



Baptist Deacon Network

of Georgia

Newsletter
October 14, 2013

Dear Fellow Baptist Deacons:

Let me start by encouraging you to join us November 3-4 for the CBF Fall General Assembly in Augusta. Sunday at 4:00 there will be a Deacon Network Reception and Meeting. Then, on Monday, there will be a laity breakfast at 8:00 and our featured speaker and discussion leader for the Deacon Network sessions, Dan Bagby, will be held between 9:15-10:30 and 10:45-12:00.



In preparation for our time together, I would like to share the story of Daniel Vestal, who has been the inspirational and spiritual leader of the Deacon network up to this point. As Baptists, we would refer to his story as a confession of faith, or personal testimony. As you read it, I think you will find it compelling and inspirational. As a result, I hope you will consider preparing or even beginning to write your own unique and personal story, as we will be exploring what this can mean to each of us, and to the servant leadership that we can provide to our congregations. We can share our testimonies with our families, our church, our friends and with each other. In the days to come we will begin a "BDN blog" where we can share our Christian experience.

I hope you are looking forward to our gathering as much as I am, and I hope to see you there as we share our stories with each other.

Mike Hendley
First Baptist Church
St. Simons, GA

Baptist Deacon Network Steering Committee

David Keel (First Baptist, Augusta), Don Brewer (First Baptist, Gainesville), Mark Whitaker (Harlem Baptist, Harlem), Mike Hendley (First Baptist, St. Simons), Susan Broome (First Baptist, Macon), Connie Jones (First Baptist, Macon), Carol Younger (Northside Drive, Atlanta) and Carol Palmer (Smoke Rise Baptist, Atlanta) are the steering committee.

What Jesus Means to Me

by Daniel Vestal

Years ago I read the story from E. Stanley Jones, the esteemed Methodist evangelist, about his first sermon. He was 17 years old, and he was delivering it to his home church. Early in the sermon he fumbled with some words, and a lady on the second pew chuckled. He was "undone" and quietly said to the congregation, "I'm sorry, there won't be a sermon today." But as he turned to go to his seat, a voice spoke to him and said, "Stanley, haven't I done anything for you?" to which he responded, "Yes, Lord, you have." Then the voice said, "Then tell the people about that."

He returned to the pulpit and in his own 17 year old way he gave his testimony in about 5 minutes. When he finished someone came to him and said, "That was the greatest sermon I ever heard." Someone else said, "I wish I could preach like you." Someone else said, "I want to experience what you experienced." Stanley Jones said he learned from his first sermon that God doesn't need defense attorneys. He just needs witnesses.

I want to offer you my witness, my testimony, my "apologia," my confession of what the Lord Jesus means to me. I intentionally refer to Jesus as "Lord" because like Thomas who said to the resurrected One who appeared to the disciples, "My Lord and my God," I believe in the deity of the man named Jesus. And I believe that after his death on the Cross, God raised him from the dead.

I can't ever remember a time in my life when I didn't love God and believe in Jesus. I was nurtured in the Christian faith, and I owe a great deal to family, friends, pastors, teachers and mentors. Like many who grow up in a Christian culture, I went through a period of serious doubt and difficult questioning during high school and college. This resulted in a "deconstruction" of a childhood faith and a "reconstruction" of a more adult faith.

During graduate school and seminary I became a student, a serious student. I developed an intellectual curiosity and deep desire to learn. I confronted the "critical" issues of Scripture and the historical development of theology. I studied world religions, philosophy, psychology, and I struggled with issues of science and faith, the problem of evil and suffering and the meaning of history. It was during this time that something very important happened. I was introduced to some intelligent and thoughtful Christians who had lived before me, who loved God and followed Christ with their minds. I realized that I too could love God with my mind. I could have faith and still have intellectual integrity. I could engage in serious scholarship and thoughtful inquiry as a Christian.

It was during this time that the Lord Jesus became TRUTH for me. He became the touchstone, the center, the foundation for all knowing and all learning. He became the embodiment of truth: truth about God, truth about mankind, truth about the universe, truth about life, truth about death and life after death. He not only became the criterion by which I interpret Scripture, but the criterion by which I judge all truth claims. Please do not hear this testimony as a kind of fundamentalist arrogance or prideful confidence, because there is more mystery in my faith now than ever before. I have more questions than I have answers. It's not that I "have" the truth, as

much as it is that the truth "has" me.

Fast forward in my story, and I became a Pastor. One of the realities of being a Pastor is being involved in people's suffering. Part of my life was dealing almost daily with death, disease and disaster. It is not easy walking with people in the darkest hours of life. In addition to personal grief a Pastor is exposed to the reality of corporate and systemic darkness that causes a lot of pain in the world. This experience can be overwhelming. And then to make it more serious, Pastors, like everyone else, deal with their own pain and suffering, some of which is self-inflicted and some of which is not.

For me the loss of my denomination to a hostile takeover was a grief and pain that combined the personal and the corporate. Individuals that I knew and loved were injured. Their reputations, families and ministries were hurt. Institutions that I knew and loved were injured. Some were dramatically and unalterably changed in character and content. This pain was exacerbated by the fact that nothing could be done to stop it, although serious efforts were made to do so. When those efforts failed, all the expressions of grief followed: frustration, anger, fear and depression.

It was during this time that the Lord Jesus became LOVE for me. I had always heard and believed that "Jesus loves me, this I know" and embraced the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. But in times of pain and suffering, there is a deepened experience of divine love. Where I have found comfort and strength in the midst of suffering is that Christ has suffered more than anyone can imagine, and that He continues to suffer with us. And that suffering is because of love.

I was drawn to the suffering Christ, the wounded Christ, the broken Christ. I came to see Christ as "the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." What I experienced in my loss was Christ as love in a new and profound way. Whatever loss, whatever pain, whatever suffering I may have known was nothing compared to that of Christ. I was drawn to Christ at a deeper level and saw his passion and pain as a revelation of sacred love.

Please do not hear this testimony as a kind of morbid melancholy. No one enjoys suffering. No one wants to suffer. But I have come to believe that the greatest love is shown in suffering. I have also come to believe that in suffering the opportunity to show love is the greatest. The Lord Jesus never stopped loving, even in his suffering. Indeed it was in his suffering that we see the greatest revelation of love. He never stopped loving his "Abba." He never stopped loving his disciples. He never stopped loving his mother. He never stopped loving his executioners. He never stopped loving "thieves, tax collectors and sinners." He never stopped loving the world.

Simultaneous with this part of my story was another discovery that had to do with the experience of prayer. I had always practiced prayer, but primarily as asking God to do something. In the early 1990's I was introduced to the practice of contemplative prayer or listening prayer. It was transformative. I began to read the works of men and women outside my tradition who became mentors and spiritual directors. It was during this experience that the Lord Jesus became a PRESENCE in my life in a way I had not known before.

The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith had always been one and the same person for me, but in learning contemplative prayer, this Person became more central to my existence as a spiritual presence. No longer was Christ "out there" in a remote heaven

or "back there" in history. Now Christ was here within me and within others. No longer was Christ simply an example or model but a real presence experienced and encountered in a variety of ways.

Please do not hear this testimony as saying that I always feel Christ's presence or have some kind of emotional sensation, because I do not. This presence is a hidden presence. And it is mediated in both common and uncommon ways. For me this presence is encountered in corporate worship, particularly in observing the Lord's Supper. It is encountered in hearing and reading Scripture, in simple acts of kindness to strangers and children. It is embodied in the poor and powerless as well as the unpretentious and humble lives of saintly Christians.

The presence of Christ is apprehended in unexpected and unexplained ways. It is mystical, but not magical. It is faith, not foolishness. I don't seek to "conjure" a certain mental state or produce a particular emotional response. I live, like everybody else, in the routine of daily responsibilities, periodic problems and social relationships. But the reality of Christ's presence is a growing conviction. It is a compelling consciousness of an unseen reality. It is a perspective that shapes and influences everything I see and do.

There is one last word that describes what the Lord Jesus means to me: HOPE. The older I grow the more I think about the end of life, and the beginning of a new life beyond this one. I want to end this life well, however that end may come. I want to transition well to the next life, whenever that transition may come. In some ways I sense that the transition has already begun.

The older I grow the more I want to be with Christ, to see Christ, to be in Christ's presence in a fuller and more complete way. I want to see Christ "face to face," to no longer "see through a glass darkly" or "to know in part." I want "to know fully, even as I am fully known." Please do not hear this part of my testimony as a death wish or a denial of the life I now enjoy. I hope to live a long time and continue to be productive and fruitful to the end. But I must also say that I anticipate being with the Lord in a way not possible in this life.

I honestly don't know what heaven will be like (either before or after the Resurrection), but it is enough that Jesus promised the thief on the cross before he died, "Today you will be with me." Earlier he told the disciples "I go to prepare a place for you that where I am there you may be also." I increasingly feel like the Apostle Paul who was torn between wanting to continue in his ministry and to depart and be with Christ. It will be far better to be with Christ. That is what I anticipate.

**If you would like to register for CBF/GA Fall General Assembly,
[click here!](#)**

For we are partners working together for God, and you are God's field.
1 Corinthians 3:9



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