

## Falling Out of the Church Window | BY KENT HANSEN

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*On the Saturday night, when we gathered for the breaking of the bread, Paul, who was to leave the next day, addressed the congregation and went on speaking until midnight. Now there were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were assembled, and a young man named Eutychus, who was sitting on the window ledge, grew more and more drowsy as Paul went on talking, until, completely overcome by sleep, he fell from the third story to the ground, and was picked up—dead. Paul went down, threw himself upon him, and clasped him in his arms. "Do not distress yourselves," he said to them, "He is alive." He then went upstairs, broke bread, and ate, and after much conversation, which lasted until dawn, he departed. And they took the boy home, greatly relieved that he was alive (Acts 20:7–12, REB).*

**T**his story is best known as a cautionary tale about long-winded preaching, and a description of one of the miraculous signs and wonders that accompanied the power of the Holy Spirit in the early Christian church. I think it speaks a much deeper message to the contemporary church.

A young man sits on the window ledge of the church, halfway in and halfway out. What brings him to that position? Apparently, that's where he has followed his family and friends, but there isn't much attraction in the message; he can't relate to it and is bored. The preaching lulls him to sleep. He falls out of the church and dies.

A concerned embrace revives him. Fellowship, a meal, and conversation renew him. He returns home with new life.

I know a lot of young men and women like Eutychus. In fact, I've been Eutychus—born into a Christian family;

brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; attended church and church school; listened to thousands of sermons, homilies, and devotional talks. There is a common but false premise in the circles in which I grew up: that just showing up and listening is going to bestow citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, along with a godly spouse, good-looking kids, perfect job, and white picket fence, here on earth. When that doesn't prove true, accusations fly about who and what has gone wrong.

I have worked with Christian schools, colleges, and universities for thirty years, and never cease to be bemused at the projected blame of parents, teachers, and denominational leaders when young people walk out the door at graduation and leave the church. Judgments issue forth in blasts of self-righteous invective:

"It's the parents' fault. There is a failure of devotion in the home and a lack of support for the school!"

"The church has failed to keep up with the times. The message lacks a vital nexus of relevance to the challenges and enticements of contemporary society!"

"The schools betrayed us. Faithlessness and cynicism in the classroom destroy the beliefs of our youth!"

"You don't want these young people to think for themselves. All we've done here is raise legitimate questions and give them some exposure to what the world is really like. It's up to them to find the answers for themselves!"

Each of these statements can have factual merit, but they also carry a Christ-denying arrogance that salvation depends on human performance. The best that parents, teachers, and pastors can do is to plant the seed. Only God can give the growth (1 Cor. 3:7). It makes sacred sense, then, to focus on the crucified Christ (John 12:32, 1 Cor. 2:2, Gal. 6:14) in our own devotions and in where we point the youth, but pride keeps us fighting rather than focusing. Stunningly and disgustingly, we too often

close our hymnbooks and go right back to our senseless arguments of comparative fault. Meanwhile, more and more young people fall off the ledge and go missing.

**E**ach one of us has a free choice to go with Christ or to pursue our own path. Whenever we invite someone to join us in commitment to Christ, they look at us as an example of what they will become if they accept the invitation.

If what is observed is an angry, stubborn, hair-splitting debater, the invitation will, quite likely, receive a pass. If it doesn't, this most likely means that the proselyte shares a pathology with the proselytizer. Then the question is whether the conversion is to the life of Christ or to a human point of view.

I have many friends who have just given up on the faith and doctrines learned in their childhood. Many of these reprobates actually believe that the teaching is correct, but they lose hope in the face of its harsh application and demands for perfect performance. They are confused and disheartened. They quit and drop out in despair. For the most part, they don't move on to any other faith community. They just suppress the spiritual aspect of their life, unwilling to live their faith as their rule of life.

I know some who believe they have it spiritually made because they are doing the "right" things with the "right" people and avoiding all the "wrong" things with the "wrong" people. My basic question for them is this: If you are so sure of your righteousness, why are you angry and miserable toward everyone else whenever two or three of you of like mind are gathered together?

There is a larger "safety-in-numbers" crowd comprised of individuals who aren't as sure about where they stand on the spectrum of absolute right and wrong. They find comfort in showing up at the same time and doing the same thing as their peers, without giving much thought to the deeper implications of what God may want for or from them (compare with Gal. 6:12–13).

Some of us (I learn about more all the time) are hungry for more than we've been getting. We are criticized for dissatisfaction with the status quo by those who profit from control of the religious franchise. We are disdained as "too serious" and "too religious" by the safety-in-numbers crowd. We don't want to fight over what it means to follow Christ, because it really doesn't matter to us what

someone else thinks about that. Scripture is our compass, and prayer is our desired means of communication.

There is an increasing pressure in my heart from the Holy Spirit. A one-day-a-week, set-piece Christianity expressed in glib platitudes doesn't cut it. I see people hanging on for dear life to the window ledges of the church, and falling when their strength gives out because they aren't offered anything compelling enough to bring them into the center. No one extends a hand of rescue when they are teetering on the edge.

My heart burns with desire to say to them, "Wait, wait, don't give up on Jesus, who has never given up on you. Whatever you have heard, he is bigger, better, and more demanding than that, and his burning passion is for you. I am pleading with you—don't settle for anything or anyone else. Let's talk." It takes time and relationship-building to bring someone back from that window ledge. This takes patience and substance that are rarely devoted to the challenge.

Parents bring their wayward children to hear me speak. Spouses drag their husbands into my sermons, hoping that this Christian lawyer will say something that will turn everything around. They do it with preachers and evangelists too. Folks, it's just not realistic to hang the hope of salvation and the godly life on a person or an institution, let alone a sermon. This breeds the cult of personality, "lone ranger" religion, or the heresy of corporate salvation.

One of the real disappointments that I know as a Christian is that our culture is so accepting of the status quo, and devotes so little thought to the implications of the great gift of our salvation, reflected in the way that we live and relate to each other. Why do we settle for so little?

When Jesus said, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), he was speaking in the plural. He was not talking about one man, one woman, or one-day-a-week religion. He condemned "hired hand" religion as leaving the flock open to scattering under attack. He proclaimed the benefits of life in community: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). Only engagement in community will fulfill the life that Jesus gives us.

Jesus picked twelve persons as disciples to change the whole world. The best educational theory says that knowledge transmits best in a ratio of somewhere between one to one and one to thirty. So by what mad-

ness does modern Christianity celebrate a one-to-three-thousand ratio as a success through the “preaching” model?

Once a week, most of us go to church in anonymity, then return to our private lives for the next six and a half days. We are exhorted to do more, but we think, “Who has the time?” But what is that person going through who sits next to us on the pew, kneels in front of us, or passes by us in the foyer? What is breaking their heart, or giving them new hope and delight?

How will we ever know, and how can we ever help, when we are content to sit lined up in rows, looking at the backs of those sitting in front of us? Do we not know and fear that many modern-day Eutychuses are not coming in off the ledge, but instead are falling asleep and dropping out the window to their spiritual death because the old ways of “show up, sit down, and shut up” are not engaging them?

If Jesus came to give us life and we accept it, then we need to live. We can’t sleepwalk through the kingdom. We need to be alert and responsive to what’s around us.

Participating in community, I was asked to deliver the sermon for my twentieth anniversary homecoming at the Christian high school that I attended. What could a lawyer say to these people that would be of spiritual value? I simply gave my personal testimony and urged people to open up to the possibilities of God in their everyday lives. The response overwhelmed me. One couple spoke to me with such obvious spiritual pain that it haunts me still. They had driven 1,800 miles for the weekend from their home in another state. I sent them a note of encouragement the following week. Here is what they wrote in response:

*We struggle daily. Our [professional] practice has consumed us. We are so exhausted that we collapse the day we go to church and don't even feel sociable. We have no time for Bible studies even though there are requests. I feel like a dry well—like the clouds that blow over this dry part of our state only to keep going, leaving us parched and desolate. With that*

*state of mind we went to alumni weekend, and you can see why your sermon was meaningful.*

*We are suffering from shell shock after being here for sixteen years. Our church school is closed, and our membership all in terrible need of being infused with life. We are tired of playing “bazooka quote” in Bible class and afraid of bringing anyone to church where they get blasted and discouraged.*

Too many souls dry up like this and fade away in spiritual aridity, but it doesn’t have to be that way. We know that the first Christians lived their lives together and shared their material possessions with each other “as any had need,” says Luke. They spent their days together going to the temple for worship and visiting each other’s homes for fellowship, meal-sharing and praising God “with glad and generous hearts,” and their community grew exponentially (Acts 2:44–47).

The letter to the Hebrews says that the assurance we have of our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ grants us access to a close and intimate relationship with a God who is faithful to us. This confidence, we are told, gives us the freedom to stir each other to love and good deeds, and that’s why we meet together—to encourage each other. We need to do more of this as time grows short and the world deteriorates in stress (Heb. 10:19–25).

The purpose of our gathering together is to encourage each other. Eutychus came to life when he was embraced, held close, prayed for, fed, and engaged in conversation.

Am I taking license with this incident in Acts? Absolutely! I take this license from Paul in 2 Cor. 5 when he says Christ, in love, died for us all and was raised so we could live fresh and free as new creations, without the need to build ourselves up by criticizing the frail humanity of others. Encouragement and reconciliation are the stuff of hands-on religion, requiring engagement rather than passive listening.

There is always a danger that one of us, worn and weary with the struggles of living, will drift to the edge of the congregation, fall

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asleep and tumble out the window. The resulting injury can leave us in chronic spiritual pain, spiritually paralyze us or deaden our spirits. What we all need and want from our community is a brother or sister who will come to our aid, embrace us in our brokenness, bring us back to life in fellowship, share a meal with us, converse in encouragement and help us home in healing grace.

**W**hy isn't there more of such ministry? Because whatever our lip service, there are pitiful few of us who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness to the exclusion of self (Matt 6:33). What does that "seeking first" require of us?

It requires our commitment of body, soul and spirit to the achievement of community in the bond of Christ. It requires us to unclench our spiritual fists and jaws and unfold our arms in mutual submission to the wisdom of Christ revealed in the Word. It demands that we converse in the mutual upbuilding of love and not talk at and past each other in spiritual "one-upmanship." It means that we must sacrifice our competitive desire to score points to the greater goal of winning a brother or sister in love.

Seeking first the kingdom of God requires each of us to plant and root our lives in Christ alone while generously sharing the fruits of our growth in Christ with the others in our community. At the same time, our quest for the kingdom of God and his righteousness calls us to resist the temptation to shape our faith community in our own image, and insists on transparent fidelity to the Word of God without reservation or condition. Grace, the applied righteousness of God, requires that we develop an alert mind and heart for the mercies of our heavenly Father who, Jesus says, "is kind to the ungrateful and evil" (Luke 6:33).

Hardest, but most important of all, community requires us to accept on trust that Christ equally loves both us and those who irritate us most, so that our hearts become open and capacious for the lost and the damaged. God's express intention is that repentance be obtained through kindness, forbearance and patience (Rom. 2:4). Christ demonstrated this spirit when he prayed for a Judas who betrayed him; dined with sinners; washed feet that in a matter of hours would run away from him; reached out to a Peter who denied him; loved a James and a John who misrepresented him; and forgave his murderers.

We are so impatient with the broken, the shameful, and the stubborn. It is tempting to tidy up the community by the euthanasia of legalistic condemnation. "Out of sight, out of mind," the saying goes. But revival is a stirring to life, not a process of elimination. Sanctification is a fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit, not an obstacle course for ascetics.

We have a calling to patience expressed in the very autobiography of the Apostle Paul himself: "I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Tim. 1:16–17). In receiving "the utmost patience" from Christ, Paul found a rule for successful living in the fellowship of believers, which he shared with the Colossians, in Col 3:12–17. Everything Paul describes is meant to contend with the threats and ravages of sin. There is brokenness, meanness, arrogance, pride, and impatience at work in the world. So we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, all found in the robe of righteousness that Christ places on us (Isa. 61:10).

We have frictions and grievances, but we are called to forgiveness. We have differences and divisions, but we are asked to drape ourselves together in the silken folds of love. We have doubts and resentments, but we can submit our issues to the rule of the peace of Christ in our hearts, which umpires all disputes in the body of Christ.

If selfishness is robbing us of joy, we can count our blessings in thankfulness. When we are famished, exhausted, angry and lonely, we can let the word of Christ fill us with the truth that we are loved. We can sharpen each other against complacency with the wisdom of the word applied to the realities of life together, and refocus on Christ in musical worship.

All of these things are done with Christ and for Christ. This is the positive Christian life that Paul is talking about, lived out in relationship. It is the kind of engaged, growing life that draws us together because we are looking only to Christ. It is neither simplistic nor unrealistic.

The proud and critical naysayers who rebuke us that a life like this will only end in disappointment are the real rebels against the reign of Christ. Any time we seek our own strength as a hedge against the uncertainties of love within our community, we express an odious mistrust of the Savior. God is love, and we love because he first loved us. If we can't accept and live in that truth, the Apostle John says, then we prove we don't know God (1 John 4:7).

I write this as a man blessed by a fellowship of encouragement and accountability that keeps me away from the window ledge. It begins each morning with prayer and study of the Word. As we reach the challenges of midday, the streams of personal devotion join in a flow of grace running through my home and my law offices. Colleagues and friends who know each other's personal and professional challenges and weaknesses join in prayer and encouragement.

If need be, within five minutes a dozen or more of us can join in intercession, called by pager, cell phone, and email. Sometimes we gather for prayer and worship, not because anyone tells us to do so, but because it is the pressing desire of our heart. The point, as one of my colleagues says, is "to walk through each day holding hands with Jesus."

This is made more difficult for many of us because we work in faith-based settings where religious programming is de rigueur, and spontaneous religious expression can be viewed with suspicion. What is it if it can't be motivated, trained, reduced to policy, incentivized, and assessed? This is a question that I've encountered more than once, and rises out of pride of status and fear of the unknown. Nothing freezes the corporate heart quite like Jesus' observation that "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

Love is irrepressible, however, and like flowing water it finds its own level. So we who know that we are loved find each other in the ways that the body of Christ has always grown—growing with a growth that comes from God alone (Col. 2:19).

I recently gave the morning devotionals at a camp meeting. After one session, an attractive thirty-something woman approached me. "Where did you get what you talk about?"

"You mean God loving us and not quitting on us no matter what?"

"Yes."

"Out of my experience," I told her. "Years ago, God connected with me on an airline flight

and the Word came alive for me and that Word was that God loved me. Nothing has been the same since."

"I know what you mean," she said. "I wandered far away from God. My life was going nowhere."

"The Holy Spirit impressed me to go to church one morning," she continued. "I didn't want to go, but the Spirit kept pressing me. I sat through the class study and it was the same as I remembered it—so-so.

"I wanted to leave and was getting ready to go. Then an older woman sat down next to me. She talked to me kindly and even reached in her purse and showed me a picture of her son who had died in the Vietnam War. She took my hand in hers and held it. I kept thinking that I should go, but she held my hand clear through the service. I don't remember a thing about the sermon that day. But when I left I knew that God loved me and I haven't forgotten since."

The older woman's handclasp revived the young woman to the vibrant glow of eternal life, just as Paul's embrace brought Eutychus back to life in the little community of Ephesian believers. The kingdom of God is always and ever a "hands-on reality."

Paul moved on after that night, but he sent the Ephesians a letter that ended with these words: "Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 6:23–24). We couldn't have a better prayer for our community of faith. ■

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