

Belonging in an Age of Disintegration: Can Spiritual Discipline Rescue Faith?

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I'd like to begin with a story from Anne Lamott's classic memoir, Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith. I have told it in every church I've served. It captures something important about church. Lamott is writing about what a slide show of her life might look like:

"I think we have missed church ten times in twelve years. Sam would be snuggled in people's arms in the earlier shots, shyly trying to wriggle free of hugs in the later ones. There would be different pastors along the way, none of them exactly right for us until a few years ago when a tall African-American woman named Veronica came to lead us. She has huge gentle doctor hands, with dimples where the knuckles should be, like a baby's fists. She stepped into us, the wonderful old worn pair of pants that is St. Andrew, and they fit. She sings to us sometimes from the pulpit and tells us stories of when she was a child. She told us this story just the other day: When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.' And that is why I have stayed so close to mine – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."¹

Now, just for a second, think critically about it. What made it effective?

I am going to hazard a guess here – is it the implication of *belonging* that makes the story work? Is it a belief that there are places where we belong so profoundly that they serve as an *ebenezer* for us, so that we "Know our way home," both physically and metaphorically?

Belonging is important. And yet, we also know we are living in an age of *disintegration*. We're shifting away from the activities and organizations that bind us together. We know *belonging* is important to us culturally, developmentally, and emotionally, yet we resist the means of belonging that traditionally have created community. Robert Putnam's seminal book *Bowling*

¹ Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith. (Anchor, NY 1999) pp54-55.

Alone has been out for twenty years - we have been exploring why we've shifted from being a culture of *joiners* to being a culture of *individuals* for a full generation now.

A mature understanding of what it means to belong has the capacity to build us individually and corporately – but only, I am going to argue, if we get *belonging* right.

What do I mean? In order to make my case in a timely fashion, I am going to have to indulge in some sweeping generalities, but I hope you'll hear a ring of truth within these broad assumptions, or at least prompt a question in your mind. I believe they show us that there is a cost and a benefit to nearly everything we do, and the ways that we have refined and defined what it means to *belong*, particularly within the context of American Protestantism, have created the circumstances for *belonging* to be hijacked by *egotism*.

How has this happened?

In his excellent work, The Domestication of Transcendence, How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong, the late William Placher explores how various thought movements in the history of the church pointed us on to our current path with a particular eye for what we have *lost* in order to retrieve some premodern notions that could benefit us in our understanding of God. I would like to note that Placher wrote this particular work after Narratives of a Vulnerable God. As simplistic an exercise as juxtaposing these two titles could easily demonstrate the challenge of formulating useful talk about God.

I am particularly interested today in a short section about Anne Hutchinson.

American Protestantism began and developed in different ways in different regions. In New England, the puritans arrived as Pilgrims and established their *city on a hill*. There was a strong, nuclear community. That's good. But dissenting viewpoints were stifled. That's bad. Soon, the puritan community experienced a split that resulted in the Baptists heading off to Rhode Island

with Roger Williams. Now, to be clear: The Puritans are not the heroes in this interaction. Anne Hutchinson and her family were treated shamefully by the Puritans, exiled not once, but twice before ultimately the entire family was killed by natives. Before we reached this point, though, Anne Hutchinson and her family were deeply immersed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Her husband was elected a deputy to the Massachusetts General Court. Though she lived in Alford, she began to travel in the 1630's to Boston, twenty miles away, in order to hear the preaching of John Cotton. By 1634, she was hosting groups of women in her home, at times exceeding sixty women, and she was not bashful about critiquing the preaching of local clergy for their anemic presentations of the scope of the grace of God.

The local clergy were not amused. Their construct of God required, essentially, that the Christian participate in his or her own salvation by the manner of their lives. Cotton's preaching upended all of that. He wrote this, and aside from the archaic language, I suspect we'd agree with it, "God doth sometimes poure out the Spirit of grace upon the most bloody, and most haynous, and most desperate, and most prophane, and most abominable sinners."² I believe that. If you believe it as well, we have our evangelical revivalist forbears to thank for it. As I critique the language of evangelical revivalism in the United States, remember that. Placher concludes that, for the local clergy,

"This would not do. Take Cotton seriously, and the local drunk might be as likely to receive divine grace as the pious governor of the colony. To leaders of a colony striving to create a city on a hill to inspire all the world with its virtues, Cotton seemed to be opening up, as one of them put it, 'such a faire and easie way to Heaven, that men may passe without difficulty.' Would ethical efforts not even matter?"³

² Placher, William. The Domestication of Transcendence, How Modern Thinking about God went Wrong. (W/JKP, Louisville, 1996) pp104-105

³ Ibid.

Now, we mostly would answer this question from a standpoint of having been steeped for generations in the positive effects of the First and Second Great Awakenings. We know that God's grace is free, unaffected by presence or the absence of ethical efforts.

Cotton was called to answer for his heresy, managed to obfuscate his position, and got away with his views. Hutchinson, on the other hand, stuck to her convictions. She and her family were expelled to Rhode Island, where they were later expelled to New York.

The puritan establishment preserved their model of the *city on the hill*, with its cohesive social structures, but sent a clear message that free thought of this nature would not be permitted.

Enormous strength of ego would be required of anyone who was called to diverge from these views.

By the time we reach the First Great Awakening, a hundred years later, the very viewpoints that resulted in the expulsion of the Hutchinson family have become the driving values of religious practice.

Which brings me to Pennsylvania, which was populated by Quaker dissenters and where the Presbyterians found a comfortable home there before migrating south. In 1698, the Presbyterians organized the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where I serve as the pastor. In the history of the church, which was founded in a warehouse called the Barbadoes Store, one of the earliest written minutes reflects a bit of smugness over having finally gotten rid of the Baptists from the warehouse. First Church is not the oldest Presbyterian church in the country, but it does have the distinction of being the church to found the first American Presbytery, a veritable gathering of early Presbyterian luminaries. Even so, in the city of Philadelphia, there was only one Presbyterian church until 1742. Then the Second Presbyterian

Church was formed by dissident elders splitting off and forming a new congregation. What happened to cause such a split?

Now we look at the *negative* consequences of the First Great Awakening.

Historian Bruce Bendler of the University of Delaware addresses this in a recent article in the Journal of Presbyterian History. He writes,

“The Anglican evangelist George Whitefield travelled from one end of the colonies to the other more than once; thousands heard him preach and responded to his preaching by placing their faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Based on that common faith, the Great Awakening strengthened bonds of unity; but it also sowed discord and divisions within Protestant denominations in British North America, including Congregationalists in New England and Presbyterians in the mid-Atlantic colonies. New converts and young “enthusiastic” pastors challenged the established leadership, especially those clergy whose response to the Great Awakening was viewed as lukewarm or even hostile. These divisions came to head in the Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia at its annual meeting in 1741.”

What went wrong? Bendler continues,

“In their zeal to promote the revival, some of them [Itinerant preachers] disregarded the traditional process of receiving a call to a local congregation and then having that call confirmed by a presbytery. Rather, they traveled across the region as itinerants, preaching in a number of localities, seeking to ignite or fan the flames of revival. As they did so, they often came into conflict with local pastors when they challenged the credentials and, at times, the genuine faith of those pastors. Such challenges eroded respect for a pastor among his congregants.”⁴

The story of the early progression of American Protestantism runs from where individuality represents opposition that cannot be countenanced, to where the conviction of the individual conscience is celebrated, to where the approbation of the public as we would recognize it in the authority of the church to govern itself is eschewed. Or, perhaps more saliently for us, it runs from a problem, to a correction, to what I would term an over-correction.

Rarely do we manage to gain something of value without losing something at the same time.

⁴ Bruce Bendler, *Matter and Substance: The Tennent-Evans Controversy and the Presbyterian Schism of 1741* in the Journal of Presbyterian History, Fall 2019

There is no question that our gains in understanding God's grace were worthwhile, but what was eroded was the sense of communal responsibility for the kingdom of God. It was replaced with a model of conversion that eliminated the community as a means of grace.

In each of these historical instances, what transpired was that when the cost of *belonging* grew too high, divisions surfaced, and splits occurred. No doubt it was freeing for many, but even as something was gained, something was lost also.

What it takes to start something completely new requires a strong sense of self and ego, even more so if it means stepping away from foundational beliefs cultivated over formative years.

That is also what creates the danger. As a result, I believe American Protestantism has taken some wrong turns along the way. Specifically, I believe we have oftentimes allowed our ego to drive our sense of belonging. Consequently, *belonging* risks becoming a commodity we control, rather than a means of offering up ourselves to God. When we catch ourselves thinking of what we *get* out of belonging rather than what we *give*, something has run amok.

Moreover, I believe the danger of egotism within American Protestantism has been fed by *the language of faith* in the following ways:

- the language of evangelical revivalism
- the language of hymnody
- the language of doctrine/standards of inclusion

Let's start with the language of evangelical revivalism. We've already noted that The First Great Awakening caused division within American Presbyterianism. With that said, it is perhaps the language of the second Great Awakening that most changed how we view what it means to belong to God. Where the first great Awakening sought to bring the Christian to earnest awareness of one's sins followed with repentance to a corrected life, the second Great

Awakening sought to bring about conversion to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the latter that opens the door to an egotistical understanding of salvation.

How does the language of individualized salvation affect our sense of belonging?

Before we go any further, I want to be clear that the reason I am engaged in a critique of the language evangelical revivalism is because it is such a major influence in American Protestantism. Please know that I am not critiquing personal faith or piety or sincerity. I am looking at the outcomes.

That said, as goal of the Evangelical Revivalist understanding of faith and practice became more narrowly focused, its language became more strident and at times more manipulative. So, from the generosity of say, Jonathan Edwards' preaching, which sought to instill greater piety within an existing, close-knit community, we turn to a different goal shown by later generations of preachers, who defined success instead as greater and greater numbers to be baptized or rebaptized, and colonized into *newly established* revivalist congregations. The growth of these congregations, by definition, came at the expense of others.

As a result, we migrate from thoughtful, deliberate preaching intended to "awaken" a congregation that has grown complacent to mass rallies with charismatic preachers seeking to evoke religious ecstasy.

Here's a fun little fact: neurologically, religious ecstasy is simply a hop, skip, and a jump away from sexual ecstasy, so by the time of the Cane Ridge revival during the Second Great Awakening, it was said that at Cane Ridge, more souls were conceived than were saved. And, lest we feel too smug in our propriety, it should be noted that the Cane Ridge revival was started by the local Presbyterian church. Perhaps the chosen aren't quite so frozen!!

Here's the problem with using religious ecstasy as a means to manipulate faith: Ongoing devotion requires recapturing the *feeling* of the initial conversion. And when faith development becomes about what we *feel*, it will almost by definition become egotistical.

When faith practice becomes primarily about “me and my Jesus,” something profoundly important risks becoming lost.

Whatever may be wrong with Presbyterianism, I'll say this for us: our founding principle is the sovereignty of God. And because the sovereignty of God is central in our doctrine, it acts as a corrective on a theology and a piety that becomes about how we affect our own salvation.

A theology that counts as central one's personal choice of Jesus Christ as a savior potentially puts the onus of faith on the individual. That's *not* to say that a personal choice to follow Jesus Christ is inherently flawed; it *is* to say that the belief that we get there under our own steam is inherently egotistical. Calvin knew this well and sought to correct it. But the seeming rigidity of Calvin's doctrine of election led later theologians to over-correct the problem.

The risk we run is when faith practice and language become egotistical is that belonging becomes transactional.

The language of revivalist preaching, with its emphasis upon personal choice runs the risk of reinforcing a view of the church where the individual is central and the community exists to serve the individual in what can be self-centered personal practice. Practice becomes about what *we* get out of belonging, and that feeds our egotism rather than our faith.

When that happens, the language of worship becomes problematic.

Let's take a look at how the words we sing reinforce this notion.

Students of reformation history know that there was a liturgical shift that accompanied our theological shift in the reformation. Calvin established the Psalter as the music of worship,

thereby shifting the worshipping body of Geneva away from the music of the Mass. For generations, Reformed Protestant hymnody in general hewed very close to the use of scripture as the basis of congregational singing. The language of the psalms as our language of song served as something of a guardrail against the encroachment of egotism into our worship.

Then, hymns changed.

The Psalter has the advantage of limiting the effects of egotism on worship, but it also stymies theological development if all the singer can do is to sing words from not only another century, but another millennium. I asked a church musician to reflect on this shift with me. I'd like to share her thoughts, and I'm going to warn you, this one might hurt:

"If one accepts that one of the primary characteristics of Evangelical identity is that salvation comes by being "saved" through a personal relationship with Jesus, and that this can take one down the proverbial "rabbit hole" of egotism, then these hymns might serve such an Evangelical well:

Amazing Grace
What a Friend We Have in Jesus
Rock of Ages
I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say Come Unto Me and Rest
Jesus, Lover of My Soul
My Faith Looks Up to Thee
O Love, that Wilt Not Let Me Go
Just As I Am
Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

In the 1990 Hymnal, all these hymns appear in the "Life in Christ" section of the hymnal. But their texts are in such striking contrast with others in this section, as they are entirely self-centered, and offer only personal fulfillment as a response to salvation. Many others (O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee; Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life; Take My Life; etc) have an offering of self in grateful service as response. And other "I" hymns, such as When I Survey the Wondrous Cross and In the Cross of Christ I Glory, also express personal devotion that leads to a greater sense of living in the world as a "saved" Christian."⁵

⁵ Credit to Jane Arant for this reflection.

What winds up happening is that, in the interests of keeping it personal and therefore able to speak to us personally, we run the risk with our language of substituting *anthropology* for *theology*.

If you want to see the theological development of any denomination, look at the development of its music. To the extent that hymnody remains focused on God, it remains worthwhile. When what we sing points back to us, we've run headlong into egotism in our faith. Which is to say that in the development of our songs, there has been fertile ground in every age, and there has been fertilizer in every age.

To the extent that worship music makes a faith claim, it feeds belonging. But when the purpose of congregational song instead seeks to elicit a feeling, we're veering in the territory of feeding our egotism.

Finally, the language of *doctrine* can either feed a healthy sense of belonging or it can feed the egotism of those who set the boundaries of community.

Again, I feel a need to disclaimer my critique here: We believe strongly in the freedom of the conscience as Presbyterians. Specifically, what that means is that we don't subject our members or our clergy to doctrinal litmus tests. We understand that within the confines of the pale of orthodoxy, there is a broad range of what constitutes acceptable belief.

This approach has always confounded the church. In nearly every age, there have been those who felt that the leeway meant laxity. As a result, in the history of American Presbyterianism particularly, there have been numerous splinterings. You may know the alphabet soup of American Presbyterianism: PCUSA, EPC, ECO, PCA, ARP, OP, PDQ.

Doctrinal standards alone do not make theology egotistical, but the way we went about navigating the diversity of theological viewpoints most certainly did. Our mistake: The means

by which theological thought became codified into our polity and confessional history created winners and losers.

When theology becomes about winning or losing points, it becomes a danger. The case in point for this would be any number of doctrinal disputes in American Presbyterianism. We could begin with what split the typically northern church from the typically southern church in our own history. Slavery, followed by Virgin Birth, followed by women's ordination, followed by LGBTQ+ inclusion and ordination equality.

Each of these "controversies" within the history of the church began as a doctrinal dispute, became a polity issue, and resolved with a split in the body. Denominational splits are complex things, but to my mind, to suggest that egotism *didn't* factor into the equation is to be naïve to the point of self-delusion.

This is my diagnosis of how we went wrong in twentieth-century Protestantism, and the fact that we are a fifth of the way into the twenty-first century does not by any means suggest that we have begun to correct ourselves. This is the disease of the church.

How do we know if this is still happening?

What are some symptoms that might tell us we need to slow down and examine our motives?

- Obsession with metrics and numbers
- Decline in operational support paired with increased support for capital expenses
- Church-hopping in search, not of like minds in Jesus Christ, but of identical minds with respect to our own views

Let's go through these quickly, starting with the first one.

We got here honestly. There is a preponderance of publications that suggest that if we aren't measuring, we aren't paying attention. As noted a theologian as Will Willimon, in his 2012

memoir entitled Bishop, The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question, sets a new benchmark for defining church by metrics, suggesting that every pastor should have a “dashboard” that he or she consults on Monday morning to see how the church is doing. It should include church attendance and giving. In fairness to Dr. Willimon, I don’t know anything about the Methodist ministers he was leading other than the very uncharitable ways he described his colleagues in his memoir. I will even confess that, for a time, I found his argument convincing. Then I began to notice something: The churches that measured themselves thusly all began to sound alike, and the language employed by church leaders sounded ego-driven. If things went poorly, the solution was to replace a program or worse, a person. It sounded less like church and more like something very secular.

Thankfully, some other scholars are looking at things a bit more critically. In a 2014 article entitled, “RIP Average Attendance”, church sociologist David Odom of Duke University wrote,

“In a doctoral seminar with experienced pastors last semester, the group begged for help in developing a score card of statistics by which they could monitor the vitality of their congregations. Each was tracking average worship attendance, giving, mission/ministry hours and more. Yet, the relationships between the numbers were not clear.

Church attendance was once a key indicator of a virtuous cycle. If the church could get a new person in the pew regularly, offerings would go up, involvement in small groups and missions would climb, and the church would be healthy. If attendance was declining then everything else would eventually decline.

The growing lack of dependability on attendance is a sign that the virtuous cycles that have sustained congregations since the end of World War II are collapsing. In order to sustain congregations over the long haul, new cycles need to be developed. Once that begins to happen, new measures can be identified.”⁶

Well, hallelujah! I can’t think of a more effective way to reduce the Gospel to a reflection of personal ego than to reduce faithfulness to what can be measured: weekly, monthly, and annually.

⁶ <https://faithandleadership.com/rip-average-attendance>

Any metric we use must be a subordinate standard to the ultimate faithfulness of the church in proclaiming good news.

Second, how we relate to money can offer us a warning sign if we are willing to take the lessons our giving would offer us. Virtually everyone who raises funds agrees that it is easier to raise for a project than it is to raise operational support. Folks want to give to bricks and mortar. James Hudnut-Beumler has noted in an essay in the anthology Financing American Religion, that every generation wants to be able to say, “We built this church.” Capital projects can certainly create investment in the life of a congregation. I’ve lead them myself. They can help to renew and develop patterns of giving that leave the operational support of the church, ultimately, stronger. However, in the interests of time, let me just hypothesize that, perhaps, Jesus Christ doesn’t need nearly as *many* bricks and mortar as we think he does?

Finally, it is not surprising that in the era of MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN, where we can readily receive as much confirmation bias as our little minds can hold, churches are becoming more homogenous. In fact, it reminds me of one of my favorite New Yorker Cartoons: It shows a plutocratic couple exiting church, fur coat and top-hat clad, making their way to a limousine, with the priest standing behind them greeting people, and the caption reads, “You know, it can’t be easy for him not to offend us.”

When we can’t stand to hear a viewpoint that differs from ours in church, or worse yet, pillory a pastor or preacher for preaching a prophetic word - *even if it is scriptural* - if it offends our politics, we can be certain that our egos have taken control of what we believe it means to belong.

But perhaps even more dangerous to our spiritual well-being than seeking political homogeneity is becoming so immersed in spiritual malaise that we instead chase a *feeling*.

This leads me into what I consider the greatest danger the church faces when seeking to define belonging as a means of grace and a discipline of faith. I am speaking of the effects of consumerism on the church. And to be fair, while I have been critical of some of the influences of revivalism on our collective psyche, some of the staunchest critiques of the effects of consumerism on the church are coming from the evangelical wing of the church. A simple google search will yield an abundance of opinion pieces seeking to address this concern. Here is a piece I found particularly compelling, an op-ed piece by Christy Thomas, a Methodist elder, from the blog *Patheos*:

“The church is not called to please. We are called to make, or I prefer, “shape” disciples of Jesus Christ.

The moment we buy into the consumer-led model of church growth, using business success as our model, we have inevitably left that mission of shaping disciples behind. Why? Because the moment we displease someone by . . .

- offering a worship service that is not quite perfect or as good as the one down the street
- presenting a nursery that doesn’t have the latest in child check-in/check-out procedures
- stepping on someone’s toes theologically
- insisting that people work through their conflicts with each other in the name of a higher calling
- asking people to follow Jesus to the cross and forgive their enemies and do good to them so they might really experience the resurrection

. . . we run a huge chance of losing our “customers.”

At its essence, Christianity is anything but a consumer-pleasing religion.”⁷

Indeed, if we allow the church to be defined thusly, we lose something of inestimable value.

We see *belonging* as something the church owes us, rather than a spiritual discipline that we owe to God.

When what it means *to belong* is consequently perverted in this way, belonging loses its power to feed and heal us.

⁷ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtfulpastor/2012/12/04/the-consumer-driven-church-model-part-one/>

But – while I have spent the majority of our time diagnosing what I believe to be the problem, it does not mean that I am not hopeful for the future of the church. And, while I have been critical of the lasting effects of Evangelical Revivalism on the collective psyche of American Protestantism, at times tending to emphasize what we *lost* in the process of being shaped by this major movement in American history, that is not to suggest that I believe that we haven't *gained* something as well.

What we have gained from that tradition contains the corrective I believe the church needs. From our revivalist heritage, we were bequeathed *a strong sense of personal responsibility*, and *a profound belief in the power of God's grace to transform broken lives and systems*.

One of the gifts of revivalist preaching is the belief that our past does not have to define our future.

Where do we go from here?

This is where personal responsibility comes into play. The corrective for any corrosive mental pattern is to *establish a different habit of thought*.

Some of you may remember that in the latter portion of my service here, I became increasingly convinced of the ability of *faith practice* to shape our belief patterns. While this idea was explored more directly by a number of scholars around such disciplines as prayer, fasting, tithing, sabbath-taking, and honoring the body, I would like to argue that the church needs to treat *belonging* as a *spiritual discipline* in order that it may become and remain a means of grace. This means we must remain constantly self-critical about our motivations for what we do.

I would like to suggest that there can be a method of interrogating our motives. As grist for our discussion, let me suggest a few scenarios:

- when worried about membership numbers, ask what we, as the church, seek to give to new members of our faith community. If the answer ever becomes, “We need to get new

members to raise more money,” let it be a warning sign that our way of thinking is about to go off the rails theologically. As obvious as this seems, it is a particularly pernicious symptom of spiritual malaise in the church. Evangelism, that word that means sharing good news, is not the same as institutional development and support.

- when offended theologically (and I do hope your pastors offend you from time to time – not that they are personally offensive, but that they have been so empowered by this congregation to speak truth that they will risk saying something that might step on your toes) when offended, ask ourselves, “What did it cost this preacher to say this? How can I respond with respect and awareness of my own motives?”
- when worship just doesn’t punch your ticket on any given Sunday, or even for a given season, ask, “Who is the object of this service of worship?” Hint: if the answer is anything other than “God,” we’ve gone off the rails.

My questions aren’t intended to be exhaustive, just exploratory, perhaps to open a question for you.

Develop your own list. Make sure they are fair and reasonable. Review them with a friend, preferably one who is not of the same mind. Be honest with yourselves. Be vigilant about the possibility of your own ego shaping the outcome.

The point is to cultivate a habit of mind that sees our sense of *belonging* as what we offer to God. What will we gain by doing so?

In her marvelous book, Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World, Serene Jones confronts that very question. In her opening essay, Jones recounts the story of Leah, a young woman struggling with PTSD. Having been asked to be Leah’s mentor due to their tendency to sit on the same pew in church because of perpetual tardiness, Jones noticed one day that Leah began experiencing distress and discomfort during the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. When Leah made a hasty exit, Jones followed her to the bathroom where she found her struggling to regain her composure. Later, as they were talking through the experience, Leah shared her story, a painful story, and said, “I appreciate you listening, but... I know it’s my problem, and I’m working on it.”

Jones writes,

“‘No,’ I responded quickly, words pouring out of my mouth before I even knew what I was saying, ‘It’s not just your problem. It’s our problem – my problem, the church’s problem, God’s problem. You don’t need to be alone, and I hope we can work on it together. That’s what faith communities do.’

She eyed me with slight suspicion, for only a brief moment. The corner of her mouth tried a smile. Then she looked away and turned back to me with a new conversation topic.”⁸

Jones invites us into her struggle over the following pages, contemplating how her faith community could be a place of ultimate love, a place that understood its calling to bear with and be with deeply enough to do the work of understanding Leah’s experience and how they could be church to her. Jones recounts coming eventually to what she described as converted way of thinking. She reflects,

“The Gospel of Mark calls it ‘repentance’ – that moment when one is turned around and sees differently. The apostle Paul speaks of it as conversion, transformation, and describes for us the new reality that opens up when one comes to know Christ and see him crucified. Augustine of Hippo speaks of the baptism of blood, that turbulent transformation in which one descends into death, perhaps into terror and cold blankness, and emerges in Christ. John Calvin calls it ‘mortification and vivification,’ a conversion in which one descends into hell to find life.”⁹

Whatever we term it, my prayer for the church in the next centuries is that we exercise the discipline of thought that will allow us to consider offering up our *belonging* knowing that in turn it becomes a means of grace. Let me close by pointing out what I consider the ultimate of ironies: By remembering that God is the author of our faith, the object of our worship, and the ultimate judge of our motives, we might just find that our spiritual lives grow deeper, and we ultimately *feel* that we belong in ways that feed and inspire us.

Because in the final estimation, we already belong to God, each of us.

We can only ever give back what we have first received.

⁸ Serene Jones, Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World. (W/JKP, Louisville, 2009) p7

⁹ Ibid, p12