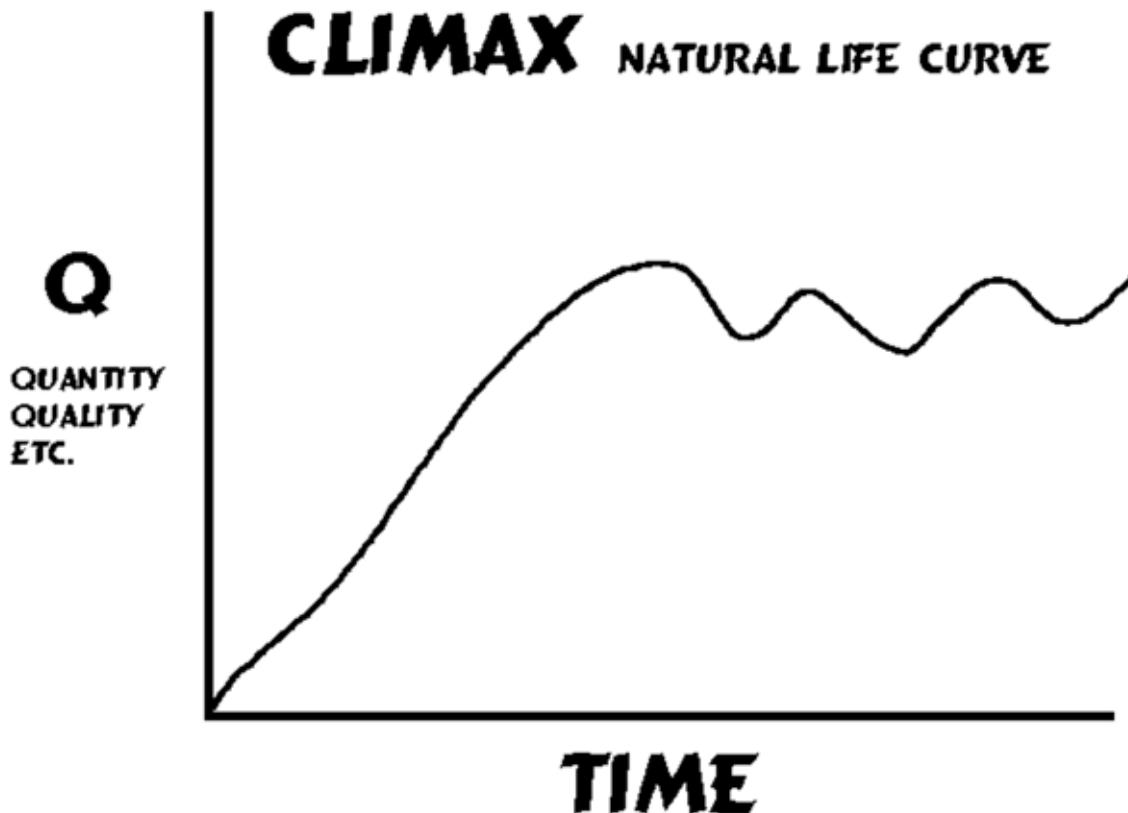


Enterprise Symbiosis overcoming the natural climax state

30 August 2000

Orient, Washington has changed little, in the last 60 years, since they closed the gold mine on First Thought during the big war, WWII. Babies have been born, people have died or in other ways moved on, while others have moved in. The tavern burned down a number of times, but this civic center has always been rebuilt. I think that the house my Grandma and Grandpa Bannon lived in before they moved back to Colville burned down and was replaced by a trailer, probably a civic improvement. The only thing I can really remember of that place was one Saturday night my Uncle Monte and grandpa got out there banjo and fiddle and played some songs by ear.

The apparent unchanging nature of communities is what ecologists call the climax state. This brief history of Orient is but a short snapshot of that phenomena. To be a true climax community that stability can last for thousands of years. Our graph this week really just being a series of toil or bug curves, spaced over time giving a kind of wavy effect



But there has been a small change in Orient, that being the quality of the highway US 395 that runs between the houses up on the hill and the civic center down in the valley. The Orient Inn and the highway section shed are situated on the west side of the road while on the east side is the railroad and is the location of the school, post office, church, store, homes and the bridge across the Kettle River, by the swimming

hole. Most of the highway's improvement I believe came when Paige Merkel was section head for the highway department. I had the opportunity to get to know him when I worked summers as a highway flag man when going to college. He also owns the acreage across Boulder Creek from me. Paige is one of the earliest residents, but now a growing number of people and families, that chose to live here. Even though Orient is unincorporated, he calls himself the mayor of Orient, not a term well accepted by some of the less capable or more independent residents.

This stretch of US 395 is probably the most beautiful segment of the whole highway reaching all the way to Mexico. Partially because there is so little traffic, but also because for many years it was exceedingly well maintained. The road way itself is high crowned, so rain, snow and ice melt and run off on to wide shoulders and manicured ditches on either side. Beyond the ditches to the edge of the right of way, the trees are thinned and well trimmed. In short as far as a highway goes, there is none better.

Some weeks ago, shortly after I found my long lost thinking cap, someone ask me a question something like, "What do we need the visible church for anyway, all we do is steer from one bad doctrinal ditch to the other, driving like a drunk on his way to hell, instead of a straight and narrow path bound for heavenly paradise?" That got me to thinking, and as some wise person once said, "Only fools and preachers rush in where angels fear to tread!" Since fools is the job description of the whole class, especially from the worldly point of view, I must fit in there somewhere and at the risk of alienating some, I believe there is some truth to what I have to say. So let's fire up the Chevy and head for Orient.

For the sake of this discussion let us use the natural church as a natural climax community. As a percentage of the total enterprise of western man, it serves a vital but limited role through out most of her history. Some times being more prominent than others, but never ceasing to be influential at least economically, if not spiritually. Great changes have come every 500 years or so, followed by slow decay into lethargy, followed again by a brief period of renew or restoration. This is an excellent description of a natural climax community, but space here will not allow me to elaborate further. In the context of the big picture, little has changed in the last 1700 years and the time of Constantine. This concept in a theological sense was really developed by St. Augustine in his work the *City of God*.

In this world we have the City of Man, or the natural culture, or the imperial state. In opposition, or opposed to that world view we have the City of God, the visible church culture, or the imperial church. Within the City of God there has always been the true visible church (those of us journeying on the right side of the road (in the ditch?) and those sects, cults and heretics on the left side of the road, traveling south to Orient. We shout as the sects, (who we believe are still on the highway) believing that they can hear us as we whiz past, "You are going in the wrong direction." We are so determined to get to Orient soon, before anyone else, we don't even bother with those we know are stuck in the ditch on the other side of the path, "God help them all!" Windows down, CD blaring redundant phrase courses, we speed forward..

As we approach Orient, we begin to see a change, Since we crossed the bridge at Barney's (just out side of Kettle Falls) and headed north, the traffic as almost vanished. But here everything is so beautiful. Taking our eyes off the road for just a brief instance, the high crown leads us to the shoulder, this particular stretch is soft because of the sandy subsoil and before you know it we are stuck in the ditch up to both axles in our new SUV, "Well honey," my wife responds, "the map says Orient is just a few miles up the road."

After having the wife try the cell phone for roadside assistance, even though it says we have coverage, the call doesn't seem to go through. I push the button on the on-board GPS, "That's right dear, just 2.59 miles, and if we walk three miles an hour we will be there in 51 minutes and 48.6 seconds." Thinking to myself, "Thank God for technology, I will never have to be humiliated by asking for directions again."

As we begin our walk to town in the right ditch, we now have time to notice that there are others in the left ditch walking towards Orient also and we begin to talk. As the conversation continues, we understand that they say they are Christians too. But they have been taught that when walking along a highway to always walk, facing oncoming traffic. Just in case that logging truck headed south doesn't see them they will have

plenty of time to jump out of the way. They mention, that since they have been walking there has been a number of semis headed north at high rates of speed, perhaps we should cross over to their shoulder.

Nonsense, especially when they tell us the church they go to. I whisper to the wife, hoping that they won't hear me. "They believe that Christ will come back in that weird way, they believe. . . ." as a motor home whizzes by, the noise overpowering my words.

Since we are talking about eschatology, or the study of end time events, let us, which ever ditch you now perceive yourself to be in, take a break and look at some of the facts of nature that now encompasses our walk. A brief few moment in the wild woods, beyond the manicured right of way might clear our thinking.

An amillennial as well as postmillennial eschatology both require, by definition, an imperial or a visible church as the method to proclaim the gospel of the ruling and reigning Christ. A kingdom of, and for, the pure in heart and mind, or dare we say Puritans. Now just for matter of discussion, let us say from God's perspective over time, these concepts got a little too religious, or dare we say pharisaic, for their own good. God being all wise could give a few just enough insight to say that isn't quite true any more. (Christ will return at the time and method ordained by the Father, not by our well intentioned teachings) But again trying to make sense out of some Biblical aspects we don't understand, we again develop another whole elaborate well meaning eschatology to counter those ditch dwellers understanding. As is the nature of all religious issues, even those of pious Christians, these folks we now call dispensationalists are going to eventually run off the road themselves by trying to plot their own course to heaven. But God be true, and everyone else be accursed, they are going to run off into the ditch on the other side of the road. It is just in our nature and part of the incredible grace and love of God.

"O God, how could you ever save anyone who believes that?"

"Well I saved you when you were just a few miles from Mexico, and now you are just 14 miles from the end of this highway,---and so are they."

The truth is, we need a tension between one another to help pull us out of the ditch and to help us continue up the road to Laurier and the Canadian border, The promised land? Without that tension, not only in eschatology, but the whole gamut of Christian doctrine, we are eventually going to steer ourselves into one ditch or the other. It is part and parcel of the fallen world that we live in and to which we are called to proclaim the Good News of the saving grace of God found only in Jesus Christ. In that respect the classic definition of the church and sects no longer has a valid meaning. J. Richard Niebuhr's, an early 20th century theologian, definition may be more appropriate: Sects are religious organizations we actively join, churches are similar organizations we are born into. Without that definition, if we are truly honest about our situation, we will find our denomination or whatever organizational community word we use, in the ditch all by ourselves. Eventually, cut off from contact with others, we find ourselves alone thinking that the ditch is still the straight and narrow path, "O God, how difficult the journey." Alone, our thoughts should search for the truth about Ichabod, "Where did the Glory of God go?" (1 Samuel 4:19-22)

Speaking of the Pharisees, William L. Coleman in his book, *"The Pharisees' Guide to Total Holiness"* (Bethany House 1977, pg. 100) states, "Another part of the difficulty was incubated within their own philosophy of life and religion. They thought they had all of the answers and had ceased to become learners. Their basic theology had been pigeonholed, and cement had been poured over it. Humility was not only gone but a sign of weakness. They had developed a steel-trap outline of how the Messiah would come, how he would appear and what he would do. Any deviation from that pattern was obviously wrong. If it were correct it would agree with them.

"This attitude seems sinister and belligerent. That is, until we examine some of our own practices. It is easy for Christians to develop the same screw-tight views concerning the Second Coming of Christ. Some of our eschatological schemes have become so narrow and brittle that even God dare not violate them.

So we see this discussion really is not about eschatology at all, but leadership and freedom. Do our religious schemes (in all aspects of our rituals) set up a road block and force people and especially future leaders into one ditch or the other. Or is it we just love the ditch mentality so much that we seek to draw in others with shallow promises of temporal and eternal security. Christ came to set the captives free, to draw all who are weary unto Himself. If we lose that focus, we lose our calling and our purpose, our reason for being visible in the first place. "We become nothing more than little Roman Catholics," as I heard someone say. **The abundant life of Christ promised in John 10:10 is in the middle of the highway, walking the Jersey Barrier of the freeway. Not cowering in the ditch like some type of thief seeking the destruction of all who pass by.**

So after talking it over with those folks in the other ditch, they throw us a rope and together we pull each other out of the ditch. We decide to link arms and walk down the center line all the way to Orient. Some other people join us, catching us from behind. As we walked a wise gentleman shared about running into the ditch down near Alkali Lake on the high Oregon desert. "I guess our ditch experience wasn't too bad after all, it could have been in a real desert." Do you know an amazing thing, in that 1.79 miles that remained? (Some guy, not me, had a hand-held GPS and had downloaded the map off his computer.) There was not a single vehicle to hinder our trip. In 35 minutes 51.7 seconds we entered the city park in Orient. (Just beyond the railroad tracks on the right side of the road).

Somebody with no formal seminary training, just as like much of the world today, and virtually all the world before Constantine, used a physical description of Orient similar to last week's message, tying it to the Bible and the finished redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The highlights follow:

To the east First Thought Mountain dominates the sunrise, leaving Orient as either the second thought, the last thought, or more fitted in its after-thought.

First Thought Mountain signifies our sinful inherited nature. It blocks out the true light of the world, the True Son. During the war for our souls the gold mine, as we learned this week, closed down and we were forced to seek another occupation for our eternal souls. Because of some helping hand of a Christian somewhere, somehow, Jesus Christ became our second thought. Now Jesus knows that in this world we will always be our own First Thought Mountain, but if we make Him our Second Thought, through our daily choices, after our acknowledgment of His deserved Lordship and grace, He will work with us until He is not the second thought, or the third, or the fourth, but our Last Thought. We can forgo the gold of this world, for a Sonlit eternal world, where the natural Orient, and the natural (visible) church will seem but a dream. Those who through their natural desire decide to make Him only their after-thought. To those He has reserved, the Sunday afternoon communion service at the Orient Inn. Truly on the wrong side of the highway. (See Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45)

The church is called not to be a natural body, resting in a state of natural climax. In that state it still does perform its true calling however. That being the major tool for evangelism of all ages. Those who believe otherwise, stand historically stuck deep in a ditch still not reaching the village. God does awaken this body at times and say leave the soft comfort of Orient and journey up to Laurier and Canada, A land that you do not feel comfortable in. We will continue north beyond Lake Christina and soon we will come to a place where the road turns to the east towards Bonanza Pass. There is no road north heading in the right direction of the calling. Our map and our GPS says that there is nothing between there and Perm in Russia, where Chris and Katherine Knox with young Zachery recently moved. If they can go around the world to start a church there, what might the Almighty God do if the church decides to get out of the ditch and climb over the top of the world. In that time that great community of believers in time and beyond time is again joined on a road made by God and not by man, its everlasting path leading beyond the horizon of our faith.

God will one day call a generation, in which He will humble our road building and ditch hugging and again call his church to walk the center of the straight and narrow path. Next week our Spiritual Life-style curve will look at some of the details of the true representation of not our natural world, but the symbiosis of

God's calling, God's purpose, with the understanding of His grace and His Love for his highest creation, the adopted sons and daughters he has made heirs along with and through his only Son Jesus, the Christ.