

“Stuck in the Mud” [Continued from cover page]

You, me, and Becky are really not that much different. Becky, stuck in the mud of anger, bitterness, and fast-growing self-pity, begins to grumble and complain about life, work, family, friends, the church, and yes, her Creator. If you have walked with Becky for any segment of her life you find yourself in a struggle. You find yourself on one hand grieving with and for your friend. Yet, you also know that anger, bitterness, grumbling, complaining, and turning away from the Lord Jesus to a false god, is neither right nor is it helpful for her. How do you weep with Becky, yet love her and help pull her from the muck and mire she is in? How do you even know if Becky really wants to be pulled from her condition? Some “Becky’s” in this world would love to have you step into the mud with her but stay there and not pull her out. Life in the mud is both miserable and yet, in a twisted way, life in the mud can be a place where some want to stay. Life in the mud is a place where, for some, they have learned to live life. They may have learned that in the mud they can garner attention, pity, and a never ending flow of sympathy. Getting attention, pity from others, and sympathy from people can be addictive. There’s a pay-out that comes with such an addiction. Why leave the mud if one can forever get attention, pity, and sympathy from friends? Stay there long enough and you begin to feel safe. Actually, you begin to feel some form of relief. As a disciple-maker, dealing with people in the mud is a tricky adventure. One who ventures into the muddy swamp will find himself wondering if he is dealing with a person who is unruly, faint-hearted, or weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

I’ve dealt with numerous kinds of “Becky’s” in the ministry. I’ve sought to help those who are truly weakened by the horrendous onslaught of trials in life. They are weakened and often in a weakened state, they want to get out of the mud but they have no strength to stand on their own. They lean on others and are strengthened, making progress to climb out of the mud. The progress is slow, but it is progress. I’ve worked to help the kind of “Becky’s” who are faint-hearted too. They are literally - “small-souled” and need to have others walk with them and give them courage to continue on. They hate the mud. They want out of the mud. They don’t spurn one’s counsel. They don’t fight against God and what He wants. When one steps into the mud with them, they grab a hold and work to free themselves from the mud. And yes, I’ve tried to

We’re Asking The Wrong Question When We Go To Church by Stephen Altrogge *(Stephen serves as a pastor*

In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul describes what a gathering should look like: “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” Paul describes church as a bunch of people coming together and giving themselves away. He expected that every one of the Corinthians would come prepared to give something, whether that is a hymn, lesson, revelation, tongue, or interpretation. For Paul, church was not a spectator sport. It was an all hands on deck kind of thing. No slackers allowed. For Paul, the most important question wasn’t, “What can I get out of this gathering?” Rather, the most important question was, “What can I do that will build others up?”

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...” It can be tempting to think that ministry is the stuff done by pastors, worship leaders, and small group leaders. We let them do the work while we sit back and watch. But the passage from

work with the “Becky’s” who are unruly. In fact, I’ve been unruly before as well. Don’t click your tongue. So have you. When Paul used the term “unruly” in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, he was using a military term in the Greek language that had the idea of, “to step out of line or rank.” The unruly person is to be admonished, Paul tells us. The unruly person knows specifically what they are supposed to do, how they are supposed to think and live, but they refuse to do it. Paul specifically stated in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 to “...admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak...” We don’t want to get those mixed up. I’ve tried to encourage the unruly. It was disaster. And I’ve tried to admonish the faint-hearted. That didn’t help either—it crushed the person. Knowing which of these types of people one is dealing with is critical, but it isn’t always so easily distinguished. Sometimes a person can seem weak or faint-hearted, but in reality he is unruly. That’s what drives us to the Lord for wisdom. Paul ends verse 14 with, “be patient with all men.” This adds a whole new dimension to the counsel. How patient? Time is precious. We are stewards of time. How do we decide when to cut the unruly person loose because they continue to stiff-arm God’s counsel? These are not easy questions to answer. Therefore, we will err on the side of patience. We will take longer to cut a person loose. We’ll get it wrong in some cases. Sometimes we will try to help a person out of the mud when really they don’t want out of the mud; instead, they want everyone to join them in the mud. As I look at various Scriptures, such as Galatians 6:1-3, Matthew 18:15-17, Romans 6, Galatians 5, it becomes clear that God doesn’t want us to stay in the mud.

My friends, are you going through a trial today? Have you or are you suffering? Are you stuck in the mud? Do you know someone who is stuck in the mud? Are you like Becky? What are you doing to get out of the mud? If you are working with someone like Becky, you need God’s wisdom to know how to help her get out of the mud. If you are personally in the mud, please understand: God doesn’t want you to stay there. Numerous times in Scripture it is clear that Christ came to free us from sin. If you have Christ, you’ve been freed from sin. So why stay in the mud of sin? And if you have Christ and His Word, He truly has given you everything you need to step out of the mud.

Ephesians makes it clear that ministry is done by every Christian. Pastors and teachers are called to arm the saints for ministry, and then the saints are to go into the battlefields. The most important question isn’t, “What am I getting out of this ministry?” The most important question is, “What ministry am I doing?”

John Frame puts it this way: “Worshippers should not take a passive attitude toward worship, such as we usually take toward entertainment. As we have seen, worship is a priestly service. It is *latreia*, ‘labor, service.’ Therefore, we should go to church to do something: to bring praise to God and to minister to one another. This perspective should make us less concerned about what we “get out of” worship and more concerned about what we contribute to God and to our brothers and sisters. (Worship In Spirit and Truth, pg. 80)

Obviously, it’s important that we attend a church which allows us to experience biblical preaching, fellowship, the sacraments, and all the other important parts of church. But if our main question after every service is, “What did I get out of it?”, we’re asking the wrong question.

It’s time to be all in.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

“Stuck in the Mud”

(Story used by permission. Names and some details have been changed for this article)

Becky is irked. Life has been very hard for her and in recent months things haven’t gotten easier. In fact, Becky is now grieving the loss of a relationship. Becky and Steve had dated for four years and talked about getting married in the near future. They were blessed to have full approval from both sets of parents. For most of her life, Becky has had a longing, a really good desire, to be a wife and a mother someday. Certainly one can understand the sense of excitement in Becky’s mind as the conversations she and Steve had often centered on marriage, dreams of life together, children, and being used by God for His glory. Little wonder then that Becky is grieving as her world was recently turned upside down when Steve texted that he wanted to end their relationship. Most would agree that texting to deliver such a message is a classless way to end a relationship. It is drenched in immaturity to say the least. Becky is crushed. We feel the sting with her. Very few things in life probably hurt more than what Becky is experiencing. Shortly after the breakup Becky learns that Steve is in a serious relationship with one of Becky’s best friends. No, this isn’t a soap opera or a Hollywood production. It’s real-to-life stuff. Understandably, this cuts even deeper. It’s one thing to be rejected. It’s like pouring salt on a wound to learn of the betrayal that has taken place within the context of this friendship. You might think this is bad enough for Becky, but it doesn’t end there. Within a few weeks of the breakup with Steve, Becky learns that her parents have decided to end their marriage after 45 years. In addition to this, Becky’s brother notifies the family that his wife of two years has been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. To add to the heartache, one of Becky’s co-workers gets promoted to a position in the company—a position that Becky not only wanted, but was actually more qualified for. Almost any person with any ounce of compassion feels sorry for Becky. I’m thinking you would. I would. Those who have experienced similar things are much more prone to weep with Becky. If that is you, you know full-well, the sting of each of those events.

In the aftermath of all of these events, Becky sank into depression. In her sorrow she turned to substitute gods. She craved relief – relief from the pains of living life in this sin-cursed fallen world. Many of us can relate to that internal craving for relief. If you’ve experienced pain, whether physical or mental, you understand the craving to find some element of relief from the ache that nags at the soul. But relief is elusive and usually the means of finding relief will drag a person further down a path into a wretched bondage. That’s the way it always is with false gods. Sadly, Becky began to consume alcohol as a means to bring some element of relief. It became a daily routine. First it began with a glass of wine before heading off to bed. Soon the routine expanded to wine for dinner and wine to top off the day. Becky described it as “taking the edge off” the sorrow that weighed heavy on her heart. Night after night, glass after glass, Becky soon found



herself locked into a battle of epic proportions. She began to ask herself questions: “What is wrong with me? Why would Steve lie to me and choose

We forget that if anyone could relate to the struggles Becky faces, Jesus Christ can.

someone else over me? Where did I go wrong? Why would God allow all of these things to come into my life?” With each question Becky counseled herself but her counsel was not rooted in Scripture. Her counsel was rooted in humanism. Her humanistic self-counsel did what all humanistic counsel does – it bent her towards self and away from her Lord. That always happens when one turns to ungodly counsel, whether the counsel comes from someone else or from oneself. You see, it’s not that Becky is ignorant of God’s Word. She’s well-studied. She’s led Bible studies and even has a degree in Biblical studies from Bible College. But in the midst of heart-ache Becky did what many of us would do: Believe the lie that Christ and His Word are not sufficient; believe that somehow God has not spoken to the sorrows and problems we now face. We forget that if anyone could relate to the struggles Becky faces, Jesus Christ can.

Craving for relief from the internal pain that she battled, Becky turned to a different form of pain – cutting. She explained that the adrenaline rush she experienced with each cut screamed so loudly that it drowned out the sorrow and pain that ripped apart her heart. Yet relief doesn’t come from wine or cutting. Relief is not a good god. It never has been. It never will be. Becky has slowly become enslaved and blinded by the power of her sinful choices. That’s the nature of sin. It binds and blinds us. The more she has pursued relief through a glass of wine and the adrenaline of self-mutilation, the further it has taken her into a life of captivity. Blinded, Becky believes she is free but her daily routine to worship the god of relief tells you that she is not drinking the water of life.

Becky is stuck. She’s climbed into the mud. Not only does she turn to gods which are really not gods, she oozes with anger and bitterness—anger at Steve; anger at her once-best-friend, now turned betrayer; anger at her parents; anger at her boss; anger at her co-worker; anger at her Savior; and yes, anger at the church. Anger has that effect on a person. Anger is maddening and if it isn’t dealt with biblically, it takes a person down a path of self-destruction. Anger clouds a person’s perspective. People become irrational when they are angry and they do some of the most ridiculous things when angry. If you don’t believe me watch what adults do when they are angry. Take some time and watch parents at their kids’ athletic contests. People really do the most bizarre things when they are angry.

Becky is no different and I’m guessing that if you looked at your life you’d realize to that when you are angry you step into an arena of madness. Read through the pages of Scripture and you see many examples of the madness of anger. Cain murdered. Moses struck a rock. Saul tried to kill a faithful servant named David, and even his own son, Jonathan. Read through sections of Scripture like Daniel 1-4 and you see the madness of anger in the life of an arrogant king. Look at the gospels and you find religious leaders driven by the madness of anger as they reject the Messiah and have Him nailed to a cross.

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Q&A with Pastor Blake Shaw

Question: The question for this edition of the COG is “Why is transparency lacking at Grace?” (Part 2)

Answer:

I knew I couldn't get away with ending my answers to the question about transparency where I did in the last edition. There are too many loose ends to move on to others issues and several questions have been put forwarded over the past couple of months suggesting to me that a certain degree of dissatisfaction with my answers is out there. So let me attempt to wrap up this series about transparency by addressing objections. I realize I will never satisfy everyone but perhaps one last article (or two) on this issue is in order.

First let me reiterate, I am not opposed to transparency. In fact, the individuals who approached me with questions agreed after some discussion that I tend to practice transparency quite often. In fact, I believe that as a shepherd of people it is both right and helpful for me to open up my life, guided with wisdom, and be transparent with people. Transparency still has to be guided by biblical principles, does it not? In other words, all of us as believers are to be submitted to Christ and His Word.

Consider this fictitious example: Let's say that my son, Dallas, is struggling in school. His grades have slipped. He has decided to start smoking pot. He got into a fight and was kicked out of school for a number of days. Let's say that I am really burdened for my son. Now, some people would say that if I were preaching/speaking at a worship service at Grace that I should share from the pulpit about the struggles we are going through with our son Dallas. They would reason that this is transparency. This is being real and personable. “Now people know how to pray for you,” they might argue. What they haven't considered though is that I have now gossiped about my son Dallas. I've violated Ephesians 4:29 as well and I have invited 1200-plus people to become my counselors. Now, it isn't bad to have many counselors. Proverbs 15:22 is clear about that, but I would not need over 1200 people inundating me with phone calls, emails, and stop-by visits. I realize that not all 1200 people would do that. Would a hundred people? Possibly. Even with one hundred people responding, with that one moment of transparency from the pulpit I would then create a life of so many interruptions that I'd get nothing done. “Ridiculous!” some may exclaim. Actually, it isn't. I have the real-to-life stories to back up the example. There are other problems with my transparency in this situation described above. There would be people who would leave the church service not remembering anything that was shared from God's Word, but remembering only what I had shared about our family struggles. The worship service then became about me and not God. I won't apologize for saying this: “People should NOT leave a worship service with thoughts about a pastor and his problems. They should walk out of a worship service with a greater view of God, a greater picture of Christ, and a deepened love for Him.” Last, in this scenario (me sharing what I shared from the pulpit), I have then forever changed the way that people in the church

family view my son Dallas. You know as well as I do that from that juncture on, there would be people who would have condemning and judgmental thoughts about Dallas every time they saw him. Has that helped him? Has that been fair to him? No. In many ways the transparency of this situation is just wrong and dangerous.

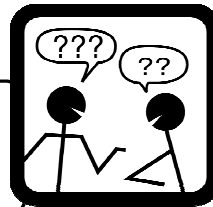
Some have asked me why I'm so dogmatically opposed to transparency. They've read/heard me wrong. The accusation of a lack of transparency has often been leveled at the church family and more specifically at leadership. I'm guessing that transparency is something that we humans always have to work on improving. I know I do. But the demands for transparency are often specific to individuals. In some cases, the persons demanding transparency want those of us who fill the pulpit at any time, to use the pulpit as a platform to open up our lives and “scream” (not literally) a message of transparency. I've suggested to you that the pulpit is not the place for most transparency. Some object. For example, one popular preacher states that one of the worst pieces of advice he received in seminary was, “Do not open up about your struggles. Your people need you to be a model.” I believe we could debate this for decades. I would agree with the point he makes. I'm just not agreeing with the location of where he believes this “opening up” should take place. I've already sought to establish the point in a previous article that transparency can have a deadly down side to it. Not everyone who sits in a church service loves, appreciates, cares for, and wants what is best for the one preaching a sermon. Information shared from the pulpit can be misused. Let me rephrase that, “It is often misused.” So, while I agree with the preacher quoted above that a pastor should open up his life, I'm not convinced the pulpit is the place to do that. There are other settings where a pastor/leader can open up his life, and yet, even then he must be guided by wisdom. Paul told young Pastor Timothy, “Preach the Word. Be ready in season and out. Convince, rebuke, exhort, will all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers...” (See 2 Timothy 4:1-5). The directive is clear: Preach the Word! God's people want to know and understand His Word. Recently a man said to me, “When I come to church I want to hear the word of God taught and explained. I don't need the pastor to share stories about his life.” Another friend of mine stated that when he walks out



of church he doesn't want to remember some personal story about the pastor and his family. He wants God's Word, cut straight, explained with accuracy what it means and then he'll wrestle with how it specifically applies to his heart before God.

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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.



Q&A continued...

Being transparent could also be seen as being personable, real, and social. All of these are critical for the life of the church. In fact, I think it is safe to say that every leader and many of the people I know in our church family are transparent in ways that we see within the pages of Scripture. When we consider the Apostle Paul, it would seem that Paul was very real with people. I take that to mean that he was transparent. As we saw in another article, 1 Thessalonians 2:8 shows us that Paul and his comrades not only imparted the Gospel but their own lives as well. Paul doesn't tell us what imparting “their own lives as well” specifically means. We know it means that he was gentle. He encouraged. He admonished and he actually worked with his hands (most likely making tents) so that he wouldn't burden anyone, as stated in the text. We can surmise what Paul meant but it would be dangerous to develop a whole theology of transparency around this one statement. Elsewhere, Paul says to “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Again, it would be reasonable that Paul would have some level of transparency with the people he says this to. In other sections of Scripture we see that Paul had a deep affection for people and, likewise, people had a deep affection for him. This deep affection most likely developed in the context of living life together, of being real, personable, and transparent. As we consider the life of the Apostle Paul and learn how he went from house to house spending time with God's people (See Acts 20), we dare not squelch the concept of transparency. It would seem that it is in the arena of transparency where a person could learn from a leader like Paul, what imitating Christ looks like. By the way, that's the beauty of discipleship. That's the beauty of counseling. In the context of discipleship/counseling relationships, transparency can abound, again, still guided by biblical principles/parameters. If you read through Acts 20, Paul makes it clear that he held nothing back from the believers in his ministry to them. Whatever was helpful, that is what he shared with them (v. 20). He taught, shepherded,



exhorted, explained, wept with, etc. I think we see transparency in this passage. We would still have to ask what that transparency specific looked like. It's hard to imagine that Paul went into the synagogue and started sharing about his struggles in life. In Acts 19, Paul spent time in public in the synagogue in Ephesus reasoning and persuading the hearers. Paul also spent time in the school of Tyrannus, reasoning with people. Public ministry for Paul seemed to be different than his ministry from house to house. In the book of 2 Corinthians, perhaps the most transparent of all of the books in the New Testament, we see Paul open up his life in numerous ways. In Corinth, false teachers were constantly attacking the integrity of Paul's ministry. Paul seemed to get worked-over often. Some of the things that the enemy of the Gospel said about Paul would be brutally hard for any of us to handle. You see Paul making a plea with the Corinthian believers at times. At other times, he tells them all he has gone through for the sake of the Gospel. We see Paul say things like, “We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” The pages of 2 Corinthians are filled with questions, appeals, defending of oneself, etc. For Paul though, his transparency was not about Paul. It wasn't for his sake. In some ways it wasn't even for the Corinthian believers' sake. His transparency seemed to be all about the integrity and purity of the Gospel and God's Word.

It seems obvious that transparency is a critical part of church life—of body life, a necessity of true discipleship. It's an area we as God's people can and should continue to work on in the days ahead. But let's make sure that our transparency is for the purpose of the Gospel and God's glory, not for the purpose of feeling better about ourselves or of just wanting to know that others are wallowing in the mud with us. Let's use transparency in a right way.

chorus over and over and over, like some sort of druid chant. And the sermon...well, it definitely could've been better. I mean, it was Bible and Jesus and something about holiness, but the pastor definitely can't preach like Matt Chandler.

What did I get out of church? Have you ever asked that question? I suspect you have. After all, in our, “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?” culture, it's hard to not be self-centered in our spiritual lives. We want to make sure that we're being fed, built-up, and connected when we come to church. And we live in a world that is filled with reviews and evaluations. I loved the shrimp and grits at “John's Seafood Shack” and gave the place five stars on Yelp! I had an awful customer service experience and I told all my friends on Facebook (I actually did this recently, but don't ask me about it because I get angry every time I tell the story). It's easy to treat church like any other consumer experience.

It's interesting though, that when we look at Scripture, we find very few details regarding the things we should get from church. Rather, we find lots of details about what we should bring to church.

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We're Asking The Wrong Question When We Go To Church by Stephen Altrogge (*Stephen serves as a pastor at Sovereign Grace Church of Indiana, PA, where his main duties include leading worship, preaching, and working with youth. He also has written a number of worship songs that have been included on Sovereign Grace Music albums. Stephen is the author of the book Game Day For the Glory of God: A Guide For Athletes, Fans, and Wannabes, published by Crossway Books in September 2008, and The Greener Grass Conspiracy: Finding Contentment on Your Side of the Fence, published by Crossway Books in April 2011. When not shining his dad's shoes, you can find Stephen drinking coffee or playing video games.*)

It's a phrase I've said or thought many times. Church is over, I'm sitting at home eating lunch, and I think to myself, I didn't really get much out of church this morning. The worship leader was wearing a loud, distracting plaid shirt, that looked like an Amish quilt and a neon sign had been thrown into a blender and then reassembled at American Eagle. We also sang that one song that I really don't like – the one that repeats the