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Liminal Spaces: A Narrative Spirituality of the Bible

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

LIMINAL SPACES:
A NARRATIVE SPIRITUALITY OF THE BIBLE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY
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PORTLAND, OREGON

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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DEDICATION

To my Dad . . .

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ABSTRACT

Liminal space is a place in-between what was and what will be. It is crucial for ongoing Christian formation. However, the Evangelical Church currently has no space for supporting those in liminality. Evangelical theology and practice actively discourage those in liminal space. As a result, Christian maturity is frustrated. Future leaders and contemplatives are endangered. This dissertation explores how the Evangelical Church could acknowledge, support, and educate those in liminal spaces.

The Bible repeats three liminal themes which create a paradigm of ongoing Christian formation. The themes are desert/wilderness, pit/grave, and exile/pilgrimage. The desert/wilderness is a liminal space, the grave/pit is a liminal posture of heart, and the exile/pilgrimage is a liminal mission into the world. Together these themes form a narrative spirituality of the Bible, a way that God changes us and prepares us for mission.

The Church has embraced this paradigm throughout its history with theology and practices. This paradigm is reflected in the liturgical calendar's recognition of Advent, Lent, Paschal Mystery, and Holy Saturday. It has also embraced liminality in Luther's theology of the cross, John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul, and Wesley's sermon on God's Love toward Fallen Man.

The nineteenth century revivalists and the Keswick movement, through a reinterpretation and synthesis of Luther and Wesley, and an abandonment of many prior practices and theologies, led the Evangelical Church to embrace an imputed sanctification in which one is placed at the pinnacle of faith at conversion. This shift was hostile toward liminality, thus creating a sanctification gap.

By re-embracing liminality as a major narrative spirituality of the Bible, we create hospitality toward those within liminality, which should lead the church to increase education on the purpose and process of liminality. God can again use liminality to transform his people and prepare them for mission.

PREFACE

Father God we know your ‘desert’ –
less as land, than pain within:
when you take away our comforts
to release us. You begin
by this training, so to teach us
how to live more free of sin.

In this ‘desert’ you command us
when to act and when to rest.
You break down our suppositions,
which assume that we know best.
For our holiness and wholeness
you give us this ‘desert’ test.

Lord, we like to know your presence;
feel you close – as if by right.
But to deepen faith not feelings
you may give our souls ‘dark night’.
When your hand is not apparent -
keep us safe, and hold us tight.

This experience of learning
is, for many, years, not days.
It takes time to break, remake us
in your image and your ways.
Feed us, therefore, guide us, heal us,
so through all - it ends in praise.

—John Richards, “Hymn: The Wilderness”

Have you ever been on a road trip? Most of us have memories of driving down the highway headed to a favorite location for a holiday. If you have experienced a road trip, you have experienced something called ‘liminal space’. You are not home, and you are not at your destination. You are at an in-between space, called liminal space.

I was turned on to this concept of liminal space through my studies of the Bible, through my doctoral program here at George Fox, and through my own life. This work

focuses on the first two, but in order to give context for those, I share my some of my life story in this preface.

My wife and I were married in August of 2001. As with most marriages, we were ecstatic with each other and at the same time totally clueless on how to be married. We honeymooned by the ocean and came home to learn how to be married and do life together: jobs, bills, cooking, community, and so forth.

In 2003 Kara walked out of the bathroom with a positive pregnancy test. We were excited to add another life to our clueless happiness. We did what most couples do when they are pregnant and excited; we looked through baby names books, registered for our baby shower, and started to prepare a nursery for this new life. It was a happy season of life.

Then we received news from an ultrasound that changed everything. “We think there is something wrong with the heart” said the doctor; as we nervously shifted in our seats. “The axis is turned a bit and there is a hole.” The next few months we spent researching heart conditions, going in for more tests and undertaking more ultrasounds.

Isaac was born on January 9th, 2004. He spent the next six months struggling to grow and thrive, and finally the cardiologist spoke the words, “congenital heart failure” and “open heart surgery.” We handed our little angel over to the surgeon to fix his little heart and five days later we were released from the hospital ready to move forward.

Isaac still did not grow, nor would he eat solid food without screaming in agony. Genetic tests revealed that Isaac was missing information on his sixth chromosome, which in the eyes of the doctors, meant that his future development was a total gamble. Could he walk? Could he talk? No one could tell us what this would mean. We started to

learn about Isaac's multifaceted special needs which would come because of his chromosomal deletion and how different life would become for us.

We became pregnant again shortly after this diagnosis, and were cautiously excited. Then when Isaac was eleven months old, and weighing only eleven lbs., we decided to have a feeding tube inserted into Isaac's stomach to help us get the nutrients to his body so that he could grow. The surgery was botched and we spent the next seventeen days in recovery at the hospital.

The week after our release, we received a call from the doctor regarding our baby in utero saying, "We found something abnormal in your bloodwork, please come in for an ultrasound." If my wife and I were not in liminal space yet, with our experiences thus far, we were about to be thrust into it headlong.

The following week would prove to be one of the most difficult weeks that lead to the most difficult season we had ever faced. During our ultrasound scan, the tech abruptly left the room. Kara and I looked uncomfortably at each other. The tech returned with the doctor who scanned and gave us the news that we were not ready for. Our son was diagnosed with anencephaly, a rare neural tube defect that had no treatment, no cure, and no hope of survival. Kara and I were ready for bad news, we were used to bad news, but we were not ready for the worst news. We were caught off guard. We spent the next few weeks preparing family and friends.

The next few months of birth and death planning were excruciating. As Thomas Merton speaking of his father's death said, "There was nothing we could do but take it like an animal."¹ That was indeed how it felt. There were awkward and painful

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 91.

encounters with strangers, friends, and family who would inquire of our happy plans after the birth. Christmas came and went numbly, life passed by swiftly and coldly as if our disillusionment did not matter, yet at the same time all of life felt slowed to a crawl.

Elijah was born on April 15th, 2005 and passed into the arms of Jesus two and a half hours later.

My wife and I were forced into liminal space with no map, resources, or guides. We had love surround us through our church and family with meals, cards, gifts, and prayers. But there was an unspoken expectation that seems to come in our Western culture that we would resolve our pain and get life back to normal as soon as possible so that we could continue on in the fashion we had always done in the past. This expectation was impossible, for we were left totally changed forever. There may be a desire to return to “normal” but there is no pathway back, and as we found out as we traversed this new terrain, we did not desire to go back. Our lives and perspectives were forever altered.

The years passed. Cynicism and anger grew and faded into cold numbness, and then the loneliness set in. Not a loneliness that comes from physical isolation, but one that comes when you are in a foreign land without anyone who understands you. We looked around at our peers who, naturally, were all-speed-ahead to accomplish, conquer, and build. That is what one does when young, unless tragedy has shattered your perception of what is important and what is merely illusion.

My wife and I were isolated by our experiences, awakened to different passions, and having a hard time relating to people who held things dearly that we no longer had interest. We could not get excited about the things that excited them, and it isolated us. We felt as if we were cast into exile in a strange land.

A year after Elijah's death we decided to try one more time for another child, and two years after his death we gave birth to Nolan. We have two boys here and one who has gone on ahead of us. We find so much joy in our family and our experiences have brought us together tightly.

Years have passed. Isaac is now about to turn eleven at this writing, and his "disability" has proven to be the best spiritual teacher we could have ever asked for. We have learned how to stand in solidarity with those who are fully human yet a "disability" to function as the rest of society does causes this society to devalue them, push them to the fringes, or do away with them altogether. They are still human regardless of our society's price tag on their soul.

This year, the writing of this dissertation was interrupted by the sudden and unexpected death of my father. He had received an injury in the springtime while using a table saw which launched his body into a mode of sickness that he would never fully recover from. He was in and out of the hospital, going from doctor to doctor, but no one could find the issue. Finally in October of this year he heard the words thyroid cancer. Most types are very treatable, but not this kind. It is the most aggressive form of cancer that exists.

We went over to my Mom and Dad's house for our niece's birthday party on Saturday, October 11th. While there my Dad took my wife and I aside to give us the news of cancer, which he himself had known only since the previous Thursday. I was devastated. I remember him saying through tears, "It doesn't look good" with a shake of his head.

My wife and I spent that week visiting as often as possible, calling, helping him make preparations, fighting and finding as many treatment options as we could to save his life. The following Saturday morning of October 18th, barely 6 days after receiving the news, we were awakened at 3:30am by a phone call from my mom. “Dad’s not responding, he’s slumped over and drooling.” The ambulance was called, and within the hour he was gone.

The death and grieving process taught me much. My Dad always loved to give gifts, Christmas was his favorite holiday. In his death I learned to receive a final gift from him, which was the gift of a perspective on faith that I could have otherwise not known. Jesus had the kind of faith that led him to the cross and the grave. God honored this kind of faith with a resurrection. I learned to have this kind of faith to a degree after my Dad’s passing. And this lesson was what enabled me to finally put together the paradigm of narrative spirituality described here in this document.

I have been able to make sense of my life’s pain with a filter of liminal space. The three themes of liminality discussed in this work are three major themes of liminality in the Bible, and the three themes I noticed in my own life. Isaac and his unique abilities taught me how to live in solidarity, the lesson of exile. Elijah taught me to live in solitude, the lesson of the desert, and my Dad’s passing taught me the faith of silence, the lesson of the grave. These three events have matured my soul beyond any church service, Bible study small group, or retreat ever has. That is how God does it.

These experiences have been adopted into my story, fully, and not treated as an unwanted dog in the corner cage. God has done a healing work within me over the years as I traverse the path with Him. As He heals over the wounds of pain, those areas become

reinforced with His strength and empowered with His passion to go and do likewise in other people's lives. The result is a "wounded healer"² as Henri Nouwen calls it.

May we enter into liminal space in faith and obedience in order to move toward the life that God has for us, a life of deep faith, able to integrate life's pain into our story and find meaning. As we enter this space, may we too become empowered with His passion to go and do likewise providing healing and meaning for others who are wounded by life. And as we move from our liminal spaces back into the Promised Land of plenty, may we enter with a new character and depth that brings God's kingdom into existence.

² Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of—oh your father. There are just some men who—who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.

—Harold Bloom, *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*

Living in the Midwest, I have not had much experience in a physical desert save a short layover in Albuquerque. Everywhere I look there are green trees, grass, and flowers, most especially in the rural areas of my residence. But the imagery of winter is something that I connect with deeply. Every year I watch the trees color and fall to the ground leaving the trees bare and exposed showing their imperfections and nesting creatures. Each year I watch the grass wither and fade into brown dormancy lying under the winter snow, waiting for the warmth of the sunshine to call it back into its green lush beauty. Each year I watch the flowers wilt and bow their heads in an annual death, waiting for their resurrection in the springtime.

As a pastor for over fifteen years, I have also watched God's people go through winter times in their lives. Many times I have seen some lose their lush green foliage of prosperity and go through a time of want that leaves their imperfect souls bare and exposed revealing their nesting addictions and dependencies. Many times I watch some lose their joy and walk through a season of depression leaving their confident and faithful lives lying under a bed of cold despair, waiting for the breath of God to breathe warmth back into their bones. Many times I watch someone bow their head in death and the family is left waiting for the promise of God's resurrection power to redeem that which has gone terribly awry. I have also seen the marriages of couples forever altering their lives together, retreat seasons in which God speaks freshly in a person's soul, and small

less dramatic, yet steady, change resulting from people living normal lives faithfully and humbly.

I too have walked through these seasons of the soul, and as a pastor, I have noticed something within our Christian culture that leaves many people on the fringes of church culture. I have noticed that our practiced spirituality can oftentimes produce feelings of guilt and inadequacy within the Christians who are not to be found in the lush summer abundance of the soul.

I have observed that so many churches lack any acknowledgement of seasons in which a soul is deserted, any hospitality for those who find themselves lost and wandering in a wasteland, and lacking proper education regarding what these seasons are for or how to traverse them. The Church is in desperate need of a theology and practice of leading its congregational members through seasons of silence where God has the opportunity to speak, seasons of solitude where the death of self and will gives God access into one's life, and into a life of solidarity with God and His Church as an authentic incarnational presence in the world.

I surely will not go as far as to say that we believe, like the disciples erroneously did, that winter times with God are caused by human sin.¹ Certainly sin can bring on times of suffering and anguish for us and others,² but not all cases of suffering come from sin.³ Nor will I assume that all times of transformation are painful and desolate seasons.

¹ John 9.

² Ps. 32.

³ Matt.5:10.

Somewhere, our picture of what a Christian should be does not have adequate room for seasons of solitude and a posture of silence, which can lead us to a life of solidarity.

Kay Warren, wife of Pastor Rick Warren wrote an article on their church's response to her son's tragic death by suicide. She has received some wonderful encouragement, and she has received some really bad advice that points to our propensity to want others to 'get on with it,' or get back to normal. She says,

They want the old Rick and Kay back. They secretly wonder when things will get back to normal for us – when we'll be ourselves, when the tragedy of April 5, 2013 will cease to be the grid that we pass everything across. And I have to tell you – the old Rick and Kay are gone. They're never coming back. We will never be the same again. There is a new "normal." April 5, 2013 has permanently marked us. It will remain the grid we pass everything across for an indeterminate amount of time
 . . . maybe forever.⁴

Somewhere in the theology and practice of our faith there lies a hidden expectation for Christians to be happy, prosperous and comfortable. Perhaps this need is common to our human nature; perhaps it comes with our Western society.

Seasons, whether in the year or in our lives, are liminal spaces. Fall is a liminal time between summer and winter as spring is a liminal time between winter and summer. Sometimes during spring in Michigan one will have a day feel much like summer and the next day there will be an inch of snow on the ground. We feel the effects of being in transition from one season to the next. The first has not given up its hold and the next has not gripped tightly enough yet. And so it is in our lives as we live in liminal spaces, between one season and another.

⁴ Kay Warren, "Facebook," *Kay Warren*, March 13, 2014, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10152032456227569&id=105128507568.

Liminal Space

Liminal is a very big word that can stretch as wide as the desert, and has been adopted by many disciplines because of its universal applications. It has many different uses. The word *liminal* comes from the Latin word *limen* or ‘threshold’, and means “Of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process, occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.”⁵ Liminal means transition, an initiation of a process, coming to the threshold of something, and is crucial to the life of a growing being.

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep is credited with coining the term ‘liminal’ in his book on rites of passages in anthropology and ethnology. A rite of passage moves us from “every change of place, state, social position and age” to another.⁶ Gennep divides rites of passage into three categories: rites of separation, like a funeral: rites of incorporation, as in marriages: and rites of transition, as an initiation from passage between age groups.⁷ The rites of separation he labels preliminal rites, the rights of incorporation are labeled postliminal, and the rites of initiation which are labeled liminal.⁸ Van Gennep describes betrothal as a liminal rite of passage between adolescence and marriage.⁹

⁵ “Liminal,” Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid.

British cultural anthropologist, Victor Witter Turner, built on van Gennep's work in *The Ritual Process*. He defines liminal as a state "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and [ceremony]." ¹⁰ Some would argue that liminal rites of passage are enforcers of current social oppressions as a status quo, and they may certainly be abused as such, keeping gender, social sects, and racial hierarchies in place. ¹¹ But liminality in its truest meaning can be the broadening of political and social change and of the reversal of hierarchies. ¹² It can be the basis for change, individually and socially.

Bjorn Thomassen claims, "during liminality, the initiands live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain: the initiands come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured." ¹³ Through this questioning those in liminal space can be destructed or constructed, but the former prepares the initiand and their group to "occupy a new social role or status." ¹⁴ Thus liminal space is a powerful time of transformation for individuals, groups, or societies

¹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 95.

¹¹ David B. Wong, *Natural Moralities : A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 86.

¹² Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, "International Political Anthropology," *Political Anthropology*, 2013, <http://politicalanthropology.org/component/content/article/34-the-journal/ipa-journal-3/328-ipa3-introduction-liminality-and-cultures-of-change.html>.

¹³ "Liminality," Austin Harrington, Barbara L. Marshall, and Hans-Peter Müller, *Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁴ Ibid.

that can be understood as instances, periods, or whole epochs. They can transform individuals and whole societies.¹⁵

Other disciplines use the term liminal as well. In biological and ecological terms, liminal can refer to periods of the day, as in twilight being the liminal time between day and dark, winter being the liminal time between agricultural seasons, and even species which are considered “Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered” or EDGE species¹⁶ which are on the *limen* or threshold of extinction.

In psychological terms, Carl Jung used the idea of liminality as the process of one becoming individuated: the psychological process in which one becomes differentiated from the collective consciousness and expectation.¹⁷

As you can see the term is broad and ever expanding in meaning and context. For this dissertation I will focus on the transforming power of three Biblical liminal themes and their purpose in our lives. I will explore, in Chapters One through Three, the roots of liminality in the Biblical context. In Chapter Four, I will follow these roots through a historical look at church doctrines and practices of liminal space. In Chapter Five I will then further investigate church history, especially the nineteenth century, to find where the Evangelical Western church lost sight of these powerful themes. I will conclude with suggestions in Chapter Six on how to recover this lost ground and re-embrace liminal space and process.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “EDGE of Existence,” *EDGE of Existence*, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.edgeofexistence.org/>.

¹⁷ C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 6: Psychological Types* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 441.

The Paradigm of the Three Themes

The word “liminal” means crossing a boundary or threshold into an in-between place. The way this dissertation uses the term liminal, is a time when one approaches or crosses the threshold of a capacity: a capacity of knowledge, understanding, faith, skill, wisdom, experience, and/or love. One’s past capacity is no longer sufficient for handling the current situation and an opportunity for growth is presented to the initiand.

The Bible uses three major narrative themes to describe liminality. These themes are a space illustrated by desert/wilderness, a posture of the heart illustrated by grave/pit, and a resulting mission illustrated by exile/pilgrim. . I am using the word liminality here in a way that is unique to each Biblical theme, and together provide a paradigm of transformation, or what Gorman calls, a “narrative spirituality.”¹⁸ Each theme is not necessarily a separate liminal space. One does not find oneself within a desert situation and ask whether they are actually in a grave or exile experience and vice versa. Instead, there is a liminal space of the desert, a liminal posture of the heart in the grave, and the resulting liminal mission of exile. These three liminal themes, after exploring their Biblical roots, provide a narrative spirituality in which God does his transforming work in our souls for the work of being a light to the world¹⁹ so they will know He is the Lord.²⁰

These narrative themes describe a season of the soul, the posture of faith that brings change, and the mission that can result. The season is desert, the posture is grave, and the mission is pilgrimage. The season of desert is diverse in its cause, duration,

¹⁸Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

¹⁹ Isa. 51:4, 58:8, 60:3, Matt. 5:14.

²⁰ Josh 4:24, Ezek. 37:28, John 17:23.

context, and results, as diverse as humanity is itself, but is seen as a needed and expected part of our faith maturing process. The grave is the posture of the heart that gives God access to one's inner life for the purpose of transformation. Exile is the authentic incarnational presence within the world, and for its welfare, that results from deepened character.

To expand further, the desert is a liminal season or place, a time of solitude with God in which we are separate from the familiar and/or comfortable in some manner, in order to learn God's way of living. The grave is a liminal posture of heart, a time of silence with God in which we are humbly surrendering our will and desire for the security of the familiar and comfortable, and often times awaiting vindication and learning the type of faith that Jesus possessed. This is not a silencing of our voice so much as our passions and complaints. There is room for lament in this season as we will study later. Walking the liminal space with a liminal posture trains us for the third permanent liminal mission in solidarity, that of exile, in which we embody what we have learned from liminal space into the world as an authentic, incarnational presence bringing God's kingdom into fruition. We stand in solidarity with God and his Church, both past present and future, in the mission to which He has called us.

Sometimes the Biblical sojourners of liminal space enter for silent reflection, wrestling with God, facing the Devil and his temptations, fleeing from physical danger, or refueling and refocusing for their further journey towards vocation. Sometimes the season prepares the wanderers for their vocation and purifies them of the vice that

prevents them from realizing it.²¹ Sometimes the season fails to mature the wanderers because of their lack of liminal posture and they spiral further into self-destruction.²²

Historically the Church has embraced liminal spaces in its theology and spirituality. We see desert fathers and mothers retreating to the desert in the early fourth century and forming the tradition known as monasticism.²³ Additionally, much respected historical figures like, Saint Francis,²⁴ John of the Cross,²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer,²⁶ Charles Spurgeon²⁷ and Mother Teresa²⁸ are known for walking through liminal space with God with a liminal posture, resulting in a liminal mission.

We also we see on the liturgical calendar the liminal season of Lent in which the church enters into the desert temptation of Christ through fasting. This season leads us into the liminal posture of the Passion Week of Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, awaiting the Resurrection. Even at Christmas the Church enters into the liminal season of Advent, in which we re-enter into Israel's

²¹ See the story of Joseph from Genesis 37-50.

²² See book of Jonah and Numbers 13-14.

²³ Thomas H. Greer and Gavin Lewis, *A Brief History of the Western World* (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2004), 179.

²⁴ Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1988), 9.

²⁵ John of the Cross and Ernest E. Larkin, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, New edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 25.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

²⁷ Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1964), 9.

²⁸ Mother Teresa and Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 230.

hopeful anticipation of God's return to liberate them. It is known as a season of hopeful waiting.²⁹ These seasons of liminality can help the sojourner maintain a liminal posture.

Historically there has been a liminal season in the Christian journey in which God's felt presence distances for the purpose of purifying the human soul of its deep rooted addiction to comfort and security. It has been variously called Spiritual Desolation,³⁰ the Dark Night of the Soul,³¹ the Wall,³² and the Long Dark Corridor.³³ This spiritual dryness is not necessarily brought on by any directly sinful action, rebellion, or immaturity, nor is it necessarily brought on through tragedy, although tragedy can become the doorway into which one enters liminality. Because of the lack of current acknowledgement, hospitality and education in the Evangelical Church concerning liminality, this season often leaves ones within these contexts confused and at times guilty.

Yet, these times in liminal space, walked in liminal posture, prove to be catalytic for those who walk through them. They prove to be times where faith in God deepens and matures, seen and unseen vice is purged, and virtue is cultivated, resulting in an authentic incarnational presence. The Biblical narratives of liminal space, posture, and mission provide us with a paradigm for walking through needed and expected parts of our journey

²⁹ Maria Boulding, *The Coming of God* (Conception, MO.: Printery House, 2000), See chapter 3 on Advent preparations.

³⁰ Saint Ignatius (of Loyola), *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 203.

³¹ Saint John of the Cross, *St. John of the Cross: Selected Writings* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).

³² Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1995), See chapter titled The Wall.

³³ R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart: Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), See chapter titled Long Dark Corridor.

with God, provides the posture in which we walk, and gives purpose and meaning to a time often felt as meaningless. This progression through faith maturity happens through seasons of orientation, disorientation, and finding new orientation,³⁴ also known as liminal space. It is this path through liminal space that supports ongoing Christian formation.

The Christian faith has long tried to find a road map to the journey of ongoing Christian formation. They are described in classic resources like Bernard of Clairvaux's "four degrees of love" from the twelfth century,³⁵ Anonymous' "four degrees of Christian living"³⁶ in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and Teresa Avila's "mansions" from her fifteenth century work *Interior Castle*,³⁷ to more modern resources like Hagberg's *Critical Journey*,³⁸ Richard Rohr's *two halves of life*,³⁹ and Thomas Ashbrook's *Mansions of the Heart*.⁴⁰ Psychologists also have recognized levels or stages of maturity and have tried to map them out. Three modern examples are M. Scott Peck's four stages of faith

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, n.d.), x.

³⁵ Saint Bernard (of Clairvaux), *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (London: Paulist Press, 1987), On Loving God.

³⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 1.

³⁷ St Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* (London; New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2012).

³⁸Hagberg.

³⁹Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

⁴⁰ Ashbrook.

development,⁴¹ James Fowler's six stages of faith formation,⁴² Torbert's six action logics,⁴³ and Susan Cook-Greuter's nine stages of ego development,⁴⁴ to name a few.

These many resources all have an end in mind, creating a depth of character that results in an authentic presence in the world. They have labeled the end goal differently: union, individuation, awareness, or formation, but the end result of each one is very similar. You often know when you have a conversation with someone who has been on the liminal journey with the liminal posture that you are drinking from a deeply dug well.

The intention of this dissertation is not to provide a map of any stages of ongoing Christian formation. Instead, I will build upon these giants and argue that liminal space with a liminal posture is the rite of passage between the stages of faith maturity that builds our authentic, incarnational presence. I hold to no preconceived notion of a road map but acknowledge that there is a faith maturing process, and liminality is a process of maturing that God uses. Therefore, I will not attempt to reconstruct any roadmap here; it is enough to know that Church history recognizes a process of maturity in faith, which is a journey model with conversion being a starting line.

I will state that one stage in maturity is not better than another. A child is not better than an adolescent, nor is a senior citizen better than a young adult. All are needed

⁴¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled, 25th Anniversary Edition : A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, 25 Anv (New York: Touchstone, 2003).

⁴² James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

⁴³ William R. Torbert, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004).

⁴⁴ Susanne Cook-Greuter, "A Detailed Description of the Development of Nine Action Logics in the Leadership Development Framework Adapted from Ego Development Theory" (www.Cook-Greuter.com, 2002).

to help one another along the way and are valuable to the body of Christ as a whole. They are merely markers on the journey of faith which help us understand what God may be up to in our life. Yet the contemporary Evangelical Church is struggling with supporting people while they grow in these liminal spaces.

A Problem in the Church

In a recent study on Reformed pastors and their churches, “81% of the pastors said there was no regular discipleship program or effective effort of mentoring their people or teaching them to deepen their Christian formation at their church.” And a mere 26% of pastors said they regularly had personal devotions and felt they were adequately fed spirituality.⁴⁵ That means 74% of all pastors feel as though they are not spiritually equipped to take their congregations through ongoing Christian formation because they are not experiencing it themselves. Why is this important? Thomas Merton says of spiritual directors, “His first duty is to see to his own interior life ... he will never be able to give away to others what he does not possess himself.”⁴⁶

As stated earlier, a problem within the Evangelical Church which I am addressing is a lack of acknowledgement of liminal space, hospitality toward those in liminal space, and education in the process and purpose of liminal space. This lack of understanding of the role of liminality in Christian formation and the lack of support which educates and guides those within liminal space on what the opportunity is before them and how to traverse it, can thwart spiritual growth and maturity of the present church, one of our

⁴⁵ Richard J. Krejcir, “Statistics on Pastors,” *Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development*, [Http://www. Intothyword. Org/apps/articles/default. Asp](http://www.Intothyword.Org/apps/articles/default.Asp), 2007, <http://www.lifechristiancounseling.com/pastors/Statistics%20on%20Pastors.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1960), 28.

goals, and do so at the expense of prospective contemplatives and leaders for the future Church.

Lack of Acknowledgement

There is a natural problem in the Church today, and it is found in the nature of the organization. An organization, when formed, immediately becomes about the survival of itself.⁴⁷ So anything that does not contribute to the survival of the entity is seen as not useful to the organization and either seen as optional or discarded all together. But what is optional or discarded can be surprising.

When you explore church mission statements⁴⁸ there is a common thread that weaves through many of them. A church must be engaging in three activities in order to be considered effective: evangelism, discipleship, and ministry. These activities meet all the immediate needs of the organization and there is no need or incentive for a person to mature any further. The role that liminality plays in ongoing Christian formation is not on the radar.

As a result, many churches today have become closed systems stifling the ongoing Christian formation of their members. Willow Creek's *Reveal* study points to this failure.⁴⁹ What is it about the paradigm of Church in the Western Evangelical context that can stifle ongoing Christian formation? As one interested in ongoing Christian

⁴⁷ These problems are discussed in detail in the work: Margaret Harris, "A Special Case of Voluntary Associations? Towards a Theory of Congregational Organization," *The British Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 1998): 602–18, 605.

⁴⁸ Craig Van Korlaar, "50 Examples of Church Mission Statements," *Church Relevance*, N/A, <http://churchrelevance.com/church-mission-statements-examples/>.

⁴⁹ -August 1 2007, *Reveal Where Are You?*, 1st ed. (Barrington, Ill.: Willow Creek Association, 2007).

formation in the Church, I have spent much time perusing church staff openings labeled ‘pastor of formation’ or ‘pastor of spiritual formation’ only to be much disappointed. According to their job descriptions, these churches have confused discipleship with ongoing Christian formation, while not understanding what the term means.

In an effort to stay relevant, many churches have recently adopted the term ‘spiritual formation’ thanks to institutions like George Fox Seminary and *Renovare*. Yet in their desire to become relevant, they may have used new wine in an old wineskin. As I read job descriptions for pastor of spiritual formation, it is usually a new ‘relevant’ way to say an old thing: namely pastor of small groups, pastor of Christian education, or pastor of assimilation.

In an interview with Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, *Christianity Today* asked them the difference between the two terms. Their response was:

Spiritual formation in a Christian tradition answers a specific human question: *What kind of person am I going to be?* It is the process of establishing the character of Christ in the person. *Discipleship* as a term has lost its content, and this is one reason why it has been moved aside . . . In our country, on the theological right, discipleship came to mean training people to win souls. And on the left, it came to mean social action—protesting, serving soup lines, doing social deeds. Both of them left out character formation.⁵⁰

When I mention ongoing Christian formation, I am focusing on Foster’s and Willard’s core question of “what kind of person am I going to be.”

Rather than focusing on this essential question, many churches have become a closed system of discipleship. For the conservative it may be evangelism training and for the progressives, social action. These responses overlook the place and process of

⁵⁰ “The Making of the Christian,” *ChristianityToday.com*, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/october/9.42.html>.

liminality to serve the function of ongoing Christian formation. We desire that people are evangelized, since it increases attendance: learning about their Bibles, since it provides us with small group leaders: and serving their church, since it provides ready workers to help keep aspects of church functioning. Then, after they have walked the bases, we want them to reproduce themselves so we can assimilate more people into our non-profit agency. We have literally created a closed circuit or a baseball diamond, and Church becomes a closed system with no room for subversive, prophetic voices, or for those in liminality. Many of those who are tired of the monotonous carousel are leaving the Church.⁵¹

It is not in the organization's interest to upset its hypostatic, closed system that runs so smoothly. Often times an organization does not have adequate resources to be financially viable against subversive acts within its structure. But this closed model of church is an unsustainable one that does not have in mind the faith of future generations but the hypostatic maintenance of its present organization.

This dissertation will not attack and breakdown the use of strategy and mission within the church context, it merely wishes to point towards a general lack of acknowledgement of a major Biblical theme of liminality within these strategies and structures of the Church. There are, no doubt, other ways in which the Church lacks acknowledgement of liminal space. However we do not have time to dissect them all and correct each perspective. This discussion is merely one illustration of the major problem.

⁵¹ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, "Move Forward Ch_1," *Willow Creek Move*, December 6, 2014, willowcreek.com/move/Move_Forward_Ch1.pdf, 9.

Lack of Hospitality

Another illustrative problem within the Church is discomfort with seasons of lament, which have a large place within the liminal posture of the grave. The song book of our Bible, the Psalter, contains many laments. Lament can be defined as, “an act of silent or articulated verbal communication to God in the sense of a protest, or crying, cursing, pleading, sighing (etc.) before, with and against God.”⁵² Sixty-six of the one hundred and fifty Psalms are lament in nature, which is forty-four percent.⁵³ These laments are raw, unedited, and at times offensive. Many of us, including myself, have edited Psalms for public reading. Take Psalm 139, for instance. It is pleasant until you get to the part about God destroying the wicked.⁵⁴

When we compare this percentage of laments found in the Bible’s worship songs to our contemporary Christian song lists from the Church Copyright License (CCLI),⁵⁵ we note a different approach,⁵⁶ we find that only three of those songs are lament in nature. That is only two percent, making our culture disproportionate in what we believe is acceptable to bring to God in worship.

This denial of lament is merely one facet of Christian culture that reflects our lack of acknowledgement and hospitality toward those in liminal spaces. It also reflects our

⁵² Eva Harasta and Brian Brock, *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (London; New York: Continuum, 2009), 62.

⁵³ DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy L., *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2012), 42.

⁵⁴ Ps. 139:19-22

⁵⁵ CCLI is responsible for tracking the copyrighted worship songs that are used on a weekly basis in our Sunday morning worship services.

⁵⁶ Song Select. “CCLI Top 100” <https://us.songselect.com/search/ccli-top-songs> (accessed November 4, 2013).

lack of education in the process and purpose of liminal seasons. If we collect our prayers, sermons, and Bible studies, often times we will see that we are disproportionately emphasizing the happy prosperous seasons of the soul, or praying for their return.⁵⁷

However, in addressing this problem, the danger would be to swing the pendulum the other way and become a place of darkness, solemnity, and sadness. Surely we are a people of hope and joy and our communities should reflect that as our primary identity. We should also be hospitable toward people who are rejoicing and in seasons of plenty, which can also be a season of liminality, if it leads you to a threshold of capacity of some kind. What we need is to be able to worship during times of light and times of darkness.

Walter Brueggemann says, “. . . human life is not simply an articulation of a place in which we find ourselves. It is also a movement from one circumstance to another So we will suggest that the life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the two distinctive movements of faith that are always underway”⁵⁸ He goes on to describe the transitions between orientation to disorientation and from disorientation to new orientation. Within our communities we will have people on both liminal journeys, and both need hospitable space to encounter God in a liminal posture of faith. It is our responsibility to prepare people to encounter liminal spaces.

Lack of Education

There are plenty of works within the Christian milieu devoted to trials. Yet the concept of liminality and the concept of trial are different. Merriam Webster defines trial

⁵⁷ See “full solar spirituality” in Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).

⁵⁸ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 9-10.

as a “trying of one’s endurance, patience, self-control, courage, or power to resist temptation.”⁵⁹ This definition does fit within the context and definition of liminality, for it is a threshold of one’s capacity, so any progress on a developing edge of one’s life will be trying. But trial does not envelop the whole liminal concept. Liminality is the developing threshold of some capacity of your life, a trimming of vice and/or cultivation of virtue.

One can enter into liminality voluntarily and involuntarily. Liminality can be a place of joy and delight as well. A prayer retreat can be a liminal time which takes you to the edges of your known conception of prayer and stretches you, yet can be an enjoyable experience. You can have liminality without the trial, but you cannot have trial without the liminality. Further, the classic content on trials focuses on the purpose of trial being a strengthening of character, but lacks the paradigm of a narrative spirituality that includes the posture of heart and end goal of liminality. The teachings on trial are a mere facet of liminality on which this dissertation wishes to expand and provide a better picture of a narrative spirituality. For if we want a healthy and vibrant church, we need liminality.

The Ramifications: Unsustainable Church

There is a product line at my family’s grocery store called ‘Seventh Generation’. We try to buy this product when we buy cleaning supplies since we like their philosophy. This company wants to do business in a way that is sustainable for those seven generations from ours, instead of living unsustainably on their future. I would argue that the way we are doing church needs to resemble this philosophy.

⁵⁹ “Trial,” in Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms, (Springfield, Ma.: Merriam-Webster, 1984).

It must be said here that I believe the elements of mission, strategic planning, and joy are essential to fulfilling the mission of the Church. I believe in each one of those with all my heart and it is not my intention to argue that the Church should stop any one of these items. Instead, I wish to argue that a paradigm of liminality as a narrative spirituality of the Bible leads to an authentic incarnational mission. Liminality may not, at first, add to the organization's health, but it prepares a "compassionate and receptive soil for the future."⁶⁰

Liminality asks the question: is ongoing Christian formation happening in our church in such a way that seven generations from now people will talk about the theologians, mystics, artists, poets, activists and church planting entrepreneurs we are producing today? What songs have we written that will be sung then? What churches have we planted that will be thriving then? What theological and spiritual works have come from our community that will be read then? What justice issues are we taking on today that will make society better then? And, most importantly: are these works growing out of the soil that has been cultivated by liminal desert wandering in a liminal grave posture?

My aim is to show how acknowledgement of the narrative spirituality of liminality will produce a paradigm for ongoing Christian formation within Church. This acknowledgement will provide hospitable space to those within liminality, which can lead to the education that guides people through liminality. Attention to this process will enrich the Church today and sustainably sow seeds for the Church of tomorrow. It can

⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), "November 12, 1962."

provide them with a legacy of leaders, thinkers, and contemplatives that will shape the Church's response to culture in the present and in the ages to come.

CHAPTER ONE: THE DESERT/WILDERNESS

That is what the Midbar is. A place of utter desolation. In life one does not choose the experience of Midbar. But in Israelite history, often our people, overcome by distress and darkness and the deep gloom of anguish, have been forced to flee into the Midbar. Often men have fled there when it became more frightening to remain at home, for in those places of desolation, at least their enemies could not easily find them. And so these Midbars, these terrains of terror, became, in fact, realms of refuge. Such as the Midbar where our people fled with Moses from bondage in Egypt. In that Midbar, that land of meaninglessness and disorder, of death rather than life, there was neither food nor water. They fully expected to die of thirst and exhaustion. Yet in their experience of the Midbar, they had found both food and water, and they had lived, not died. In the Midbar they had been confronted by God.

—Linny Harris, *Midbar II*

As stated earlier, the Bible uses three major narrative themes to describe liminal space, posture, and mission: desert/wilderness, grave/pit, and exile/pilgrim. These three liminal themes provide a paradigm of narrative spirituality in which God does a transforming work in our souls for the purpose of being a light to the world. These are not the only themes, nor is this the only paradigm, but it is a major one. These themes describe a season of the soul, the posture of heart in faith that brings change, and the mission that can result. The season is desert, the posture is grave, and the mission is pilgrimage.

Our first liminal theme in the narrative spirituality paradigm is that of desert or wilderness. The desert is a liminal season or place in which space for solitude is created, voluntarily or involuntarily, and an encounter happens that defines the trajectory of the next phase of our journey in life. In this solitude we are separate from the familiar and/or comfortable in some manner which creates the opportunity to learn God's wisdom for the next phase of the journey.

The theme of desert is a universal one. There seems to be so much about desert that is applicable and transferrable across culture, religion, geography, or age. The desert symbolizes tough times in our lives, which we call trials. But what if the desert could actually be a good thing as well as a tough thing? Do we need to expand our definition and classification of deserts? I think so.

The desert is an acknowledged theme in Christian culture and its theology of ‘trial’. The desert, while inclusive of trial, is more than trial. It is the liminal space of solitude and can be either painful or joyous. The desert is any situation that brings you to the edge of your known resources, your developing edge, and offers the opportunity for ongoing Christian formation through maturation. Perhaps you enter liminal space through a difficult trial situation that brings you to the edge of your faith. Other times you may enter into a prayer retreat and come to the edge of your understanding of prayer. Both are liminal space because of the nature of coming to a threshold of a current capacity in which one has the opportunity to grow into.

Word Study

The Hebrew word for wilderness or desert is *midbar*, and has its roots in the word *mi*, meaning ‘out of’ or ‘from’, and either *davar* meaning to ‘bring order’ or *dabar* which means ‘to speak’.¹ In the Genesis creation account, God brings order out of chaos, and desolation through speaking.² Symbolically, the desert was a place of solitude, in which to hear God speak. The spoken words of God or the breath of God brings life, order, and justice.

¹ Thomas Jude Germinario, *The Year of Jubilee* (Thomas Jude Germinario, n.d.), 193.

² Gen. 1.

In the New Testament, we find the word used for ‘wilderness’ (another way of thinking of desert) is *eremos*. The meaning of the word is an isolated or solitary place.³ The root of the concept of *eremos* is ‘abandonment’.⁴ *Eremos*, while a physical location came to be known not as “a certain locality on the map of the Middle East, but the place of God’s mighty acts, significant for all believers of all times and places.”⁵ There is a literal understanding of the word wilderness referring to locations, and yet there is also a metaphorical understanding of the word as well, referring to certain characteristics of God and those who pursue Him.

These definitions are important to our study of liminal space. Liminal means threshold, or boundary. The *midbar* or *eremos* is a literal place where we have crossed all human boundaries, arriving in empty nothingness where there are no points of orientation. They then become symbolic of liminal space and ambiguity, Backhaus notes they are, “shattering the order associated with the domestic human world, where you come to the end of what you have depended upon to give continuity and meaning in your life ... In short, the liminality of the desert and mountain terrain redefines every boundary giving shape to one’s life.”⁶

³ Robert Barry Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 39.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (Norwich: SCM Press, 1963), 14.

⁶ Gary Backhaus and John Murungi, *Symbolic Landscapes* (New York: Springer, 2008), 71.

Geography Study

When the Bible refers to the desert or wilderness, there are two places to which the Bible may be referring. The first is the Sinai Peninsula, a place which is just east of Egypt and south of Israel. It is a triangular-shaped peninsula about size of West Virginia⁷ with two arms of the Red Sea flanking the land on the east and west. The Sinai Peninsula was neither Egyptian nor Canaanite.⁸ This desert was a literal liminal space.

The book of Deuteronomy gives a description of the geography of the Sinai Peninsula saying, “then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the *great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions.*” [italics mine]⁹

The most prominent section of the peninsula, the central section, consisted of a limestone plateau which occupied two-thirds of the peninsula.¹⁰ Its northern most section is formed by a series of mountains ranging from 2,058 feet to 3,200 feet. The southern limit of the plateau also consists of mountains reaching 5,000 feet.¹¹ Between these two mountain limits is the *Badiyah et Tih*, or the ‘Desert of the Wanderings’.¹² It consists

⁷ James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai : The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Deut. 8:14-16 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Hoffmeier, 36.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

mostly of gravel with no vegetation or water¹³ and it is here that the Biblical account of the Israelites' desert wandering takes place.

The Judean Wilderness, the alternate location, was similar in wildness, a “strip of land ... ten to twenty miles wide ... [that] lies between the hill country of Judah and the Rift Valley.”¹⁴ It is a “desolate variegated landscape of plateaus, rounded hills, dramatic scrapes, deep canyons, and cliffs.”¹⁵ This area is known as the “rain shadow”¹⁶ because it experiences so little rain. The terrain is tremendously steep experiencing a drop in elevation from 2,600 feet above sea level to 1,100 feet below sea level, which is a 3,700 foot drop in a mere thirteen miles.¹⁷ The Judean wilderness was seen as a dangerous land filled with “wild beasts”¹⁸ like “boars, jackals, wolves, foxes, leopards, and hyenas”¹⁹ as well as “wild bees.”²⁰ It is within these two places that the Biblical liminal themes of desert/wilderness arise. While we can get a clear picture of the desert from these descriptions, the theological concept of the desert is often misunderstood.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Charles H. Dyer and Gregory A. Hatteberg, *The New Christian Traveler's Guide to the Holy Land* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 121-22.

¹⁵ Carl Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 49.

¹⁶ Dyer, Hatteberg, 122.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark 1:13.

¹⁹ Kenneth Samuel Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 26.

²⁰ Ibid., 21. As well as Mark 1:6.

Misconception of Desert

In my experience as a pastor, I have counseled numerous people in desert situations and found a common misunderstanding about its purpose. There is a perception that desert times are to “make us stronger.” While they certainly can accomplish this goal, the purpose of becoming stronger is an end in itself. In this limited paradigm, we become stronger so that we may endure future trials of greater intensity. The ends and means form a circular pattern void of meaning.

The church may be quick to acknowledge a trial as a desert situation, but may not provide the education of an end goal outside of endurance for the sake of endurance. Thus, hospitality toward those within liminal space is diminished because we believe desert liminal space is a cyclical season void of purpose outside of itself. The Church, lacking an education of the purpose and process of liminality hopes those within “get over it” and become productive members of the community once again. However, understanding people’s experiences of the desert in the Bible can guide us to a more helpful path.

The Desert Theme in the Bible

When looking at the desert stories of the Bible, there are some common elements, and some unique elements of each story. There are many stories of solitude in the wilderness: Elijah on Mount Carmel, John the Baptist in the Judean wilderness, Paul in the wilderness of Arabia, John on the Island of Patmos to name just a few. However, we will focus on the stories of Hagar, the nation of Israel, and Jesus which can summarize the common elements of the desert experience.

Hagar

Our first encounter with the word *midbar* happens in Genesis 16:7 when Hagar flees from Sarai. Sarai was angry and jealous toward Hagar and her child because she was barren.

The Biblical record recounts Abram and Sarai heading through Egypt on their travel to Canaan, but Abram feared the Egyptians would murder him to take his beautiful wife Sarai. So Abram convinces Sarai to lie and say she is his sister. Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem because of her beauty, but also takes on the judgment of God for taking someone else's wife, even though he was unaware. Pharaoh figures out that Sarai is Abram's wife and angrily sends them both on their way in order to stop the judgment of Yahweh.²¹

Hagar was believed to be a gift from Pharaoh to Abram and Sarai. "According to the Midrash, Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh, who, seeing what great miracles God had done for Sarai's sake, said: "It is better for Hagar to be a slave in Sarah's house than mistress in her own."²²

Sarai, however, unable to have children, presents Hagar to Abram so that Sarai may bear a child through her, and she does. But Sarai becomes angry and jealous of Hagar and drives her out into the *midbar*. Hagar fled via the way of Shur,²³ which according to early excavations of this area is a "narrow strip of arable land [that] served

²¹ Gen. 12:10-20.

²² "Hagar," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7021-hagar>.

²³ Gen 16:7.

as a well-established point of access to Egypt by travelers on the route from Canaan across the Sinai.”²⁴ It is very likely that she was headed back home to Egypt.

On her way she encounters the angel of the LORD as she sits by a well in the *midbar*. Hagar is encouraged to go back to Sarai and submit to her. Hagar’s blessing will be a nation that comes from her child. She is to name the son, Ishmael: which means ‘the LORD hears’.

In the wilderness of Shur, Hagar has solitude away from Abram and Sarai. In this solitude she encounters the Angel of the Lord who speaks to her and changes her trajectory from going back to the familiar Egypt and abandoning her son to returning to her new home and raising her son to become a great nation.

Israel

The story of the wanderings in the *midbar* recorded in Exodus and Numbers, becomes a major defining story in the narrative of the nation of Israel. After spending 400 years in slavery to the Egyptians, God raises up Moses to free his people. “When Pharaoh let the Israelites go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’”²⁵ Just as Hagar desired to return to the comfort of Egypt, now Israel will, even though harshly enslaved, desire to return to Egypt on many occasions. God however intentionally led the Israelites into a dead end. The Red Sea and the harsh

²⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Israel: Ancient Kingdom Or Late Invention?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 113.

²⁵ Exod. 13:17 (NRSV).

midbar of the Sinai Peninsula were in front of them and the harsh *midbar* of Shur and Pharaoh's armies behind them.

This time would prove to be very harsh and if they had gone the way of the Philistines, the *via Maris*, they would have the option of a convenient highway back to Egypt and the old way of living and thinking. Instead God leads them into the *midbar* where they will have to trust Him for their survival. God was leading them straight into the *midbar* with the purpose to test, humble, and discipline his people.²⁶

The Israelites cross the Red Sea on dry ground and watch the sea swallow up Pharaoh's armies behind them. God encounters them in the wilderness and the result was "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses."²⁷ Moses then records the mighty act of God in a Psalm²⁸ for the Israelites to remember what God did.

God leads them away from the Red Sea,²⁹ and farther from the initial miracle of his protection and provision. They walk three days into the wilderness of Shur only to find themselves thirsty without anything to drink, so they complain,³⁰ and forget what God did a mere three days ago. But God, being faithful, provides a branch to make the bitter water of *Marah* sweet for them to drink.

²⁶ William Richard Stegner, "Wilderness and Testing in the Scrolls and in Matthew 4:1-11," *Biblical Research* 12 (January 1, 1967): 18-27.

²⁷ Exod. 14:31 (NRSV).

²⁸ Exod. 15:1-19.

²⁹ Exod. 15:22.

³⁰ Exod. 15:24.

Again God leads them away from the water miracle only to hear more complaints for food.³¹ They long for Egypt again, for the familiar. Again, God who is faithful provides manna, bread from heaven, to rain upon the ground every non-Sabbath morning for forty years.³²

The Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites and they fight back. Miraculously when Moses lifts his hands in prayer, the Israelites prevailed, but when he tired and let his arms down, the Amalekites prevailed. So Aaron and Hur held his arms up for him and the LORD gave victory to the Israelites.

They move on to Mount Sinai to receive the gift of the *Torah*, the law of God. God has been preparing them to receive the law. But as we see communicated, they engage in idolatry, worshiping an image of a calf that they believe was the one who performed the miracles in the *midbar* behind them.³³ The lifestyle of Egypt was still deep within their hearts and they needed the experience of the *midbar* to cleanse it from them in order to receive the ways of God.

Reflecting on this story, the Jewish philosopher Philo said about desert experiences:

He who is about to receive the holy laws must first cleanse his soul and purge away the deep set stains which it has contracted through contact with the motley promiscuous horde of men in cities. And to this he cannot attain except by dwelling apart, nor that at once but only long afterwards, and not till the marks

³¹ Exod. 16:1-3.

³² Exod. 16:12.

³³ Exod. 32:4.

which his old transgressions have imprinted on him gradually grown faint, melted away and disappeared.³⁴

In the wilderness, Israel had the solitude away from Egypt. In the wilderness they encounter the Lord miraculously working on their behalf which changes their trajectory from going back to the slavery of Egypt to become a great nation in which God can reveal Himself to the nations.

Jesus

Jesus spends his first thirty years of life in almost complete obscurity, and then is proclaimed to be the Christ by John the Baptist, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit at His baptism. We are ready for big things at this point. We are ready to see the Kingdom of God break into this world, but instead the Spirit ‘leads’ Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus is benched.

In the three different Gospel accounts there are three different verbs used in the ‘leading’ of Jesus into the wilderness. In Matthew Jesus is ‘led up’: in Greek *anago*. Literally this word is made of two Greek words, *ana* which is “a primary preposition and adverb; properly *up* ... it often means (by implication) ... *intensity*,”³⁵ and *ago*, which means to bring, drive, or induce. Luke merely uses the verb *ago* without the prefix *ana*. This verb is not like when we experience an inner nudge and try to decide whether or not to act upon it. It is not a passive feeling within Jesus that causes Him to act. The same word is used in Acts 12:4 where Peter is arrested and led up (*anago*) into prison by King Herod.

³⁴ Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *Eve’s Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2003), 110.

³⁵ "303." *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*.

Mark uses an even more intense verb *ekballo*, which means to cast out. This verb is made of two words as well, *ek* which means point of origin from where motion started, and *ballo* which means to throw, or hurl, in contrast to striking.³⁶ Jesus is literally cast, or thrown into, the wilderness. This is the same verb used when Jesus casts out the money changers from the Temple in John 2 with a whip, and when Jesus casts out a demon.

All three accounts of Jesus being driven into the wilderness are the result of the Holy Spirit resting upon Him at his baptism. Luke says that Jesus went in full of the Holy Spirit, and exited full of the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁷ This result is not quite what we would think of when being filled with the Holy Spirit, an *ekballo* experience. “The first thing the Spirit does in to *drive* Jesus into the wilderness, the expression not implying reluctance of Jesus to go into so wild a place, but intense preoccupation of mind.”³⁸

Interestingly for our study, Paul uses *ekballo* when he quotes the Genesis 21:10 passage of Hagar being driven into the wilderness by Sarai: “But what does the scripture say? “Drive out (*ekballo*) the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.”³⁹ Hagar, Israel, and Jesus are all driven by God into the wilderness. We can see here that this occurrence is a natural and expected part of the journey of faith.

Jesus then spends forty days in the desert fasting, which is akin to the forty years in the desert that Israel spent. Jesus takes on the failed role of Israel, and does it as God

³⁶ "Cast." M.A, William E. Vine, and Thomas Nelson Publishers. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Limited, 2003.

³⁷ Luke 4:1, 4:14.

³⁸ Wuest, 25.

³⁹ Gal. 4:30 (NRSV).

intended. It then says that Jesus was tempted by Satan. The English gives us the idea that Jesus spent forty days fasting and *then* Satan tempted him, but according to Wuest, the verb tense is a “present tense participle speaking of continuous action.”⁴⁰ Jesus was tempted by Satan the entire time and at the end of the forty days, seeing his time was short, attempted his worst.⁴¹

Our understanding of the word temptation is also skewed and inhibits our interpretation of this passage properly. Commonly the understanding is a “strong desire to do something wrong.”⁴² But a deeper look at the Biblical Greek proves otherwise. The verb *peirazomai* means to “try intentionally ... with the purpose of discovering what good or evil, power or weakness, was in a person.”⁴³ Because human beings are so inclined, like Israel, to fail the test it came to be known merely as a “solicitation to do evil.”⁴⁴ As Wuest puts it so eloquently “The Last Adam was being put to the test to show that He was equipped and ready for his ministry as prophet, priest, and king. The universe was looking on, God the Father and the holy angels, the fallen angels, and the demons. What a battle royal was waged there. What tremendous things were at issue ...”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Wuest, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴² “Temptation,” *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴³ Wuest, 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The scriptures also say that angels ministered to Jesus. Mark gives the understanding that angels were constantly ministering to Him in the wilderness⁴⁶ while Matthew only records angels coming after the fact suddenly.⁴⁷ Both are true for Jesus was not abandoned until the cross experience.⁴⁸ The purpose here is to show us a vivid picture of a “spiritual crisis: intense preoccupation, instinctive retreat into uncongenial, grim solitudes, temptation, struggle, fierce and protracted, issuing in weakness, calling for preternatural aid.”⁴⁹ The angels were the presence of good and Satan was the presence of evil at war with one another.

Then the recorded temptations come, historical and archetypal in nature. These are the three temptations that human beings commonly face. Henri Nouwen sums them up as the temptation to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful.⁵⁰ Richard Rohr sums up the three temptations as the need to be relevant, the need to be right, and the need to be powerful.⁵¹ Demetrius Dumm sums up the temptation as a deterrent from completing the journey and to settle for early success and popularity.⁵²

⁴⁶ Mark 1:13 (NRSV).

⁴⁷ Matt. 4:11 (NRSV).

⁴⁸ Matt. 27:46.

⁴⁹ Wuest, 27.

⁵⁰ The three sections of Nouwen’s book: Henri J. M. Nouwen *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), sum up each temptation.

⁵¹ Richard Rohr, and John Bookser Feister. *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), 103.

⁵² Demetrius Dumm. *Flowers in the Desert: A Spirituality of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 73-4.

Matthew gives the order differently than Luke. Matthew has the order of the three temptations as: stones to bread, top of the Temple, kingdoms of the world. Luke however has the order differently: stones to bread, kingdoms of the world, and top of Temple. The difference in order probably comes in the difference in the message that is being communicated. Matthew is written to Jews and has Jesus identifying with Israel in the desert, while Luke was written to Gentiles and has Jesus identifying with Adam and Eve. Both accounts are saying that the previous representatives for humanity failed, and now Jesus has come to put things right.

Luke has Jesus face the three temptations in the order that Eve faced them⁵³: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, [stones to bread] and that it was a delight to the eyes, [kingdoms of the world] and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, [top of Temple] she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.”⁵⁴

Matthew has Jesus facing these temptations as surrogate Israel. “It is clear that Jesus is here re-living the experience of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. This temptations scene is a summary of all the temptations ever experienced by Jesus.”⁵⁵ If we look at the ways that Israel failed in the desert, we can see a picture of Jesus overcoming these failures in his desert experience. Israel complained for food and God gave manna [stones to bread], Israel was not comfortable waiting for Moses to come back with a revelation from God so they created their own image of a calf to worship, [top of Temple] and

⁵³ Everett Ferguson. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 138.

⁵⁴ Gen. 3:6 (NRSV).

⁵⁵ Dumm, 73.

Israel, when seeing the kingdom of Canaan and the giants who walked there, did not believe that God would give it to them and ran back into the desert [kingdoms of the world].

These three sets of three temptations all stem from the three basic temptations of humanity at all times, the desire to grasp for pleasure, power, and prestige. There is nothing wrong with pleasure, power, or prestige inherently; it is the grasping for it, the temptation to take it on our own terms, at our own disposal, and at the expense of another. These temptations are all different ways to take control of our life and avoid transformational liminal spaces.

In the wilderness, Jesus has the solitude away from the baptism proclamation. In the wilderness he encounters the temptation to grasp at a shortcut to the end goal of glorification. However, he overcomes this temptation and solidifies his trajectory to glorification through the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection events.

Common Elements

There are three common elements to the stories above, as well as to other wilderness stories in the Bible. These three elements are: solitude, encounter, and trajectory.

Solitude

Maria Boulding writes about the definition of the desert in her book *The Coming of God*. She says, “The desert in our lives is the place where in our poverty, our sin and our need we come to know the Lord ... it is the place of essential confrontations, where the irrelevancies are stripped away and the elemental things become all-important, where

the truth in our hearts is revealed.”⁵⁶ She continues, “Our desert is any situation of stripping, of hopelessness, of chaos; it is the place of sterility and loneliness . . .”⁵⁷ The desert is the place where we encounter the solitude needed to hear God’s voice of perspective on our current entanglement with the world’s temptations.

This solitude can come in the form of trial and pain, or this solitude can come in the face of joy. Hagar’s desert experience brought comfort while Israel’s brought pain. Jesus’ desert experience was unique to his vocation and person as the Son of God, yet still we see solitude, encounter, and a trajectory set.

A desert experience can be a time of separation away from our normality of life in order to see a greater perspective. A funeral is a tragic season when people slow to think of the gift of life, family, and friendship. A retreat experience is a “spiritual high” experience where we are brought to the edge of what we know and understand about the retreat topic. Here we learn and grow separate from the normality of everyday life’s demands and responsibilities that can keep us distracted from our developing edge. But a desert experience is also a time to encounter God.

Encounter

Henri Nouwen says that solitude is the place of encounter.⁵⁸ We encounter God and our self. In our lives there have been many protective barriers of false identity erected over time, supported with “scaffoldings” of friends, phone calls, meetings, entertainments

⁵⁶ Boulding, 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (New York: Random House, 1991), 16.

and distractions.⁵⁹ In the desert this scaffolding is stripped away by God. This stripping of scaffolding in the desert situation can become painful. The silence of the desert is a silence from the usual protective barriers. Nouwen says that the desert is the place of conversion, not in an evangelical born-again way, but in a death of old ways of living way.⁶⁰

In a tragic desert experience we encounter truth in a painful way, perhaps in a way that we were in denial about previously but can no longer ignore. A divorce season can be a painful desert for those who may have been ignoring the problems of the marriage, and are now forced to engage in the developing edge to save a marriage.

A joyous encounter may be taking a walk through the neighborhood without the distraction of a media device. Here on the walk you encounter a truth about God as you think and pray about something, or possibly hear the voice of God speak into your heart concerning present issues. But whatever the encounter, it affects our trajectory.

Trajectory

Our trajectory is often on auto-pilot, run by current paradigms of thinking and believing. Those paradigms can be healthy or unhealthy, determining whether our trajectory is good or bad. If we have much faulty scaffolding in place, the trajectory of our life is on auto-pilot to protect these scaffoldings and ignore the invitation to desert solitude. Thomas Merton speaks of this auto-pilot saying,

There are certain imperatives of culture and of conscience which appear pure on the surface and are in fact bestial at their roots. The greatest inhumanities have been perpetuated in the name of “humanity,” “civilization,” “progress,”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

“freedom,” “my country,” and of course “God.” This reminds us that in the cultivation of an inner spiritual consciousness there is a perpetual danger of self-deception, narcissism, self-righteous evasion of truth.⁶¹

These desert solitude times are needed in order to gain perspective on the many different religious and social facades that define our current trajectory. If “evil gains its power in disguise,”⁶² then the desert is a place where the faulty illusions about who we are fall away and we are left in the poverty of the reality of our sin, and helplessness to do anything about it. Matthew calls this being poor in spirit, and as we read from Israel’s experience in the desert, this is God’s purpose of the desert, to humble and test us to know what is in our hearts, and what trajectory we are on, in order to adjust this trajectory.⁶³

Desert is more than trial, although it envelops the concept. The desert is an opportunity of solitude to hear God’s voice, honestly assess our current capacity, or lack thereof, and receive from God adjustments to our auto pilot accordingly. This reception often comes in hearing God’s voice in the solitude of the desert.

The Hebrew word for desert, *midbar*, has a root meaning ‘to speak’. Desert experiences today are times when we encounter the needed solitude in life with which to look at the trajectory of who we are becoming on auto-pilot and make necessary adjustments. These times can be intentional and joy-filled, such as a retreat experience that encourages us to reflect upon life, church services that provide us space to silently pray, an intentional discipline of engaging God, or unexpected glimpses of God

⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1975).

⁶² Rohr and Feister, 3.

⁶³ Deut. 8:2.

throughout our day. Or it can be a time of study where we encounter a threshold of our understanding of a certain concept and learn to expand it.

Or these times can be sorrow-filled, tragic, and absolutely unintentional. This desert stripping can be physical, such as a job loss, death, a physical ailment or it can be mental, such as depression, mental illness, or anguish caused by difficult decisions or intentional mental space consecrated and dedicated to God alone. The desert can be relational, such as emotional distance from someone you love, divorce, lack of forgiveness, or a consecrated silent retreat away from the one's we love. The desert can be spiritual, such as spiritual affliction and oppression or a wrestling time with God in prayer over areas of our life. Most likely it is a mixture of many of these for we are holistic beings connected on these levels through and through. One affects another; much like disturbing one arm of a mobile upsets the rest of the mobile through its connectedness.

Either way, joyful or painful, a desert adjusts the auto-pilot trajectory of our life or solidifies the auto-pilot trajectory of our life. The difference maker is the posture of heart we take while in the desert.

Addressing the Problem

As stated earlier, the problem within the Church that I am addressing is a lack of acknowledgement of liminal space, a lack of hospitality toward those in liminal space, and a lack of education of the process and purpose of liminal space. This deficit results in the stifling of ongoing Christian formation at the cost of the Church's future leaders and contemplatives.

While having a proper understanding about the desert helps us in all three problem areas, it specifically advances us along in the acknowledgement and hospitality problems most.

Acknowledgement

So often in our pragmatic society, liminal times of wilderness can be seen as a total waste of productive time. Would not God rather have us working on a ministry or pursuing our vocation? There is not an acknowledgement of the value of the desert. Yet, how you get something determines who you will be when you have it. This is the value of the desert, an opportunity to shape the “who.” The “how” is discussed in the next chapter.

The church today may acknowledge part of desert, but the acknowledgement is incomplete since the understanding of process and purpose piece is skewed with the cyclical monotony of trial for trial’s sake.

Having a proper understanding of the desert’s purpose will remove the monotony of trial for strength for future trial’s sake and raise the bar towards something higher, which is solitude for the ‘seventh generation’s’ sake. When we encounter the solitude of the desert it is the opportunity for ongoing Christian formation, which enriches the present Church, which therefore enriches the future Church as well. The major difference is the end goal. Ongoing Christian formation is more concerned with forming all our character to match Christ’s for the sake of the world, where trial theology is more concerned with the sole virtue of fortitude. While fortitude is valuable, it is not the only virtue that contributes to Christian maturity. Expanding ‘desert is trial’ to ‘desert is solitude’ will encompass both the joy and pain of solitude and give a more complete picture of the end goal of either situation.

The desert is important in the paradigm of narrative spirituality because it provides the opportunity of solitude. Whether this opportunity is seized upon depends on the posture of our heart as we walk through solitude, which will be discussed more in the next chapter. However, having a fruitful posture may depend on whether we receive hospitable support along the way.

Hospitality

The devaluing and incomplete understanding of the desert leads to a lack of hospitality within the Church toward those who are in such experiences. Merton claims our busy existence:

Is one which is geared in many ways to help us evade any need to face this inner, silent self. We live in a state of constant semi attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise of what goes on around us all the time ... We just float along in the general noise. Resigned and indifferent, we share semiconsciously in the mindless mind of Muzak and radio commercials which passes for "reality."⁶⁴

T.S. Elliot agrees, noting of our culture,

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not in the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or on the rain land,
For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among the
noise and deny the voice.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Book of Hours*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, illustrated ed. (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2007), 148.

⁶⁵ Part V of *Ash Wednesday*, Sunil Kumar Sarker, *T.S. Eliot: Poetry, Plays and Prose* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2000), 117.

Within such a culture solitude is often seen as fruitless endeavors to be saved for cloistered monks and hippie artists. Yet solitude is not a luxury for the super religious nor is it antisocial behavior for the oddballs. We need, as Philo stated, separation from these influences so that we may gain the perspective necessary to think critically of them, knowing which ones are entanglements to our souls in the present time in order for our auto-pilot trajectory to be influenced for good.

Our culture, including religious culture often times, becomes bent on removing these spaces from our life since it cannot capitalize upon them. Thomas Merton said, “We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest.”⁶⁶ The path out of this lack of hospitality is education about the benefits of solitude and the desert.

Education

Solitude provides much needed contemplative space. As Merton said, “Contemplation, then, is a gradual interiorizing of consciousness, a going inside to quiet our minds, calm our hearts, and move toward deeper levels of our own nature. It is aided by regular intervals of solitude and silence, stillness and serenity that allow our lives to be

⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition*, 50th Anniversary (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 148.

listening to the ever speaking mystery of God.”⁶⁷ Solitude is quite the antithesis of culture’s bent to strain every human desire in order to cater to it.

But within such a society, the value of solitude has never been greater. The space to encounter the places in which we are broken and to let God recreate us and build his character within us is an essential journey on to the deeper places of our faith formation. This need is why there are so many frustrated Christians who are stuck in their faith development. Many have never been provided ample space, nor informed that this space was necessary, for ongoing formation of character.

Conclusions

As a pastor for fifteen years, I have been a part of many funerals. They are heart-wrenching times of loss and separation where we feel like we are cast out into a wilderness experience, yet here in the face of the heart-breaking reality of loss, I find many people silently reflecting upon life and God for the first time in years. Why?

In the desert times of our life, we find the space and the solitude to reflect upon life in its current state and our role within it, and broaden our understanding of what ‘reality’ is. We learn of the petty idolatries of our heart in order to release them and take firmer hold upon God. He becomes more real to us because we have learned a new name for him through the experience of his character firsthand.

Jesus was tempted to take the shortcuts away from the desert experience of a three year ministry, painful crucifixion, and crushing end in a tomb. Satan tempted him with immediate success bypassing the desert. But Jesus knew the message of the desert: How

⁶⁷ Merton, *Book of Hours*, 25.

you get something determines who you are when you arrive. God often leads us the ‘long way’ through the desert, instead of the *via Maris* which conveniently provides us a highway back to old ways of slavery thinking and living that are secure and comfortable, even though harsh and enslaving.

Jesus describes this ‘long way’ through the desert in the passages immediately following his temptation: The Sermon on the Mount.⁶⁸ What is important here is Jesus’ opening beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁶⁹ Rohr describes those who are poor in spirit as those who have been excluded from the Pharisaical religious system.⁷⁰ The poor in spirit have an advantage of not being tied up in the Pharisaical religious system and can start from very real transparent places with God.⁷¹ The last shall be first because the system that was being used to try to come in first place was broken.⁷²

Many of our religious systems today are longing for the shortcut to success. We also long to skip over the desert experiences of Christian formation and move on to the success of having a thriving ministry. The desert, however, puts us in a place of solitude in order for us to see our character as it truly is, which will give us the perspective to see what character issues God is working on in our life. Without this perspective we easily

⁶⁸ Matt. 5-7.

⁶⁹ Matt. 5:3.

⁷⁰ Rohr, 8.

⁷¹ Matt. 21:31.

⁷² Rohr, 8; Matt. 19:30.

can go busily about our life and ministry ignoring the very thing that God wishes to address.

It is very possible, with present metrics of ministry success, to “do ministry” in such a way that our own personal formation is unnecessary. We can use business leadership techniques, emotional services, multi-faceted ministries for all ages, fancy buildings and the like as the foundation to grow a church large rather quickly. But to use these techniques as the foundation to grow a church large quickly robs the ministry of its power for deep character transformation, for it is building upon the shifting sand of the world and puts a Christian façade upon them. We must first understand that our world and its methods are not interested in the formation of character and the deepening of individuals. By the nature of the world, it is only interested in pursuing power, pleasure, and prestige. If we use the same tactics to vie for people’s attention, our byproduct will be the same. We may have the power of large attendance, the pleasure of large budgets, and the prestige of being the excellent church on the block, but we do so at the expense of our people’s formation, and because people are not being formed, we also rob future generations of deep thinkers, writers, artists, and mystics.

I am not saying that we dismiss these, but use them as tools instead of foundations. The foundation to build upon is the way of living that Jesus taught, especially in Matthew five to seven, which builds character that acts as salt and light within the world. I have found that Christian leaders reproduce who they are, not what they teach or accomplish. Therefore it is imperative to the sustainability of the church for future generations that we focus on ongoing Christian formation as the foundation of

ministry. This dissertation focuses on the role of liminality in ongoing Christian formation.

Martin Luther King on the night of his death said, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”⁷³ Martin Luther King knew how to live in liminal space. He knew the spiritual implications of desert wandering. The liminal space of desert is any situation where we reach a threshold of one’s capacity of understanding, faith, knowledge, skill, experience, or love: a good book where we reach the threshold of our understanding, or a time of spiritual dryness where we reach a threshold of our faith in God, a situation in which we reach the threshold of our love and need to extend forgiveness. May the Church learn how to guide others through such desert situations from such a great man as King, even though we may not see the fruits of our labors in the present age.

However, merely going into a desert time of solitude does not guarantee that one will do so with the right spirit or posture and come out the other end with a deeper Christian character. The Israelites first generation of wilderness wanderers all died in disobedience far from the Promised Land, save two.⁷⁴ How you walk through the desert matters just as much as the desert path itself. The next chapter focuses on the spirit with

⁷³ Darrell J. Fasching, Dell deChant, and David M. Lantigua, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 253.

⁷⁴ Num. 32:13.

which one walks through the desert and is illustrated with the picture of Grave/Pit. This is the liminal posture of faith and obedience to God when all is dark.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PIT/GRAVE

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?
Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise

—Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*

For God alone my soul waits in solitude; from him comes my salvation.

—Psalm 62:1

The above poem illustrates the liminal spirituality of the grave or the pit, and our redemption from it that we see repeated over and over in the scriptures. It is seen in the story of Joseph, and illustrated in the story of Noah. David cries to God for rescue from it in the Psalms, Jonah seeks escape from the belly of a fish. The prophets were imprisoned in pits, and Daniel was left for lion food within one. Jesus was dead and buried in one and

both Peter and Paul were locked in prisons. John was left for dead on an island. The pit or grave is a recurring theme throughout the Bible.

The theme of grave is a universal one, yet misunderstood. The concept of grave transcends culture, religion, geography, or age. Every human being shares this concept in common with another since we all die and we all experience the death of loved ones. We properly see death as a thief since it robs people of life and loved ones. But what if there were more to death than mere robbery? What if the theme of the grave had something to teach us?

The image of the pit or grave is the image of helplessness, despair, hopelessness, death, and finality. This image is the perceived ‘last say’ of our life as we rest surrendered in a grave. It plays an important role in understanding the transforming power of the desert solitude in our lives.

The theme of grave is all throughout the Bible and is acknowledged for its robbery and evil. For the Christian, though, the grave has been conquered and has lost its sting.¹ And while we mourn a grave, we do not mourn like those who have no hope.

The grave is also teacher to us. A grave is any situation that brings one face to face with both our human inability and God’s power over our hopelessness. In the grave we learn a posture of heart that leans towards the reality of God’s faithfulness over the seeming finality of our hopeless situations. The grave teaches us the posture of heart we are to have in order for the desert space of solitude to bear its transforming work on our souls. All of life seems to be made up of smaller grave situations in which the preparation of our faith for the final act of surrender to God in the grave takes place.

¹ Hos. 13:14, 1 Cor. 15:55.

In an interview Demetrius Dumm says, “When we love, we die a little bit, long before we die. If you die to yourself enough, then real dying won't be a problem, just more of the same. But if you're always protecting yourself, always clinging, then it's going to be tough. Life will have to be torn out of your grasp.”² The smaller deaths of our lives are teaching us something greater about love and selflessness. Nancy Copeland-Payton spells out in concrete terms the implications of this learning process:

With each day's succession of losses, one following another, we learn about journeying through the valley of the shadow of death. We learn to hold things and others lightly in gently cupped hands. We learn to say thank you each day. We learn we must name and acknowledge our losses before we can understand what we haven't lost. Then we can mourn our true losses. In due time, we learn to let go of our losses and not to clutch life, but to open our hands to let life flow through our fingers.³

We must keep in mind that the Bible uses three major narrative themes to describe liminal space, posture, and mission: desert/wilderness, grave/pit, and exile/pilgrim. These three liminal themes provide a paradigm of narrative spirituality in which God does a transforming work in our souls for the work of being a light to the world. These themes describe a season of the soul, the posture of faith that brings change, and the mission that can result. The season is desert, the posture is grave, and the mission is pilgrimage.

Our second liminal theme in the narrative spirituality paradigm is that of grave. The grave is any situation in which we perceive our own helplessness, learn a liminal posture of faith in which we silence the inner desire for comfort and control, and see

² Demetrius Dumm, “Into the Mystic with John: An Interview with Demetrius Dumm, O.S.B.,” *USCatholic.org*, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/prayer-and-sacraments/2008/07/into-mystic-with-john>.

³ Nancy Copeland-Payton, *The Losses of Our Lives: The Sacred Gifts of Renewal in Everyday Loss* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2009), 102.

vindication in some manner. In this silence we see the severe addiction we have to power and comfort and learn greater faith for silencing their overpowering voices.

Word Study

The word translated pit in the Bible is the word *bor*, which has multiple nuances and meanings. The word *bor* is used sixty-nine times in the Old Testament and is translated into pit, cistern, dungeon, and well.⁴ Our English verb ‘to bore’, which means to carve out or dig out, shares roots from this Hebrew word.⁵ This word is commonly used for a dug out chamber for holding water which later came to symbolize the place of the dead.

The Greek word used for pit or cistern is *phrear*. It is used in John 4 of the well where Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman about worship. It also carries the Old Testament connotations of the place of the dead when it is used in the Book of Revelation with the adjective ‘bottomless’ added to the front. This term in the Greek is *abyssos* which is made of two words: *a* as a “negative particle” and *bythos* meaning deep.⁶ Together they mean depthless, without bottom, intensely deep. It is used as a description of the immeasurable depth of the underworld, or Sheol.⁷ Thus the phrase indicates a metaphorical cistern without a bottom.

⁴ “bor,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*.

⁵ James Samuelson and William Crookes, eds., *Quarterly Journal of Science, and Annals of Mining, Metallurgy, Engineering, Industrial Arts, Manufactures, and Technology* (London: John Churchill and Sons, 1866), 230.

⁶ “abyss,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

These definitions are important to our study of liminal space. Liminal means threshold or boundary, and just as the desert is the threshold of our understanding, the grave is reaching the threshold of our control. Here we must turn to God in faith and learn his faithfulness firsthand.

Geography Study

On the desert plains of Palestine, water was valuable, hard to come by, and treasured when received. Water was provided for ancient cultures in three ways: wells, pools, and cisterns.⁸ A well was “a place where water springs up on the spot—a fountain or spring.”⁹ Wells were rare in early Palestine, especially on the plateau of Judah, which had no spring.¹⁰ As a result people made cisterns to catch rainwater rushing down from mountain passes. A cistern was “a subterranean artificially hewn reservoir for storing rainwater.”¹¹ Cisterns allowed a people to exist in regions where “natural springs were not available.”¹²

The people of this region would divert running water into cisterns, which acted as holding tanks for this water received in the rainy season of November through March. The water would be used during the dry season for everyday use of washing, drinking, and bathing. These were “common in the highland region of Palestine, diversion channels

⁸ “Water Supply,” Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

⁹ “Genesis 37:24 Cisterns,” James Midwinter Freeman, *The New Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Alachua, FL: Bridge Logos Foundation, 1998).

¹⁰ John Alexander Mackay, “Broken Cisterns and the Eternal Spring,” *Theology Today* 2, no. 3 (October 1, 1945): 300–1.

¹¹ “Cistern,” Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Blu-Cof* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomas Gale, 2007).

¹² *Ibid.*

brought surface run-off rainwater during the short rainy season to the mouth of the cistern. Silting basins sometimes were built next to the mouth of the cistern to prevent dirt from entering.”¹³

Dry cisterns were used for dungeons or prisons.¹⁴ Some cisterns were “provided with a small basin cut into the floor of the reservoir directly below the opening, presumably to catch impurities, they did nevertheless become extremely slimy at the bottom.”¹⁵ Jeremiah cried out to God that he was sinking into the mire of this type of cistern, never to be seen again.¹⁶ Often times dead bodies were tossed into dry cisterns as a crude grave,¹⁷ or in tactical strategies, dead bodies were tossed into full cisterns in order to spoil them for drinking.¹⁸

Because of this association with death, cisterns symbolically came to be known as a place of death, or the gate to Sheol. The term “go down/descend into the pit/cistern” became synonymous for death in the scriptures.¹⁹ Even though there is this strong association with death, there is also a life-giving aspect to the grave.

Misconceptions of the Grave

In my experience as a pastor, I have counseled numerous people encountering liminal situations and found a common misunderstanding about its purpose. There is a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Genesis 37:24 Cisterns,” Freeman.

¹⁵ “Cistern,” Skolnik and Berenbaum.

¹⁶ Ps. 40:3, Jer. 38:6.

¹⁷ “Genesis 37:24 Cisterns,” Freeman.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ps. 30:3, Pro. 1:12; Isa. 14:19, 38:18; Ezek. 31:16, 32:23, 24.

perception that liminal times have nothing to offer us and they are best rushed through to reach comfort and control on the other side, and it is best done quietly. People perceive that God wants them to be comfortable, and the place where they find comfort is in knowing that they are in control. Their faith lies in their own ability to orchestrate their lives to achieve comfort and control, not in God's resurrection power over the grave.

The silence of the grave is the silencing of our complaints and passions as the main voice in our life. This silence is not a "shut-up-and-take-it" kind of silence, but the resting of our will in God's care. The overwhelming voice that cries out for comfort and security becomes secondary to the desire to traverse the desert with God. There is a place for lament in silence as we shall see later on in this chapter. Lament leads to surrender, even in the midst of crucifixion. The faith posture of the grave may not seem like faith at all. The faith posture of the grave produces the surrender of a self that desires comfort and control. The surrender feels like dying,²⁰ and our soul laments the death, but the continual adherence of a liminal posture of the grave is our act of consecrating our soul over to God to create in us what he desires.

The grave teaches us the kind of faith that Jesus had. The faith of Jesus led him through the cross and grave and into the vindication of the resurrection. Michael Gorman calls for us to have a co-faith with Christ, in Christ's own faithfulness when he speaks of the New Revised Standard's translational footnotes on Galatians 2 and 3, as well as

²⁰ Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 75.

Romans 3 and Philippians 3. The footnote allows for a variation in the Greek phrase faith *in* Jesus to also be translated the faith *of* Jesus.²¹

Gorman sums up his thoughts on the implications of this variation saying: “In summary regarding “the faith of Jesus Christ ... Christ’s faith must be shared by those who wish to be justified ... the faith of Christ is his ‘narrative posture’ of faithfulness or obedience toward God, the right ordering of his ‘fundamental option’, which led him to, and which was particularly manifested in, the cross.”²²

Christ’s “narrative posture” of obedience is spoken of in Romans 1:4. Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead ...”²³ N.T. Wright translates this passage as “marked out powerfully as God’s son in terms of the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead.”²⁴ Jesus was appointed “Son of God in power” by means of his spirit, or liminal posture, of holiness, or obedience. Douglas Moo comments on this passage saying that Christ experienced “the resurrection to a new and more powerful position in relation to the world. By virtue of his obedience to the will of the Father and because of the eschatological revelation of God’s saving power in the gospel, the Son attains a new exalted status as ‘Lord’.”²⁵ An interpretation of this phrase the “spirit of holiness” can

²¹ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, Chapter six sums this concept up.

²² *Ibid.*, 119-20.

²³ Rom. 1:4 (NRSV).

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part One: Chapters 1-8* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

²⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 48.

mean “the obedient, consecrated spirit that Jesus manifested throughout his earthly life.”²⁶ This obedient ‘narrative posture’ of Christ is the faith of Christ, faith in a God who vindicates from the silence of the grave/pit.

The Church today acknowledges liminal situations in part, and even becomes hospitable to those within, providing compassion and care. However the Church lacks an educational process on how to posture the heart in faith toward God as people walk through liminal situations. This posture is where we learn the faith of Christ and dethrone the idol of our own comfort and control. It is where we enthrone the God who rescues from the pit, who does not leave us in the grave to rot, and who is victorious over the grave. As we head into the liminal space of the desert, there is a liminal posture of heart with which we must enter for the wrestling match to favor character formation.

The grave is how we practice silence within the solitude of the desert. There is nothing more silent than the place of the dead, a pit, a grave, a dungeon, or a cistern. Solitude and silence go hand in hand. As Richard Foster writes, “We must understand the connection between inner solitude and inner silence; they are inseparable.”²⁷ As we have seen previously in Israel’s story, it is possible to walk through the desert and not learn or grow in character. What makes the difference is the placement of our faith.

The Theme of the Pit/Grave

There are many illustrations to choose from when studying the liminal posture of grave/pit. We can acknowledge the numerous Psalms that cry out to God in helplessness

²⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁷ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 98.

for vindication. We can look at the stories of Noah, Jonah, Daniel's three friends in the fiery furnace, Jeremiah, or Peter in prison singing and being released by an angel.

However, I will focus on three prominent stories that capture the theme well: Joseph, Daniel, and Jesus.

Joseph

The first instance where the term *bor* is used is in Genesis 37:20 when Joseph's brothers conspire to kill him and toss him into the pit, or cistern as a crude grave and, no doubt, a hiding place for the body. We shall follow the development of where the concept of 'going down into the pit' comes from.

First, Jacob settles in the land "where his father was an alien."²⁸ Isaac lived in Canaan as a foreigner, but Jacob was a resident, fully established as a native of Canaan, the promised land of the people of God. Jacob/Israel has a favoritism relationship towards his youngest son Joseph, which causes jealousy and anger in most of the other sons.

Early in the story, Joseph is a spoiled brat favored by his father, and hated by his brothers. He is in no condition to save the people of God, as well as the whole world, from famine.

Joseph dreams of his family coming to bow down before him. Recounting this dream causes his brothers to hate him all the more.²⁹ Indeed Genesis records the fact of the brothers' hatred three times: Genesis 37:4, 5, and in v8; symbolic of a complete hatred. Joseph is sent to check on his brothers in Shechem, but winds up "wandering in

²⁸ Gen. 37:1.

²⁹ Gen. 37:5.

the fields.” A stranger directs him to his brother’s location in Dothan,³⁰ which means “two wells/pits” and was on the trade route from Syria to Egypt.³¹

The hatred of the brothers sparks a desire to kill Joseph, the “master of dreams,” and toss him in a pit to hide the body in order to prevent his dream from happening.³² But Reuben steps in and convinces them to throw him into the pit alive so that he can return and pull him out. Here the symbolism of going down into the place of death and coming out alive is seen.

The brothers then strip him of his favored robe and throw him into the pit, which was a well with no water in it. The brothers capitalize on an opportunity and decide to pull Joseph from the pit alive and sell him to the Ishmaelites, who are incidentally carrying myrrh, commonly used for wrapping the dead,³³ which further illustrates the connections of pit and death.

Joseph will go on to Egypt and rise to power three times: in Potiphar’s house, the house dungeon, also referred to as the pit,³⁴ and in Pharaoh’s house. He will have one more pit experience³⁵ after being falsely accused of attempted rape. He will rise to power within the pit and after his release, rise to power again and see the fulfillment of his dreams. Joseph’s story holds many common elements with the story of Daniel.

³⁰ Gen. 37:15-17.

³¹ Henry Andrew Harper, *The Bible and Modern Discoveries ...* (London: A.P. Watt & Son, 1895), 332.

³² Gen. 37:19-20.

³³ Martin Watt and Wanda Sellar, *Frankincense & Myrrh: Through the Ages, and a Complete Guide to Their Use in Herbalism and Aromatherapy Today* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³⁴ Gen. 41:14 (ESV).

³⁵ Gen. 39:20.

Daniel

Daniel is the story of a young Hebrew man taken with Israel into the Babylonian captivity, and lives the command of Jeremiah, to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”³⁶ He is another picture of a Joseph type of character who rises to power within a foreign culture. Daniel’s life story is long; so I will only explore his pit experience and the applicable story around it.

Daniel has risen to power, yet remains faithful to Yahweh. His faithfulness becomes the vehicle for his rise to power for it provides wisdom and integrity.³⁷ His integrity and faithfulness is tested when a decree is passed that declares prayers illegal. The question Daniel faces is the question of Lordship. Who really has power? Who really is LORD? Daniel chooses Yahweh and prays in violation of the law. His punishment is to be thrown into a lion’s den.

Indeed the satraps were jealous and wanted Daniel removed from power and killed. Daniel is thrown into the pit and a large stone is placed over the entrance and sealed with the king’s signet ring.³⁸

In the morning the king rushed to see if Yahweh had been gracious to Daniel, and indeed He had sent an angel to shut the lions’ mouths. Daniel is then vindicated and his adversaries are thrown into the pit where the lions tear them apart.³⁹ Thus, God shuts the

³⁶ Jer. 29:7 (NRSV).

³⁷ Dan. 1:17-20.

³⁸ Dan. 6:17.

³⁹ Dan. 6:25.

adversaries' mouths of accusation as well as the lion's. Yahweh had saved Daniel and the king praises Yahweh.

In the beginning of the Narrative, Daniel's Hebrew name is changed to a Babylonian name, Belshazzar, which means "the prince whom Bel favors."⁴⁰ The narrative shows that it is Yahweh who favors Daniel. This favor is shown through the quiet faith and integrity of Daniel. "The irony here is that his enemies think they have found Daniel's weakness, but the narrator knows they have actually found his greatest strength."⁴¹

In the Aramaic version of this story, Daniel is thrown into a pit of lions, and not a den.⁴² The word pit is used ten times in this chapter in the Greek language, but in the Aramaic it is used nine, with one usage being converted to the grave.⁴³ This linguistic change is important for our pit imagery. Just as Joseph rises to power and then is thrown into a pit because of a human adversary unjustly accusing him, so too is Daniel thrown into a pit. This narrative model is called "the Vindicated Courtier," which is described as "the story of an esteemed royal counselor who suffers disgrace and misery at the hands of envious colleagues but is finally restored to his former glory, thanks to the intervention of a friendly god."⁴⁴ Although some scholars, such as Karel van der Toorn, conclude that

⁴⁰ John Parker Lawson and John Marius Wilson, *A Cyclopædia of Biblical Geography, Biography, Natural History, and General Knowledge* (New York: A. Fullarton & Co., 1866), 392.

⁴¹ Bill T. Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3 (September 1, 1993): 479–85, 485.

⁴² Karel van der Toorn, "In the Lions' Den: The Babylonian Background of a Biblical Motif," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 626–40, 626.

⁴³ Greg Goswell, "Resurrection in the Book of Daniel," *Restoration Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 139–51, 145.

this narrative is not historical, others, such as Greg Goswell, lecturer in biblical studies at Presbyterian Theological College, believe that this conclusion is unnecessary.⁴⁵

The addition of the lions in this story adds a powerful image for the Babylonians and the Hebrew people within the culture of Babylon. The symbol of lion in Babylonian literature is the Babylonian symbol of human adversaries.⁴⁶ Add to this imagery the Bible's own imagery of false accusers being seen as a lion ready to tear apart the innocent,⁴⁷ and the full meaning of the pit of lions can be seen. The New Testament will further take the imagery of lion and apply it to our adversary, the devil, who, "like a roaring lion ... prowls around looking for someone to devour."⁴⁸

This story will set the stage for the story of Jesus, who will also be thrown to the Roman and Jewish lions, and placed in a pit/grave, yet vindicated by God through the resurrection, shutting the mouths of his accusers.

Jesus

The narrative of Jesus in Holy Week is the perfect example of how to maintain the liminal posture of the grave. Jesus approaches his death with an understanding that it is a fulfillment of God's plan. Jesus meekly and faithfully approaches Holy Week with an active passivity. This passivity is not giving oneself to random forces of the universe

⁴⁴ van der Toorn, 626.

⁴⁵ Goswell, 144.

⁴⁶ van der Toorn, 627.

⁴⁷ Ps. 7:2-4, 22:14, 58:7, Job 4:8-10, 29:17.

⁴⁸ 1 Pet. 5:8.

hoping that all will be well, but rather a deep understanding of the plan of God, and a full releasing of one's will into it in faith.

Jesus does start wrestling with God in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴⁹ He does not want to take on the task at hand, knowing full well that a minor reality of pain and suffering is at hand. Jesus struggles so much that he sweats drops of blood⁵⁰ before gaining the confidence to move forward with the plan of God.⁵¹ Dumm states,

This was the most crucial moment in the whole life of Jesus, for it was at this moment that he died on the all-important psychological and spiritual planes. Here he finally and totally rejected illusion or evasion and embraced the reality and truth of human life. He did so purely and simply because he had come to know and trust God as his loving Father, in spite of all appearances.⁵²

Jesus, knowing in faith that God promises to vindicate his suffering, has the confidence to remain silent before his lions, the religious Sanhedrin,⁵³ Roman governor,⁵⁴ the crowds,⁵⁵ and the Roman soldiers.⁵⁶ There is no struggle; there is no grasping for freedom. Isaiah prophesied about His passion saying, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a

⁴⁹ Matt. 26:36-46.

⁵⁰ Luke 22:44.

⁵¹ Matt. 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42.

⁵² Demetrius Dumm, *Flowers in the Desert: A Spirituality of the Bible*, Kindle Electronic Edition, n.d., Location 1923.

⁵³ Matt. 26:63.

⁵⁴ Matt. 27:14.

⁵⁵ Matt 27:15-23.

⁵⁶ Matt. 27:27-44.

sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”⁵⁷ Jesus embodied the Psalmists’ cries for vindication from accusers,⁵⁸ to not be put to shame and have his enemies exult over them.⁵⁹

A great picture of the faith of Jesus in the God who vindicates the faithful is the story of Jesus standing before Pilate in John 19. Even though flogged nearly to death he is full of confident meekness.

He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin’.⁶⁰

The phrase, “Do you not know I have the power to release you and...to crucify you?” communicates the threat of finality that the grave possesses, and man’s obsession with power in order to fight against this finality through amassing power. This obsession is illustrated in Jack London’s novel, *The Sea Wolf*. The captain of a seal hunting vessel is portrayed as a ruthless cutthroat who has climbed to the top of the evolutionary ladder of power through his philosophy of “strong yeast” eating “weaker yeast” to survive. The captain is having a conversation with the protagonist of the story, a physically weak yet idealistic individual who is hauled onto the ruthless vessel after a shipwreck:

“If I am immortal—why?”

⁵⁷ Isa. 53:7 (NRSV).

⁵⁸ Ps. 109.

⁵⁹ Pss. 6:10, 22:5, 25, 31:17, 35:4, 40:14, 44:7, 57:3, 69:6, 70:2, 71:13, 83:17, 86:17, 109:28.

⁶⁰ John 19:9-11 (NRSV).

I halted. How could I explain my idealism to this man? How could I put into speech a something felt, a something like the strains of music heard in sleep, a something that convinced yet transcended utterance?

“What do you believe, then?” I countered.

“I believe that life is a mess,” he answered promptly. “It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all. What do you make of those things?”

He swept his arm in an impatient gesture toward a number of the sailors who were working on some kind of rope stuff amidships.

“They move, so does the jelly-fish move. They move in order to eat in order that they may keep moving. There you have it. They live for their belly’s sake, and the belly is for their sake. It’s a circle; you get nowhere. Neither do they. In the end they come to a standstill. They move no more. They are dead.”⁶¹

The captain’s remarks illustrate humankind’s fear of the grave and our reaction to this fear of a grasping for power. Jesus, however, tells us that the meek will inherit the earth,⁶² not the power brokers, who are living in constant fear of their mortality evidenced by their grasping for power and control, which is the opposite of faith and trust. This belief was tested in Jesus at his passion, and he held true to this belief.

Jesus is then crucified, abandoned by the Father, dies, and descends to the place of the dead. Hell seems to be a hot topic as of late. Some claim that we put too much

⁶¹ Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf* (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1999), 50-1.

⁶² Matt. 5:5.

emphasis on it;⁶³ some claim that there is not enough emphasis on it.⁶⁴ There does not seem to be a debate as to the existence of hell, so much as its nature.⁶⁵

The Harrowing of Hell

The classic Christian doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell by Christ has become an awkward subject in modern times. Jesus went to hell/the place of the dead ... we feel so much discomfort with that belief even though it is included in the Apostles Creed in the Catholic,⁶⁶ Anglican,⁶⁷ Methodist,⁶⁸ and Lutheran churches.⁶⁹ There has been a recent rejection of the doctrine by modern theologians like John Piper who said, “My conclusion is that there is no textual basis for believing that Christ descended into hell.”⁷⁰ Wayne Grudem also said, ““The single argument in its favor seems to be that it has been around so long ... But an old mistake is still a mistake.”⁷¹ Even the church father Augustine

⁶³ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2011).

⁶⁴ Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up* (David C Cook, 2011).

⁶⁵ Bell argues in his book that “There is hell now, and there is hell later, and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously,” 79.

⁶⁶ English translation of the Apostles' Creed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Va. 1997-03-25. Retrieved 2013-04-26.

⁶⁷ "The Book of Common Prayer (original text)" (PDF). Archived from the original on May 16, 2011. Retrieved 2011-05-19.

⁶⁸ *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), #563.

⁶⁹ Lutheran Service Book, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 159, 175, 192, 207; *Lutheran Worship*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 142, 167, 186.

⁷⁰“Did Christ Ever Descend to Hell?,” *Christian Post*, accessed August 19, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/49959/>.

⁷¹ Daniel Burke| Religion News Service, “What Did Jesus Do on Holy Saturday?,” *OnFaith*, accessed August 19, 2014, <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2012/04/03/what-did-jesus-do-on-holy-saturday/21590>.

seemed to have a hard time with this idea of Christ descending to the place of the dead saying the idea “disturbs me profoundly.”⁷²

While there seems to be a lacking of clear passages in the New Testament that teach this doctrine,⁷³ the early church adopted the doctrine as early as Tertullian in the second and third centuries.⁷⁴ It is not the place of this dissertation to argue the validity of this doctrine’s place in the Creed so much as it is to illustrate the belief and why it is there in early Christian doctrine, and its relation to the theme of pit/grave.

There is much emphasis placed on the doctrine of Christ’s atoning work on the cross in Western Christianity today, and there is a growing interest in the doctrine of the resurrection as well, but there seems to be an absence of any understanding of what Christ did on Holy Saturday and its implications in the plan of salvation. Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Carroll said, “The wise comments of the Holy See regarding the “unique liturgical character of Holy Saturday” often received only a passing nod from us [Catholics], to whom they should have been most important.”⁷⁵ Presbyterian theologian Mark Davis says, “The story of Jesus’ burial, although attested by all four gospels, has scant representation in the Revised Common Lectionary ... one is tempted to see

⁷² Saint Augustine, *Letters, Volume 3 (131-164) (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 20)* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, Inc., 2010), 382.

⁷³ Although there are scriptures that give allusion to it like Acts 2:27, 1 Peter 3:19-20, 4:6, and Ephesians 4:7-10.

⁷⁴ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* (OrthodoxEbooks, n.d.), Chapter 55.

⁷⁵ Thomas J. Carroll, “The Lost Day of Holy Week,” *Worship* 31, no. 5 (April 1, 1957): 265-69, 266.

Joseph's burial of Jesus as just a necessary moment along the way from cross to the empty tomb, as opposed to having meaning in itself."⁷⁶

In theology there are a few theories as to what Christ accomplished in the atonement, the two main ideas being an expiation of sin and a disarming of the evil powers of the world.⁷⁷ In the resurrection we understand that Christ is victorious in his work on the cross and initiates the new creation seen in Revelation 21.⁷⁸ But what is the purpose of Holy Saturday?

Jesus said that he would give the sign of the Son of Jonah.⁷⁹ What is the sign of Jonah and what does it have to do with Holy Saturday? Jonah went to Sheol in the belly of the whale, and then returned to earth. The journey was to last three days and nights, an ancient idiom that referred, not to a length of time so much as to the nature of a journey from earth to the place of the dead.⁸⁰ Jonah, however reverses the trip and goes from Sheol to earth. Jesus said that he would give the same sign as Jonah, being gone three days and three nights, again not a chronological amount of time, but referring to the idiom of the type of journey he would make, from the place of the dead back to earth.

⁷⁶ Mark Davis, "Matthew 27:57-66," *Interpretation* 60, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 76-7, 76.

⁷⁷ Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009). On page 98, Wright argues "He would go ahead of the nation to take upon himself the judgment of which he had warned, the wrath of Rome against rebel subjects. That, I believe, lies at the heart of the New Testament's insistence that Jesus died the death that awaited others, in order that they might not die it."

⁷⁸ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 19.

⁷⁹ Matt. 12:40.

⁸⁰ Terence Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 98.

Jesus goes into the heart of the earth, as Jonah went to the depths of the sea to the foundations of Sheol, and there, classic theology states, Harrowed Hell.⁸¹ The Western Church's liturgies⁸² have less practices and beliefs on this day than Eastern Orthodox⁸³ churches do. The Western Church has much to learn from Eastern Orthodox on this theology:

Orthodox liturgy, iconography and theology interpret “O Hades where is your victory?” to mean that Christ's victory over death was accomplished not only on the cross and by his resurrection, but also on Holy Saturday. Indeed Holy Saturday may be the most significant of the three days of Easter. On Friday Christ is lifted up on the cross. On Saturday, Christ descends into Hades, knocks down its gates and liberates its captives—all of those righteous dead since Adam and Eve who died a corruptible death. On Easter Sunday, Christ rises again into the living world with his resurrected body. The victory over death that commenced on Friday is completed!⁸⁴

The Church Fathers agreed with this doctrine and proclaimed it. For example, St. Ephrem the Syrian proclaims, “By death the Living One emptied Sheol. He tore it open and let entire throngs flee from it.”⁸⁵ St John Chrysostom said “for the being baptized and immersed, and then emerging, is a symbol of the descent into hell, and the return thence.”⁸⁶

The Orthodox theology of Holy Saturday is about our destiny as well as those whom Christ liberated. If Sheol was the place of disembodiment of soul from body in

⁸¹ “descended to hell,” Apostle's Creed.

⁸² Including but not limited to: Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Episcopal.

⁸³ Including but not limited to: Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Greek, and Russian.

⁸⁴ Vigen Guroian, “Descended into Hell: The Meaning of Holy Saturday,” *Christian Century* 127, no. 6 (March 23, 2010): 26–9, 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

some ghostly realm, then “Christ’s descent into Hades and his destruction of it are the preconditions not only of his own bodily resurrection but ours as well.”⁸⁷ Death has lost its sting because of His faithfulness, and we may now share in his inheritance.

Ian Wallis argues that the faith of the disciples was exercised on Holy Saturday, just as he prepared them, and was strengthened by the resurrection.⁸⁸ He goes on to argue that it is the central focus of the early church’s faith as well.

Jesus’ resting in the grave and descent into Hades fulfills the theme of a faith in God who rescues from the pit.

Common Elements

As we have seen, the theme of grave is fluid through the Old Testament, starting with Joseph in Genesis, continuing throughout the history of Israel which is illustrated by Daniel, and continues on with Jesus resting in the grave on Holy Saturday.

The stories here have many differing elements and are unique in their content, context, meaning, and genre. Yet we see three things in common, as a thread woven through each story that serves as the irreducible core elements of the liminal posture of grave/pit.

Helplessness

The first element is a situation, feeling, or acknowledgement of helplessness. There is a realization that the edge of one’s resources has been met and one is not in

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ian G. Wallis, *Holy Saturday Faith: Rediscovering the Legacy of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000), 4.

control of one's own redemption. There is a vulnerability and powerlessness that one acknowledges. This realization is often done in a lament and a cry out to God for rescue, or a silent acknowledgement of the story of the helplessness of the situation.

Joseph is abandoned in a cistern twice and forgotten. While Joseph remains silent the text paints a picture of utter helplessness and abandonment. Daniel remains silent as Joseph did and lets the scriptures spell out the helplessness of the situation. And Jesus crucified and dead, is buried in a grave with a large stone placed over the front.

Faith

After the realization of powerlessness and communication to God of a lament, there is a change of heart, from negative emotion to a submissive posture of faith. Joseph does not sulk in prison but rises to power and faithfully works for the chief dungeon master. Daniel proclaims to the king that he has done no wrong and that God sent an angel to shut the lion's mouths.⁸⁹ Jesus on the cross cries out a lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"⁹⁰ as well as saying, "Into your hands I comment my spirit."⁹¹

Vindication

Following the situation of helplessness, a lament or silent acknowledgement, and a turning toward God in faith, comes the vindication. Joseph is taken out of prison and placed over the whole land of Egypt and sees his dreams fulfilled. Daniel is pulled from

⁸⁹ Dan. 6:22.

⁹⁰ Matt. 27:46.

⁹¹ Luke 23:46.

the lion's den alive and sees his accusers thrown in. Jesus is resurrected from the dead and is glorified with all authority.

Addressing the Problem

As stated earlier, the problem within the Church that I am addressing is a lack of acknowledgement of liminal space, a lack of hospitality toward those in liminal space, and a lack of education of the process and purpose of liminal space. This lack results in the stifling of ongoing Christian formation at the cost of the future Church's leaders and contemplatives.

Acknowledgment

The theme of the grave is all throughout the Bible and is acknowledged for its robbery and evil. The grave though has been conquered and has lost its sting. And while we mourn a grave, we do not mourn like those who have no hope. The grave is also teacher to us. A grave posture is approaching with faithful submission, any situation that brings one face to face with both our human inability and God's power over our hopelessness. In the grave posture we practice a submission of heart that leans towards the reality of God's faithfulness over the seeming finality of our hopeless situations. This posture encompasses a silencing of our complaints for comfort in order for our heart to become soft clay in God's hands. The grave teaches us the posture of heart we are to have in order for the desert space of solitude to bear its transforming work on our souls. All of life seems to be made up of smaller grave submissions in which the preparation of our faith for the final act of surrender to God in the physical grave takes place.

Acknowledging the theme of the grave as not mere evil and thief but a teacher that has lost its sting can expand the understanding of the purpose and process of walking

through liminal situations. By communicating its place in the paradigm of the narrative spirituality we gain an acknowledgement of the purpose of an often perceived purposeless and hopeless situation. The acknowledgement of a liminal posture toward God in faith against death as thief provides us with training grounds for the type of faith that Jesus had in his Father.

In the grave's liminal posture we acknowledge that we are helpless. In a retreat experience we acknowledge that we are helpless to grow on our own and desire to move forward. We are then in a situation of faith relying upon God to meet our desire to grow. Often times on retreat there is a moment of spiritual elation where God has done whatever was required for our growth.

An acknowledgement of helplessness in a tragic situation evokes within us a lament to God. This lament, raw and honest, is an act of faith itself. As this lament matures we see the pattern of the Psalmists' faith develop into gratitude and trust. God at some point will provide vindication of this faith posture and the vindication can be as diverse as humanity.

Hospitality

Acknowledging the grave posture of faith in God over death as thief can address the problem of lack of hospitality toward lament. By communicating the proper purpose of lament we can give voice to the idols of comfort and security, identifying their hidden place in our life. In a posture of faith, we confess our lack of faith in God and beseech his help in vanquishing these idols.

Providing place for lament can provide validation for those who await vindication. So often those in a liminal situation with a liminal posture of heart feel guilty

or selfish bringing laments to God and his people. But if we acknowledge the liminal posture of the grave, and communicate the place of lament, those people within can better handle the situations for the purpose of transformation.

Education

Education of how to walk through a desert is just as important as knowing what a desert is. First generation Israel died in the desert for lack of liminal posture, and many people's spirits have been crushed through a lack of correct posture for walking through the desert. Granted it is much easier to walk through a joyous retreat experience with a liminal posture than a tragedy. And it is much easier to traverse a joyous retreat experience without the danger of becoming wounded and bitter on the other side. But liminal posture is the key to growth in each place. This liminal posture addresses the problem of a lack of education by following the theme of grave and pit through the Old and New Testaments showing its prominent repetition, which shows us how the posture can be done correctly and incorrectly.

Within a retreat experience a director can provide education on how one can properly benefit from the experience through educating the retreatant on the posture of heart needed in order to meet God's transforming Spirit on His own terms. Within a tragic experience, it provides room for lament in the process, as well as education on the healing journey toward vindication.

Conclusions

We are called to have the same type of faith as Jesus, the same posture of heart, while we face our solitude desert experiences. This liminal posture of faith leads us into a place of transformation specifically because we have ceased to control everything for the

purpose of preserving our comfort. We have decided to follow God through the desert in an obedient posture.

In this liminal posture of faith/obedience through the desert, we are mourning the death of our comfort, control, or understanding and are entering into a space of uncomfortable confusion, just as the three Mary's sitting by the tomb of Jesus are waiting in a place of unknowing.⁹²

Jesus has this kind of faith as well as he lay in the tomb. This picture illustrates the kind of faith that Jesus had, that the disciples had, and that we will need to face our deserts with the assurance of vindication and resurrection on the other side. Perhaps a Christian is walking through a divorce and dealing with the death of what his or her everyday family life has been like for the past few years. Is there any hope of resurrection? I have talked with many in this situation and they long for restoration of the way things used to be, as Jesus raising Lazarus back from the grave. This restoration may or may not happen. If it does not, many lose hope, lose faith, and struggle with anger and resentment toward God, because He did not prevent the tragedy from happening. But our faith does not rest in preventing tragedy, but in walking us through it.

Our life can be lived with wisdom⁹³ to offer a life that is less likely to go through tragedy of our own making, but not every tragedy can be diverted with faithfulness toward God and fellow persons. The rain and sun falls on the good and the bad alike.⁹⁴

⁹² Mark 16:1.

⁹³ Prov. 1 is a treatise to the young man to live wisely so that Sheol does not swallow him alive in his folly.

⁹⁴ Matt. 5:45.

The difference is God vindicates those with faith in Him which leads to a faith like His, our narrative posture.

The resurrection is the vindication of a holy life,⁹⁵ of humble faith that Jesus lived, even to a death on a cross.⁹⁶ Resurrection for us would not necessarily be obtaining the old life back again, so much as it is finding a new and transformed life on the other side. As Jesus said, the meek will inherit the earth,⁹⁷ not those who faithlessly grasp for power to preserve their own comforts and securities.

One would think that walking the solitude path of the desert in silence is encouraging a monastic life of asceticism and seclusion. But as Richard Foster says, “the fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others.”⁹⁸ This compassion leads us to live in solidarity with God and His people, as a light to the world, which is the liminal mission of exile/pilgrim. The wisdom learned in the solitude of the desert walked in the faithful obedience of the silent posture of the grave will lead us to live in solidarity with others as exile and pilgrim on mission.

⁹⁵ Rom. 1:4 tells us that Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.” (NRSV)

⁹⁶ Phil. 2:6-11.

⁹⁷ Matt. 5:5.

⁹⁸ Foster, 108.

CHAPTER THREE: EXILE/PILGRIMAGE

If we possess our *why* of life we can put up with almost any *how*. Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche *Why I am So Wise*

It can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being. We should not, then, be hesitant about challenging man with a potential meaning for him to fulfill. It is only this that we evoke his will to meaning from its state of latency. I consider it a dangerous misconception of mental hygiene to assume that what man needs in the first place is equilibrium or, as it is called in biology, “homeostasis, i.e., a tensionless state. What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him... If one wants to strengthen a decrepit arch, they increase the load which is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are more joined firmly together.

—Viktor Emil Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

One of the current debates of the Christian worldview asks the question of whether a Christian should embrace a monastic Benedictine style of faith that is separate from society, or should a Christian embrace a missional, light-of-the-world stance of faith within society. For example, Thomas Merton writes,

In the fourth century A.D., the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia were peopled by a race of men who have left behind them a strange reputation. They were the first Christian hermits, who abandoned the cities of the pagan world to live in solitude. Why did they do this? . . . Society . . . was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life... to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.²³⁵

Ed Stetzer on the other hand would argue that the Christian’s place is to be subversively involved in society. He writes:

²³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1970), 3.

We are far too easily pleased with religion than the reign of God. We are far too pleased with the comforts of the church rather than the work of God's kingdom. And in doing so, we are missing the blessing of being part of something that is so much more than a moralistic philosophy of life . . . God has kingdom plans for you, if you refuse to alter your religious calendar and connections in order to engage with people's true needs in culture . . . come back and be part of an underground movement to overthrow the oppressors of God's lost children.²³⁶

Both can be argued from a Biblical perspective so how do we create a Biblical paradigm that honors them? This is the problem before us. If you honor separation alone, how can the Church fulfill the call to be salt and light?²³⁷ If you honor engagement with society, how do you honor the Biblical mandate to "come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord."²³⁸

The exile is the last piece of the paradigm puzzle in this liminal narrative spirituality of the Bible. The exile provides us with an outward missional call to stand in solidarity with God and his people as a light to the world, but to do so with deepened faith learned from the wisdom of the desert and the posture of the grave.

Word Study

A Hebrew word used for being exiled is *garish* which means to drive out, to cast out, or to divorce. It is used in Genesis 3:24 of the action of God on Adam and Eve after their fall in the garden. It is also used of Israel in Exodus 34:11 in God's warning toward the Israelites: if they fail to love the LORD, God warns that he will *garish* the people from their land. In Leviticus 21:7 the verb is used of a man who may *garish* his wife, or drive her out from his household. It means to divorce. To be *garished* from your land

²³⁶ Ed Stetzer, *Subversive Kingdom: Living as Agents of Gospel Transformation* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 48.

²³⁷ Matt 5:13-16.

²³⁸ 2 Cor. 6:17(NRSV).

means to be utterly separated from your land and then one becomes a *galah* or *galut*, a captive in exile.

The word *galah* is used seventy-four times in the context of “going into exile.”²³⁹ This word is used in the context of an “emigration or colonization.”²⁴⁰ When the word exile is used as a threat, the Hebrew word is changed from *galah* to *pus*, which means scattering, the same word used for what happened at the tower of Babel.²⁴¹ *Galah* is the natural result of negative behavior, specifically for Israel forgetting the LORD who brought them out of Egypt and engaging in idolatry.²⁴² But it refers more to a state of existence than it does something that will happen.

David Gray sums up the meanings of *galah* in six types of contexts where the term is used: to go into exile, be taken into exile, to be carried away into exile, to wither and disappear, and to be removed.²⁴³ The word *galah* had basic non-religious meanings and usages in the Old Testament, like grass withering away in Proverbs 27:25, but after the event of the Babylonian exile, the term evolved to take on theological meanings of their new reality.

²³⁹ David K H. Gray, “A New Analysis of a Key Hebrew Term: The Semantics of Galah (‘to Go into Exile’),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 43–59, 51.

²⁴⁰ James M. Scott, ed., *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 145.

²⁴¹ David Reimer, “Exile, Diaspora, and Old Testament Theology,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 3–17, 14.

²⁴² Deut. 4:23.

²⁴³ Gray, 53-54.

The Greek word used for exile used in the LXX for *galut* or *galah* is *paraoikia*²⁴⁴, which is the word ‘sojourner’, meaning to have no home, to be a foreigner, to dwell alongside as a stranger.²⁴⁵ This concept is seen in a passage from Acts 7:6 in which Stephen refers to the Israelites in Egypt as “resident aliens.” Again in Acts 7:29 Stephen refers to Moses as a “resident alien” in the land of Midian. In 1 Peter 2:11, Peter urges the church not to indulge in fleshly lusts by reminding them that they are “strangers.” Here the term is teamed with the word *paraepidemos*, which is translated as alien, stranger, or sojourner. The same term is also used in the same pairing in Hebrews 11:13, referring to the Old Testament saints as being strangers and foreigners.²⁴⁶

We can see here the theological evolution of the term from its Old Testament secular usage to the New Testament theological usage. It is a state of living in faith with God, alongside others in solidarity, within a culture where one does not belong. What does it theologically mean to be on pilgrimage? To explore this concept further I turn to the final theme within the Biblical narrative spirituality, the exile.

The study of exile is important to our study of liminal space. Liminal means threshold, or boundary. Just as the desert is the threshold of our understanding and the grave is resting outside the threshold of our control, exile is taking the expanded capacity received in the desert, through the grave, out into the world to live as a stranger in a strange land, but for its benefit. Exile helps us turn, in community, to others on the journey with a common mission.

²⁴⁴ John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 185.

²⁴⁵ “Sojourn,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, “Pilgrim.”

As we study the last theme in our paradigm, it will benefit us to review the Bible's use of three major narrative themes to describe liminal space, posture, and mission: desert/wilderness, grave/pit, and exile/pilgrim. These three liminal themes provide a paradigm of narrative spirituality in which God does a transforming work in our souls for the work of being a light to the world. These themes describe a season of the soul, the posture of faith that brings change, and the mission that can result. The season is desert, the posture is grave, and the mission is exile.

The exile is living life in a way that takes the faith created in the season of the desert that has been tested and purified through the posture of the grave, into solidarity with a community of people who are putting their faith to work tilling the land for its welfare. In this community we can function as the body of Christ on mission in the world as a light revealing God to the nations. However, the Church can struggle with implementing this mission appropriately.

Misconceptions of the Exile

The Church often times can confuse its purpose with Jesus' unique vocational purpose. Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost.²⁴⁷ But if we look at this passage in the Old Testament context,²⁴⁸ we see that it refers to a gathering again of Israel's lost sheep back to the fold of God, not a winning of Gentiles into Judeo-Christian worldview. After the gathering of Israel's lost sheep and their energizing at Pentecost with the Spirit of God a result is the winning of Gentiles into the fold.

²⁴⁷ Luke 19:10.

²⁴⁸ Ezek. 34.

The Church has assumed a purpose of seeking and saving instead of the purpose that Christ gave us, which is to become salt and light,²⁴⁹ preserving and guiding influences within the world. Jesus taught a way of life for a community of people that preserves and guides humanity in ways of living that brings about the kingdom of God on earth. Walter Brueggemann argued:

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us . . . The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness. . . . On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward the community of faith may move.²⁵⁰

Jesus gave the disciples a mission to go and make other disciples, not converts.

This mission was to be accomplished by teaching these new disciples what Christ taught his disciples, namely a way of living in the kingdom of God, then baptizing them into a community of people with an “alternative consciousness.”²⁵¹ When a church adopts Jesus’ unique vocational purpose of seeking and saving, it can turn evangelism into models of church growth to extend its own power and influence. This purpose is usually accomplished using and promoting the dominant consciousness of society which uses systems of human control and manipulation aimed at shortcut success as opposed to the wisdom and character forming process learned from the desert, enriched in the posture of grave and lived out in solidarity with God’s people. Thus the church fails in its vocation to be salt and light for humanity which can provide an alternative consciousness which

²⁴⁹ Matt. 5:13-16.

²⁵⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

²⁵¹ Matt. 28:19-22.

preserves and guides humanity, instead propagating the dominant consciousness which turns people into commodities for the sake of an organizational goal. This behavior was the sin of the golden calf at Sinai, to declare allegiance to the God of the desert, but in the consciousness of Egypt.

Living in exile with a community of people as light of the world provides guidance on how to live in a way that brings God's kingdom of peace into existence and establishes the value of human beings above Egypt's commoditization of souls. Exile is about faithfulness to a way of life within a community of people contrary to popular culture's negative values, and thus is a guider and preserver of humanity in a society which dehumanizes the soul into a commodity.

The Theme of Exile/Pilgrimage

The Bible recounts many examples of exile, such as Joseph in Egypt²⁵², Moses in Pharaoh's house²⁵³, Israel in Egypt²⁵⁴, Ruth in Bethlehem,²⁵⁵ David in Gath²⁵⁶, and Elijah by the brook of Cherith.²⁵⁷ However, for this discussion I will explore the stories of exile of Adam and Eve, the nation of Israel, and Jesus.

²⁵² Gen. 37-47.

²⁵³ Exod. 2.

²⁵⁴ Exod. 1-13.

²⁵⁵ Ruth 1.

²⁵⁶ 1 Sam. 27.

²⁵⁷ 1 Kings 17:1-7.

Adam and Eve

Adam and Eve provide the first example of exile in the Bible. There is much debate on the historical²⁵⁸ vs mythical²⁵⁹ nature of this story, but this argument is peripheral to that of the story of exile that I am pursuing.

According to the story, God creates Adam and Eve and sets them in a garden. The garden is portrayed as a sacred sanctuary where the presence of God dwells. Schachter argues that a visualization of the garden, when one reads the story of the text as the oral traditions called for, describes an image of a mountain top temple:

Putting the story's visual clues together leads to placing Eden on a mountain top because the rivers flow downward from there. It is an enclosed space with only one entrance . . . As each detail builds on the previous one . . . Eden is not only a lush garden but also a sacred space, sharing characteristics with other mountain-top shrines found throughout the ancient Near East.²⁶⁰

Adam is the “priest” of this sacred sanctuary, given the task of “working” and “guarding” it.²⁶¹ “These two verbs are precisely the ones used to describe the work of the Levites in caring for the Tabernacle.”²⁶² The Book of Jubilee, a late Hebrew *midrash* on the creation account, states that Adam was outside of the Garden of Eden for forty days before God placed him into the garden. “The forty-day period is explained . . . as prefiguring the biblical laws of impurity after a woman gives birth to a boy, when she

²⁵⁸ Mark Dever et al., *Proclaiming a Cross-Centered Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), See Chapter 2.

²⁵⁹ Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

²⁶⁰ Lifsa Block Schachter, “The Garden of Eden as God’s First Sanctuary,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 73–7.

²⁶¹ Gen. 2:15.

²⁶² Schachter.

may not touch anything sacred and she may not enter the Sanctuary (Lev. 12:5).²⁶³ This interpretation also points to Adam working and caring for a sacred space as a priest would, according to the holy law of God. However it is clear that the Genesis account comes narratively before the Leviticus account and it could be argued that the law of God was not given at this time to be obeyed.

God asks Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but to freely eat from any other tree. They fail and eat of the forbidden tree, listening to the voice of the serpent instead of to God. God protects Adam and Eve from the tree of life through the exile from paradise and sets a flaming sword, or more accurate to the Hebrew, “the flame of the whirling sword,”²⁶⁴ along with a single cherubim to guard the entrance to paradise.²⁶⁵ But before He does, there is a promise of redemption through a messiah.²⁶⁶

The curse spreads to creation with thorns and thistles coming from the ground from which man must bring order and control, but from the sweat of his brow. Creation is placed under the curse of sin²⁶⁷ alongside of Adam and Eve, and they are to stand in

²⁶³ Zvi Ron, “The Book of Jubilees and the Midrash on the Early Chapters of Genesis,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 143–55.

²⁶⁴ Ronald S. Hendel, “‘The Flame of the Whirling Sword’: A Note on Genesis 3:24,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 4 (December 1, 1985): 671–74.

²⁶⁵ Gen. 3:24.

²⁶⁶ Gen. 3:15.

²⁶⁷ Rom. 8:18-25.

solidarity with creation “tilling the ground” to bring about its good. Jesus will resolve the Adam problem²⁶⁸ and initiate God’s plan of redemption for all creation.²⁶⁹

So we can see here a pattern established: God made humankind to live in a dynamic relationship of obedient faith in His goodness, ruling his creation. Humans disbelieve God and grasp for control, only to see that they lose control. In God’s grace, He sends humans away in exile to stand in solidarity with one another in creation in order to redeem it all in Christ. Yet the pattern of exile persists in the Old Testament.

The Nation of Israel

Fast forward a few years and observe that the people of God display their refusal to give up the ways of Egypt. Samuel, the leader of Israel, becomes old. The people of God see that Samuel’s children are wicked and are not fit to lead them. They do not wait patiently for God to raise up a new judge, but instead decide to take matters into their own hands and get a king “like the other nations.”²⁷⁰ They ate the fruit of control.

They long to become like the other nations, like Egypt, built upon human power and reasoning, and have a king. This request displeases Samuel and God greatly, and both see it as a rejection of God, the one who “brought them out of Egypt” and out of the systems built on human power and reasoning, as opposed to faith, that Israel now wants to implement.

God warns them that a king will act outside of how he wishes the people of God to live:

²⁶⁸ Rom. 5:12-21.

²⁶⁹ Rom. 8.

²⁷⁰ 1 Sam. 8:5-7.

He [God] said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”²⁷¹

But God honors their request for a king and grants them Saul, a man after Egypt’s own heart. The writer of 1 Samuel tells us that Saul had an outward appearance that would please Israel’s desire for a king. He was from a wealthy family, handsome, tall, and strong.²⁷² God does show a desire to use him just as Moses was used: to “save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me.”²⁷³ Saul indeed delivers the people. Samuel warns the people of bringing the judgment of God upon them “and their king” if they do wickedly,²⁷⁴ but they still do wickedly.

A mere two years after Saul is king, God rejects him because of his “unlawful” sacrifice. Saul does not trust in God’s saving ability, but in his own ability, enacting the problem of Egypt and Babel, and the forbidden fruit. Samuel does not show up to offer the sacrifice before a key battle and Saul’s army starts to dwindle. Saul does not wait for

²⁷¹ 1 Sam. 8:11-18 (NRSV).

²⁷² 1 Sam. 9:1-16.

²⁷³ Compare 1 Sam. 9:16 to Exod. 3:1-12.

²⁷⁴ 1 Sam. 12:25.

Samuel to offer sacrifice before the battle, but takes matters into his own hands and unlawfully offers it himself. This behavior went against everything that Israel learned in the desert as a people of faith. God rejects Saul and appoints a young boy after his own heart, named David, to rule.²⁷⁵

David does indeed rule well, and God chooses to bring the Messiah through David's family line. David acts as God would have him. He is tempted by the power of being king and steals a poor man's wife by murdering him, but when confronted by his sin by the prophet Nathan, he repents.²⁷⁶ In his repentance he is shown to be pleasing to the Lord. Through David's continued relationship with Bathsheeba, Solomon is born and will be an heir to the throne. While Solomon starts off as pleasing to the Lord,²⁷⁷ the allure of power and the comforts of wealth draw him away from God.²⁷⁸

Walter Brueggemann argues that the turning point in Israel's history was Solomon's reign as king. The shift started happening with David, but solidified with Solomon. He says, "The entire program of Solomon now appears to have been a self-serving achievement with its sole purpose the self-securing of the king and dynasty . . . the steady abandonment of the radicalness of the Mosaic vision." He then goes on to summarize the systems put in place that are a diversion from the vision of Moses:

1. A harem of political marriages showing a concern for self-generated fertility. This system would go against the faith of Abram and Sarai who received one promised child from God in their old age.

²⁷⁵ 1 Sam. 13:9-13.

²⁷⁶ 2 Sam. 11-12.

²⁷⁷ 1 Kings 3:13.

²⁷⁸ 1 Kings 11:1-9.

2. A system of tax districts which displaced the clans and tribes and made state control more effective. This system was a diversion from the local economy to a political state run economy. This [system] is more Egyptian thinking than the desert nomad thinking that God invited the people of Israel into.
3. An elaborate bureaucracy. This system was another imitation of Egyptian thought which “institutionalized technical reason . . .” making them “nearly immune to questions of justice and compassion.”
4. A standing army which dispersed power to the king’s vision for the institution instead of to the nation’s vision for following God.
5. The wisdom fascination, which was an attempt at rationalizing reality to “package it in manageable portions.”
6. Conscripted labor to support building projects, quarrying, mining, logging, and shipbuilding.²⁷⁹

Solomon achieved the “paganization of Israel,” which is a “return to the religious and political presuppositions of the pre-Mosaic imperial situation”²⁸⁰ or a return to Egypt and the problem of Babel. Dumm says that this return was all symbolized in the building of the Temple. When they built a Temple, it solidified Israel’s culture away from a dynamic desert faith of a moveable tabernacle to a static religious system of a fixed temple, just like the other nations. And as we have seen, when Israel copies other nations, it is against God’s desire for them to be the light of the world. “Solomon was able in a few short years to neutralize and even negate the idealism of the Exodus.”²⁸¹

It is all downhill from here. As 1 Kings 11-16 describe, the kingdom divides under civil war immediately following Solomon’s death. Rehoboam of Judah practically enslaves his own people, and Jereboam of Israel crafts two golden calves for people to

²⁷⁹ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 24-25.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Dumm, 82.

worship, reminiscent of the Mt. Sinai sin, but doubled! Jereboam even states as Israel did, “these are the gods of Israel who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”²⁸² From here, king after king is said to “walk in the ways of his father,” which meant his idolatry, instead of having a heart like David’s. The climax of Israel’s sin is seen in Ahab’s reign, and is illustrated by Ahab’s seizing of Nabor’s vineyard through murder. “When Ahab accepted [Nabor’s Vineyard] without a qualm, it was clear that Israel’s ideals had been irreparably compromised.”²⁸³ The successions of kings in the Northern Kingdom are all horrid with sparse attempts to become right with the LORD. In 2 Kings 17-25, Israel falls to Assyria and it is permanently scattered.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah has better kings in its history, and fends off Assyria through the righteous actions of Hezekiah. But his reign proves to only delay the exile. Judah is faced with a Babylonian threat and is sent off into exile. However this fate is delayed through the righteous actions of an eight year-old king named Josiah who came upon the law of the LORD and reformed Judah. But Judah has fallen too far, and the king that follows Josiah is corrupt. Finally, King Nebuchadnezzar comes into Jerusalem and burns the Temple down. The people of God will have to learn on a deeper level what it means to follow God in a dynamic faith oriented way.

Maria Boulding says, “The exile was the greatest disaster they had ever suffered; it was crushing and horrifying not simply in the way that war always is for prisoners and refugees, but because it seemed to call into question the whole meaning and validity of

²⁸² 1 Kings 15:3.

²⁸³ Dumm, 83.

their faith.”²⁸⁴ A reason the exile was so disastrous was because the people had lost sight of the vision of becoming the light of the world. Their comfortable systems of power and control were disrupted. In exile Israel is now in a position in which they need to make sense of God in light of their new reality.

Walter Brueggemann says that “Israel must intentionally and honestly face its true situation, refuse denial, and resist pretense. Exile will be a reality. This is now Israel’s place to be, and Israel must learn to practice its life of faith in exile.”²⁸⁵ Living in exile will require a new and deeper understanding of God, faith, repentance, and hope, but also require that Israel till the land of Babylon, and work for its good. Israel is invited to stand in solidarity with God and one another in a mutual fallen state and become a light in Babylon with Daniel being the shining example.²⁸⁶ God asks them to establish themselves, to build houses, plant gardens, and raise families in their new reality of exile.²⁸⁷ God desires for them to learn how to practice a faith of repentance, grief, presence in absence, and a hope for a re-gathering.²⁸⁸

Israel remains faithful to God for the seventy-year exilic period, and as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, prophesy, there is a turning of Yahweh back to Israel and a return back to the land to occupy it in a new way. The books Ezra and Nehemiah recount the re-

²⁸⁴ Boulding. 16-17.

²⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 40.

²⁸⁶ Jer. 27:8.

²⁸⁷ Jer. 29:5-7.

²⁸⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 437-38.

gathering process and the people's desire to purify themselves to retain the blessing of the Lord.²⁸⁹ While we close with a restored Israel, the problem of Adam has not yet been dealt with. For that we turn to Jesus.

Jesus

Jesus' incarnation serves as our prime example of exile. To be clear, Jesus never engaged in any idolatry that invokes an exile as a scattering motif. Instead Jesus lives the exile life voluntarily. As Philippians states, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."²⁹⁰

Jesus' life in exile is for our welfare just as Israel's exile in Egypt and Babylon would be for their welfare. God himself becomes a Joseph in the midst of Egypt, and a Daniel in the midst of Babylon. Jesus is not in the midst of Rome, but instead is in the midst of all humanity. The incarnation is God's ongoing plan to make his dwelling place with his people,²⁹¹ to initiate the rule of God on earth.

Through Jesus' death and resurrection God opens up the pathway back to the garden. Thomas Merton believed that the spiritual journey was a return to paradise, and gave particular emphasis to St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, in which he states, "Christ removes the sword from the gate of paradise."²⁹² Indeed Christ even tells the thief on the

²⁸⁹ Ezra 10:3.

²⁹⁰ Phil. 2:6-8.

²⁹¹ Rev. 21:3.

²⁹² Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation Into the Monastic Tradition 2* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2006), xxlii-i.

cross that he will be in paradise with Himself.²⁹³ But the end goal is not Eden, it is the New Jerusalem. The curse has been dealt with as well through Jesus taking on the thorns of the curse upon his brow and taking them to the cross.

While the garden of paradise has been opened up and we are invited back to the garden to walk and talk with God in relationship again, we are still on pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. Jesus' life showed us how to live a "New Jerusalem life in a Fallen Babylon world."²⁹⁴ The kingdom of God is initiated but not consummated. It is "now" but "not yet."²⁹⁵ This embracing of a 'now-not yet' way of living that rejects the dominant dehumanizing consciousness of the current age by living in exile according to an alternative consciousness is what makes the final theme of exile liminal.

Jesus' life is a call out of the customs and consciousness of Egypt and Babylon, a security system of the established powerful, rich and elite that serves as a wall between the people and God. Jesus echoes the prophets' calls for authentic relationship instead of religious pretense²⁹⁶ when he condemns the pharisaical systems over and over again for their lack of authenticity.²⁹⁷ This exile is an entrance into solidarity with the people of God for the benefit of the land, while never moving physically out of the culture.

²⁹³ Luke 23:43.

²⁹⁴ M. Robert Mulholland, "A New Jerusalem Life in a Fallen Babylon World" (lecture, Spring Arbor University, MSFL Intensive Seminar, Malibu, CA, January 14, 2010).

²⁹⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev Sub (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 368.

²⁹⁶ Jer. 3:6-10, Isa. 1:12-17, Amos 5:21-27.

²⁹⁷ See Matt. 23 for example.

A word needs to be said about human systems of order. There is nothing inherently wrong with these systems, for they are needed to run society smoothly and justly. But Jesus understands that a system put in place can become tyrannical. When one lives by the sword one dies by the sword,²⁹⁸ meaning when one serves a system one is under the rule of that system.²⁹⁹ Jesus shows us how to live on the margin and revolutionize the tyrannical system by not being caught up in the consciousness of it. To do so is to live a life dependent upon the manna of God day by day instead of the riches of society which demand our soul.³⁰⁰ We are invited into a tightrope walk of ‘tilling the ground outside Eden,’ ‘working for the welfare of the city,’ and yet like Daniel, to do so in solidarity with God and one another, on a journey instead of seeking to exploit others for our own comfort and security.

Jesus says that it is impossible for those wrapped up in the religious temple systems of this world to experience the transforming power of the kingdom of God, but with God all things are possible.³⁰¹ The story of the rich young ruler, someone with wealth, power, and pleasure, is the only time that Jesus states that something is impossible. On human terms, it is impossible to enter into a liminal experience with God while you possess everything that comforts you in the present. This statement was the warning of Deuteronomy 8:2, of forgetting God in our abundance.

²⁹⁸ Matt. 26:52.

²⁹⁹ See Jesus’ explanation of paying taxes in Matt. 22:21.

³⁰⁰ The cost of gaining the world is our soul as seen in Matt. 16:26.

³⁰¹ Matt. 19:26.

Jesus cleanses the Temple from all its money-making systems that keep people worried about social status and order. Ched Myers expounds on Jesus' comments concerning the widow's mites story in Mark's Gospel believing that Jesus is not giving praise for sacrificial giving on the widow's part so much as he is giving an indictment on the temple system that asks for a widow to give her last two mites in order to worship God.³⁰²

Jesus pronounces judgment upon the Temple, not because the Temple is evil, but because the people have gotten caught up in the worship of their own social system. The people are using the Temple to gain wealth, power, and pleasure at the expense of other people. The people are using the Temple to hide from God instead of encounter God. This is illustrated by the *Shekinah* glory of God leaving the Temple in Ezekiel 10, but promised to return in Ezekiel 43. Yet the people still go on with religion as usual. This self-protecting religious system that seeks to avoid the pain of transforming liminal space expels from the Temple the very presence it has been waiting for and crucifies God's anointed Christ, the Messiah, in favor for Rome, the New Testament's Egypt and Babylon.

Rome eventually destroys the Temple and scatters the people of Israel in 70 A.D.,³⁰³ but God has already invited a new movement into a liminal mission of solidarity: the Church. The temple is torn down and the mobile tabernacle is re-established in the hearts of his gathered people wherever they may be, for the Temple is the gathered

³⁰² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). 320.

³⁰³ Edward F Campbell Jr, "A Concise History of Israel from the Earliest Times to the Destruction of the Temple in AD 70," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, no. 1 (March 1, 1960): 82-3.

community in which the Holy Spirit resides.³⁰⁴ Faith has become dynamic again with the Spirit of God resting on His people at Pentecost. The people of God will become a people in exile on the way to New Jerusalem, standing in solidarity with those in need of God's rule and reign as light of the world.

Common Elements, Unique Elements

There are elements that are unique to Jesus, given his hypostatic nature and purpose to resolve the Adam problem, that make him stand apart from Adam and Eve and Israel. And there is something that all of them have in common. Both the uniqueness and commonality of these three stories need to be noted.

Creation

Adam and Eve are created outside of the garden setting. Genesis tells us that God created man from the dust of the ground, and then breathed life into his nostrils and he became a living soul.³⁰⁵ He also created woman from Adam's side rib. God then places them in the garden to tend it.

This action mirrors the story of Israel, which is created in the wilderness journey and placed in the paradise of the Promised Land, to tend it. In chapter one, I discussed the people of God called out of Egypt and into a time of desert wandering in which they are to learn how to live as the people of God on a faith journey with God.

A primary lesson that both Adam and Eve and Israel were to learn was how to be in a dynamic trust relationship with God. Adam and Eve had to trust God in covenant not

³⁰⁴ 1 Cor. 3:16, 1 Pet. 2:5.

³⁰⁵ Gen. 2:7.

to eat the fruit prematurely and Israel had to trust God in the desert, relying on the manna falling from heaven. Israel was given the paradise promised land of Canaan in covenant. God's desire was to establish a nation that would reveal to the world that the LORD is God.³⁰⁶

During Israel's creation in the desert, they learned the wisdom of the desert, as opposed to Egyptian ways of control, which is akin to eating fruit prematurely. Dumm contrasts the two:

Egypt is under human control," whereas the "wilderness is unmapped, unsurveyed, undomesticated by man . . . Egypt is famous for its order and neatness" while "the wilderness symbolized the mystery of God . . . Egypt was human rationality order and slavery" whereas the "wilderness was divine presence, freedom of God, and lack of human control."³⁰⁷

Adam and Eve enjoy walking with God in the garden, just as the Israelites enjoyed the *Shekinah* glory of God leading them through their wilderness and residing in their tabernacle. The Hebrew word for walking about, *mithallekh* is the same word that is used to describe God's moving about in the wilderness with the Israelites.³⁰⁸ We can see how God has set up humanity to function with Himself; a dynamic relationship of faith in God's loving care.

Failed Testing

One may wonder why God would put a tree of such disastrous potential within the Garden of Eden. But there is just as much glorious potential with that tree, and love gives a choice. Meredith Kline argues that the creation of the Sabbath was a "commitment to

³⁰⁶ See the repeated phrase throughout the Old Testament, "Then the world will know that the LORD is God" 1 Sam. 17:46, 1 Kings 8:43, 2 Chron. 6:33, Isa. 49:26, etc...

³⁰⁷ Dumm, Location 841-50.

³⁰⁸ Schachter.

man that his God-like endowment would move on in the way of obedience to a consummation of rest, indeed, to the glory of God's own Sabbath."³⁰⁹ The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was meant for eating after a period of covenant obedience, in which their eyes would be opened in obedient illumination instead of opened in disobedient illumination. "Rather than serve as their downfall, it would have served as the means of their exaltation—to the righteousness, power, and glory God intended them to enjoy on their viceregal thrones."³¹⁰

The evil one knows the potential of this tree, and the potential of human beings, so he tempts them to acquire its benefits outside of God's timing and will.³¹¹ We accept and our eyes are opened to our sin. "This understanding of wisdom should make it clear that there is no reason to think that the knowledge of good and evil was wrong in and of itself."³¹² Adam and Eve eat of this tree prematurely in disobedience and invite sin into the holy sanctuary of God. They do not fully believe that God is good and can be trusted. Thus, God must banish them from the garden lest they eat of the tree of life in their present state of sin and live forever in separation.³¹³ The exile is as much grace as it is punishment.

³⁰⁹ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 35.

³¹⁰ William N. Wilder, "Illumination and Investiture: The Royal Significance of the Tree of Wisdom in Genesis 3," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 51–69.

³¹¹ Gen. 3:5.

³¹² Wilder, 56.

³¹³ Gen. 3:22.

Israel also fails the test. The Exodus event establishes the ideal with which the people of God are to differentiate themselves from other nations, as a light. However:

... the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced.³¹⁴

This failure is illustrated by their consistent turning from sole trust in Yahweh toward idolatry, as evidenced in the following verses,

They rejected all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. They made their sons and their daughters pass through fire; they used divination and augury; and they sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.³¹⁵

Adam and Eve failed the covenant obedience test and were not established in their vice-regal positions overseeing creation according to God's plans. And likewise, Israel fails their covenant obedience and was not established as the light of the world nation. Yet even in this exile, they were given God's work to do.

Exiled to Till Land

God commands Adam to till the ground in exile, to tame the thorns and thistles so creation will benefit from his exiled state. This is similar to Israel's call while in Babylon to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."³¹⁶ Adam and Eve are exiled to till the land, now filled with thorns and thistles. Israel also is exiled from the land to till the

³¹⁴ 2 Kings 17:7-8 (NRSV).

³¹⁵ 2 Kings. 17:16-17 (NRSV).

³¹⁶ Jer. 29:7 (NRSV).

ground of Babylon. Israel longs to be like the other nations with kings and temples instead of living the life they learned in the desert. They too are under a curse of exile into Babylon and are commanded to till the ground there, working for the welfare of the city, planting gardens and growing vineyards. They are to become the light of the world standing in solidarity with one another.

Uniqueness of Jesus

Jesus is the incarnation of God, not a creation by God. His nature is both divine and human.³¹⁷ This nature makes Jesus unique when compared to Adam and Eve and the nation of Israel, who were created in the wilderness. As Rolheisser states, “the Incarnation is not a thirty-three-year experiment by God in history, a one-shot, physical incursion into our lives. The incarnation began with Jesus and it has never stopped . . . We are the body of Christ. This is not an exaggeration, nor a metaphor.”³¹⁸ While Christ is unique in this aspect, we are invited into the incarnation as coheirs with Christ.³¹⁹

Adam and Eve and the nation of Israel both failed in their time of covenant testing with God, but Jesus was tested in every way that we were, yet without sin.³²⁰ His role was to fulfill successfully what Adam and Israel did unsuccessfully. Humanity can now, by faith, enter into Christ’s faithfulness³²¹ and become born anew,³²² a new creation,³²³ with

³¹⁷ Col. 1:15.

³¹⁸ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 79.

³¹⁹ Gal. 4:7, Rom. 8:17.

³²⁰ Heb. 4:15.

³²¹ Rom. 3:21-26.

³²² John 3:2.

the law of God written on our heart.³²⁴ And his calling was to undo the curse Adam set into motion for humanity, and Israel set into motion for future Israel, and drink the cup of God's wrath meant for the nations.³²⁵ This calling enables the community to live as an ongoing incarnation of Christ, for the benefit of the land.

Common Elements to All

The concept of being sent into exile for the welfare of the world is the common thread through these themes. Adam and Eve are sent out of the garden for the welfare of creation, Israel is sent out of Jerusalem for the benefit of Babylon, and Jesus is sent from the Father for the benefit of all creation. Now the Church is sent out into the world as co-laborers³²⁶ with Christ, and representatives³²⁷ of Christ, in the working out of His redemption plan for all creation.³²⁸ The Church has become a possession of God, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation, living as foreigners and pilgrims in the land.³²⁹ Christ's life, death, and resurrection models for the Church its own mission: salt and light, namely a way of life that preserves humanity and guides humanity in ways of living which bring about the kingdom of God on earth instead of making converts to employ as commodities. Christ then empowers his Church to live in liminality, as pilgrims in exile, through the Pentecost empowering.

³²³ 2 Cor. 5:17.

³²⁴ Jer. 31:33.

³²⁵ Jer. 25:15-38, Matt. 20:22, 26:39-42.

³²⁶ 1 Cor. 3:9.

³²⁷ 2 Cor. 5:20.

³²⁸ Rom. 8.

³²⁹ 1 Pet. 2:9-11.

So in summary, living in exile in such a way that benefits the world, as Daniel, Joseph, Adam, and Jesus did illustrate for us the mission of the Church. The way that Jesus lived shows us a way of living which guides and preserves humanity, by incarnating what humanity truly should be. We embrace the value of human beings by treating them with dignity, living with the common good in mind, and sojourning with others. We refuse to treat people as commodities to be used for personal gain, or embrace any unjust system which does so. We also seek to correct systems of injustice which currently turn people into commodities for personal gain. Even though this consciousness permeates society around us, we choose to live in exile to it for the sake of humanity, by embracing, promoting, and living out an alternative consciousness. This alternative is learned in the desert solitude times and deepened through the grave posture to be lived out in a liminal 'now-not yet' exile existence.

Addressing the Problem

As stated earlier, the problem within the Church that I am addressing is a lack of acknowledgement of liminal space, a lack of hospitality toward those in liminal space, and a lack of education of the process and purpose of liminal space. This lack results in the stifling of ongoing Christian formation at the cost of the future Church's leaders and contemplatives. Therefore having a proper understanding about the exile helps us in all three problem areas, but specifically advances us along in the education problem most.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledging the liminal mission will help balance ongoing Christian formation with its rightful outward mission as a community. We can be a light-of-the-world presence in society as opposed to either a monk-like solitude, or a seek-and-save

convert seeking models. The theme of exile helps us acknowledge that the Church has a mission to become, maintain and promote a preserving and guiding presence within humanity. Living as pilgrims and exiles in the world helps us preserve our saltiness by not becoming entangled in the dehumanizing consciousness of Egypt. This behavior preserves the dignity of humankind, and guides the world in the ways of valuing human beings and their welfare.

Hospitality

Acknowledging liminal mission will provide hospitality toward those who have a contemplative and prophetic call within the Church. The Old Testament prophets always pointed Israel back to the ideals of the desert³³⁰ as the starting place for effective mission within the world. These prophets were often silenced, imprisoned, or killed.³³¹ Today many of these voices are misunderstood, perceived as people getting in the way of the vision and mission of a leader. When we acknowledge exile as a part of this narrative spirituality, we can help the Church hear the prophetic voices within, and provide hospitality toward those voices who will provide both “criticism” and “energizing”³³² toward the mission of the church.

Education

When we make space in our ecclesiology for this narrative spirituality, we understand the purpose of the Church as salt and light on mission to teach others what Jesus taught his disciples, namely a way of life that preserves humanity and guides

³³⁰ Hos. 2:14, Amos 5:18-25.

³³¹ Luke 11:47, Acts 7:52.

³³² Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination: Revised Edition*, 2 ed., 3.

humanity in ways of living. This way of living brings about the kingdom of God on earth instead of making converts to employ as commodities which increases our church's kingdom and/or our personal ministry kingdoms.

Having a proper education on the liminal mission of the Church as opposed to the seek-and-save model, will help us maintain a model for church that is sustainable. The Church's seek-and-save model has grown the Church wide yet created a chasm in holiness that the next few chapters will be addressing. The seek-and-save model of Church is not a sustainable one, for if we build our church solely with the value system and strategies of Egypt, we will fail to preserve and guide humanity toward its redemption in God, since we will have abandoned the means and consciousness by which we accomplish this mission.

The present lack of education leads to a lack of acknowledgement and hospitality which robs individuals of the past faith of spiritual giants whose influence has become pale in the light of leadership and growth models. This will then rob the future generations of their past spiritual giants who will inspire their faith. The model is unsustainable, and benefits only the short term and short sighted missions of individuals and churches at the cost of the future.

Conclusions

We must remember that the exile is a way of living in solidarity with God and his people which takes the faith created in the season of the desert, which has been tested and purified through the posture of the grave, out into a community of people putting it to work tilling the land for its welfare. In this community we can function as the body of Christ on mission in the world as a light revealing God to the nations.

When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, he left the poor to tend the land and took the influential people to Babylon.³³³ “Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Chaldeans, only deported the most prominent citizens of Judah: professionals, priests, craftsmen, and the wealthy. The ‘people of the land’ were allowed to stay . . . Some people were better off; when Nebuchadnezzar deported the wealthy citizens, he redistributed the land among the poor.”³³⁴ There was famine, death, war, and deportation to be sure, but the poor were better off until the return of the exiles. Then the Egyptian style oppression of taxes and interest began again.³³⁵ This oppression is opposite of the society that God taught them to be in the desert.

For clarification, the invitation into liminal mission is not a demand to become poverty-stricken and free from all social or religious structure. These structures are needed to keep society from falling into despotism and a riotous mania. Instead, it is a spotlight shone upon the dehumanizing consciousness on which these systems run. The inherent nature of these systems is to establish order, homeostasis, and a status quo that keeps society running in a natural order, yet in its fallen state, looks out for those at the top first. God’s order is different. “There is, of course, an authentic and praiseworthy law and order but it is the law and order of God whereby the rights of all are honored. It will probably never be quite as neat and logical as tyrannical law and order because it needs to

³³³ 2 Kings 25:12.

³³⁴ “Jewish Virtual Library,” *The Jewish Temples: The Babylonian Exile*, accessed December 24, 2014, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/History/Exile.html>.

³³⁵ Neh. 5:1.

satisfy so many but it will have the great honor of assuring a real sense of justice and freedom.”³³⁶

When we place our faith in these systems and their methods to keep us safe, instead of placing our faith in the God who transforms us and leads us, often times into painful liminal spaces for the purpose of our maturation, we make the same mistake that the people of Israel did throughout their Old Testament existence. We can become defensive, angry, protective, tribal, exclusive, and oppressive in order to keep the established order functioning.

However, the journey of the exiled pilgrim is the journey from “the Galilee of self-discovery and self-awareness to the Jerusalem of self-sacrifice before God . . . To understand the message of Jesus . . . is to make the journey with Him.”³³⁷ This way of living in solidarity with community of people that is a preserving and guiding influence within society promotes the Exodus ideals: a community living in exile with one another to till the land.

Through the Exodus event, God established the ideals and values that He wished to be present in His people. The goal of the Exodus is to remind us that this is not our home, that we are a pilgrim people released from Egypt, the land of limited human understanding, fearful human control, and we were released into the desert to become a pilgrim people, entertaining the presence of God, and waiting for the future home that is prepared for us, in Him. The exile experience for Israel, though painful, would shape their faith to become the sort of people that do not feel at home in this world, with all its

³³⁶ Dumm, Location 861.

³³⁷ Ibid., Location, 972-83.

systems and values. This experience would then cause the people to develop a faith in a God and kingdom that is not of this world, and usher that kingdom into existence.³³⁸

The Exodus and exile events help us make sense of the whole Bible, for in it we learn the type of people that God wishes to live with Him in His kingdom. We learn that we are headed to a different home, not a Gnostic spiritual heaven, for God's kingdom is recreating the world around us and we are to be a part of the new creation. The meek inherit the earth³³⁹, not the powerful. Exile reminds us that the old creation and its dehumanizing systems are dying and that we have no allegiance to them. Instead we are called to live within them but according to a different consciousness, for their good and redemption, and bring the Kingdom of God into reality. As God told Jeremiah, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."³⁴⁰

Dumm sums up the liminal mission of exile best when he states that the task of God's people throughout history would be to "move resolutely through time entertaining the presence of God and honoring the ideals of the exodus in their lives. This amounts to living in mystery because the selflessness of those ideals will appear to be foolish to human reason and logic. To be foolishly unselfish is to live in the wilderness in mystery in God's country."³⁴¹

³³⁸ A good example of this mission is the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:9-13 in which we ask for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is done in heaven.

³³⁹ Matt. 5:5.

³⁴⁰ Jer. 29:7.

³⁴¹ Dumm, Location 855.

In the liminal mission of exile, we start to feel more and more like outsiders and less and less like residents of this age. Yet in that liminal mission, hope is given a new meaning and a further grasping. We wrestle with the insufficiency of our current faith to take on these new feelings of un-belonging, and we learn new ways of exercising our faith in the world. Our faith expands to the point of a breakthrough moment where we burst through a barrier that had been holding us back. We let go of all the familiar and controllable ways we were operating, ways of the fallen dominant consciousness which dehumanizes ourselves and others, and enter life on the other side of the barrier with a new sphere of existence. Here one “transcends previously, self-defined limits through finding home in God and not primarily in one’s own culture, family, or community.”³⁴²

Living as an exile people on mission is taking on the task of becoming the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world as a guiding and preserving presence. It means offering an alternative consciousness and criticizing the destructive dominant consciousness that dehumanizes people into commodities.

I have spent the last three chapters arguing how the three themes of desert, grave, and exile make a narrative spirituality of the Bible within which God changes people. These themes have gone unnoticed in the modern Evangelical church, but the Church historically has embraced these themes in both theology and practice. In the following chapter I will argue there has been a prominent place of these themes in the historical theology and practice of the Church, which will set up Chapter Five’s question of how we forgot about these themes.

³⁴² Boulding, 18.

CHAPTER FOUR: LIMINALITY IN CHURCH HISTORY PART ONE: ITS
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Faith, manifestly, is a dark night for man, but in this very way it gives him light.

—John of the Cross, *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*

And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest,
evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel Him or see
Him, as it may be here, it behoveth always to be in this cloud in this darkness

—Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*

When we speak of liminality as being a narrative spirituality of the Bible, we are talking about a path that God uses to sanctify and bring us into union with Himself. As we have seen in chapters one through three, liminality is a major path that is woven throughout the whole Bible. However, the Church has strayed away from liminality as a narrative spirituality as practices and theology have evolved.

The Triad

Biblically and historically, there has been a division of sanctification by states or maturity. These states are recognized as early as the Apostle Paul when he asks the Ephesians and Colossians to be fully mature in Christ.¹ The Apostle John admonishes maturity, as when he divided up the Christian walk in stages of maturity according to human physical growth of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.² Peter also talks of a progression of virtue for the purpose of fruitfulness in Christ.³

¹ Col. 1:28, Gal. 4:19, 1 Cor. 14:20, Eph 4:12-14.

² 1 John 2:12-13.

³ 2 Pet. 2:5-8.

In the fifth century, Pope Gregory the Great builds on this division and spells out states of maturity as “the beginning, the middle, and the perfection.”⁴ This process refers to “the beginning of virtue, other its progress, and other still its perfection.”⁵

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, in the fifth and sixth centuries, describes these three states or ways, which he calls the hierarchy. The goal of union or perfection

is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him . . . causing its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed God himself . . . [so] they can pass on this light generously and in accordance with God’s will to beings further down the scale.⁶

The Church, not universally, but commonly, named these three states or ways, the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way. The purgative way is the way of beginners who are attempting to resist their mortal passions and feed the virtue of charity.⁷ The illuminative way is for those whose minds are becoming illuminated spiritually and have their mortal passions under control but still struggle with venial sins.⁸ The unitive way is for those who “have their minds chiefly fixed on God and their attention turned, either always or very frequently, to Him. It is the union with God by love and the actual experience and exercise of that love.”⁹ But how does one maintain

⁴ Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* (London: F. and J. Rivington, 1847), 69.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 154.

⁷ Arthur Devine, “State or Way (Purgative, Illuminative, Unitive),” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14254a.htm>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

their union with God? Practices developed that supported the concept of liminal space and its effects on spiritual formation.

Advent as Liminal Space

Advent is the start of the Western liturgical church calendar.¹⁰ The liturgical calendar is how the Church “rehearses and actualizes the gospel story, which is the history of the Triune God in the church.”¹¹ So, Advent is a liminal season in which the church, in preparation for the Second Advent of Christ, lives out the expectation of the first advent of Christ.

Advent has its origins in the Egyptian Christian Church’s celebration of Epiphany on January sixth. This date was Egypt’s winter solstice, which was twelve days behind the Roman calendar, and shortest day of the year. What better time to celebrate the manifestation of the light of the world than when the days start to become longer again? It is also believed that this celebration was put as competition to the Roman sun cult celebration feast that happened at the same time. The Feast of the Epiphany from the East and the Feast of the Nativity from the West were integrated into the Roman liturgy around the middle of the fourth century.¹²

¹⁰ Frank Leslie Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.

¹¹ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 164.

¹² Frank C. Senn, “The Christmas Cycle : Historical Origins, Traditional Practices, and Contemporary Possibilities,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8, no. 6 (December 1, 1981): 325–33, 325.

Epiphany in the East was paired with Christ's baptism and declaration of divinity and became a day of "solemn public baptism."¹³ In the Eastern Church, this time was a "winter Pascha," for the Pascha of the incarnation of Christ prepares us for the Pascha of the Resurrection.¹⁴ In Spain and Gaul, highly influenced by the Eastern Church, Epiphany was imported as a baptism day and in order to prepare for baptisms, there was a six week penitential "period of preparation similar to Lent."¹⁵ Following the fasting would be the twelve feast days of Christmas.¹⁶ This fasting season would begin on November 11th and conclude on January 5th, pairing with the 40 days of Lent, with Saturdays and Sundays excluded.¹⁷

Pope Leo, however, was concerned for "liturgical tidiness, for keeping the mysteries and seasons 'clear and distinct', and did not want to 'confuse the mysteries of the two seasons'."¹⁸ This battle between East and West was never settled and Epiphany remains the day in which the Eastern Church celebrates the birth of Christ with a forty day fast instead of the traditional Advent wreath, while the Western Church observes Advent as the preparatory season for the twelve days of Christmas, concluding at Epiphany, the time when Jesus was made manifest by the Magi.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid., 326.

¹⁴ Nathan Mitchell, "The Winter Pascha," *Worship* 67, no. 6 (November 1, 1993): 534–41, 535.

¹⁵ Senn, 327.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Terrance W. Klein, "Advent and the Evangelical Struggle for Cultural Symbols," *Worship* 69, no. 6 (November 1, 1995): 538–56, 539.

¹⁸ Mitchell, 535.

¹⁹ Klein, 540.

In Rome, by the year 590, the weeks prior to Christmas became a time of joyous preparation, and baptisms were only practiced at the “vigils of Easter and Pentecost” for there was no need for another season of penitence before Epiphany.²⁰ The integration of the Gallic and Roman Advent concepts produced a four week liturgical preparation for the twelve days of Christmas, blending the ideas of “eschatological judgment with joyous anticipation of the coming of Christ.”²¹

In the sixteenth century, the Lutherans added the popular Advent wreath. The lectionary focused on the prophetic readings of the Old Testament as a kind of a countdown to Christmas in order to emphasize the hope concept of the Advent season.²² Liturgical churches traditionally celebrate Advent through the progression of lighting four candles on the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day, and concluding on Christmas Day with the lighting of a fifth candle. These candles are lit to highlight the Light of the world entering into our darkness to redeem His good creation.

This Advent celebration has morphed over time, and has settled into declaring the liminal space of exile in which the Church finds itself. Here we retell the story of the nation of Israel anticipating their Messiah, the coming of this Messiah, and the anticipation of His return to establish a kingdom of justice and peace.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 328.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 327-28.

²³ Isa. 9:1-7.

“Advent invites the church into a temporal world shaped by a hope in God’s continuing presence and God’s will for the future.”²⁴ This season provides liminal space for the Church to enter into, again, the suffering and waiting of Israel for their Messiah. We identify with their darkness and suffering of sitting in exile under the rule of foreign oppressors. We have the luxury of knowing that the Messiah did come, so our darkness is not quite the same, but nonetheless it is a space on the Church calendar with the intentional purpose of entering into a liminal season of waiting.

Maria Boulding says that “Advent is the consecration of waiting in our lives.”²⁵ It is a source of hope for the many ways in which we are waiting for the salvation of the Lord to come into our current darkness, confusion, and pain. Advent has been the perfect vehicle for communicating liminal space and posture of heart, for it teaches us to live within the unresolved tension of waiting. O’Day concurs, “It is the season of anticipation and hope, the season for waiting and watching for the in-breaking of God’s kingdom, the season when all things seem possible as we wait anew for God-with-us.”²⁶ There are many ways in which we are longing for God to move in power as He has done in the past, and we remind ourselves of who God is and how He has worked in the past to fuel our hope in the future. Advent has the potential to teach us new ways of living and praying within situations of tension and discomfort. Here we can acknowledge these feelings while learning to wait on the Lord’s deliverance instead of contriving our own salvation.

²⁴ Gail R. O’Day, “Back to the Future: The Eschatological Vision of Advent,” *Interpretation* 62, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 357–70, 361.

²⁵ Boulding, 40.

²⁶ O’Day, 364.

“Advent is the season of new beginnings and new hopes in its anticipation of the dawning of God’s new age.”²⁷ There is an already established kingdom within His Church and a “not yet” consummated kingdom tension that Advent teaches us to live within and hold with both hands. Advent is a preparation for the Second Advent of Christ in which He will enter into human history as King of kings to rule the world with justice and peace and do away with all the systems of oppression which are holding back his kingdom from coming into full existence.

Advent acknowledges the liminal kingdom of God which has been initiated, but not yet consummated. “Advent is a way of beating the Final Judgment to the punch, by passing through it now with Christ ahead of time.”²⁸ We have passed through judgment day already justified and yet we are waiting for its coming. And so we can boldly proclaim, “Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly.”²⁹

Unfortunately, modern day Advent celebrations are often used more for a Christmas Day countdown than invitation into liminal space and posture. There is a blending of Advent with a secularized celebration of gift giving that the church attempts to hold. Advent has often become the season of waiting for the presents that Santa will bring as opposed to learning how to live within the liminal spaces of life with a liminal posture of heart.

²⁷ Ibid., 357.

²⁸ Robert W Bertram, “Advent Is Adventure,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 21, no. 6 (November 1, 1994): 452–54, 453.

²⁹ Ibid.

Lent and Holy Week as Liminal Space

Lent is another liminal season on the Church's liturgical calendar. In it we reenter the sufferings of Jesus in the desert narrative, which prepares us for the sufferings of Jesus in his crucifixion and burial. Lent prepares us to better celebrate the joyful meaning of Resurrection Sunday.

The word *Lent* comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'Spring'.³⁰ Historically, we see an observation of Lent as early as 354.³¹ Lent was separate from the Triduum, or the three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, but it was a preparation time for the Church for the Triduum.³²

Lent is the season prior to, Holy Week that begins on Ash Wednesday. In many liturgical traditions the church would be housing the palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday that is brought in and burned into ashes to be placed upon your forehead as a sign of repentance. The words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" are spoken over the worshipper as they remember their mortality.

Then we begin the forty-day fast that commemorates Jesus' forty days in the desert, a liminal theme that we looked upon earlier in this work. This fast is not observed on Sundays, which commemorates Jesus' resurrection. Through the fasting, we too are invited into the desert with Christ, which will reveal physical weaknesses, addictions and comforts that we have developed over the last year since the previous Lent. The season

³⁰ Fr. William Saunders, "History of Lent," Catholic Education Resource Center, 2002, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0527.html>.

³¹ Patrick Regan, "The Three Days and the Forty Days," *Worship* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 1980): 2-18, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

ends on Palm Sunday with the celebration of Jesus as Lord and the reception of another palm branch for one's home. Then on Maundy Thursday Christians observe the transformed Passover feast that Jesus observed the night before his crucifixion, which became our Eucharist. Next is Good Friday, an observance of Jesus' crucifixion, and Holy Saturday, an observance of Christ lying in the grave in a liminal posture of faith in a God who vindicates. Next is the celebration of the Resurrection, a joyous end to the paschal observation and the joyous beginning to the celebrations of the Ascension and Pentecost.

The purpose of Lent was a "yearly reminder of [Christians] own incorporation into the paschal event through baptism . . . to renew in the memory of all the faithful their commitment to live the new life of him who for their sake was crucified, buried, and raised . . . accuse them of their failure to do so . . . [and] summon the tepid to amendment and the fervent to greater progress."³³ Unfortunately Lent has also evolved over time as Advent has, into a time of willpower exercises of fasting from social media, coffee, entertainment, meat or the like, but separated from its roots of practicing a liminal posture of heart with Jesus in the desert. It is separated from walking through Holy Week with Him in the same posture. This posture leads us toward Resurrection Sunday as assurance that God vindicates the faithful. Much of the modern day prosperity gospel wants to skip the liminal posture of heart learned in the desert Lenten season and jump into the vindication of Resurrection Sunday. Lent teaches us that there is a pattern, or narrative

³³ Ibid.

spirituality, that we must follow. Taking part in the discipline of a forty day Lent fast was to “heal us and restore the purity of our minds”³⁴

Lent historically was a time for the faithful, penitent, and catechumens preparing for their baptism.³⁵ “The entire Christian community is invited to journey through Lent toward Easter in company with the candidates for baptism, who are in the last stage of their preparation for sacramental initiation into the Body of Christ.”³⁶ It was understood as a “gateway to the paschal mystery, as a door to be unlocked and thrown open for the faithful . . . who find themselves already in the kingdom of promise.”³⁷

The Lenten liturgy was more than an impartation of Bible history or details of “history, geography, scientific exegesis or spiritual law” but an impartation of “spiritual nourishment and to activate the supernatural faculties of the faithful”.³⁸ The Lenten liturgy was far more than individual sanctification; it was an “ecclesial participation in the paschal mystery which required the disciple to share in Christ’s passion and death.”³⁹ There is a journey one is on in Lent from self to Christ. Schepers claims, “The Lenten pilgrimage begins with a strong emphasis on our moral fitness (or lack thereof) . . . Then as the weeks go by there is a shift of attention, away from that insistence on self-denial to a quite different concern, namely, Jesus’ own journey to Jerusalem, and eventually his

³⁴ Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, Volume XII* Leo the Great, Gregory the Great (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 156.

³⁵ Regan, 7.

³⁶ Maurice Schepers, “An Integral Spirituality of the Paschal Mystery,” *Worship* 75, no. 2 (March 1, 2001): 98–106, 98.

³⁷ Augustine Cornides, “Lent and Holy Week,” *Worship* 36, no. 4 (March 1, 1962): 263–71, 264.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

suffering, death, and vindication.”⁴⁰ Lent is meant to be a yearly transformational shift in thinking that “begins with a not altogether unnecessary concern for self, and then passes to a state of wonder at the great life-giving work of mercy, the celebration of which culminates in the Great Triduum.”⁴¹

The means by which this healing and purification was accomplished was the discipline of fasting, which “[Pope] Leo recommends as an unusually potent instrument for gaining mastery over both the enemy and oneself.”⁴² This fasting was seen not as mere abstinence from food, but opportunity for “bountiful benevolence,”⁴³ which “concentrates the total life of faith into a single act, capable of corporate and public performance.”⁴⁴

The Lenten season is an intentional liminal space because of its invitation into the sufferings of Christ in his fasting in the desert and his Passion. We too are invited to take up our cross and learn from Christ. Lent has also historically been used as an initiation rite for catechumens preparing for baptism. Lent is a rite of passage and liminal space that has been embraced by the Church in the past, and while still celebrated today, many churches and their participants have lost the liminal meaning behind the celebration.

⁴⁰ Schepers, 99.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Regan, 9.

⁴³ Schaff and Wallace, 155.

⁴⁴ Regan, 9.

Paschal Mystery as Liminal Space

Paschal mystery is a liminal theology that illustrates the liminal posture of the grave. The words of Jesus ring true in this subject on paschal mystery: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”⁴⁵ This statement defines the paschal mystery as a “cycle for rebirth.”⁴⁶ Johnson claims, “The term *paschal mystery* has become a common theological construct and shorthand to refer to the total event of the crucified and risen Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ The principal of the paschal mystery is that “in order to come to fuller life and spirit we must constantly be letting go of present life and spirit.”⁴⁸ Thus, we are encouraged to die as well, to pick up our cross and follow Jesus,⁴⁹ which is the invitation to follow Jesus’ pattern of Cruciform⁵⁰ living.

Ronald Rolheiser wrote about two different types of death, terminal and paschal.⁵¹ Terminal death is one that “ends all life and possibilities,”⁵² while paschal death ends “one kind of life, [and] opens the person undergoing it to receive a deeper and richer

⁴⁵ John 12:24 (NRSV).

⁴⁶ Rolheiser, 146.

⁴⁷ Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery : Reflections from a Lutheran Viewpoint,” *Worship* 57, no. 2 (March 1, 1983): 134–50, 134.

⁴⁸ Rolheiser, 146.

⁴⁹ Matt. 10:38, 16:24.

⁵⁰ Gorman, *Cruciformity*.

⁵¹ Rolheiser, 146.

⁵² *Ibid.*

form of life.”⁵³ Thus, dying to a marriage can terminally end our hope of loving ever again, or undergoing the paschal death of a marriage can open us up to new ways of loving for a deeper future.

There are also, according to Rolheiser, two kinds of life. The first life is resuscitated life when “one is restored to one’s former life and health.” A Biblical example would be Lazarus, who was resuscitated back to his former life only to experience death again later.⁵⁴ The second kind of life is resurrected life, which is not the “restoration of one’s old life but the reception of a radically new life.”⁵⁵ This pattern can be seen in the radical difference in Christ after his resurrection.

Rolheiser states “The paschal mystery is about paschal death and resurrected life.”⁵⁶ Thus, the pattern of the paschal death is put forth in the Gospels accounts of “Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the forty days leading up to the Ascension, the Ascension, and Pentecost.”⁵⁷ Rolheiser defines each of these accounts as follows:

1. Good Friday: “the loss of life”
2. Easter Sunday: “the reception of new life”
3. The Forty Days: “a time for readjustment to the new and grieving for the old”
4. Ascension: “letting go of the old and letting it bless you, the refusal to cling”

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ John 11:1-16.

⁵⁵ Rolheiser, 146.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 147.

5. Pentecost: “the reception of new spirit for the new life that on is already living.”⁵⁸

The paschal mystery is a paradigm of how Christ walked through his sufferings as a model for how we are to walk through our sufferings as well. Indeed, the church’s liturgy is said to be the “performance of the paschal mystery . . . the Risen Christ continuing the work of salvation in the world of today.”⁵⁹ His is the pattern that we also are to take on in our sufferings, letting certain things die, such as expectations, comforts, and desires, and laying them to rest to never live as they were again. Only then can we see the resurrection and new life ascend to the Father and let the Holy Spirit breathe new life and power upon this circumstance.

Walking this pattern through faith is the picking up of our cross daily, the grain of wheat falling to the earth to die, the total trust in God that His will and His kingdom are the ultimate reality that wins out in the end of time. Walking in this pattern is an act of faith proclaiming death has lost its sting, the grave has lost its victory, and Christ overcame this world and all its evil with the ultimate power of love. The resurrection is God vindicating the type of life Christ lived, for he was raised by his “spirit of holiness”⁶⁰ that is his willingness to live the holy life of obedience to the kingdom of God in faith. This spirit of holiness leads Christ to the cross, which he is then declared, or “appointed to be the son of God in power”⁶¹ through this obedience.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Henri Jenny Bp, “The Paschal Mystery Is Central,” *Worship* 37, no. 8 (August 1, 1963): 497–501, 498.

⁶⁰ The Greek of Romans 1:4 as discussed in. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 49.

⁶¹ Rom. 1:4.

From the paschal mystery, Schepers declares two spiritual laws, one coming from Christ's death, and one from his vindicating resurrection. The first law is called "the Law of the Cross,"⁶² which is how Christ, and his people, deal with evil and bring about a greater good, through faith in God's non-violent⁶³ way of resolving the universe's problems of evil.⁶⁴ This law is in direct opposition to the world's way of resolving evil with the exercise of power. The law of the cross is able to convert evil by dismantling the mindset that caused it, instead of promoting that mindset.⁶⁵

The second law, the Law of Resurrection is how our "radical renunciation" of the world's ways of resolving evil through power can bring about our death to them entirely. We experience a death to the past, casting our sins into oblivion so we can embrace a radical peace of someone who has been forgiven.⁶⁶

We can now live within Christ's faith and holiness and have access to the kingdom of God by faith in his type of holiness, which leads to a paschal death and resurrection. Our crosses that we bear daily are small, but a lifetime of living in the "spirit of holiness" leads us toward resurrection as well. This invitation to crucifixion and burial is why the paschal mystery is liminal space, an initiation or rite of passage of death that leads to new life.

⁶² Schepers, 99.

⁶³ There are many different ways of viewing the atonement, penal substitutionary, substitutionary, Christus Victor, etc... This paper is not dedicated to the working out of these theologies independently, but instead uses the view that is best in line with the argument of the paper, which is Christus Victor.

⁶⁴ Schepers, 99.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 103–4.

I have explored some aspects of the liturgical calendar that intentionally acknowledge seasons of liminality, and encourage participation from the Church to enter in to liminality. I have also explored the concept of paschal mystery. Now I will turn to some people who acknowledge liminality as part of the way they view the Christian life: Luther, John of the Cross, and John Wesley.

Luther's Theology of the Cross

Luther believed that the theology of the cross was his only theology.⁶⁷ He differentiates outward virtues of works from inward virtues of heart and their means of transformation saying “. . . virtues may be perfected by *doing*; but faith, hope, and love, only by *suffering*, I say; that is, by being passive under the divine operation.”⁶⁸ Here Luther explicitly embraces a liminal posture of the grave as the means by which his faith, hope, and love are purified. He defines faith, hope, and love as, “. . . motions of the heart”⁶⁹ which cannot be transformed by our own will or works but only through “a passive suffering or being acted upon, a being moved, a being carried along by the Spirit; whereby the soul is moved, formed, cleansed, and impregnated by the Word of God.”⁷⁰

Luther embraced liminality as a way of internal transformation that led to outward virtue. Outward virtue could not lead to inward transformation. Luther believed that the passive posture of the heart under God's leading through suffering was the way of

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther: An Offering to the Church of God in the Last Days*, trans. Henry Cole, vol. III (London: Bensley, 1826), 260.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

transformation. Why can one not change the inward virtue of faith, hope, and love through outward practice? Luther believed that our outward virtues were “employed about grosser things, and things outwardly carnal.”⁷¹ The inward virtue of faith, hope, and love were employed by “the pure Word of God; whereby the soul is taken hold of, and does not take hold of any thing itself: that is, it is stripped of its own garments, of its shoes, of all its possessions, and of all its imaginations, and is taken away by the Word . . . into the wilderness, (as Hosea saith, chap. ii. 14;) to invisible things, into the vineyard, and into the marriage chamber.”⁷² Luther explicitly embraces liminal seasons of desert in which is described by Luther as the marriage chamber, the place of intimacy.

The desert leading with a passive posture of heart Luther describes is a

. . . hard path to walk in, and a strait and narrow way, to leave all visible things, to be stripped of all natural senses and ideas, and to be led out of all those things to which we have been accustomed; this indeed is to die; and to descend into hell, for the soul seems unto herself to perish utterly, when all those things in which she stood and was employed, and to which she cleaved, are destroyed, and when she herself can neither touch earth nor heaven, nor feel herself nor God . . . I know nothing; I am come into blackness and darkness; I can see nothing; I live and am made strong by faith, hope, and love only . . . This leading of being led, is what the mystical theologians call ‘going into darkness.’⁷³

Luther embraces both the liminal season of desert and the liminal posture of the grave as a means God uses for soul transformation. Luther anticipated seasons of difficulty and spiritual dryness for which he postured his heart in a passive grave manner in order for God to do his inward work for which Luther had no power to influence or

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

change. His only duty was to hold a liminal posture of heart toward the work God was doing within him through seasons of desert suffering.

Luther challenges the classical triad (purgation, illumination, union) with his emphasis on the theology of justification (read “union”) by faith. Luther will “turn this triad on its head.”⁷⁴

Dark Night of the Soul as Liminal Space

Joan Chittister argues “God is the question that drives us beyond facile answers”⁷⁵ and Rowan Williams says that paradox is a way “that keeps [that] question alive.”⁷⁶ The modern world has given us a faith that seems more certain than has been historically accepted. Evangelicals ask the question, “Are you certain that if you died tonight you would go to heaven?” While there are things that we can be certain about in our faith, there are also mysteries and paradoxes of the faith that are just as important to hold onto without mentally conquering them into our understanding. For example, Fifth century mystic Dionysius opens his *Mystical Theology* with a prayer to the Trinity saying:

Thou that instructeth Christians in Thy heavenly wisdom! Guide us to that topmost height of mystic lore which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness, and surcharging our blinded

⁷⁴ Philip S. Watson, “Luther and Sanctification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30, no. 4 (April 1, 1959): 243–59, 248.

⁷⁵ Joan D. Chittister, *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 21.

⁷⁶ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1995), 100.

intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories which exceed all beauty!⁷⁷

He goes on to encourage the receptor of his letter to “strain (so far as thou mayest) towards a union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.”⁷⁸

This concept of darkness, obscurity, and unknowing is continued in the fourteenth century with the anonymous writing *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Darkness and unknowing keep the paradox of God alive within our hearts, since we do not resolve the question. Rowan Williams says, “That light cutting through our darkness, is not a comfortable clearing up of problems and smoothing out of our difficulties and upsets. On the contrary, it brings on a kind of vertigo; it may make me a stranger to myself, to everything I have ever taken for granted.”⁷⁹

St. John of the Cross picked up the concept of darkness and built upon them in a practical way, creating *Ascent of Mount Carmel*,⁸⁰ showing how to attain union with God,

⁷⁷ Dionysius the Areopogate, “Christian Classics Ethereal Library,” *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, June 1, 2005, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/rolt/dionysius.v.html>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Williams, 100.

⁸⁰ John of the Cross, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, 41.

the quickest path being darkness.⁸¹ He then wrote the classic “masterpiece in the literature of mysticism”⁸² *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

The term darkness does not necessarily mean suffering or trials. John of the Cross says that there is more suffering for those who resist the dark night because progress to union with God is slower.⁸³ But indeed it entails suffering. John calls the process of purgation or purification “night.”⁸⁴

John explains that a soul is incapable of loving union with God when the soul loves something else, because love makes “an attachment to a creature,” making one “equal to that creature; the stronger the attachment, the closer is the likeness to the creature and greater the equality.”⁸⁵ Psychologist Gerald May writes, “The dark night is . . . an ongoing process in which we are liberated from attachments and compulsions and empowered to live and love more freely.”⁸⁶

John divides the dark night into two kinds: a *dark night of the senses* and a *dark night of the soul*. Each of these is further divided into passive and active portions. The Dark Night of the Senses is to purge the newly proficient believer from their vice through ascetical practices. The Dark Night of the Soul is to purge the matured believer of improper internal motivations of their practice of faith. John writes, “Their motivation in

⁸¹ Ibid., 55.

⁸² St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul: A Masterpiece in the Literature of Mysticism by St. John of the Cross*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday Religious Publishing Group, 2005).

⁸³ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 65-6.

⁸⁶ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Reprint ed. (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), Location 85.

their spiritual works and exercises is the consolation and satisfaction they experience in them”⁸⁷ Thus, the motivation is not God, but a feeling of satisfaction. The dark night’s purpose is to purge these imperfections.

John says that in these imperfections “God desires to withdraw them [believers] from this base manner of loving and lead them on to a higher degree of divine love.” God desires to “liberate them from the lowly exercise of the senses and of discursive meditation . . . and lead them into the exercise of the spirit, in which they become capable of a communion with God that is more abundant and freer of imperfections.”⁸⁸

John claims, “God places these souls in the dark night so as to purify them of these imperfections and make them advance.”⁸⁹ The passive night of the senses is God doing the work that only God can do, while the active night of the senses refers to us doing what we can do in obedience.⁹⁰ The completion of the dark night of the senses prepares us for the dark night of the soul. John says “the night of the senses we explained should be called a certain reformation and bridling of the appetite rather than a purgation.”⁹¹ His reasoning is the spirit fuels the passions of the senses, when the senses are calmed the soul is ready to undergo the purgation of the spirit.⁹²

⁸⁷ John of the Cross, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, 164.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹² *Ibid.*

The dark night of the soul is when “God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both of spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling of satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings.”⁹³ The purpose of this experience is the purgation of all lesser loves so the soul can receive a “union of love” with God.⁹⁴

This night is called dark because of “the height of the divine wisdom, which exceeds the capacity of the soul. [And] because of the soul’s baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul . . . Thus when the divine light of contemplation strikes souls not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness.”⁹⁵

Within the dark night there is a danger of slipping into a neo-platonic dualism if one does not have a healthy theology of the incarnation as a foundation that keeps one from slipping into Gnosticism. But this dark night is purposed to leave us holistically with more light and understanding, in body, mind, and spirit, on the other side of the experience. John writes that the dark night of the spirit, “humbles persons and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them. And even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only so that they may

⁹³ Ibid., 199.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 201.

reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all.”⁹⁶

John is the most detailed contributor for the theology of the liminality of the dark night. John Wesley, however, addresses liminal space from another angle, the question of God’s love in light of sin and evil.

John Wesley’s Sermon of God’s Love toward Fallen Man

John Wesley was interested in this question: For what end did one perfect the self? To explore this question, Wesley wrote a sermon entitled, “God’s Love toward Fallen Man” in which he communicates the place of liminality within his paradigm of sanctification. Wesley believed that through the fall of humankind, God’s love is shown all the greater saying, “the greatest instance of His love had never been given, if Adam had not fallen.”⁹⁷ This is known traditionally as “*O felix culpa*, O happy fault. A result of experiencing the love of God in the fall is a liminal mission of exile in the world for their sake He states,

. . . if not its very being, from this grand event, as does our love both of the Father and the Son; so does the love of neighbor also, our benevolence to all mankind, which cannot but increase in the same proportion with our faith and love of God. For who does not apprehend the force of that inference drawn by the loving Apostle: ‘Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another?’”

⁹⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁹⁷ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection: As Believed and Taught by the Rev. John Wesley, from the Year 1725 to the Year 1777* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 234.

He argues further that “. . . this motive to brotherly love had been totally wanting if Adam had not fallen. Consequently, we could not then have loved one another in so high a degree as we may now.”⁹⁸

Wesley embraces the liminal mission of exile, as well as the liminal season of desert and posture of grave. He describes, “How much holiness and happiness out of pain! How innumerable are the benefits which God conveys to the children of men through the channel of sufferings! . . . Indeed had there been no suffering in the world, a considerable part of religion, yea, and, in some respects, the most excellent part, could have had no place therein . . .”⁹⁹ Wesley indeed leaves room for seasons of suffering, an aspect of the liminal season of desert, within the Christian life, and even believes it to be the most excellent part. Wesley also has a liminal posture of heart while in the midst of desert.

Upon this foundation, even our suffering, it is evident all our passive graces are built; yea, the noblest of all Christian graces, love enduring all things. Here is the ground for resignation to God, enabling us to say from the heart in every trying hour, ‘It is the Lord: Let him do what seemeth him good:’ ‘Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil!’¹⁰⁰

The result of enduing liminal desert seasons with a liminal posture of heart was a liminal mission of exile for the world’s sake. “What a glorious spectacle [Christ enduing suffering] is . . . did it not constrain even a heathen to cry out . . . ‘See a sight worthy of God;’ a good man struggling with adversity, and superior to it.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ibid., 235.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Implications

Here in the history of the Church's theology and practice we see a clearly defined use of liminal space and posture of heart. Some approaches are similar and some differing. There are intentional annual observations of liminal spaces, which invite the Church into liminal postures of heart. There is also theology that leaves space for those experiencing liminal spaces on their own.

Richard Rohr suggests that modern and postmodern civilization have become too "strategic, functional, and hurried to easily seek what the ancients sought above all else,"¹⁰² namely liminal spaces. He also states¹⁰² that the church has followed suit creating, instead of sacred liminal space, a false sacred space, which he calls ceremony. He likens this space to profane space: "Profane space has no absolute center, but rather many centers that periodically take their turn. 2) Profane space always reflects the dominant consciousness because it knows no alternative. 3) Profane space never allows the appearance of the shadow. It would be far too threatening."¹⁰³

This drift into profane space has described many worship services and communities that I, as a pastor, have both led and have been a part of. God is not in the center of this space. Perhaps there are things about God that take center stage and cause us to believe that God is at the center because of the good cause we are promoting, perhaps a person, a ministry, a project, an ideal, or cause. So many church services and communities are mere reflections of the dominant culture around us upon which we have

¹⁰² Richard Rohr, "Sojourners, Faith in Action for Social Justice," *Grieving as Sacred Space*, February 2002, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2002/01/grieving-sacred-space>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

stamped God's name. We stamp His name on political causes and hot topics, values of national pride, or accumulation of power and success in the name of God. So many church spaces and communities I have been a part of leave no room for people to be honest about their darkness and struggles. There seems to be a collective projected expectation that we should be happy at all times, and if one is not we hope they get over it soon and join us in our emotionally prosperous bliss.

Historically, the path of spiritual formation in the Church has been one of liminality. Of course, not every soul that experienced liminality experienced a maturing of his or her faith. But there was intentional space and theology for the explanation of how to go about it.

How has the church gotten so far off track? If our primary responsibility as disciples of Jesus is to make disciples of Jesus, teaching them to obey all the commands He gave to us¹⁰⁴, why is that we have become so ineffective at walking people through the liminal space that God is almost always leading us toward? If liminality is such a major theme throughout the Bible and Church history, as we have discovered so far in this study, why is it that we have missed it? It has not always been so.

Somewhere in the Evangelical tradition, liminality was left by the way side. In the next chapter I will explore where we set it down, and why, and encourage us to pick it back up again.

¹⁰⁴ Matt. 28:19-20.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIMINALITY IN CHURCH HISTORY PART TWO: ITS RECENT
DECAY

One loving spirit sets another on fire . . . History teaches us, in fact, that God most often educates men through men. We most easily recognize Spirit when it is perceived transfiguring human character, and most easily achieve it by means of sympathetic contagion . . . Even the most noblest sons and daughters of God are also the sons and daughters of the race; and are helped by those who go before them. And as regards the generality, not isolated effort but the love and sincerity of the true spiritual teacher . . . are the means by which the secret of full life has been handed on . . . If we study the lives of those who founded these Orders . . . we notice one general characteristic: each was an enthusiast, abounding in zest and hope, and became in his lifetime a fount of regeneration, a source of spiritual infection. For those who came under his influence. In each the spiritual world was seen “through a temperament,” and so mediated to the disciples; who shared so far as they were able the master’s special secret and attitude to life . . . Yet sooner or later after the withdrawal of its founder, the group appears to lose its spontaneous and enthusiastic character. Zest fails. Unless a fresh leader be forthcoming, it inevitably settles down again toward the general level of the herd. Thence it can only be roused by means of “reforms” and “revivals,” the arrival of new vigorous leaders, and the formation of new enthusiastic groups: for the bulk of men as we know them cannot make the costing effort needed for a first-hand participation in eternal life. They want a crowd compeller to lift them above themselves. Thus the history of Christianity is the history of successive spiritual group-formations, and their struggle to survive; from the time when Jesus of Nazareth formed His little flock with the avowed aim of “bringing in the Kingdom of God.”

—Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*

The purpose of this chapter is to continue to follow the thread of liminality and its decay in the nineteenth century revivals to see how a “sanctification gap”¹ was formed. For it is in the nineteenth century Church, that there was a shift in sanctification theology that led to a shift in our paradigm of sanctification overall. This shift created a lack of acknowledgement, hospitality, and education of liminal space, posture, and mission. The shift was one from journey toward union with God, often through liminal seasons of

¹ The concept of a “sanctification gap” was developed in the article by Richard Lovelace: Richard F. Lovelace, “Sanctification Gap,” *Theology Today* 29, no. 4 (January 1, 1973): 363–69.

suffering, toward maintaining our standing of righteousness at a pinnacle of our faith. It happened through the reinterpretation of major theologians' concepts like Luther's justification by faith and Wesley's entire sanctification.

The Decay of Liminality in Revivalists

Sanctification was accomplished through different means at different times, and was evidenced through different ways. Yet, the revivalist's understanding of it as an imputed state at a pinnacle of faith left little room for seasons of desert solitude, for this season could be taken as a backsliding phase. How did we shift from journey motif to pinnacle motif? While there are many revivalists I could depict, I will cover one of the key figures of change. I now turn attention to Charles Finney of the nineteenth century, to explore the creation of the sanctification gap.

The means by which union was attained by faith was heavily reliant upon renewed interest in religion and enthusiasm about faith. According to the paradigm of revivalism, union starts with an illumination, specifically of the depraved state of sin we find ourselves in, in order to become converted through repentance. Illumination however was "not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is [the] purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much as any other effect produced by the application of means."² The means of union with God came through pragmatic elements within a revival setting that promoted emotional enthusiasm. These means were "physical prostrations, women speaking, protracted meetings and, from 1830, the use of the 'anxious seat', an isolated bench at the front of a meeting where

² Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1026.

a penitent would sit in full view of all to be the target for the whole congregation's prayers.³

Charles Chauncy would criticize the enthusiasm of the first Great Awakening as imaginary inspiration saying,

. . . the *Enthusiast* is one, who has conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the *Deity*. He mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the SPIRIT of GOD, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination.⁴

One of the most well-known and influential leaders of the revivalist movement was Charles Finney. Finney was a key figure in the Second Great Awakening. He built upon the First Great Awakening methods of George Whitefield, using “preaching soul searching sermons on conversion . . . newspaper advertising, inexpensive publications, and the deliberate provocation of controversy to stimulate interest.”⁵ He was a Presbyterian theologian who built his theology upon his methods of revivalism, which is often referred to as Finney's ‘new methods’.⁶ Specifically relating to the classic triad of sanctification is Finney's theology of moral depravity. Popular at the time was a theology of Calvinistic moral depravity, which stated that man is totally depraved in his nature.

³ David W. Bebbington, “Revivals, Revivalism and the Baptists,” *Baptistic Theologies* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 1–13.

⁴ Eugene E. White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 105.

⁵ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 483.

⁶ Sean Michael Lucas, “Charles Finney's Theology of Revival : Moral Depravity,” *Master's Seminary Journal* 6, no. 2 (September 1, 1995): 197–221, 199.

Finney called this theology “absurd . . . anti-Scriptural and non-sensical dogma,” and claimed that it makes the gospel “a farce.”⁷ At one point, Finney mocks his opponents with sarcasm when he writes, “Sin an attribute of nature! A sinful substance! Sin a substance! Is it a solid, a fluid, a material or a spiritual substance?”⁸ Instead Finney states that man’s nature is fine, it is the will that is depraved and separates physical depravity from moral depravity.⁹ Lucas argues, “Therefore, in order to have a conversion, it is necessary to convince an individual to cease making decisions to satisfy self and to begin making decisions to glorify God.”¹⁰ Thus a preacher could become skilled in the art of getting conversions through emotional enthusiasm. If the will were depraved and needed coercion, why not use all means possible in order to coerce the soul to make a decision? This process of coercion had four “managers”: “God, truth, sinner, and preacher.”¹¹ According to Finney, “God and the godly convert sinners,” this was a “reaction to the crippling error of Calvinistic cannotism [a belief which states that some people cannot receive the Gospel] which palsied with work of salvation and prevented revivals.”¹²

The end goal of revivalism is seen in their metrics used to measure effectiveness: conversions. Finney himself says, “Those are the best educated ministers, who win the

⁷ Lucas, 202.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 203.

¹⁰ Ibid., 204.

¹¹ Leonard I. Sweet, “View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism,” *Church History* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 1976): 206–21, 208.

¹² Ibid.

most souls.”¹³ The end goal of union with God was replaced by an end goal of being converted from sin and hell into heaven. God became a means to an individualistic end of attaining heaven, instead of God Himself being the end goal of faith. The result was that purgation took a back seat as being secondary and optional as illumination of sin and conversion into heaven replaced union with God. Salvation was being saved from hell, and sin is what sent one to hell. Therefore, illumination of sin leading to conversion would save one from hell, and the cross was the means by which one maintained one’s assurance of heaven.

Finney, however, ran into a “crisis of sanctification”¹⁴ when he realized he was “skillful at virtually coercing conversions,” yet “new measures revivalism failed to retain converts once the revival fervor diminished.”¹⁵ He published *Views on Sanctification* in 1840 where he attempted to correct his sanctification crisis by adopting Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification and creating a theology of backsliding. Finney states that human beings had “a capacity to fulfill God’s command to be perfect.”¹⁶ This belief was then referred to as the ‘Oberlin heresy’, named after the school where he taught and where this theology arose. Finney, being so pragmatic, measured perfection in outward moralism since inward character change is hard to measure. In his *Systematic Theology* he answers the question, ‘does a Christian cease to be a Christian, whenever he commits a sin?’ saying,

¹³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion*, 2nd ed. William L. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1960) 185-87.

¹⁴ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 75.

¹⁵ Sweet, 219.

¹⁶ Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 75.

Whenever he sins, he must, for a time being, cease to be holy . . . Whenever he sins, he must be condemned. He must incur the penalty of the law of God . . . for a precept without penalty is no law. It is only counsel or advice. The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned if he disobeys; or Antinomianism is true . . . Until he repents he cannot be forgiven. In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.¹⁷

With this mindset, one maintained one's sanctification through repression of sinful desire and by enacting fervent good deeds. A shifting of the end goal from God Himself to heaven caused a fear within believers that they might lose their end goal through an act of sin. This approach encouraged moralism, which encouraged facades, which encouraged emotional and psychological repression of areas of life not yet sanctified.

Reinterpretation of Luther

The revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a great impact on the theology and practice of the modern Western church largely because of a reinterpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection.

Luther had turned the classical triad on its head. He believed that union with God happened at conversion, that is, one is justified and united with God in Christ by faith. Luther constructed a paradigm of sanctification in which union with God happened at the time of repentance by faith, not after purgation. Purgation came as a byproduct of union through his theology of the cross.

¹⁷ Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2003), 215.

The revivalists simplified justification by faith and made conversion easier. Lovelace argues that “the nineteenth century heirs of the revival tradition modified the Puritan system by allowing easier standards of initial conversion . . . the ultimate simplification, of course, was Finney’s call for instantaneous commitment and instantaneous conversion, with no waiting period to allow election to set in.”¹⁸ Conversionism through enthusiasm swept through the church, yet disconnected from the common triad.

The fruit of their reinterpretation produced “revival leaders [who] were like mechanics examining an engine in which the power-train has somehow been attached to the carburetor, the whole of sanctification inserted into conversion . . . they disconnected sanctification from conversion, and made it easy for men to enter the kingdom on the basis of simple faith and initial repentance.”¹⁹ Lovelace is not trying to argue for difficult entry into the kingdom of God, but merely pointing out that “having unloaded conversion . . . [the revivalists] failed to reinsert sanctification in its proper place in the development of the Christian life, and left the engine with no power-train at all.”²⁰

Sanctification became an imputed standing, “when believers are accepted by Christ . . . they are not only accounted righteous in Justification. They are also credited with holiness, without any work of the Holy Spirit to make their lives actually holy.”²¹ This imputed-by-faith sanctification was received by faith, yet was in danger of

¹⁸ Lovelace, 366.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 366-67.

²¹ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000), 31.

antinomianism, a belief that requires no need of moral actions as proof of sanctification. How do Christians show sanctification externally if it is received by faith and “the Christian was as much sanctified at the start of his union with Christ as at its consummation”?²²

In response, there arose within Calvinism’s holiness stream four characteristics of a holy life. First, it commenced with conversion. Conversion provided assurance that one was in union with God. The second characteristic was the focus on the cross and atonement theology. Christ crucified provided consistent forgiveness to backsliders and provided the “bedrock of continuing discipleship.”²³ The third characteristic of a holy life was the Bible, “the supreme source of nurture in the spiritual life” and the remedy for the backslider. As Andrew Fuller said, it served as a “preservative from sin” and a “restorative from it.” The fourth characteristic of a holy life was “ceaseless activity” especially evangelism and a “zeal for souls.”²⁴

According to the revivalist interpretation of the Reformed tradition, at the start of the Christian life, one is placed at the pinnacle of spiritual experience through conversion. One is sustained at the pinnacle by the power of the cross, and able to return to the pinnacle after backsliding away from the pinnacle by the same power. This life was fed by consistent Bible reading, in both morning and evening, and put on display through evangelistic activity.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 39.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

Redefinition of Wesley

The holiness movement, led by John Wesley, would keep union as the end goal of faith. The terminology he used was ‘perfection’. Wesley defined perfection as “. . . pure love filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions.”²⁵ Wesley argued that if an entire sanctification from sin was not possible in the present life, the prayers in the Bible for God to sanctify would make a mockery of God.²⁶ Yet if perfection was possible, what is the means by which one attains perfection? Perfection was a gift of faith from God through prayer. Wesley said, “God hardly gives his Spirit even to those who he has established in grace, if they do not pray for it on all occasions, not only once, but many times.”²⁷ Thus, the doctrine of Christian perfection arose.

The methodical approach of John Wesley for maintaining a state of holiness met a need in a very pragmatic society. It was straight-forward in its approach to sanctification, based in group accountability. It started when Wesley was approached by “eight to ten persons . . . who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption.”²⁸ He set aside Thursday evenings to meet with this group and advise them in holiness and pray with them.²⁹ This approach gave rise to the Methodist movement and John Wesley’s *Rules of the Band Societies*. The rules consisted of meeting once a week

²⁵ Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

for confession and prayer for the purpose of healing.³⁰ The rules were practical, intentional, and based upon honesty and accountability in a small community.

The upkeep of one's union with God was to be found in the illumination others brought upon one's soul through their questions on our state. One could then move forward practically in purgation toward union, which God would provide when prayed earnestly for as a second blessing.

Watchfulness about one's spiritual state was an essential element in nineteenth century Wesleyan piety. All believers had to be wary lest they themselves became castaways.³¹ This wariness was known as an "active, fervid, and joyous piety."³² Followers of Wesley were encouraged to remain active, for "Methodists . . . threw themselves into a full round of meetings . . . prayer meetings, business meetings, visiting societies and tract societies, bazaars and sewing circles . . . The greater the involvement, as a general rule, the higher the piety rating with contemporaries."³³

The Wesleyans' love of reason led to their embrace of the Enlightenment's value of a utopian happiness. This utopian happiness would not be reached through humanism, however, but through their doctrine of 'entire sanctification'. While Wesley's followers were encouraged to endure "persecution and affliction in a right manner [in order to attain] a higher measure of conformity to Christ,"³⁴ their nineteenth century definition of

³⁰ James 5:16.

³¹ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 52.

³² *Ibid.*, 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

a ‘right manner’ fell short of including lament. Adherents were expected to be in a state of happiness all the time, which depended on the spiritual state one’s soul embraced. Thus, one’s sanctification often became tied to one’s positive emotions. Negative emotion was a sign that one’s sanctification was lost or in jeopardy. Liminality started to become seen as a loss of sanctification, since many liminal seasons are fraught with negative emotion, spiritual dryness, and feelings of distance from God. This belief is illustrated by Phoebe Palmer’s second blessing account which describes ‘full surrender’ as a full consecration of one’s life to God.

I will let every high state of grace in name alone, and seek only to be *fully consecrated to the will of God, as recorded in his written word . . . all my energies shall be directed to this one point . . .* By this she saw, that if she lived constantly in the entire surrender of all that had been thus dearly purchased unto God, she was but an unprofitable servant; and that, if less than all was rendered, was worse than unprofitable . . .³⁵

She goes on to describe the moment of total surrender at a point of crisis and receiving an assurance:

. . . while pleading at the throne of grace for a present fulfillment of the exceeding great and precious promises; pleading also the fullness and freeness of the atonement, its unbounded efficacy, and making an entire surrender of body, soul, and spirit; time, talents, and influence; and also of the dearest ties of nature, my beloved husband and child; in a word, my earthly *all*, *I received the assurance that God the Father, through the atoning Lamb, accepted the sacrifice*; my heart was emptied of self, and cleansed of all idols, from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, and realized that I dwelt in God, and felt that he had become the portion of my soul, my ALL in ALL.³⁶

³⁵ Phoebe Palmer, *The Way of Holiness: With Notes by the Way : Being a Narrative of Experience Resulting from a Determination to Be a Bible Christian* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1843), 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

Effects on Liminality

Liminality not only was not needed in the revivalist conversionism, it was a threat. The reinterpretation of Wesley's pragmatic methods of sanctification, linked with the reinterpretation of Luther's justification by faith led the revivalists' into near obsession with conversion rates and moralism. This made sanctification merely about outward morality and active evangelism. Any sign of darkness, doubt, spiritual dryness, lament or the like could be interpreted as backsliding sin, and sin makes one lose the end goal of heaven.

Finney developed a theology of backsliding to support his pinnacle model of faith saying "If they have professed religion, and have at any time conformed their lives to its rules so far as to appear to be religious, and if they then go back from even the appearance of religion, they are called backsliders."³⁷ He further describes this in terms of the revivalists stressing on enthusiasm expounding,

A person who is truly converted and is a Christian, but has left his first love. His zeal has grown cold. The ardor of his feelings and the depth of his piety are abated. Such a person is a 'backslider in heart.' He may keep up all the forms of religion, attend to worship, public and private, and read the Bible, and go through all these exercises regularly, but the spirit is gone—all the fine edge of pious feelings is blunted . . . Have you less ardor of feeling, less fixedness of purpose, less faithfulness in duty? If you have, they I mean *you*. God means you. He calls you backslider. That is your name—you elder in the church; or you minister, if there be any such here; you woman—no matter what is your standing in the church, if that is the description of your character, then you are a backslider. And so you stand entered on the book of God.³⁸

Finney goes on to describe concrete characteristics of backsliders that make liminal space a threat to one's sanctification, and therefore a threat to one's entering heaven. These

³⁷ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 2nd ed., 400.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 400-1.

characteristics include those who do not enjoy secret prayer, those who do not enjoy the study of scripture more than any other book, those who let worldly minded thoughts enter one's mind in the morning. If one does not feel "painful anxiety and prayer in view of the state of the church" it is because they are backsliders.³⁹ In short, if one has lost emotional enthusiasm for God, one is a backslider.

Finney swung the pendulum far and fast from conversionism to perfectionism in order to compensate for a sanctification gap. Since sanctification was both defined and measured in one's emotional fervor, and one's moral cooperation with this fervor, hostility toward liminality resulted. One can sense the hostility of Finney toward liminality when he describes backsliders as "the most unhappy . . . guilty . . . despicable . . . inconsistent . . . difficult to please . . . hardened . . . loathsome . . . injurious to the cause of religion . . . hypocritical" people on earth.⁴⁰ And such people invite the punishment of an angry God upon them for "If you continue in your backsliden state, you may expect that by and by God will let you fall into some iniquity or some disgrace that will be a source of vexation and trial to you as long as you live."⁴¹

While a church may not entertain the theology of Finney to such a degree, the revivalist value system of conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism along with Finney's moralistic fear of backsliding from an emotional, enthusiastic pinnacle of faith which one was placed at through conversion, left its mark on the modern Evangelical church's paradigm of operation. How can one embrace a practice without the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 409-12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 412-13.

theology? There is one more shift that also left its mark and created a melting pot effect within the church: the Keswick movement in England.

The Decay of Liminality in the Keswick Movement

The Reformed tradition was marching on, and tension between Finney and the Reformed was high. A movement in England attempted to temper these two and left the modern day Evangelical church a theological and methodological melting pot. This attempt was the Keswick movement, named for the town that held the conferences in which ministers and leaders would attend. Bebbington says of the movement, “Here again is an instance of the nineteenth-century practice of inventing a tradition. Contemporary practice was being buttressed by evidence drawn selectively from a handful of earlier sources—or in this case from a single one.”⁴² The single source he speaks of is seventeenth-century’s Walter Marshall’s *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, in which holiness by faith is discussed.

The Keswick movement started in England and tried to find common ground in Wesleyan and Reformed traditions while addressing the sanctification crisis. Bebbington says that the Keswick movement can best be defined as a synthesis of [Reformed] and [Wesleyan] theologies.⁴³ Thus, the Keswick movement became a melting pot of the Reformed tradition and Wesley’s holiness movement. This movement sought to bring sanctification by faith to the Reformed traditions through Finney and the revivalists.

⁴² David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

The Keswick movement emphasized union through faith as did their Protestant predecessors, yet also emphasized purgation through faith. Both are the work of God. “A Christian, on this view, was wholly sanctified in status at conversion; it only remained for that sanctification to be worked out in experience.”⁴⁴ This was an attempt to synthesize imputed justification and sanctification with the doctrine of Christian perfection. They believed that there are certain practical actions that we take in order to maintain God’s dominion in our soul over dormant, repressed sin. This dominion of God over our sin is what the Keswick followers called ‘victory’. It was our duty to let God reign in our life through total surrender so we can walk in victory over sin.

The higher life does not mean an eradication of sinfulness. Sinfulness remains present in the believer, yet dormant, as long as the Holy Spirit had freedom to repress it. Evan Hopkins wrote a major work on this subject saying, “Our conflict consists in fighting, not *for* this position of victory, but *from* it. We are to fight, not in order to reach the place of victory, but, occupying that position in Christ, being strengthened in Him, we fight from it. The conflict is . . . but to stand in possession [of victory].”⁴⁵ This belief gave rise to the language of victory in Jesus, which was victory over the struggle within the consecrated believer over sin, but one in which God would always be victorious.

A major influential work within this movement was W.E. Boardman’s *The Higher Christian Life*. “The book urged its readers to move on by faith to a superior form

⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵ Evan Henry Hopkins, *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life* (London: Marshall Bros., 1884), 185.

of spirituality.”⁴⁶ In this work, Boardman describes Paul’s exhortation to be “filled with the fullness of God”⁴⁷ in three parts: what it is, how it is attained, and how it is maintained. Boardman’s description of what a higher life is starts with what it is not. He opens saying, “Some disciples of Christ live, life-long, under the condemnation, and know no better. They are always doubting, and think they must always doubt. And very many live a life of ups and downs, and suppose that to be the best God has in store for them.”⁴⁸ He then describes the higher life saying “there is actually, a sunny side of the Christian life – such an experimental knowledge of Jesus, as would place the soul, as a vineyard on the southern slope, under the sun and the rain of heaven, to blossom and ripen its luscious fruit in abundance for the glory of the Master.”⁴⁹

Boardman explains this sunny life as a second “deeper work of grace”⁵⁰ often as a return from backsliding. This deeper work is a “fuller apprehension of Christ, a more complete and abiding union with him than at first.”⁵¹ How was this fuller life attained?

The paradigm that the Keswick movement was built upon was that union, purgation, and illumination are all obtained by faith and maintained in victory through total surrender, the latter two: purgation and illumination, being separate and deeper works of the same grace at work in our lives. Boardman states,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁷ Eph. 3:19.

⁴⁸ William Edwin Boardman, *The Higher Christian Life* (Boston: Henry Hoyt, 1859), 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The Scriptures . . . always answer the question ‘what must we do?’ by the assurance, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.’ Whether the question relates to justification or sanctification the answer is the same . . . Faith in the purifying presence of Jesus brings the witness of the Spirit with our spirits that Jesus is our sanctification, that the power and dominion of sin is broken, that we are free, just as faith in the atoning merit of the blood and obedience of Christ for us, brings the witness of the Spirit that we are not no longer under condemnation for sin, but freely and fully justified in Jesus.”⁵²

In order to maintain this higher life, one must progress in greater fullness, from faith to faith and glory to glory. This progress is emphasized with the concept of consecration.

Another major contributor to this movement’s influence was Hannah Whitall Smith, who wrote a popular and very pragmatic book on holiness called *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. She opens her work stating plainly that her book is “not a theological book” nor has she received training in theology, nor does she understand theology. Instead Hannah said “the Lord taught me experimentally and practically certain lessons out of his Word, which have helped me in my Christian life, and have made it a very happy one.”⁵³ She states that with sanctification there is “God’s part” and “our part.” This concept attempted to marry together the Calvinist understanding of imputed sanctification and the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification of pragmatic sanctification believing that both of these teachings are “different sides of the same great truth.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 94.

⁵³ Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* (Boston: Willard Tract Repository, 1885), 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

The Keswick movement's attempt to marry together two polar opposite traditions was influenced by Romanticism's free individualistic expression.⁵⁵ Thus, the Keswick followers moved from the moralistic holiness of the nineteenth century Wesleyans and the intellectual and sometimes antinomianism faith of the nineteenth century reformers to an individualistic, expressive faith that leaned on God entirely for Him to perfect the soul.⁵⁶

Liminality was embraced in this tradition in a limited way. Its place was to lead one to the moment of crisis, in a conference setting in Keswick, which was in the beautiful countryside separated from the influence of the city, in order to become sanctified and find rest in total surrender. After this point, liminality had no place in ongoing Christian formation, and was often seen as a threat to one's stance of victory. Their doctrine of total surrender comes very close to the liminal posture of the heart, yet it does not leave room for the negative seasons of liminality of lament and darkness.

Ramifications on the Evangelical view of Liminality

The Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proved influential on Western Evangelicalism. David Bebbington describes four characteristics of this tradition that have been transmitted down the generations and have left a deposit of faith in its wake.⁵⁷ These characteristics are conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism. We will explore the effects of these four characteristics in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2003), 269.

There are arguments out there proposing a prosperity gospel, claiming God has taken liminality on himself so that we do not have to. We can live in constant physical prosperity and emotional happiness. A.A. Allen wrote a book entitled *God's Guarantee to Heal You*, where he argues that it is God's will to heal the sick if they have enough faith.⁵⁸ Similarly, in *The Power of Spoken Faith*, E. W. Kenyon declares we can speak prosperity into existence.⁵⁹ Other modern pastors and theologians have followed suit and gained a following, such as Crefflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, and Kenneth Copeland.

Many Evangelicals are quick to dismiss the 'prosperity gospel' as heretical teaching, misguided understanding, and at times, selfish money-making schemes by people of influence. Yet have we ascribed to their same theology in a different realm: an emotional prosperity gospel in which we believe that it is God's responsibility to keep us happy and comfortable?

In this chapter I have argued that this belief is not the orthodox theology and stance of the Church, but is a result of the "sanctification gap"⁶⁰ created in nineteenth century evangelical revivalism. The Apostles⁶¹ and the early Church Fathers⁶² all practiced and held to a self-sacrificing doctrine of some sort. Instead of Christ taking on

⁵⁸ Asa Alonso Allen, *God's Guarantee to Heal You* (San Francisco: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2012).

⁵⁹ Don Gossett and Essek William Kenyon, *The Power of Spoken Faith* (Lakeside CA: Whitaker House, 2003).

⁶⁰ Lovelace, 363–69.

⁶¹ As seen in the life of Paul and the eleven apostles who were martyred.

⁶² As seen in the intense martyrdom and suffering of the early Church.

liminality so we do not have to, they viewed Christ's faith as a model for their own, which early church theology and practice reflect as shown in chapter four.

As we can see from this discussion, sanctification has made major evolutions in the last few centuries. It began as an initiative rite into the community when the Church was the main influence and power structure of society. Doctrine and society changed in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. These changes switched the power from Church to reason, science, and the individual. As a result, the Church made it easier to enter into the community through quick conversion. This switch deemphasized the work of sanctification through a doctrine of an imputed state, or a reinterpreted doctrine of sanctification as happiness, prosperity, activity, or victory. Thus, the liminal spaces in life were not sought out, and negative emotions that can come with them; loneliness, depression, darkness, and separation, were demonized as backsliding from a standing of imputed sanctification or a losing of one's sanctified state.

Drawing from my experience as a pastor for the last fifteen years and with my upbringing in the Church since childhood, I see modern Western Evangelicalism on the lay level as a melting pot for all of these movements. The practicality of Wesleyan's accountability in small groups, the emphasis of the doctrine of the atonement with its focus on Bible reading for maintaining the holy life, the frantic evangelistic activity of the revivalists, and the positive emotive individualistic thinking of the Keswick movements have all informed the corporate mindset of Evangelicalism.

We have become preoccupied with quiet times, accountability groups, evangelism, positive thinking, and church activity in order to maintain our state or standing at the climax of Christian holiness so we do not backslide away.

By addressing liminality as a narrative spirituality of the Bible, perhaps we can bridge a portion of sanctification gap. I am proposing that what is needed is a return to liminality as a narrative spirituality of the Bible as a means to sanctification. In chapter six we shall look at how this can start.

CHAPTER SIX: RE-EMBRACING LIMINALITY

I'm not really sure how a pastor can do spiritual formation in a church setting.

—Robert Moore Jumonville, Spring Arbor College April 2010

Pastor of Spiritual Formation . . . if that's his job, then what do the other pastors do?

—Richard Foster, private conversation Jan. 2009

The capstone class of my Master's Degree in Spiritual Formation and Leadership was a bit of a letdown. I loved the teacher, materials, classmates, and lectures. There was one question we all had going in to this class, "How does one do spiritual formation in a church setting?" The question we were all drooling over was what programs we should launch in order to accomplish the task of spiritual formation. The professor's opening answer was shocking. He said that he was not really sure how to accomplish spiritual formation in a church setting since spiritual formation cannot be a program. I was a bit disillusioned with the start of the class opening this way, but as we continued on in the class, we noticed that ongoing Christian formation wasn't a program, and therefore was not able to be tamed.

Yet, I was bound to find out how ongoing Christian formation could happen in a larger church scale. I was hired at a local church plant to come in as the Transformation Pastor, which meant I was the spiritual formation expert on site. My goal was to find a way to 'do' spiritual formation in a church setting. I started a small group ministry based in a foundation of teachers who were trained in the understanding of spiritual formation. I wrote a training manual, and even made the whole ministry into a doctoral project. I was let down fast when all my plans failed. In the end, when I wrote my conclusion paper for class, it was a report of failure.

Spiritual formation did not happen on a mass scale like I had dreamed. My Master's Degree professor was absolutely correct. We do not know how to program spiritual formation. It is like trying to film animals and children; you can't script it, you just need to catch it. God meets us in our everyday life, using it to make us holy.

Summary of the Dissertation

In this dissertation I have journeyed through the subject of liminality and its place in sanctification. Liminality's definition comes from the Latin word *limen* or 'threshold', and means, "Of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process, occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold."¹ Liminal means transition, an initiation of a process, coming to the threshold of something, and is crucial to the life of a growing being. Liminality is often accomplished through rites of passage and can be subdivided into three categories: rites of separation, like a funeral; rites of incorporation, as in marriages; and rites of transition, as an initiation from passage between age groups.² It often comes with pain, but not always, because liminality is a state "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and [ceremony]."³ The amount of discomfort is equal to the amount of emotional investment and reliance one has in the previous conventions.

The reason liminality is so powerful an element in transformation is because "during liminality, the initiands [those in the midst of transformation] live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order

¹ "Liminal," Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*.

² Ibid.

³ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 95.

through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain: the initiands come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured.”⁴ As the apostle Paul would argue, it is an opportunity to not: “become so well-adjusted to [one’s] culture that [one] fits into it without even thinking. Instead, [liminality is a time to] fix [one’s] attention on God [in order to] be changed from the inside out. [Liminality is an opportunity for one to] readily recognize what [God] wants . . . and quickly respond to it.”⁵

Liminality’s place in transformation is to provide separation from one’s comfortable milieu for objective questioning of that milieu so it “can be destructed or constructed . . . to occupy a new social role or status.”⁶ Thus, liminal space is a powerful time of transformation for individuals, groups, or societies that can be understood as instances, periods, or whole epochs. Liminal spaces can transform individuals and whole societies.⁷

In this dissertation I have also argued that the Bible uses three major narrative themes to describe liminal space, posture, and mission: desert/wilderness, grave/pit, and exile/pilgrim. These themes work together to provide a paradigm of transformation, or what Gorman calls, a “narrative spirituality”⁸ of the Bible. These three themes are not separate spaces, but a single paradigm that describes a season of the soul, the posture of

⁴ “Liminality,” Harrington, Marshall, and Müller, *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*.

⁵ Rom. 12:2 (MSG) [brackets mine].

⁶ “Liminality,” Harrington, Marshall, and Müller, *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gorman, *Cruciformity*.

faith that brings change, and the mission that can result. The season is desert, the posture is grave, and the mission is pilgrimage.

I expounded upon these three liminal themes by exploring their Biblical roots in order to describe this narrative spirituality in which God does his transforming work in our souls for the work of being a light to the world.⁹ The desert is a liminal season or place, a time of silence with God in which we are separate from the familiar and/or comfortable in some manner, in order to learn God's way of living. The theme of the desert was exemplified the stories of Hagar, Israel, and Jesus.

The grave is a liminal posture of heart, a time of solitude with God in which we are humbly surrendering our will and desire for the security of the familiar and comfortable, and often times awaiting vindication and learning the type of faith that Jesus possessed. The stories of Joseph, Daniel, and Jesus exemplified the grave.

Walking the liminal space with a liminal posture trains us for the third permanent liminal mission in solidarity, that of exile. In exile we embody what we have learned from liminal space within the world as an authentic incarnational presence, bringing God's kingdom into fruition. We stand in solidarity with God and his Church, past, present, and future, in the mission to which He has called us. I explored this theme through the stories of Adam and Eve, Israel, and Jesus.

I then followed the theme of liminality through a historical exploration of Church theology and practice of liminality. Liminality appears in the theology of Advent, Lent and Holy Week, Paschal Mystery, Luther's theology of the cross, Dark Night of the Soul,

⁹ Isa. 51:4, 58:8, 60:3, Matt. 5:14.

and Wesley's Sermon on God's Love toward Fallen Man. I described each practice or theology, displaying how each one honored and promoted liminality within the Church.

Finally, I explored an evolution of the doctrine of sanctification through the lens of the classical triad of purgation, illumination, and union. I noted key times throughout history in which the classical order was rearranged and the end goal of faith was altered. I explained how this new paradigm was maintained, and liminality's place within the new paradigm. My goal was to observe how these evolutions have affected the modern Evangelical church today.

In this dissertation I pointed out how sanctification evolved and adapted to the surrounding world, at first including liminality, then slowly setting it aside. Sanctification began as an initiative rite into the community when the Church was the main influence and power structure of society. Doctrine changed in the Reformation to justification by faith, and again in the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, Wesley brought in the concept of perfection. The social changes switched the power from Church to reason, science, and the individual. As a result, the nineteenth century Church reinterpreted Luther and Wesley, making it easier to enter into the community through quick conversion. The journey motif switched to pinnacle motif.

This switch deemphasized the work of sanctification by over emphasizing a doctrine of an imputed state, or reinterpreted the doctrine of sanctification as happiness, prosperity, activity, and victory. Thus, the liminal spaces in life were not sought out, and the negative emotions that naturally come with them like loneliness, depression, darkness, and separation were demonized as backsliding from a standing of imputed

sanctification or a losing of one's sanctification state. As a result, liminal space is no longer valued, which has made it difficult to support spiritual formation.

The problem that has arisen within the modern Evangelical church today that I am addressing is a lack of acknowledgement of liminal space, a lack of hospitality toward those in liminal space, and a lack of education of the process and purpose of liminal space. This deficit results in the stifling of ongoing Christian formation at the cost of the Church's future leaders and contemplatives.

Theological and Theoretical Solutions

I am not arguing in this dissertation that the Evangelical church should go backward and revert to a medieval theology of sanctification. However, we must acknowledge where we have lost valuable practices and theologies. This loss has created an unsustainable paradigm of 'doing' church that inhibits, and in some cases is hostile toward, ongoing Christian formation. And in this acknowledgement, we must start to recover these practices and theologies. The Church can build upon the spiritual giants of the past as we seek to find contemporary expressions of these theologies in the present.

The Reformation was a much needed transition in the Church's history that resolved many theological issues of its day. However, the Church needs to acknowledge what was lost or set aside during this era's pendulum swing response. A high value on sanctification and transformation was exchanged for a high value on grace and justification. Yet, we still need to grasp tightly to the reformers' doctrine of justification, for it is invaluable.

So should we then take up the flag of entire sanctification as the Holiness tradition did in attempt to correct the pendulum swing? This move is also not necessary. The

doctrine of entire sanctification is not a dogma that the Church as a whole needs to adopt. It may stay in its proper denominational place and do much good if it is wielded in the hands of healthy leaders. Yet we would do well to adopt and adapt the high value of social and personal sanctification as well as their pragmatic and concrete practices of accountability and group direction.

Is the answer then to establish more deeply the four characteristics of the Evangelical church: conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism? I do not think that we need to dismiss these values, yet they would be stronger if better informed Biblically and historically.

Conversionism can be informed by the liminal theme of exile's mission to be a light-of-the-world, becoming a preserving and guiding presence within society instead of the seek-and-save models that it so dearly holds. If this value is redirected in philosophy, practices would follow suit. Let me illustrate. Church mission statements can be altered, which would alter the strategic plans of a church's fulfillment of this mission. If a church embraced a guide and preserve mission statement such as 'nurture one another into Christlikeness for the sake of the world' then the church's primary resources and planning will wrap around practical ways that our ongoing Christian formation can benefit the community which we are found. This mission embraces the need to be transformed in order to preserve and guide humanity, instead of skipping the transformation section to get quick growth.

We also can embrace activism. Theoretically, if the church embraced a preserving and guiding mission statement, such as 'to nurture one another into Christ-likeness for the sake of our community,' the primary mission becomes to make ambassadors of Christ

within each individual member and family's context. This approach honors the desire to expand the kingdom of God and provides room for the acknowledgement of liminal spaces. It allows for more hospitality to honor those who may not be effective in expanding the church's influence through the traditional understanding of productivity, which is giving, serving, and evangelizing. This approach, in turn, would lead to a more Biblically based and sustainable activism. This activism would have the kingdom of God in mind more than the small kingdom of an individual church's success, at the expense of future leaders and contemplatives.

What then shall we do with the characteristic of Biblicism? Dare I say keep it? I do, yet I would seek better education in it by giving equal weight to the way of living that Jesus taught, as much as the doctrines of Paul. Paul's teachings should be interpreted through the lens of the Gospels, in light of their Old Testament roots and cultural/historical contexts. Strict adherence to a fundamental literalist interpretation of the Bible, divorced from its historical/cultural roots and context in attempt to honor this value, has ended up as a distraction from the Church's true mission and diversion of its resources.

Crucicentrism also needs to be addressed. The cross *for* us is an important doctrine that needs to continue to expand and integrate a doctrine of the cross *in* us.¹⁰ The doctrine of salvation should include present physical, emotional, and mental welfare as well as eternal security. This approach would include Perry Yoder's claim that the Old Testament concept of *shalom* is translated into the New Testament's words of salvation,

¹⁰ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 423.

justice, and peace, each a separate facet of salvation.¹¹ This translation was all initiated on the cross. In addition, crucicentrism should embrace an equal theology of incarnation¹² and resurrection¹³ as a means of salvation.

Should we then aim for a higher Christian life and preach a victorious life theology of prosperity, happiness, and blessing? We can redefine higher life as keeping space for lament, crucifixion, and Holy Saturday faith as a means to receiving vindication from God. This higher life can be in this life and/or in the next. We must not buy an Easter Sunday prosperity gospel, emotional or physical, that excludes Good Friday and Holy Saturday practices.

Bebbington has a very good point when he described the Keswick tradition as a “nineteenth-century practice of inventing a tradition. Contemporary practice was being buttressed by evidence drawn selectively from a handful of earlier sources—or in this case from a single one.”¹⁴ Our roots must go deeper than the nineteenth century revivals and Holiness movements if we wish to grow sustainably for the future. There is much theology and practice to recover from the pre-Reformation time period as chapter four described.

I believe that a good paradigm of sanctification will honor two theologies. First, it will honor an imputed status of righteousness, for this fills the believer with confidence

¹¹ Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1998).

¹² In Rom. 5:10 Paul argues that we are saved by the life of Christ: the incarnation.

¹³ The Apostles and Paul mention the resurrection in Acts ten times (Acts 1:22, 2:31, 4:2, 4:33, 17:18, 17:32, 23:6, 23:8, 24:15, and 24:21) as opposed to mentioning the crucifixion only three times, (Acts 2:23, 2:36, 4:10) and those times only as a means to the resurrection.

¹⁴ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, 74.

and assurance to move forward in salvation. Second, it will honor an ongoing process of working out that salvation. In this piece we acknowledge that we are in union with God. We have an active part to play in moving toward a consummation of that union through an ongoing illumination by the cultivation of virtue and purgation of vice.

Often times God will bring us to liminality to do this work. The cyclical paradigm: union leading to illumination, which encourages purgation, which leads to greater union, which leads to greater illumination, works. This cycle is not a monotonous merry-go-round in which one is always moving yet gets nowhere. Instead it acts more as a tire, in that as it circles around, progress is made on the road of sanctification toward union with God as an end goal, instead of heaven. This cycle is maintained through the nurture of living in community with others as a preserving and guiding influence for humanity. Liminality has a proper place within the community, acting as a prophetic voice within. Liminality is both critic and energizer toward the mission of God to create a people as a light-of-the-world presence.

When someone enters into the liminal desert space of, for example, mourning a tragic death, the solitude provides potential to address one's mortality, taking people in our lives for granted, or possibly, a lack of Sabbath rest. When a community surrounds us with their support, or a spiritual director helps us see the activity of God, they can help us enter into a season of silent obedience before the transforming hand of God. After a season of obedient submission one finds a new level of trust and understanding of God. A threshold of capacity has been extended and we are able to, not merely take on life's challenges with greater fortitude, but to have a greater capacity of love for God and others. This sends us into an exile state for the benefit of the world as an ongoing

incarnation of Christ's body. Exile here is not punishment so much as a result of a new reality. This produces a feeling of un-belonging in the world around us for the purpose of speaking into that world for change. We are now speaking prophetically and not as a part of the world and its dehumanizing systems, but as a mouthpiece of God and his purposes for humanity. Thus we are a preserving and guiding influence on society through our submissive obedience.

Practical Solutions

If I were to go back to the liminal seasons of my life and ask the question, "What do I wish the church would have done for me"? I find that a very practical answer comes to mind. I wish the church would have journeyed with me through liminal space as a guide. I had no idea what God was doing. At times I thought I had earned the punishment of a wrathful God for sinful behavior. I became depressed on the interior but felt no safety to show it on the exterior for fear of being labeled a backslider.

If there was a credible voice in my life that assured me of the love of God for me and the purpose and process of liminality, I believe that I could have traversed the ground of liminal space much more gracefully. If I had known about a liminal posture of heart, I may have learned very valuable lessons, hurt less people in my immaturity as a pastor, and have a deeper relationship with God to offer the world.

How can a church journey with someone in liminality? How can a church understand liminality: its purpose, process, and product? It can be done by reading the scriptures, wearing the lens of liminality. It can also be done by being honest and authentic about life's struggles, doubts, questions, and times of darkness. One cannot program liminality as a program of the church. This wine will not fit in the revivalist

wineskin of church. Instead, the church needs to become a greenhouse of formation where all pastors are pastors of ongoing Christian formation in whatever responsibilities they hold. The church can embrace traditional elements of discipleship as tools in the greenhouse more than a college track to follow. It can have sections of the church dedicated to resourcing the congregants with written and recorded materials, small groups of liminauts (those exploring liminal space in community), and space to be unproductive for a while.

I plan on putting together a ministry dedicated to resourcing churches for liminal space, helping provide acknowledgement, hospitality, and education in the process. To do so I will need credibility on the subject. In order to have credibility to speak into this area one needs a few things: informed expertise, positive experience, and proven authority, otherwise one may end up speaking truth to an empty room. Thus, the practical solution to bring liminality back into the Church has various stages designed to increase expertise and experience, which will increase this work's authority to speak.

To help correct the lack of acknowledgement, I propose a book stressing the theology and spirituality highlighted within this dissertation. The book would specifically communicate in a way that trains leaders in practical strategic planning, which will then create leaders who can walk their congregants in and through liminal space. Also, I propose establishing a small cohort of pastors who will walk through the concepts of liminality together and keep a blog entitled *Liminal Leadership: Ideas of Formation for Those In-between*. Together we will work to correct the lack of hospitality in our own contexts and archive our experience of the intersections of theology and leadership as it relates to liminality for others to glean. My goal in all of these efforts will be to help

correct the lack of education and build a coaching and consultation ministry. This ministry would have resources and opportunities to guide and train leaders in the concepts of liminality and its implications in ongoing Christian formation. The strategic plans for these initiatives are contained in the appendix to this dissertation.

APPENDIX ONE

Book Proposal

- Title:** Liminality: The Three Narrative Spiritualities of the Bible
- Author:** Thomas J. Rundel | 8894 S Carlsen Rd., Fenwick, MI 48834 | 616-902-6198 | tomrundel@gmail.com | www.liminalleadership.org
- Hook:** Have you ever traversed a time of difficulty, pain, or distance from God? Many modern day Christians have and felt guilty, punished, or confused. What if this fit right into the Biblical narrative of how God makes a soul holy? What if you knew that you were not alone but accompanied by a great host of saints gone before you?
- Overview:** This book walks the reader through the three Liminal themes of the Bible, Desert, Exile, and Grave and shows how these are the spaces that God leads us into for sanctification. These can be summed up as Solitude, Solidarity, and Silence. The takeaway value of this book is providing people with validation of their liminal times, that the evangelical church has often overlooked, though offering acknowledgement, hospitality opportunity, and education on these themes. The felt need is great since liminal themes are universal to all human beings.
- Purpose:** To provide acknowledgement of liminal spaces in peoples' lives, Hospitality to those who feel alone within them, Opportunity to those within to seize the value of these times, and education on how these themes are a part of the narrative spirituality of the Bible.
- Promotion and Marketing:** Research stats/facts and any pertinent information that will help sell your MS to the agent/publisher. Ways that your book can be successfully marketed to its targeted audience. Avenues in which you can promote the book: radio, television, magazine, ministry, speaking engagements, blog, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Address audience felt-need & takeaway value.
- Competition:** Other books out there that are comparative to this work:
1. Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross. Michael Gorman.
 2. Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine. Kevin J. Vanhoozen
 3. Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen
 4. The Story of God: A Narrative Theology. Michael Lodahl

Uniqueness: This book is unique in the sense that the books listed above are very academic in tone and content and not written for the lay person. The proposed book here would be very accessible to all communicating theology within a narrative context with practical applications and stories to illustrate.

Endorsements:

- Valerie Hess: Author of *Spiritual Disciplines Devotional, Habits of a Child's Heart, The Life of the Body*
- Will Hernandez: Author of the Trilogy of Nouwen Books: *Henri Nouwen and Soul Care, Henri Nouwen a Spirituality of Imperfection, Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities*
- Evan Howard: Author of *Discovering Lectio Divina, Four Views of Christian Spirituality, The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality, Praying the Scriptures, Affirming the Touch of God*
- Robert Moore-Jumonville: Author of: *Advent and Christmas, Wisdom from G.K. Chesterton, Jogging with G.K. Chesterton, The Hermeneutics of Historical Distance*

Chapter Outline:

- Introduction: Our Story
- Chapter One: We Dropped it
- Chapter Two: What is Liminal?
- Chapter Three: What is a Narrative Spirituality?
- Chapter Four: The Solitude of the Desert
- Chapter Five: The Silence of the Grave
- Chapter Six: The Solidarity of Exile
- Chapter Seven: The Great Cloud of Witnesses
- Conclusion: Let's Become Liminauts

Intended Readers: Primary Audience: Christian Leaders who are responsible for shepherding others through life. i.e. pastors, elders, counselors Lay
Secondary Audience: Christians who have walked the path of tragedy with confusion or guilt

Manuscript: The content is fully researched in the form of a doctoral dissertation and needs to be rewritten in less academic tone for presentation to a lay audience.

Author Bio:

Thomas J Rundel holds a Master's Degree in Spiritual Formation and Leadership from Spring Arbor University and is an all but dissertated Doctoral Candidate at George Fox University's D.Min. in Leadership and Spiritual Formation degree.

Thomas has been a pastor for 15 years within many different contexts including: youth ministry, Associate Pastor, Worship Pastor, Transformation Pastor, and Intentional Interim Pastor.

Thomas also has a blog dedicated to leadership and theology within liminal contexts.

Thomas and his family have spent the last 11 years raising a special needs boy with a rare chromosome abnormality which taught him solidarity and gave him a love for authors such as Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier. They also lost their second son shortly after birth to a rare neural tube defect which taught them about the Silence that the death of a small child can bring. Thomas also recently lost his father unexpectedly to an aggressive form of cancer which took a week to do its nasty work. In this Thomas learned the Solitude that can come in the face of tragedy.

Publishing Credits: Thomas launched a blog on liminal theology and leadership early in 2014 and self-published many articles on the topic.

www.liminalleadership.org

Current Books Comparable To the Proposed Book

There are four books currently that approach the scriptures from a narrative perspective. Only one of these books approaches the Bible from a narrative spirituality approach like the suggested book here.

The Drama of Scripture by Bartholomew lays out the story of the Bible from start to finish using the work of N.T. Wright's metaphor of the scriptures as drama. He spells out six acts of Creation: Kingdom established; Fall: rebellion in the Kingdom; Israel: redemption initiated; Jesus: redemption accomplished; Church: spreading the news of the King; and Return of the King: redemption completed.

This book is a wonderful work spelling out the narrative of the Bible. The proposed book on liminality would differentiate itself from this work with its focus on liminality as a major theme within the greater Biblical story. To speak within the concept of narrative, the proposed book on liminality would highlight a writing style of the Author, God.

The Story of God by Michael Lodahl is another book which emphasizes a narrative approach to the scriptures. This book spells out the story of God told in the Bible, but specifically through the lens of Nazarene doctrine and the Wesleyan quadrilateral. There is more of an emphasis on doctrine communicated through narrative than Bartholomew's book.

The proposed book would distinguish itself from this work by not approaching the scriptures through a denominational lens, and would focus more on spirituality than doctrine and theology.

The third book, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Forming the Drama of Doctrine* by Vanhoozer approaches the scriptures through narrative as well, but using a theater motif as opposed to the written narrative. This book does a wonderful job of integrating doctrine and practice of the drama.

The proposed book would distinguish itself from this work by focusing on a written narrative approach to the scriptures and focusing in on the theme of liminality within the narrative.

The fourth book which approaches the Bible as a narrative is Michael Gorman's *Cruciformity*. This book is the only one on the market that uses the terminology 'narrative spirituality'. It is a wonderful book that describes Paul's narrative spirituality of the cross. This book is written in an academic tone for an academic audience.

The proposed book would build upon Gorman's concepts showing how Paul's narrative spirituality of the cross is a part of the liminal posture of the grave practiced in Paul's life. The book would differentiate itself from Gorman's work by writing in a non-academic tone for laypersons in a devotional manner. It would also attempt to communicate the entire theme of liminality as a narrative spirituality of the Bible.

What the proposed book will not do

This book will not attempt to communicate that liminality is the only narrative spirituality within the Bible, but only a major theme within the Bible. This book does not attempt to spell out liminality as a seamless garment approach to the scriptures. There are many approaches to the scriptures: historical, cultural, mystical, and textual to name a few. This work would not attempt to hold the ocean in a cup but sail upon the ocean in an approach called liminality. The scriptures are much too grand and the approaches much too diverse to attempt any seamless garment approach to the scriptures. Therefore, the use of narrative will be used to approach the scriptures.

Nor will this book suggest that liminality is the only approach to ongoing Christian formation. Spiritual formation is a topic as wide and diverse as the Bible with

2,000 years of history filled with diverse traditions, ordinances, practices, theologies, and people. Ongoing Christian formation is much too mystical of a topic to dissect and explain in a scientific manner. Therefore, the method of a devotional guide will be used to assist people on their journey.

APPENDIX TWO

Strategic Plan for Blog and Coaching/Consultation Ministry

Who We Are

The Liminal Leaders are a group of pastors and leaders who have dedicated themselves to living the way of Jesus within their congregations and leadership contexts. We embrace a servant leadership model and reject the “power tie” style of leadership which we believe to be more about manipulation of power. We are dedicated to living faithfully, simply, and patiently guiding others in the way of Jesus, dedicated to being point persons in our community to forge the way of formation for those we lead.

We acknowledge the existence and value of liminal space and posture knowing that it will lead to enhanced mission in the world. We provide hospitality toward those within liminal spaces, and those leading others through liminal spaces knowing full well that their current effectiveness may appear diminished from a “power tie” perspective, but God is doing a great work within the person and community for a great purpose. We also provide education for those we lead on the purpose and process of liminal spaces in order to better guide initiands.

Guiding Values

1. **Formational Leadership:** The first and foremost goal of the Christian life is to be formed into the image of Christ, for the sake of the world. If we are not doing this, we are wasting our time. This both encompasses leadership and formation.
2. **Community:** Sharing life together with a group of people who are nurturing one another into Christ-likeness for the sake of the world through living the way of Jesus.

3. Presence: Living incarnationally in communion as a church body, within a larger community that needs the presence of Christ lived out for them to see.
4. Simplicity: Living as free from the suffocating values and dehumanizing systems of this world as possible while still remaining an authoritative presence within that world.
5. Authenticity: The core value that is the result of all the other values. An authentic life is one free of any false-ness, illusion, delusion, or false self. It is humbly seeing ourselves as God sees us, free of self-hatred or self-infatuation.

Our Mission:

To nurture one another in Christ-likeness for the sake of our communities.

Our Milestones of Celebration for 2015-2016

1. To establish a bi-weekly blog consistently posting for a year
2. To establish a blog community of 5-7 content contributing pastors and leaders dedicated to living out these values and mission
3. To propose a book to IVP, Zondervan, and Baker on the subject for Christian leaders in order to expand the acknowledgement, hospitality, and education of the purpose and process of liminal spaces.

Our Metrics: How We Measure Success

1. Stories of liminality shared: Primarily we want to know that our blog and book are reaching people and making a difference in people's lives. To know for sure that this is happening, we wish to become curators of stories of those traversing liminality and display them on the blog. This will show us the depth of influence.

2. Coaching/Consultation Relationships: We wish to establish relationships with churches and leaders as coaches and consultation resources for leadership in the areas of strategic planning, ongoing Christian formation, and servant leadership.
3. Subscriptions/Shares and Re-tweets/Friends: We understand that Google analytics provides ways to measure one's breadth of influence by tracking visits, subscriptions, shares, tweets, and the like.

Our Map

Acknowledgement:

1. Liminal Leadership Facebook/Twitter Page: This will provide a means of communication of sharable bits and memes from the overall content of the blog for the purpose of spreading the acknowledgement of liminality.
2. Liminal Leadership Blog: This will provide a means of communication of the content of liminality in shorter bits than a written work. This will help others acknowledge liminality without the full education of the subject.

Hospitality

1. Coaching: We will coach leaders through liminality as well as leading others in liminality. This coaching will inform mission, planning, and leading.
2. Consultation: We will consult with both established churches and new church plants on how to incorporate liminality into their strategic plans and mission statement in order that they do not become or remain a closed system church.

Education

1. Written Materials: We will write a full book on the subject of liminality to help educate leaders and pastors on the purpose and process of liminality in order to help them lead their communities through liminality.
2. Conferences and Speaking Opportunity: We will accept and pursue teaching and speaking opportunity in order to help educate the Church in liminality and increase the influence of the concept of liminality.

Future Projects and Possibilities

1. A minor track of liminal leadership for pastors in undergraduate or seminary
2. A small group study and participant's guide
3. A devotional book for individual use
4. A video teaching series for churches

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