

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By Pastor Blake Shaw

Thus, the broken hearts of people like Tony and Janice was understandable when Pastor John announced his resignation from the pastorate, due to his failure to live out the standards of leadership, as stated in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. There was hurt, sorrow, and confusion that followed. Tony sat in silence for an hour after the service wondering about the situation. He loved the humility and submission demonstrated by Pastor John in stepping forward to admit to his failure and take the tough step of resigning. But Tony described himself as, “devastated.” As the following week unfolded, Tony began to grasp the heart of the problem. In his words, “We compromised. We compromised Scripture when it came to qualifications for an elder. We then began to build the church around a person—a personality, but it wasn’t the person of Christ. We elevated our brother to a pedestal that no man should ever be put on. We are all frail, sinful people. We did him a disservice perhaps by not reigning in the growth. When people came to our church from other good churches, we should have sent them back. The fast growth, the popularity of the church, the praise of man sent us on a fast track to problems. Sadly, John was in a prime position to experience the horrendous nature of what the flesh does to a man when things are successful.”

Mission Fortnight: The Coke Bottle of Blame

by Tim Sieges

I have to admit, watching movies with me isn’t always fun. You’re probably thinking my rich and insightful commentary would only enhance one’s viewing pleasure. Strangely, Denise says that my critiques of a film’s depiction of human behavior and historical accuracy can be annoying. She often responds to my observations about the storyline’s authenticity and realism with, “I know it’s not accurate. It’s fiction. It’s just entertainment. Stop over thinking it.” Me, overthink something? When has that ever happened?

This dynamic came up recently as we watched the 1980’s comedy *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. If you aren’t familiar with the film, the mock documentary format portrays the Eden-like existence of a group of African tribesmen. According to the narrator, the people are “the most contented people in the world. They have no crime, no punishment, no violence, no laws, no police, judges, rulers or bosses. They believe that the gods put only good and useful things on the earth for them to use.” Their idyllic existence is compromised when a Coke bottle drops into their community from a passing airplane. For the first time, the harmonious group experiences competitive disharmony and violence surrounding the bottle. The solution is obvious. Get rid of the evil bottle and the group will return to its former peace. Spoiler Alert: That’s exactly what happens.

I confess I had one of those critical moments during the opening scenes of the movie. Even though the story is fiction and for entertainment purposes only (as per Denise’s intervention), the premise that drives the plot illustrates several common but troubling mis-truths. Check it out: The people are happy and content. No fighting. No misbehavior. Their simple polytheistic religion is working for them beautifully. A Coke bottle enters and brings violence, estranged relationships and a crisis of faith...hence the title. The storyline keeps us engaged because on some level we believe that well-timed outside factors can explain and excuse why we act badly. The logic leads us to seek ways to remove the Coke bottles of our discontent at the expense of dealing with the real problems that reside in our hearts.

Blaming something or someone other than ourselves is deeply imbedded in our souls. For many of us, the speed of sound or light is eclipsed by the speed with which we can excuse ourselves for our failures. Consider the following common life excuses: How many times have you heard people explain their unwillingness to attend church as the natural result of being forced to go as children? Or how often does someone blame his/her overeating on being made to “clean your plate” as a child? Both of these explanations usually go

This begs the question for you and me: Are we following any person in an unhealthy way? Don’t misunderstand what I’m trying to say with this article. I’m not saying that following a leader is wrong. I’m not saying that submission to those in authority is wrong. I’m not saying that having respect and appreciating those in leadership is outside of the Biblical standards. What I am saying is that following leaders based upon the wrong standards is wrong. Following someone blindly is wrong. Following someone with wrong motivations is wrong. Following someone where your loyalty to that person supersedes your loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Word is wrong. Jesus told His men, “Follow Me.” The apostle Paul tells people to follow him but he qualifies his statement when he adds, “as I follow Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1). Christ calls us to follow Him exclusively. He is the standard, which is exactly what Paul makes clear in his statement in I Corinthians 11.

My friends, as we head into a new school year, I want to encourage you to follow Christ. Sure, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to follow people but specialize in being a follower of the only perfect person. Put Him on the pedestal. You’ll be okay for He is the one who never falls.

unchallenged because they intuitively make sense. But think about it for a minute: Being forced to go to church when people don’t want to makes them hate church...but being forced to eat food they don’t want to makes people love food too much? I think I get it. It’s wrong but I get it.

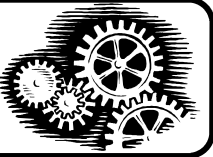
We blame as naturally as we breathe. Read Genesis chapter 3 and you’ll see the first instance of sin driven blame. Adam and Eve disobey God’s clear directive about the forbidden fruit. When confronted about their sin, Adam blames Eve (and God) while Eve blames the Serpent. Notice that God isn’t swayed. Our spontaneous blame defense doesn’t neutralize the consequences. When Bud was young he sometimes brought home less than stellar report cards. The excuses would begin immediately. I would hold up his grade card and check to see if the excuses were moving his grades up. Nope. The same bad grades remained. I would ask him to try another excuse. Blame the teachers and the school and the football coach and your Dad’s unreasonably high expectations. Did those D’s morph into A’s? Not surprisingly, they never did.

I believe the answer lies in telling myself the truth about who I am and the brokenness that lies in my soul. Truth #1: Coke bottles or unsympathetic people do not make me do wrong. I carry around an active dead man who is capable of all sorts of mischief. Truth #2. Left to myself, I will self-destruct rather than self-actualize. Really, even alone on a deserted island I will cause problems. Truth #3. My only hope for confronting that broken dead part of me is faith in Christ. Romans 3:23-26 sets the record straight: “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glory. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He Himself is fair and just, and He declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus.” And while you’ve got your Bible open to Romans, notice these two phrases in 1:18-2:11: “so that men are without excuse” and “therefore you have no excuse.” Believe it. Let go of the excuses. Take a look in the mirror instead. It ain’t pretty.

Well, shucks...have an awesome fortnight. It only comes around twice a month. There is no excuse for not enjoying it. Really. Zero excuses.

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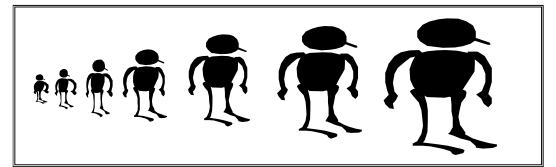
FOOD FOR THOUGHT BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

The Perils of Man-following

Are you a follower of men (people)? What I mean by that is: Do you tend to find yourself following people without giving thought to where you are headed, who or what you have left behind, or the character of the one whom you are following? This issue of being a “Man-follower” has been soaking in my mind for quite some time following a situation last year with some friends of mine and has sat dormant in the articles written column for quite some time. The story, though names and some details have been changed, is commonly repeated and will resonate with what we understand from the times in which we live. The issue should be of concern for all of us. The wrong kind of “Man-following” can be costly. History verifies that point.

To begin, let me say that our world obviously has many leaders which implies that there are followers. If someone one claims to be a leader, yet no one is following him, his claim is empty. I realize that order and structure in our world is a necessity. God is a God of order (I Corinthians 14), and thus, there is structure and leadership. Life within this sinned world requires governance. God has ordained it to be so. Even within the family structure there is God-ordained leadership and in the church the same is true as well. So, in a sense, we are set up to follow people. Some people lead. Others follow. So leadership and followership is really not the issue. Jesus Himself chose and trained 12 men to be leaders. It is crucial to establish at the start that leadership, order, structure, or governing is not wrong, and submission to God-established leadership is a biblical directive. This article is not so much about structure, and leadership, and submission to those in leadership. It’s more so about the lack of discernment that we as people have that leads us to follow others—blindly. This article is more about following others to the point that when the one being followed takes a tumble off of the human-developed pedestal, devastation soon follows. You see, we humans are a funny lot. We have a tendency to follow a personality, or follow the crowd, or follow leaders that seem to be on the cutting edge, ones who are visionary, aggressive, dynamic, and not stuck in the ways of yesteryear. We tend to follow individuals who seem to be confidently going some place in life. One of the tragedies in the church of my generation and younger generations is that we have arrogantly conveyed to the older generation that we have something new and more innovative that is better, much better, than what used to be. And so, in our arrogance, we live a transient church life, bouncing from church to church, following the next best leader or the next best philosophy of ministry or the next best worship band. Such was the experience of my friend Tony.

Tony and his wife Janice are brokenhearted. Two years prior they had moved to a large metropolitan area as Tony began a new job. Settling in they began a search for a church fellowship to be involved in. Soon they found the one they called, “home.” Tony described their church as one of three or four churches within 25 minutes of their home, all of which they had visited and had considered being involved in. Tony noted that each of the churches had strengths and weaknesses. The first one they visited was, to use Tony’s words, “high energy, had an awesome band, very nice facility, very nice people, and what appeared to be a genuine love to reach their community for Christ.” Tony and Janice both investigated the church thoroughly and both came to the conclusion that



for all of the strengths the church had, there was a corresponding weakness. They both knew that being involved in this church would shrivel them up spiritually. They knew that the theological shallowness would lead them to spiritual starvation. They also learned that this church didn’t practice obedience to Matthew 18’s directives for how to restore a sinning brother. A second church they visited was another large church which clearly had a commitment to sound Bible teaching, excellent kids’ ministry, a solid youth and college ministry, and an amazing missions’ program. Both Tony and Janice looked long and hard at this church, visiting several weeks before deciding to visit other churches before settling down. Janice loved most of what she saw at this church but she didn’t care for the music and she felt that “everything seemed staged.” As she explained it, “Everything seems to be perfect there. From the music, to the sermon, to the way the whole service flows. It felt cold, staged, and distancy-impersonal.” So she and Tony visited two more churches. The third church was a church in a particular denomination that Tony had a bad experience with back in his college days so he was not real interested but went because Janice, having grown up in this particular denomination, thought it would be appropriate to give this church a chance. Last they visited the church they ended up settling in. When they visited this fourth church, they both walked out with similar thoughts, “I think this is where we should plant ourselves and make this our church home.”

What gripped both of them was the friendliness of the people, the style of worship—modern, but with depth, the teaching pastor and how “Pastor John” taught the Word of God, and then the incredible vision that John and the leaders seemed to have for their church family. Tony is a visionary person so the pastor’s vision resonated with him. You see, 15 years prior, Pastor John, fresh out of seminary brought his excitement, his vision, his leadership skills and his ability to teach God’s Word to this once small and dying church. John was a perfect fit for the church and within five years the church had grown from 50 to 300 people. Soon, the church initiated a building project to build a bigger building. People began to drive 1-2 hours just to be at their church services. Tony struggled with what he called, “an unfortunate compromise with Scripture” that this church had as they had a woman serving as an elder. But all things considered, the church was a solid church and they felt that they could live with the compromise. The strengths outweighed the weaknesses. And so, for almost two years, Tony and Janice had been an active part of the church fellowship. They loved it. Janice had become involved in the women’s ministry and Tony was being groomed by Pastor John to eventually serve as an elder.

Tony had one struggle that pestered at his mind. It turned out to be the fatal flaw within the church. Tony noticed that the church was built too much around a person. In this case, Pastor John. That issue is nothing new because many churches are built up around a pastor. That’s often the nature of leadership and followership. It’s way too easy for “sheeple” to gravitate towards following someone like the lead pastor, especially given that history we know of many examples of people in leadership and people following those leaders.

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Q&A with Pastor Blake Shaw

Question: The question for this edition of the COG is a compilation of several questions put forward to me over the past year: Why is transparency lacking at Grace?



Answer:

Transparency! Who hasn't heard this word bantered about over the past six years or so? Ever since our president proclaimed that his cabinet would be the most transparent cabinet in history, the concept of "transparency" seems to have taken on a new life. But forget politics. Let's talk about church life, for it is in the church that the proverbial drum of transparency continues to be beat. Because it continues to be pushed to the forefront of our minds, perhaps it is only appropriate to take some time to understand the concept and to develop a biblical framework for which we can practice transparency in a way that is more about God's glory than it is about any of us simply feeling like we are connected to people.

Transparency is defined by Webster as: "fine or sheer enough to be seen through; free from pretense or deceit; easily detected or seen through; readily understood; characterized by visibility or accessibility of information especially concerning business practices." It seems that when someone is asking for transparency, elements of these definitions definitely apply. So we have to answer some questions about this topic of transparency. For example, "Is there a biblical basis for it?" "What are some potential guidelines needed for transparency?" "Should leaders in a church have the same level of transparency as those who are not in leadership?" Or along the same lines, "Should leaders be equally transparent with all people or not?" "What are the land-mines one has to avoid when living a transparent life?" And for those who constantly call for transparency from other people, "What is the desired goal in being transparent?" Let's try to answer some of these questions.

First of all, one might want to know if there is a biblical basis for the concept of "transparency". Immediately our minds probably go to a variety of passages that would seem to indicate that the godly person would definitely want to be "free from pretense or deceit" correct? And it would seem that most people want to be readily understood. Biblically, First John 1 seems to indicate that we as believers should be characterized by walking in the light. As we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another. I John 1 helps us see that some level of transparency is appropriate. Walking in the light would seem to imply that there is nothing hidden. We are open, honest, and forthright about who we are. And because of the honesty in our walk we have a fellowship around the person of Jesus Christ, and the corresponding forgiveness that we have in Him. Biblically, it seems that Paul himself practiced a level of transparency. We see in I Thessalonians 2:8 that Paul not only imparted the gospel to the believers in Thessalonica, he also imparted his own life as well. There is no description of what that entails but if we look at statements like I Timothy 1:15 and Romans 7:13-25, it becomes abundantly clear that Paul was open and honest about the battles with the flesh. We also see in Acts 20 that Paul had a very close relationship with the elders at the church in Ephesus, made obvious by the fact that there was great emotion when Paul said his

last goodbye to the men with whom he met. From the pages of the Old Testament, more specifically, the Psalms, we get a glimpse of transparency from many of the song writers. The psalms are often very raw in the emotions and forthrightness in which the authors write. And James, in the New Testament, when writing about those who are sick—that is—those who are spiritually worn down and discouraged to the point of weakness, he tells the believers to confess their sins to one another and pray for one another (James 5:16). That is certainly transparency. But please note, it doesn't say confess other people's sins to one another. In other words, if I were to practice James 5:16, I wouldn't be confessing the sins of my wife or children, even if I would like people to pray for them. Sometimes there is this unfortunate pressure by some for a pastor to open up about a struggle his kids or wife are having. But frankly, I am not convinced that the pulpit is the place for a pastor to seek prayer for members of his family who are struggling. In fact, I'm not convinced that a pastor should be sharing with a group of people or individuals about the struggles his family members are having unless the recipient can play a role in perhaps helping with the situation. Having said that, however, there does seem to be a biblical basis for transparency as broadly defined.

Recently a friend asked, "But what about those in leadership. Should leaders in a church have the same level of transparency with all people?" I want to answer this question in this edition and then pick up on this subject of transparency next time as well. When speaking of transparency as being free from deceit, the obvious and biblical answer to this question is a resounding, "Yes!" Right? But that is not always what people have in mind when they start demanding or requesting that a leader, the pastor or some elder, become more transparent. What many people have in mind when they ask that the pastor be more transparent is that they want him to share more of his struggles from the pulpit or in some group setting. They want to know that he is real, or so they say. But with such transparency, the pulpit might not always be the wisest place for a pastor to be transparent.

There are a couple of reasons why: 1) Not everyone who sits in the church service has a care and concern for the teaching pastor. Sure, many people in a church appreciate their pastor and many might even love the Bible teaching, but we are foolish to think that everyone who sits in a pew loves, cares for, respects, and really wants what is best for the guy doing the teaching. 2) The church service is not about the pastor, it's about God. If someone leaves a service and what they remember most is how the pastor struggles with some issue, then the church service has become a man-centered service. The church service isn't about the pastor. It isn't about you. It isn't about me. It's about our great God. Wisdom might lead the pastor to a different approach and that might be that his transparency might be better served in smaller groups and/or one-on-one discipleship relationships. Regardless of where the transparency takes place, it can, in any situation, come back to bite a guy. Let me tell you of a situation:

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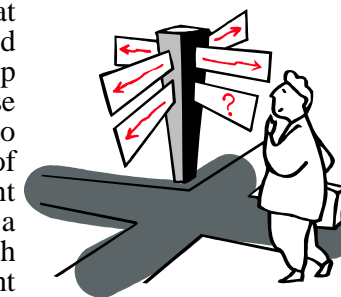
Q&A continued...

Pastor William has been a friend for a couple of decades, going all the way back to Bible College days. We had numerous classes together and played ball together and spent a lot of time debating theological issues. William is now in his sixth church, now serving as an Associate Pastor, as opposed to the senior pastor position. Transparency has been the downfall for him in every church he has been in. William is worn down from the many battles—yes—battles in the church. Even the sound of that sounds odd, out-of-place, so wrong. Battles in the church? Huh? William's most recent battle came to an end after a moment of transparency when he shared his heart with a fellow board

member as they enjoyed a cup of coffee at Panera Bread. William related to this supposed friend that he had experienced some deep discouragement in recent months, and in those times of discouragement, had given thought to a change in occupation. Ah, that moment of simple transparency—who would have thought that such a simple moment of honesty with a trusted friend, would create such a stir. But oh it did. Within weeks, William's transparent confession of discouragement and thoughts of a change in occupation spread. The board member, meaning no ill-will, shared with his flock group that Pastor William had fought discouragement and had thought about a different occupation. Word spread that William didn't want to be a pastor anymore. In typical fashion the story was tweaked and twisted and reshaped and formed in many different ways. Phone calls began to come to William asking about why he didn't like ministry, why he couldn't stand a certain group of people in the church, etc. William tried to clean up the mess. Well-meaning folks began to call his wife to offer counsel, while others cornered William's teenage son and daughter seeking to find out what the real issues were for their father's struggles. Others still, functioning like Job's counselors, made the assumption that William had some private sin in his life. At some point, William decided to tender his resignation. A friend serving as a senior pastor in a church in another state contacted him to see if William would be willing to serve as an Associate Pastor in a small but growing church. William jumped at the chance to serve in a role other than a Senior pastor. William tells of how in each of his first five churches, he worked hard to build relationships, to relate to people, using the pulpit as an opportunity, not only to teach verse-by-verse through Scripture, but to also share his life, his struggles, etc. Each time, his transparency was used against him. Today, William has become much wiser, somewhat guarded, and much more strategic about sharing specifics in his life. This short glimpse into my friend's life illustrates what can happen when transparency is used wrongly. And

this story could be repeated over and over.

Please understand, I like transparency. I think most, if not all, people who have come to me for counseling would say that I utilize a level of transparency in my counseling, so as to relate to and connect with the person being counseled. I know there are strengths to transparency. I'm just not convinced that the pulpit or large group setting is always the place to have the level of transparency that people want from their pastor, nor am I convinced that all transparency, regardless of the setting, is always the best and most helpful way to live life.



Someone may say, "But I want to be able to know how I can pray for my pastor and encourage him." Here's some insight into your pastor(s). Do you ever get angry? It just might be that your pastor(s) battles anger too. Do you ever get jealous? Your pastor(s) might do the same? Do you ever have a lustful thought for the member of the opposite sex? Your pastor(s) might do the same? Do you ever get really discouraged? Let me remove the word "might" and say, "So does your pastor(s)." Do you ever get anxious about something in life? Your pastor(s) might do the same? Do you ever struggle with contentment with your lot in life? Your pastor(s) might just struggle with that as well. Are you a parent who struggles with the stresses and strains of parenting little kids, big kids, teenagers? Guess what, your pastor(s) does as well. Do you have grown kids who aren't at a place spiritually where you would like them to be and you grieve for him or her? There's a chance your pastor(s) might be doing the same. Are you a parent of a teenager who is making foolish decisions and you often find yourself grieving and worrying over the choices your teen is making and the direction your teen is going? It might be that your pastor(s) is doing the same. Do you ever find yourself envying the wicked wishing that you could own what they own or have what appears to be an easy trouble free life? Your pastor(s) may just battle that as well. You see, you don't need to hear a pastor say it from the pulpit or in front of a group of people before you can pray for your pastor(s). Take some time to get to know your pastor(s) and you might learn that their life is filled with concern, not only for the church, but also for their own life and their family. You may just find out that just as you take up the armor of God daily to battle against sin, so too, does your pastor(s). You can pray knowing that the pastor is a man with a nature...just like the rest of us. **So pray!**

Next month we'll take on the sticky issue of separation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names can be withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask for future publications feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.

