

THE WALKING WORD  
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

I have suggested that the Second Coming and the Virgin Birth are great blunders that hide and obscure the True Wonders of the Christian Way. Well, perhaps it sounded like more than a suggestion; I hope so. In any case, lots of people get free from these blunders by simply paying no attention to the Bible in general, or Jesus in particular. If you detect a note of scorn in my voice, you put it there – I did not. I understand the sentiment: “Forget the theology and the endless biblical nit-picking, and let’s try to go do some real good for somebody. If there is a real Jesus, He would probably appreciate that more anyway.” Many people with such opinions are camped out in the church – the liberal church – paying attention to other things that seem more relevant than Jesus or the Bible: gay rights, saving the trees, women’s liberation, the world’s need for food and medicine and justice.

I do not believe that the outer problems of our world can be fixed, because I believe that something is wrong on the inside. We should still do what we can, when and where we can – *under guidance from the Holy Spirit*, who is smarter than we are and who sees further than we do. But even if we could fix all the outer problems, what about the inside? Christianity is always primarily an inside job. At least that is my conviction. I swear allegiance to a King who does not officially rule here. All my hope is in a Kingdom not of this world. Nothing here is what it seems to be; there is a spiritual dimension behind everything I see here – including all of you. And our experiences here are only an introduction to the true story that is unfolding. So both now and for the Life to come, I have to get my own heart right or I do more harm than good, no matter how much I want and try to help or be good. One shouldn’t say such things in public, but: Without Jesus, I don’t have a prayer of ever getting my heart right, never mind my soul. If you don’t have that same problem, I have no idea what you are doing here – I mean, in a Christian church: a fellowship of sinners.

In any case, many of you got free from a lot of the blunders for a while by simply ignoring them. But the blunders hide incredible Wonders, so if you simply ignore the blunders, guess what? (There used to be a phrase about throwing the baby out with the bathwater.) Then you came here – and started reading the Bible again (or maybe for the first time),

and started thinking about Jesus and learning to pray again. And guess what? There were the blunders, all lined up and waiting for you. Either from the religion of your childhood, or from the influence of fundamentalist Christianity all around you, or from the natural tendency of humans to be literalists and simplex (childish) with any new or unfamiliar information – there were the blunders, waiting for you. We have to either deal with them or leave the Christian Way, or they suck us right back in.

Long since, most of you have gone far beyond just listening to me. And you are deeply engaged in tracking your own identity and destiny in the presence of Christ. And I am incredibly grateful for you, and for all who follow the WAY, however imperfect we all feel about how well we are doing it. That is the true fellowship of the church, and this building and the organization that maintains it are just a “front” for what Jesus is really doing here with us, and in us.

But you still have to deal with the blunders, one way or another. Because I would so hate to be stuck with them myself, I want you to be free of them too. However, we still carry the Congregational heritage in this church. You do not have to agree with anything I say. If you want to keep the blunders, that is your privilege. I do not have to live with them, and I do not. I have not for years. The Second Coming and the Virgin Birth are not “friends” of the Christian Way. They obscure rather than reveal it. So I have told you in what manner they do damage, and where the mistakes came from in the first place. If you want to go on carrying the blunders, that helps to load up and keep their weight on others also. But as a friend of mine used to say: “Most people don’t like new wine. They insist that the old wine is better.” That is life in a broken world. I don’t hate you for it; it only makes me sad.

Today I want to talk about the worship and deification of the Bible itself – a third huge blunder that hides incredible Wonder. Oh my! That puts me in the very awkward position of warning you about the Bible as a blunder, when most of the time I am telling you to read it, study it, love it, and appreciate it *more*. So if you *want* to misunderstand me, today will be an easy day for that.

There is nothing which cannot be turned into an idol – except God. Your spouse, your children, the concept of “love,” money, sex, security ... anything can become an idol – except God. Only God deserves the place of God. If you cannot imagine God disagreeing with your spouse, guess what? Your spouse has become your god. If you cannot imagine God

disagreeing with your boss, guess what? If you cannot imagine God disagreeing with the Bible, guess what!?

The fact remains that in our time, at least in many circles, the Bible is being equated with God – treated as if the words on its pages were written by God and have authority equal to God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Not only is this idolatry, which would certainly be reason enough for alarm, but this is a great blunder that hides, obscures, and frequently even negates the very essence of the Christian Message. To caricature: “You have to believe what the Bible says, and the way I say it says it, or you are not a Christian and you are going to go to Hell.” Then one or two verses are quoted as if that settles everything – the secret elixir of life – and no Christian has a right to think or question or hold an opinion in the face of biblical authority.

A couple of summers back, one of our laywomen was preaching one Sunday morning. A visitor was alarmed, stood up in the middle of the service, and quoted First Corinthians 14:34-35: “*Women should keep silence in the church – it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*” How could we so blatantly disobey the Bible, this visitor wanted to know. Presumably, he was a sincere Christian who wanted to be faithful. He read the passage straight – in English – and there it was, in black and white. Our laywoman preacher should sit down and be quiet. There could be no “ifs,” “ands” or arguments. The Book should rule our lives. End of discussion.

Now, we know from other passages that Paul had great regard and respect for women in the churches – that they were the leaders of some of his congregations; that they taught, preached, and were deacons; that sometimes the church met in their homes. Lydia couldn’t speak in her own home?! We also know that if this man would study his Bible a little more thoughtfully and not just conclude that God wrote it in English – “in black and white” – he would have discovered that Paul was concerned with orderliness in the worship services. Paul thought that women should not be doing a lot of chit-chatting while the service was going on. It was not about women never preaching; it was saying that *whoever* was preaching, the women should not use the worship service as a time to catch up on neighborhood gossip. (Rabbi Dresner said he wished that passage was in the Old Testament.) Why didn’t Paul think the men had the same problem? Well, I will leave that to your imagination. Paul did, however, say the very same thing to the people who spoke in tongues. Yet nobody concludes that people who speak in tongues should never be allowed to speak or preach in the church. Why is that?

So in this case – no matter how much we might wish to agree with what Paul *never said or meant* in the first place – the text and the context will not support it. But my question to you is this: What if it had turned out that Paul really was the misogynist he is so often accused of being? Should we then forbid women to speak or preach in our church? Or would we be free to say, “Brother Paul, you got this part wrong.” In short, knowing what you know about the love of Jesus, would you dare to stand against the word of Paul, who is not the Christ but only a very incredible, yet still very human, follower of the Christ? Or would you simply swallow it because it’s in “The Holy Bible” and we aren’t supposed to doubt it or question it or dare to seek the inspiration of the Risen Christ in our time – as Paul did in his?

How ironic that in this case, Paul did *not* get it wrong, but – as a result of the blunder of biblical deification – over half of the Christian world still thinks *to this day* that women should not be fully ordained clergy! Jesus must be so pleased.

A lot of religion, by the time humans get through with it, is not an invitation into the Wonder of LIFE in Christ Jesus – life and joy and growth, and finding out who you really are, why you are here, and all the destiny that awaits you. A lot of religion is not about a Living God who wants to relate to us, love us, and lead us on into an Eternal Kingdom. A lot of religion, by the time humans get through with it, is an invitation into a straitjacket. Everything is rigid and frightened – locked down and boxed up. Some people can only feel “safe” if everything is locked down tight: we know the truth; faith is knowing all the right answers, which automatically means not very many questions will be allowed; anything that doesn’t fit what we already know must be evil or, at the very least, false. Of course, things that are rigid and already perfect are also fragile and easily threatened. That kind of religion needs a static, predictable God, a sinless Jesus, an errorless Bible. You get “saved” by a three-step formula about as brilliant and deep as a recipe on a box of breakfast cereal. You get “saved” by getting inside the box. Once saved, the way to keep “safe” is to stay inside the box.

It all fits nicely: If you believe rightly, you go to Heaven. If not, you go to Hell. Jesus saves (we have no idea how) but only if you “believe in Him.” In fact, it is *your* believing correctly, not His love, that saves you. The Bible is the only truth in the world, and it contains no errors. Reading it helps you to believe correctly so you can go to Heaven – if you learn never to think. We have creeds that tell us the truth correctly so we

can say them and believe them, and never have to work out anything for ourselves. Jesus was born of a virgin so that we know He was pure enough and special enough and different enough to save us. It's like painting by numbers, only no other paintings exist – and if they do, they are evil.

Be careful. Some people need this kind of “certainty” to keep sane and balanced in this very scary world. And some of these people love Jesus a lot, even though, from my perspective, they completely misunderstand and misrepresent Him. Be careful again: A lot of people are badly damaged by this kind of rigid, judgmental, cookie-cutter religion. In any case, and quite obviously, there are churches everywhere for people who want this kind of religion. Without shame or apology, this is not that kind of church. That is not what you will find here. Nevertheless, those of you in Bible Study groups know we often still wrestle with literalism and boxes and passages that start to take us back to fear and the negation of Life. And those of you who are not in Bible Study groups, is it because you are afraid that's where they will try to take you?

Christmas is not about a book; it is about Jesus. How revolutionary is that! Christmas is not about a book being written; it is about Jesus being born – coming into our world. God chose to reveal himself in Jesus Christ. That is our claim: Incarnation. God comes to us in human flesh, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This does not mean that Jesus equates to God in all of God's numinous, omniscient, omnipotent Being. How much of that could we understand anyway? Have we no humility?! But Jesus is so filled with the Holy Spirit of God that to know Jesus is to know everything we humans can comprehend or understand about the nature, attitudes, motives, heart, and purposes of God.

I repeat: God chose to reveal himself in Jesus Christ, not in a book. *“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”* Not *“The Word became written down, and we all read it and learned to blindly believe and accept every word in it.”* Sometimes the written words obscure the Living WORD, even as sometimes they point toward it. And Christmas is a Walking WORD, not a written word. That is at the very core and essence of our Faith. Why did Jesus never write down His truth? He certainly could have, had He chosen to do so. Many others have chosen writing as a way to influence the world. [A bad old joke: When they said to Jesus, “Publish or Perish?” Jesus replied: “I choose Perish.” (Hard to know whether to laugh or to cry.)]

Why did Jesus choose to spend so much time and energy with His followers instead? Why did Jesus not help us get it right by writing it down so we could read it straight and not have to pore over stuff written in a different language thirty to sixty years later? Simple answer: That is not how we get it – that is *not* Life in Christ. It is not about intellect – an exam we pass or fail. It is about relationship – trust. It is about repentance and going with Him. We never get it “right.” But we come to Life and joy and purpose and love by getting to know HIM, not by knowing The Book. The Book only gives us some information about Him, enough to let us know that He is alive and present here with us, and that we can know Him and follow Him – receive comfort, guidance, love, and support from Him – whenever we care enough to pray, opening ourselves to His presence and influence. Lots of Christians are spending too much time with The Book and not enough time with Jesus – that is, not enough time in prayer. The two are supposed to go together; Bible study and prayer are supposed to enhance each other. But they cannot if we turn the Bible into an idol – if we deify and worship it. Then The Book fights Jesus for control over our lives, instead of helping us to see Him and go with Him.

Lots of people dead-end their prayers in just such a fashion. “Dear God, you can say anything you want to me ... as long as you don’t disagree with my parents, mess with my prejudices, try to change what I read in the Bible, or ask me to do anything scary or difficult.” No wonder their prayers take only five minutes and they do all the talking!

I trust the record – if I put it ALL together. Though nobody was following Him around with a video camera, I trust the record to give us an accurate enough picture of what Jesus was like, what He taught and believed, what kind of choices He made, and what happened as a result of who He was and how He confronted our world. No other religious story or record on earth has ever been challenged, doubted, pawed over, examined, and cross-referenced from every shred of information we can find – from secular records to archaeological digs – with anywhere near the meticulous and picky attention we have showered on the Bible, and especially on the New Testament. The Bible stands! But it stands as authentic *human record*, not as some magic, errorless manual from God. The Bible is *not* an excuse or license to stop thinking or to stop pondering our own relationship and experience with God. Most of all, it is no substitute for prayer, however often our reading it draws us to our prayers.

Never let anybody say to you: “This is what it says in the Bible, and you have to believe it or you are no real Christian.” You *must* go on to ask, and keep on asking: “Is this what God in Jesus Christ really intends, what he really means? Is this what he is really like, and what he really wants *me* to be like?” It is not all cut-and-dried. It is a *living* relationship. It is a Walking WORD. You do realize, do you not, that no matter how glowingly I might write down words, stories, accounts of what my son Brennan is like and what he means to me, *that is nothing* in comparison to who Brennan really is or what it is like to be with him?

God is so careful to not break our free will: to engage us fairly; to help us grow authentically. The Bible can be such an incredible tool to help us on our pilgrimage – on the Christian WAY. But the moment you make it sterile and rigid and perfect, it takes away free will. Then you cannot engage in the conversation. The dialogue stops, and you are only supposed to “believe it” in that mindless way only appropriate for slaves and robots.

The Bible reveals what the people who wrote it understood and comprehended – what they “got” from what was going on. It reveals what they thought was most important – what they gleaned from their best prayers and efforts. It is the truth as they were experiencing it, or at least what they could get into words at the moment of writing. The Bible is that and nothing more. And *that*, of course, includes a lot of inspiration from the Holy Spirit, as well as from encounter with Jesus. You can feel it. The record is incredible and wonderful. It is hard to imagine we would be here without this legacy from those who came before us. But does it not occur to you that there may be some things you know more about than the Apostle Paul did? What if you pray and study for as many years as he did? Can the Holy Spirit not inspire you as well? Is not Paul himself hoping that you will get into the drama, and live your own life of faith and service just as he was trying to do? Nothing in the Bible excuses you from being just as faithful and sincere a follower of Jesus as anybody else who ever lived. The New Testament was not written for spectators! Not only are you allowed to disagree with the New Testament writers, you *cannot* agree with all of them, since *they* don’t all agree with each other. And they don’t always agree with what *they themselves* have said earlier or in different times and places. They are pilgrims. They are learning and growing all the time. **Go thou and do likewise!** Life and truth and love never get handed to us on a silver platter. We must also get into the story, and find our own authentic awareness of His truth and presence.

This is very dangerous thinking. (People are always saying that to me.) No kidding! Why do you think Paul talks about working out our salvation in fear and trembling? (Philippians 2:12) What if we make mistakes? What if we have errors in our thinking? What if we don't make the right choices? Are some of you still imagining that the Christian Path is about getting it right and being perfect? Why do you think Jesus made such a big deal out of forgiveness and grace and mercy? Christians are supposed to be fearless because of the mercy. Why are so many of us still frightened and depressed and anxious? His mercy is our only hope! Why not trust it? You cannot follow Jesus if you will not trust Him to cover your mistakes. There is nothing in Christendom about IF we make mistakes. There is just a whole lot about what to do WHEN we make mistakes.

“Canon” means “measuring rod.” You do know what a measuring rod is, right? (It's like a tape measure.) The “canon of Scripture” means we have selected the most helpful writings from among a vast array of writings in the first and second centuries A.D. You are then supposed to use “the canon” to measure against your own experience and convictions. You place it alongside your own pilgrimage, and invariably it will raise questions and suggest dimensions you have neglected or perhaps not thought about yet.

The Bible is a tool. You are supposed to *use* it, not swallow it, worship it, or deify it. If you swallow it, it is of no further use to you. It will even gag you. So we measure our own experiences against Scripture, remembering that Scripture is never merely one verse or two. Do not put a frame around the tool; do not plate it in gold; do not throw it away or leave it to gather dust on the shelf. Use it. Is God less real to you than he was to those who *wrote* the Bible? If God delivered Daniel, does God deliver you? If Jesus talks about Gehenna – the city garbage dump outside Jerusalem – do you ever feel like you have landed there? And if Jesus tells stories so people can identify their own feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and uselessness and others turn them into a doctrine of hellfire, does that match your experience of the Walking Word – the Risen Christ who tracks your days through thick and thin, always ready to forgive, pick you up, draw you out of whatever holes you get into? The vengeful, angry Lord has never been my experience, not even through the worst of my drinking days. So I do not believe those constructs. They are a huge insult to my Lord, and His Cross, and His Holy Spirit. Some *people* treat me like Hell, but Jesus never does.

And a great deal of the New Testament talks about Jesus freeing us from the bondage and Hell we are already in – not about throwing us into Hell unless we shape up, as if we were all happy and wholesome before He came along and started ruining all our fun.

I am also very sad about this biblical blunder because it robs you of some wonderful friends. Why do we have books? A book is just a substitute for a real person. A book stands in for a conversation we might have had with a real person who is not available to us physically because of time or space. So it is wonderful to be able to have some conversations with Paul or Mark or Luke, despite the fact that they have gone on and we cannot talk to them in person. But they are dear Christian friends who have walked this Path before us. If you make them perfect or errorless or sinless, that's the end of it. What good is a friend you cannot talk things over with, argue with, share experiences with? With a book, we have to dub-in our side of the dialogue, but the dialogue is still what makes it valuable. If you deify the Bible, that is the end of the honest conversation. That is a horrible and ungodly blunder. And truly it obscures the Wonder.

Of course, there are no substitutes for Jesus. He is the Walking Word. He is the True Christmas. No book can stand in for Him. You have to *know Him* personally. We are back to the same thing over and over: Anything that hides, obscures, or minimizes the Holy Spirit is a blunder. The core, the essence, the dynamism of the Christian Life is our living relationship with Jesus – the daily contact possible between us and the presence of our Risen Lord. If that is not possible and real, all that is left of Christianity is an empty shell – ritual, formulas, robes, and candles – but nothing to change our lives, redeem us, inspire us, or fill us with love and purpose. If the dialogue with the Risen Christ is missing, then the only hope of anything authentic ever happening for any of us is the dim possibility that, after we die – and if we make it past the Judgment Seat – maybe something will change and it will turn out that Jesus cares about us after all. How many crèches and Christmas trees does it take to make up for the loss of the Walking Word?!

Blunders hide the Wonders. And that is very, very sad. Christmas as Incarnation is huge WONDER, so full of light and love and caring and guidance that it truly takes the breath away. It is the story of Messiah – God's Son coming to be with us. And of how the world and Satan, both unspeakably threatened by all of it, tried to take Him away from us. But they couldn't do it; they couldn't make it stick. They had

never dealt with such power before. Thirty-eight hours and He was back again. And so, unable to defeat the Christ outright, they did the only thing left to them: they tried to obscure it, to hide it, to tangle it up in all the guilt, fear, and human foibles that have always been so familiar here on earth and that have always kept us in bondage.

So we were waiting for Messiah to come. But now we are waiting for Him to come again. And He came to free us from the Law, and all the guilt, shame, and fear of judgment and damnation that go with it. But we have gone right back to the Law and Judgment, and most of our churches are every bit as rigid, unaccepting, and Law-based as any synagogue Jesus ever knew. And He came as one of us – fully human – and totally involved with us. But we wanted distance between Him and us, so we invented stories of a Virgin Birth, and we keep trying to picture Him as very holy but vague, distant, sexless, sinless, always nice, never angry – and very, very boring – even though the New Testament records support no such picture.

Ah, the blunders and the Wonders. Life with the Christ of God awaits every one of us – whenever we are willing to set aside our fears, swallow our pride, and go with Him – for His living presence is all around us, waiting only for us to want the contact enough to seek it. That is endless WONDER and JOY, and it reshapes and impacts everything in the life we are living right now, no matter what the circumstances. That is the real Christmas, and the real Wonder of His Love.