I close this essay with a quotation which holds particular significance for me.

One afternoon when I was a freshman at Appalachian Bible Institute in southern West Virginia, I hiked to the top of a small mountain overlooking the campus. I was out of money, homesick, and discouraged. Turning my face toward a sky as grey as my mood, I began to pray that God would give me some sense of reassurance that I had heard His voice clearly when I set out to prepare for vocational ministry. God did not respond to my prayer with a bolt of lightning out of the clouds, but by the time I got back to my dorm room, my discouragement was gone, and my uncertainty had vanished. I sat on the edge of my bed, picked up the Scofield Reference Bible which had been given to me by my home church when I left for Bible college, opened to a blank page just inside the front cover, and wrote these words.

My Dedication

I believe Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead for me and that I am saved to serve—to be an instrument wholly yielded to Him.

Therefore, I make this commitment of myself:

Lord Jesus,

All I am and have, all I ever will be, and all I ever will have I give to You, absolutely, unconditionally and forever.

In my native land or a foreign land of Your choosing, I am Yours to use.

May Your power, O Christ, be in me.

(Signed) Eric Kouns

November 17, 1967

That is still my prayer today. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Irwin, Ohio
Advent 2010