

RESPONSE TO DAN BOONE'S "ESCHATOLOGICAL TRAVELERS"

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I had never seen it before. Ten minutes after the closing song of my first Sunday service pastoring in the Northwest, everyone was gone. I mean gone! Ed and I stood alone in the foyer and silently looked at each other. Ed whispered, "Did we say something wrong?" Then it hit me. "I bet they're planning a surprise welcome party for us," I chuckled.

Turns out, there was no party. There was no alarm or lunch special at Bob's Burgers. It seemed our folks did not know or like each other! Decades of battles over worship preferences, appropriate attire, staff conflicts and a myriad of misunderstandings had produced an interesting phenomenon. More devoted saints had left the church than the remnant that chose to stay. Still, God called me to serve this body. Driven by divine resolve and a track record of his faithfulness, I confidently stepped into the fray.

Then reality set in. It would take more than a series of messages about reconciliation to heal our congregation's deep wounds. It would take relentless prayer and a stubborn love willing to listen and, at times, cry with those hanging on to the dream of better days. And the more I have listened, and prayed and cried, the more in love I have become with our fractured, yet slowly healing church family.

We are no longer stalled like hopeless captives "by the rivers of Babylon, weeping and longing for Zion" (Psalm 137:1). Oh, tears are still shed and tension still surfaces, but our once stagnant church is finally up and moving forward. Our pilgrimage is to somewhere far riskier and something far holier than we've ever known. We are becoming what Dan Boone describes as "a household of travelers" who are gradually learning that, regardless of our differences, we really do need each other.

Many established multigenerational congregations are on a similar journey. The oppression we face is not only from a loss of cultural or political power on the outside, but a loss of spiritual power on the inside. Our greatest nemesis is not the dark powers running our world, but a fear and defensiveness that stifle pure love within the family. The "fiery ordeals taking place among us" are sometimes of our own making. They flare up whenever sin and selfishness are not confronted and whenever believers allow differences to breed ongoing distrust and resentment.

Dan rightly asserts Christians must "ground ourselves in a Biblical theology of suffering." Anyone who sincerely follows Jesus will endure trials. Our struggles, however, are not meant to be despised or wasted. 1 Peter describes them as valuable tests to reveal the genuineness of our faith and tools of refinement. I believe Christ's Body also needs grounding in a theology of "mutual suffering." I long for the day when our beloved flock embodies the sacrificial call of Paul. "If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy" (1 Corinthians 12:26). To share each other's suffering and joy, however, requires that we love each other.

As Rueben Welch puts it,
 “Christians are not brought together
 because they like each other,
 but because they share a common life in Jesus
 and are faced with the task
 of learning how to love each other
 as members of the family . . .

What brings us together is not
 our mutualities and congenialities
 and common interests and hobbies.
 It is not our mutual esteem
 nor our happy hormones –
 It is our blood ties,
 our common name
 and our common commitment –
 it’s our parentage,
 and our heritage
 and our bloodline
 and our life”
 (Welch, *We Really Do Need Each Other*, 31).

This shared identity emerges in intentional relationships that take time to build and daily grace to sustain. How is it that once thriving congregations could divide over what to sing, how to vote or who to accept or not accept into the fellowship? Could it be that some of the time we focused on building facilities and programs could have been focused on building a people who fervently pray, hunger for wisdom and refuse to give Satan a foothold. Scripture compels us to continually learn how to love each other. That means being willing to listen, to forgive and seek forgiveness and to unite in a common call to make disciples.

Dan describes the Church being increasingly marginalized by a culture that labels us intolerant and, worse yet, irrelevant. We have sadly witnessed, however, a similar marginalization can exist within our congregations. It surfaces whenever:

- Curt comments are made about the music of younger believers,
- Senior adults are labeled as whiners whose gifts and hymns are no longer needed,
- Particular groups are targeted above others to reach for Christ, or,
- Unchristlike posts about people with differing views show up on our Facebook pages.

Without intentional efforts to understand and bridge the gender, generational, political, cultural or doctrinal gaps between us, God’s very own can split up and even fear each other. I’ll never forget one senior admitting, “I’d talk with a teen. I just don’t know how to begin. We have nothing in common.”

But WE DO have Someone and something in common. We have Jesus Christ. His shared life and love empowers us to take the first step, introduce ourselves and begin the

conversation. We don't need designated greeters for that. We need hospitality that goes way beyond tolerating to genuinely caring for each other and for all.

Peter writes, "Honor everyone" (1 Peter 2:17a). That includes those with whom we work and share our neighborhoods, our common causes and interests. I appreciate Dan's call for a theology of creation that connects our daily work to our witness. Indeed, Christians are to unashamedly live our faith wherever we are. That may mean modeling integrity when others cut corners, standing up for a maligned friend or giving a stressed boss the benefit of the doubt. It may mean picking up the trash bin, offering rides or meals to neighbors in need. It is being there, exposing all we know (or are getting to know) to a faith worth having. Funny thing. It is often easier to honor those outside the Body, than those inside. Note that right after Peter exhorts his readers to honor everyone, he reminds them to "love the family of believers" (1 Peter 2:17b).

Why should Christians be reminded to love each other? Shouldn't care for our brothers and sisters come naturally? Sure, as naturally as siblings who know each other well enough to press each other's buttons. Lingering conflicts and unmet expectations have a way of taking their toll. And pretty soon, as Dan noted, fellow sojourners begin to defect, taking their spiritual and financial gifts with them. Tragically, many who leave do not seek fellowship elsewhere. Those who do, usually wind up in churches with music, messages and people more suitable to their tastes. I suppose there is nothing really wrong with finding the "right fit." Sweet synergy arises when believers are on the same page. It is a common trait of many new congregations. They may have to rent chairs and a local gym for worship, but they are free of past heartbreaks and have little but possibilities before them.

I envy that. Some days I would gladly trade our impressive sanctuary and mortgage bills for the chance to start over from scratch. I may crave less hassle, but I also know an older congregation's differences can be catalysts for holy hunger. It takes extra compassion and fresh grace to straddle the gaps. Who else but Jesus could replace each bitter memory with renewed hope? Who else but Jesus could create the safe space for difficult topics to be discussed with mutual care and respect? Who else but Jesus could build awareness of our own flaws and quirks that need his transforming touch? Who else but Jesus could thrust battle weary saints into the mess of his love starved world? And why not! We know the sting of our own self-inflicted wounds. And this awareness presses us into God for more grace, and more grace, and more grace to embody for the world and each other holy oneness. You can rarely program this level of love. It erupts out of a corporate yearning to please our gracious Lord. And, praise God, I'm seeing it:

- In Patti who has launched a backpack drive to help 250 local foster kids,
- In Ellen who distributes Bibles and *The Jesus Film* in Vietnamese to local nail salons,
- In Harry who turned his backyard into a neighborhood community garden,
- In 14 year old Luke who weekly bowls with his disabled buddy Ned,
- In three women who weekly intercede for the needs on our youth group prayer board (with permission of course), and,
- In Jack who leads worship in his favorite shorts beside Charlie in his suit and tie.

Instead of despising or ignoring diversity, we have begun to embrace it. God is replacing an unspoken sense of entitlement based on years served, money given and turf claimed with inclusive servanthood. Mindful of our personal need for mercy, we wash each other's feet as we step out to serve the world.

Our disciple-making mission remains unpredictable and, at times, scary. Dan's paper exquisitely describes the oppression, marginalization, fallout and assimilation we are up against. Still, bolstered by God's ability to heal his own, we offer encouragement to all. We do not have to wait until our congregations are totally renewed. Healing often happens as we get about the business of being Christ's light everywhere. Our impact, however, is greatly enhanced as we forgive and love the Body for which Jesus gave himself and died.

P. S. Our once silent foyer is now filled with the laughter and sweet conversation of new and old friends who refuse to leave.

Welch, Reuben, *We Really Do Need Each Other*, (Nashville: Impact Books, 1973), 31.