

Richard G. Zyne February 24, 2002

Life is truly a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage, a walk down a road that is lined with beautiful flowers and fruit trees, but it's also bumpy and strewn with boulders and pot holes. The pathway is frequently dark and winding and we grope in the darkness for some tangible things to give us direction—to lead us to the truth.

Those who choose to walk down this road may be rewarded with gifts of insight, illumination, enlightenment, or salvation—words that actually mean the same thing. But at the same time those who walk down this road will undoubtedly fall, bleed, or even be consumed by beasts lying in wait. There will also be hunger, thirst, disorientation, and despair. But this walk in the dark woods also opens on to fields of great beauty where the sun shines and everything is perfectly clear.

Yet, as a true spiritual pilgrim, you must continue your journey and go back into the dark woods and stumble down that winding, bumpy road.

It's, frankly, much easier to not even *begin* your journey or to simply stop where the road is perceptively smooth and the flowers smell good and say to yourself, "I think I'll stop here and rest for awhile." In most cases, this will be the end of your spiritual pilgrimage and you will set up shop and live the rest of your life light years away from your true destination. You will take out your favorite book of enlightenment, sit on a nice soft tuft of grass and convince yourself that this is where God wants you to be. Well, maybe he does want you to be there.

Whatever you call it—The Truth, The Transcendent Ultimate Reality, my Lord, Allah, Jesus Christ, or simply God,—the fact is that every human being must travel down his or her personal spiritual path and must complete a spiritual pilgrimage, and must eventually return to the origin of its creation.

Don't you just envy sometimes those people who are so comfortable on their spiritual pilgrimage? There they sit under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil eating all that ripe fruit and thumbing through their well-worn Bible. So smug and sure of their salvation. So self-righteous and self-satisfied with their knowledge that they even begin to build a little shack by the side of the road and put up a sign that says, "this is MY house."

Now personally, in my own spiritual pilgrimage, I'd rather meet up with an agnostic who is tripping down the road using a 1957 edition of the Rand McNally atlas than spend much time with the guy who's lounging around the tree with his feet propped up on a pile of hymnals. I even like the woman who is walking in the opposite direction and tells me that she's not moving and that there's no such thing as the road. But the person I find most intriguing is the guy who just tripped on a rock, fell down, and is now cursing the stone and rubbing his ankle. When he looks at me with a sad scowl and asks, "Where the hell is the truth?" I know I have met a fellow pilgrim.

My personal spiritual pilgrimage has been rocky and I have fallen into many holes. I have also been stoned by those who love me and by those who were not too appreciative of my journey.

I have wrestled with internal demons and angels and find that I am slightly hobbled by all that fighting. Just like Jacob wrestling with the angel, I ask God to bless me, but he just tells me to get up and continue to walk down the road. I guess that's his way of blessing me.

Several years ago I was hired, by a small college in North Carolina, to be vice president for institutional advancement and planning. The college was owned and operated by the Convention of Original Free Will Baptists. Free Will Baptist—an oxymoron if I ever heard one.

To be fair, 99.9% of those people were good hardworking, church-going folks who didn't really give a rat's patoot about theology. I was hired to direct development, planning, and institutional effectiveness....and to offer my services at the pulpit as needed. Nobody ever complained about my preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, which I did with conviction. Nobody ever questioned my theology, though many didn't like the idea of a "Yankee" being a college administrator. They tolerated my strange accent and eventually accepted me into their fold after they learned that I had married a good Baptist, southern girl.

But after the publication of an in-depth newspaper article about my spiritual journey by a local newspaper, the excrement really hit the fan.

If you think that Paul's letter to the Ephesians was widely circulated to the churches in Asia Minor, this article was sent by malevolent forces to hundreds of Free Will Baptists and churches throughout eastern North Carolina with the explicit intent of branding me a heathen or pagan or even worse...a Jew!

Yes, I was raised in the Jewish faith. Yes, I was influenced by my grandfathers of the importance of my religious heritage. And yes, in my youth, I even considered becoming a rabbi. My best friend, in fact, did become a rabbi.

"OK," they said, "well, Jesus was a Jew, but he wasn't like those other Jews and besides he *really* wasn't a Jew, if you know what I mean."

But this Zyne fellow, this funny-sounding New York Yankee, look what else he says! "Christianity and Judaism are intrinsically bound to each other. The acceptance of a savior is the culmination of Judaism. Most Jews don't accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior because the Christian community has been hostile to Jews for two millenia."

Well, maybe he's right there. But wait, look at what else he says. Get that tar and feathers ready.

“Those who don't accept Jesus as savior receive God in other ways, such as through their family, their culture, scriptures, and the Law of Moses. Christ comes to Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims through their faiths. There is a Christ in all authentic religions. It is through the personal relationship with God.”

He also says that he doesn't believe that only those who profess to be Christians will be admitted to heaven. “How could I?” he asks. “My family have been Jews for years. IF I thought they were condemned to hell, I couldn't be a Christian.”

Well, within days, all of my speaking engagements to Free Will Baptist Churches were cancelled and letters of disdain poured into the president's office.

Here's one from a pastor. “Dr. Zyne attested that he believes, there is a Christ in all authentic religions (Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims (he uses lower case in his letters). The article further states that he doesn't believe that only those profess to be Christians will be admitted to heaven. Upon hearing these beliefs of Dr. Zyne, a motion was immediately made, seconded, and passed that all further financial support to the college be terminated. We feel that a line has been crossed. The College has shown a total disregard to the clear teaching of scripture in hiring a person who believes the heresies to which Dr. Zyne ascribes, and we feel that we have a biblical mandate to protest.

“Free Will Baptists are conservative, God-fearing, bible-believing individuals who have traditionally held to a literal interpretation of scripture. While the college may find the hiring of this man enlightening, we find it both offensive and repulsive. It shows a gross disregard for our Free Will Baptist heritage and a gross mismanagement of the authority entrusted to you by the convention.”

Here's one from a well-respected former college administrator. “I believe that the College has a responsibility *not* to hire senior administrators who espouse beliefs that are not biblical or in agreement with Free Will Baptist doctrine. (I thought Baptists didn't have doctrine). Dr. Zyne's comments showed a lack of wisdom and a sense of arrogance that is disrespectful to the Free Will Baptist Church. If he was misquoted, I eagerly anticipate a formal correction in the paper soon. If he was not misquoted, and indeed believes as was stated in the article, then the purpose of this letter is to let you know that the contribution you receive from me tonight will be the last contribution the College ever receives as long as Dr. Zyne remains at the College.

“I cannot support the College or any organization that would allow its senior level personnel to attack the Church of Jesus Christ. Under the current circumstances, my financial and moral support will not be with you.”

Finally, here's a letter to the editor from another fundamentalist pastor who is not a member of the Convention of Original Free Will Baptists. Far be it from me to lecture

the vice-president of Mount Olive College on the subject of theology. “Even though his beliefs may be acceptable at the College they certainly did not come from the Bible. Dr. Zyne’s views are nothing but liberalism gone to seed with a cavalier disregard for the authority of scripture. Dr. Zyne’s position proves that liberalism reigns as a theological position at Mount Olive College.”

By this time, the tar was bubbling and the feathers had been plucked. The Board of Trustees was asking for my head on a platter.

My boss, the president of the College, who just happened to be a moderate Presbyterian, was suffering severe heartburn over this issue, but supported me by invoking the concept of academic freedom in institutions of the liberal arts. We were not a Bible College—we were a liberal art institution.

Nevertheless, the vitriol flowed and I was essentially marked with the sign of Cain and cast out into the Land of Nod, east of Eden, throughout my tenure as vice president, which surprisingly lasted for nearly six years, until December, 2000.

I did, however, make it a point to personally correspond with all those individuals who wrote letters or cast stones at me, whether figuratively or literally. This is what I said.

One of the great problems when discussing theology and theological concepts is the basic limitation of language and words to describe God.

Any description or representation of God is always something less than reality, because God is far beyond any human conception. What makes matters even worse is that when these words are put into the everyday media—such as the newspaper—they take on even less significance and become the equivalent of sound-bites or simply bumper sticker theology. While the quotations in the paper are correct, they are incomplete and do not fully represent my thoughts, my theology, my experience, or my life. As the old saying goes, “you can’t judge a book by its cover”.

I can honestly say that I have spent the past forty years of my life in deep contemplation and study of God and have wrestled with scripture just as Jacob wrestled with the angel. Even as a little boy, my Jewish grandfathers taught me the Bible and hoped that I would someday be a rabbi. I can truthfully attest that this wrestling has been both enlightening and extremely painful, and I too have awakened with spiritual bones out of joint. The process of coming to a relationship with God is often painful, lonely and very frustrating. The prophets and apostles in both the Old and New Testaments did not have an easy time with God nor the evil that was in the world. They suffered for their beliefs and often cried out to God for clarity, justice, and logic. They cried out to see and experience the face of God and to experience God in person.

Just as we cannot know the face of God without experiencing him in a personal way—such as through Christ—I would hope that you would not prejudge me by simply reading my comments in the newspaper and assuming that you have read the whole story. I

would very much like to meet you and talk with you personally so that we might share some of our experiences and beliefs.

Your comments, however, do put me on the defensive and while it is not my intention to change your theology, I will attempt to clarify and expand upon some of the things I said in the article.

The church has done a notoriously poor job in making converts over the centuries. History is replete with massacres, crusades, and inquisitions, which have either turned the heathen into Christians or turned them into dust. All this was done in the name of God, and all this was done by persons who claimed to be Christians. Even Adolph Hitler called himself a Christian. The name of Christ has been a very bitter pill for many people to swallow because they were not encountering the real Christ—God in person—but the Christ as portrayed by a domineering, oppressive church.

Is it any wonder why so many non-Christians cannot accept Christ as their Lord and Savior? It is because the message of salvation has been packaged in hypocrisy and deceit. But, we are not saved by *our* faith or *our* works, but by the grace of God. So the face of God, which is Christ, can come shining through a dark, bloody cloud and literally kiss us with his love. And this kiss of love cuts through an individual's beliefs, value system, culture, or ideology.

It is strictly the work of God and we are saved by his grace alone. Yes, Christ may come to a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Hindu through his faith because it is God's work and his doing alone. However, the response belongs to us as individuals. This is where the work gets very difficult, because it requires a person to undress spiritually and stand naked before his creator.

And there we are before this great luminous face of God, naked as a baby and virtually transparent as the air. When we realize that we have nothing to stand on and that our lives are like water in a sieve, our only hope is to reach out and grasp the extended hand of God. That is true faith.

Our responsibility as Christians is merely to plant seeds—tiny seeds of God's love—mustard seeds. Yes, we Christians must go out and teach, preach, heal, and serve, but we must leave the work of salvation to God. It must never be forced or coerced and it must also be authentic. You know, not everyone who say, Lord, Lord, is a Christian, because only God knows the true heart of a person.

I believe that everything that I have said is scriptural, biblical, and true. I see scripture as enlightening and thought-provoking. For me, the Bible is a tool, an instrument. It is a flashlight that helps me see the face of God in a dark, evil world. It also exposes the horrible iniquity that exists in people's hearts. But, as I shine this light I also find a God who is hiding from me and forcing me to search deeper into the recesses of my own soul. Frankly, I find myself getting lost and depressed because just as I think I have found God

again, He runs and hides from me. In essence, he is saying to me, “You do not have the full picture at this time—keep on going.”

It is unfortunate that many people do not use the Bible as a light, but as a weapon against others who may have different conceptions of God. The Bible must always be presented in love as a light in the darkness or as a building tool. Too frequently, it is simply used to bang people over the head.

It’s very difficult to present a total theological statement in a short letter. I believe that our *lives* are our theological statement and not simply the words that come out of our mouths. Again, I would be most happy to meet with you and perhaps to share our mutual Christ.

Well, all that happened seven years ago, and here I am today still on my spiritual pilgrimage, tripping on that rocky road, waiting to fall into the hole of truth.

