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Symbiotic economics: The Desperation - Joy Continuum

*Sing praise to the LORD, you
saints of His,*

*And give thanks at the
remembrance of His holy name.*

*For His anger is but for a
moment,*

His favor is for life;

Weeping may endure for a night,

But joy comes in the morning.

Psalm 30:4,5

Some years ago, Gary, a friend and former boss, asked me to help him finish a flooring job up in Skagit County, so that it would be completed for the homeowner's Christmas. Returning back to Seattle, through real winter weather after finishing the job, Gary turned on the radio to the local Christian music station, since he figured they would have the most spiritually oriented Christmas music.

The music was very good until we had almost reached our freeway exit, then this male singer came on

vocalizing a historic Christmas carol, updated into the contemporary Christian (CCM) motif. They say that you can be a Country recording artist if you know three guitar cords, this dude had a range of about three notes. To make matters worse each of the three were consistently and noticeably flat. In true CCM fashion he had discarded most of the verses, using only two or three of the least spiritually significant and repeated the chorus ad nauseam. This backed up by a very tacky synthesizer orchestra.

When we attended the same church, Gary and I had both sang in the church choir. Gary being one of the congregation's normal soloists. Self, not being that good, with a voice more suited to country music than church, knew my place in the back row tenor section.

Finally, I could take no more of this and I finally asked, "Is it just me, or is this guy really bad?"



To which Gary replied, "Actually he is worse than bad, he is basically awful!"

We went on to discuss how this guy could ever get his music even recorded, not to mention get radio air time.

Sometime later, while in Spokane, I decided to drive to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho for a Sunday service. The pastor I knew there was of middle eastern descent, which in white supremacist north Idaho, shows that the Lord definitely has a sense of humor. There were other issues involving the congregation especially as it related to neighboring affiliates, so I just wanted to see if my friend was still the pastor and to see if the congregation was still as outwardly loving. The latter was true, but my friend had been replaced by an older and more experienced gentleman from California.

All this is to point out that the worship leader looked like an aging dropout from the Nashville recording scene. If that truly were the case, one cord showed that if he left Nashville, it was on his terms, because thereafter every eye and heart was focused on a truly gifted musician, operating in that gift.

In our examples, perhaps the radio personality should have been employed in a real day job. In the other case, for reasons not apparent to me, a truly gifted musician was content to be in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, leading a small church in worship to God Almighty.

So what are your gifts? Do you wander the shores of desperation on the river of life, skip stones over the smooth surface, throw sticks into the current eddies? Are you building your boat, launched and experienced the rapids? Have you yet come to the landing where you can make repairs or build a bigger or better boat? With the Good Lord as your Captain, fear is just an obstacle to be replaced with joy in the morning.

Thoreau stated that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." In our context the reason for the desperation begins with a lack of knowledge of God. The extreme case of course is atheism, but that reliance on self and fear of truly trusting God, is an attempt to bring God down to an understandable version of your own understanding. Yes, I know that is redundant.

Joy is mentioned 158 times in 150 verses in the New King James Version of the Bible. True joy is a gift from God. As in our introductory verses, most of the time it is tensioned with some sort of adversity. Now in our age of political correctness joy has been redefined as being happy or merry. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! What does that really mean? Not much except affirming a desired absence of tribulation or angst.

However, the truth is sometimes this life sucks. For many people this season is the most life sucking time of the year. If for valid reasons or personal choice you aren't part of the Merry - Happy crowd you are excluded from participating at all. Perhaps this was one of the reasons the so called culture war on Christmas began in the first place. If for a month every year the quietly desperate attempt to pep up their personal illusion of life into some sort of Merry - Happy worldview, the only people they are fooling is themselves.

Look at the first line of the four verses of "Joy to the World:"

Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!

No more let sin and sorrow grow

He rules the world with truth and grace

Lines 1,2,4 are indicative statements, line 3 is an imperative. The reason that Christians are reluctant to follow their gifting is that they make at least the first two lines imperatives also, therefore statements of God's grace become an unsufferable burden and true joy impossible.

What would Jesus do, so should you! Come into your world and reign like Jesus. So instead of God induced joy, what is substituted is a required "happy clappy" to keep up one's Christian demeanor.

By definition the atheist is a person with no possibility of Joy except by redefining the term to mean something other than Joy's true meaning. However, true atheists are a hostile but very rare breed of humanity. The vast majority of people are somewhere along a continuum from atheism, to being agnostic, to deism, to formal religion, to eternal Christianity. Eternal Christianity being a condition where joy is everlasting and not conditioned by sin, death, temptation, or trial.

The American religion is a self serving form of deism, it functions within and outside of formal church, whether that be evangelical, confessional, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Islam, and others.

Currently in America, Joel Osteen is the leading proponent of this form of spirituality. In a previous generation this role was fulfilled by Robert Schuler. The essence of their gospel is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. If the 16th Century Reformers were here, they would call this American form of Christianity a heresy. Modern Reformation proponents call American Christianity, light, or bubble gum, while truly believing in line with their founding fathers. True Christianity must rest on the five solas of the Reformation, Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, to God's glory alone.

They get no argument from me except in the application, or as they would call it the real world imperative. What the Reformation lot fails to understand, compared to a continual life in a lifeless world, this good news of God's unconditional love, is more than good news, it is the source of hope and true personal worth. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! The formerly desperate now can be happy, and the promise is that God's joy will come in due season. Life is to be lived as a journey not in a destination.

As a person moves along the continuum from eternal desperation to eternal joy, the essential reason that most people leave evangelicalism, reverting to atheism, or moving into more doctrinally sound churches isn't the persuasiveness of true doctrine. People leave because, just as continual despair is no way to live your life, the health, prosperity, and happiness gospel just flat out doesn't work in times of pain and suffering. When life sucks, just as Our Fathers, and Hail Marys don't work, neither does, "Just ask Jesus into your heart and your relationship with Him will carry you to material prosperity and a better job, a healed marriage, whatever your need. Jesus is the answer.

This is a different Jesus than the Jesus that cleaned out the temple of religious leaders and salesmen. Romans 8:12-17 puts into proper context that suffering is more to be expected in this world as Christians, than physical prosperity. As well the passage illuminates the proper perspective on desperation.

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as

are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

In light of full disclosure, my theology is essentially conservative Lutheran, or as I liked to say when I was in the service, a Martin Luther Lutheran. In my early life I was confirmed in the Lutheran church, but at that time, American Lutheranism, as most other denominations, lost their gospel way as they embraced culture through Protestant liberalism. That means I really didn't learn this conservative theology in church, it was basically by the grace of God.

In recent years I have found that the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, probably reflects most of my views doctrinally. They are quite proud that they still hold strong to Luther's and immediate followers teaching. That is all well and good, except the closest Missouri Synod Lutheran church to my place up on the river is approximately 90 miles away in Deer Park and God only knows if they too are infected with the hope of dumbed down gospel relevance. No matter, that lack of churches does signify that they do not have an active church planting effort to reach the world, which is at least of minor essence in their more liberal Lutheran brothers and sisters. Of course this lack of evangelistic fervor can be expected from gallant Germans, who only followed Luther's concept of church in the vernacular, about the time the USA began rounding up Japanese for internment camps during the last great war.

While different only in degree, sound Protestant Christian doctrines, until recently, are only found in remnants of what once were ethnically stratified, whether that be Reformed, Presbyterian, and similar expressions of Calvinism. Recently however, rejects from American evangelicalism have rediscovered the power of gospel preaching coupled with open outreach (evangelism) through real music of many genre, not marketed Contemporary Christian Music. This true transcendent music interface, coupled with a zeal to overcome religious legalism wherever it may be found. was what brought about the rise of the Calvary Chapel Movement in the last quarter of the 20th century.

This time however, instead of roots in Dispensationalism, Pentecostalism, and Wesleyan

Holiness, there is a distillation of the Reformation fathers, essentially the best of Luther and Calvin. Calvin, not Calvinism is sought because of his precise intellect and the fact that Calvinism has had a much greater influence in the English speaking world than Luther and Lutherans. Luther however, stands alone inside the fortress of a mighty God, taking on and overcoming the powers of established religion and the state (present tense), and died in his sleep. Not a bad legacy for anyone.

The grace and gifts of God are an amazing transcendent miracle. If it were not for the ethnic frozen chosen, Reformation doctrines would have been lost. Thawed out and resuscitated we see perhaps the beginning of a Valley of Dry Bones miracle, to put it into a more Biblical context.

We still haven't got to the expression of true joy however. Law and gospel tension is what the Reformers called it. You can't really understand the Good News unless you truly understand the Bad News. American evangelicalism is a tepid brew as the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-21 expresses. This is where the all loving Jesus says in verse 16, "*So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.*" True law and gospel teaching makes you appreciate both the hot and the cold of the Good News. This is in contrast with the desire of contemporary evangelicalism to always be on fire for Jesus and never seeing or understanding the context of all of scripture, or the fact that strange fire can only make for a tepid life.

Out of the salt shaker and into the world is a concept that evangelicalism has long used for programs that were really just programs with little effect. Why was that? One reason was through Wesleyan Holiness, Christians were taught that they could be contaminated by the world and become carnal or worse and then, become second class Christians like the Lutherans, the Reformed, and the Presbyterians. This illustrates small people with and equally limited small God.

Another reason just as, or even more salient, is that if you really don't understand and stand on what Jesus truly did on the cross and in His resurrection, the world, and even God's creation, will scare the transcendent hell out of you. If you don't walk with a Jesus who transcendentally overcame not only hell but death you will retreat into yourself. This eventually

leads to quiet desperation.

Winter is an amazing season. Today we do everything possible to minimize it's effects. In winter we have prolonged darkness and cold (natural law), but all the dirty garbage of life in this fallen world is covered with a pure white blanket of crystalline snow. Each of those snowflakes is mathematically unique beyond the total atoms in the universe (common grace).

Now go out at night into the cold and sit for a few moments in a small open unheated shelter, because the door is encased in a foot of snow and ice. There is an electric security light illuminating the area and causing the snow crystals to reflect the light as a field of pure diamonds. What would make you sit there until you grasp the unity and diversity of it all?

Well, I could tell you the reason I had that opportunity the night I returned back to the river after spending Christmas in Spokane. That however would negate the gift of God's grace. Being able to grasp the reality of the whole scene, there visually displayed, was a hard divine tension between the reality of natural law and the beautiful gift of common grace. I was not afraid. All it would have taken is just one minor incident out of sequence and the whole event would have been never witnessed, never recorded, but most of all, I sort of began to vaguely glimpse the veiled joy that we will one day experience without restraint, on the eternal side of today.

So finally, Joy is an indicative of God's grace towards humanity. Your imperative application is to ask God to deepen your doctrinal foundation. Doctrine will provide the ballast for all the rapids of the river, and also the armor by which your boat will bounce off the rocks. Then and only then will that river of life journey become a passage by which God may then reveal His joy in being your Abba Father. For:

Weeping may endure for a night,

But joy comes in the morning.

Soli deo gloria!