

Full Circle

Thoughts on a 50-year spiritual journey

Looking back over the years, I have observed a number of seasons within my Christian life, which started in student days in Cambridge in the late 1960s. What follows is somewhat oversimplified, but I have found it helpful, personally, to review my 50-year journey. It's probably a bit of a self-caricature too, but caricature can sometimes be used to good effect, so please bear with me.

Entering Cambridge as a student in 1968, I went to the 'Freshers' Sermon', where someone explained what Jesus had done in dying on the cross for me, and how I could receive Jesus into my heart; I did so, willingly and gladly. Thus began my first dozen years as a Christian in which I followed the conservative evangelical expression of faith and, along with others in the CU, I sought to persuade the new-fangled 'charismatics' that (certain of) the gifts of the Spirit were for the early church only.

Then I experienced some of these gifts, including healings, and realised that maybe I'd been wrong. There followed another dozen years in which I tried to persuade conservatives that they were missing out – if people can see miracles, then surely they'll come to faith, or so I thought.

I then woke up to the fact that I'd spent a lot of time trying to persuade other Christians, so there followed another period of roughly 12 years in which I sought to persuade non-Christians that they were wrong. And I believe I was successful in helping a number of people on their way to faith in Jesus.

The next period, however, was one of dissatisfaction with my own church. (Have you picked up on the pattern yet – my deep concern for other people's shortcomings?!) But I was still concerned to reach outsiders, and I still felt that if the church demonstrated a few more miracles, others would come to believe. A chap came to our church – let's call him Harry – who had remarkable prophetic and healing gifts, but my church wouldn't recognise that God was so clearly (I thought) working through him.

I met with Harry in a small Bible study group over a number of years but gradually his teaching got more and more off-beam, such that we, in his tiny group, were the only people who knew the truth – the true truth – and all the rest were 'of the enemy', including those in my own church, and that these people were trying to push us off the path of truth. Worse still, I no longer really cared about outsiders because I was totally focussed on making sure that I didn't lose my own salvation. (I still can't fathom how I managed to get into that position!)

Thankfully, I suddenly woke up and thought, "What the hell am I doing?!", and I immediately stopped meeting with Harry. But then I had to work out: "Well, what *do* I believe? Does God exist even? Maybe it's all a delusion – just wishful thinking."

But I decided that the world didn't make sense without a creator, so for the next few years I struggled to regain my faith. The trouble was that my original unhappiness with my own church – indeed, with churches in general – continued. Where could I find an expression of faith that I could really relate to?

Thankfully, while I had been off on my 'spiritual walk-about', my wife, Sue, had been pushing the bounds of her own faith, partly through a two-year, part-time diocesan course that introduced her to a

breadth of spirituality. This excited her and enlivened her faith. In particular, she got away from a purely word-based faith, and realised the value of a more contemplative approach; and some of this then rubbed off on me.

Anyway, I continued my search, made some progress, and began to feel that I was getting back on track. At that stage, I think I expressed it as saying I had ‘regained my faith’.

Then, in spring 2017, we decided it was time to leave the church we had been part of for 37 years, and look for fellowship in the ‘village’ (suburb) to which we had moved 18 months earlier. We looked around Taverham, but as soon as we attended St Edmund’s, we knew that this was the place for us. It has people from a wide range of churchmanships, but regardless of our form of belief, we all know we belong at St Ed’s!

Then a friend from my old church recommended a book, and I found that it set out in theological terms *exactly* what I had been feeling about my own faith, both the negative aspects and the “shouldn’t it be more like this?” aspects. I had only reached the third paragraph, when I almost shouted, “Yes, that’s *exactly* what I’ve been thinking and feeling for years!” but then I realised that this was just the foreword by a different author; I hadn’t even started the main part of the book!

From that and from other books since then, I’ve found relationship, community and belonging, and alongside that, a sense of wonder, a love of silence – just being with God. I certainly wouldn’t say that I’ve ‘found the truth’, but I know that this is the only place in the world where I want to be right now, and I’m longing to grow closer to God as I travel this path.

Then I remembered! My spiritual journey did *not* start at Cambridge. A friend from school had suggested we spend a week at a place in Yorkshire called Scargill House, a Christian community and retreat centre, and it was amazing! Coming from a very dysfunctional family, I was bowled over by the love and acceptance I experienced, and that was it, I believed. And, in a sense, I had fallen in love with God.

As I thought back about this, I remembered that the speaker was an 85-year-old gentleman called Jack Winslow, then described as a Christian mystic, and in the weeks that followed, I used to get up early, sit in my freezing cold bedroom wrapped in an eiderdown (remember them?!) trying to meditate.

When I got to Cambridge, I was given the intellectual framework, so that I could really *know* the truth. I am grateful for that – in a way – but it has taken me fifty years to bring it all together and come Full Circle into God’s Amazing Love.

And this is just the beginning! I have found a new expression of faith; it’s still a biblical faith but I no longer feel the need to apologise for it, and I no longer need to persuade anyone of anything. They are loved and accepted by God, and they are loved and accepted by me. And I shall try to live the rest of my life (I’ve already had my ‘three score years and ten!)) expressing these truths in the best way that I can, and if necessary, I’ll use words.