

THE
COLORS
OF HOPE

BECOMING PEOPLE
of MERCY, JUSTICE,
AND LOVE

Richard Dahlstrom



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The Colors of Hope

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INTRODUCTION

On Becoming Artisans of Hope

Have you ever seen *Schindler's List*? Steven Spielberg's masterful film about the holocaust and the role Oskar Schindler played in saving the lives of Jews is forever etched in my mind as one of the great films of modern time. I say this because of the power of its message, the skill of its cast, and the artistry of its cinematography. Regarding the latter, one scene stands out as remarkably powerful.

Perhaps you remember it. The whole film is shot in black and white, in stark contrast to the few seconds near the middle of the movie where our eye is drawn to a small child, an individual, walking with the mass of humanity as they're forced from the Warsaw ghetto. She's in color; wearing red, she highlights the reality that though we're talking about "the Jews," we're really talking about people, because what are "the masses" other than gathered individual lives, each with a story, longings, desires, and fears? She stands out against all the shades of grey that are the rest of the world: grey streets, grey buildings, grey people, grey sky. Without any words being spoken, she embodies

innocence, beauty, simplicity, and all that is good and right. She, the incarnation of hope, is where your eye is drawn.

That's as it should be. We're looking, all of us are, for hope, because God knows despair is easy enough to find without any looking at all. We run into it everywhere. We wake up to the morning news and hear about the price of oil and the threat of terrorism, pandemic, or financial scandal. Soon we're off to work, if we still have a job in the midst of the economic insanity that marks our time, wondering if our company or product is helping to make the world a better place, wondering if we're going to remain competitive what with the latest outsourcing to some farther corner of the world, because it's become too expensive to do business in China. We'll arrive home and there too, for many, *grey* might still prevail. Relational struggles, addictions, loneliness, weariness, physical afflictions, and boredom are all on the list—various shades of *grey* that dampen hope.

Of course, it's not all *grey* and certainly not all the time. There's football on Sundays, time with the kids, good moments with our spouse, a meal with friends, our workout at the gym, or even some entertainment on cable. Stirring worship or a compelling conference occasionally cheers or inspires us as well, perhaps. But for those wondering whether there's any lasting source of satisfaction, any way to make our lives count for something, any way to find real joy, the color *grey* still bleeds back onto the canvas of our lives inexorably, leaving us with a sense of longing. "Is this all there is?" we ask.

It's a time-honored question, asked in movies from every generation: *The Graduate* for mine, *Garden State* for my son's. The issue is pondered in lyrics like Dave Matthews' "Grey Street" and addressed by poets from every century.

Keep going further back, and you'll find one called "The Preacher" asking and then answering the same question in one of the most quoted books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes. The

Preacher, though, plays his hand at the beginning of his writings, when he says,

Smoke, nothing but smoke.
There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke.
What's there to show for a lifetime of work,
a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?¹

It's a rhetorical question, of course. The answer is that nothing lasts; nothing offers a sense of completion. "Like grabbing smoke," we're told.

You open your hand. And it's empty. The Preacher goes from generalization to the particulars and, in so doing, deconstructs the main narratives that have occupied humans for all time, right up to this very moment.

Money, pleasure, education, and work are the main targets of the Preacher's consideration, and in every case the conclusion is the same: we'll never be satisfied fully by any of these things. This isn't to say these things don't have value. In the right context, for the right reasons, they're gifts to be enjoyed, assets to be stewarded. But lasting satisfaction? The Preacher doesn't think so, and neither do I. They are, on their own, just not adequate to deliver the goods.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF RELIGION

In response to the greying that comes from our various pursuits, every generation has had its share of people who've come to be characterized by a fixation on the hopelessness of these endeavors. Their response, in various forms, has been a call to drop out of all this and "get religion."

In its basest forms, religion is a transaction between some god and some person or people group, whereby god offers a colorful afterlife in exchange for obedience and sacrifice here

in this present, already grey world. Christianity isn't immune to this aberrant view, as church history and present church politics and policies remind us.

Where this form of Christianity holds sway, people of faith are characterized more by what they are against (swearing, smoking, tattoos, wearing makeup, listening to anything other than approved music, reading the wrong version of the Bible, watching movies, holding hands before being engaged, and so much more . . . it's a long and varied list, depending on the century and geography) than by what they are for (justice, mercy, truth-telling, forgiveness, love of enemies, and so much more). Who can blame people for being less than enthusiastic about such models of faith? This too is a form of grey.

So we've looked around, tested the water, searched for meaning. It's as if we've thrust ourselves into one new pursuit after another, convinced that this will finally be the means whereby lasting color can come into our world. But every time, the color fades, so that when we stop and look, all we can see is the colors of our pursuits melting into lifeless monochrome. Even religion doesn't satisfy.

ARTISANS OF HOPE

And then our eye catches something different. I've seen it in the eyes of a woman living in Pokhara, Nepal. Her smile is different. There's hope in her eyes. A refugee from Tibet, her parents led her across the Himalayas in the wake of the Red Guard Chinese revolution. In the process her feet were frostbitten, and she ended up in a Presbyterian hospital, where she heard about Jesus and became one of his followers. Since then, she's devoted her life to feeding, educating, and blessing Tibetan orphans. She's an artisan of hope, living her life in

vibrant colors of joy and generosity, in spite of her relative poverty and her refugee status.

I've seen it in Nicanor, a tiny man from Nepal from whom joy oozes every time he speaks. His belief in Jesus' power to change lives, families, and villages is so great that he'd feel he was being selfish if he didn't share the good news of Jesus' invitation to a different life. Since the sharing of such news has, at various times, been illegal in Nepal, Nicanor's been in jail countless times. It's never bothered him, though, because in jail, just as much as outside, he's relentless in generously sharing the good news, encouraging his fellow prisoners by imparting hope and inviting them to a different life. Jailers grow tired of the effect he has on other prisoners, and so he's released. Off he goes to another village, where the whole thing starts all over again.

I've seen it in a friend in Africa named Walter, who's working hard to free women from sexual slavery. Once freed, they have needs for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Through his ministry they receive shelter, food, safety, and transformation, all in the name of Jesus.

There's Gahigi in Rwanda, who's mediating forgiveness between genocide perpetrators and victims day after day, even though he lost 142 family members to the killings.

Splashes of color are everywhere, even in the prosperous West. Dr. Paul is on the front lines anywhere on the planet there's been a crisis, imparting physical blessing in Jesus' name. Another person teaches gardening to inner-city children and teens, spilling the color green into the grey world of project housing and crime, shattered families and addictions. Another young man has parlayed his knitting skills (learned, hilariously, in high school as a means of raising cash for prom night) into an economic development enterprise for Ugandan women. He and his friends teach ladies to knit, then buy their ski hats and return to the States to sell them.

What do all these people have in common? They've responded to an invitation to paint with the colors of hope by stepping into the story God is writing across the canvas of history. People like this are scattered throughout the pages of time and across the continents of geography. Each of them has been, for me, a little bit like the girl in red. My eye has been drawn to them as the embodiment of hope, the possibility of beauty, the resurrection of meaning.

To know such hope is asking a lot, especially in these days of tremendous upheaval and global uncertainty. "Security" seems a quaint and antiquated notion, threatened as we are by terror and international catastrophes. We are also undermined by economic trauma, as the seeds of excess sown over past decades finally begin to germinate their poisonous flower. Foreclosures, layoffs, downsizing, and outsourcing have become such commonplace news themes that they don't shock us anymore—they only bring a sense of dread so that the only hope we have is the hope that it won't happen to us. If this is the extent of our hope, then the paradigm of our life becomes nothing more than disaster, which seems a far cry from the artistry of abundant living to which Jesus invites us.

The stunning reality of Jesus' invitation is that I'm called to more, much more, than simply surviving, protecting my assets and reputation while, as a footnote, I drop a little money in the offering and tell my neighbors Jesus died for them. Such a small view of God's activity in my life, and God's calling on my days, is part of the reason so many find Christianity boring. But let's not confuse this caricature of the Christian life with the real thing, the genuinely life-giving words of the Master. From the very beginning Jesus' vision of following him has entailed the notion of living outwardly. Trusting in God's active involvement in our daily lives, we're invited to learn dependence on the Creator for provision, direction, and protection. Then, from

this place of security, we're invited to live outwardly, finding creative ways to spill hope into the world.

I ponder what it might be like to become someone who embodies this substantive hope, able to paint the vibrant colors of God's good reign onto this world's canvas. Millions of people through the ages have walked such a road, pursued such a life. Maybe the same could be true for us. If the Bible has anything to say about it, I'm sure it's true for you, because this is, in fact, the life for which we were created, and though we might settle for less, we'll never be truly satisfied with less.

THREE MOVEMENTS

Learning to live that kind of life is what this book is all about. Part 1 helps us capture the kind of picture God is painting in this beautiful yet broken world. Based on God's character, and the teachings of Jesus, we're invited to envision a much different place than the one we presently inhabit. It's this vision of hope that will become our north star as we use the life we've been given to spill forth God's hope.

Part 2 is about the colors that create hope, because it's not enough to see what kind of world God is creating; we must have the right paints on our palette if we're going to pull it off. Religion is complex, layered with rituals, obligations, fears, reputations to protect, and experts continually arguing about doctrinal nuances and ethical priorities and mandates. The good news is we can step away from that and find a clear path toward our calling as artists by learning the colors needed to bless the world. Thankfully, God has shown us that hope, in its million different forms, always springs from three primary colors: justice, mercy, and love.

Part 3 reminds us that our calling to be people of hope needn't wait to begin until our lives are free of problems

and challenges. If we postpone our art until things settle down, our calling to impart hope will always be just a day or two away. No. Redemption, transforming the canvas of our reality, must start now, right in the midst of our messes. Learning to live out our hopeful faith amongst the realities of our fallen world is what this section is all about. The good news is we'll discover that the very things we thought were barriers to becoming artisans of hope are what God will use to shape our souls, giving a depth to the colors we'll pour into the world.

ARTISTS NEEDED

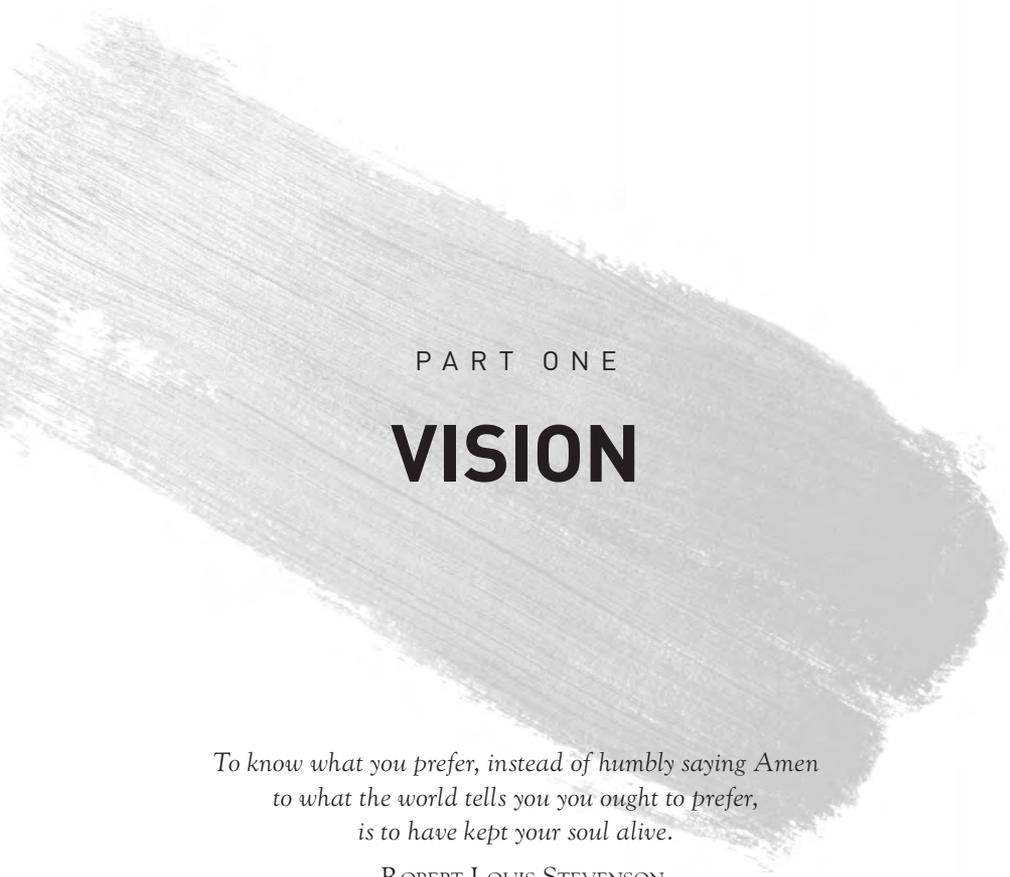
As I write this introduction, the church finds itself in the headlines once again, for all the wrong reasons. There are revelations about a cover-up of sexual abuse in the Catholic church, and there are Christian militia groups arming in some states. Right in the middle of all this, there's a big argument about the "emergent church" and whether it's composed of truth or falsehood, as if something as ill-defined as this movement could be contained in either a sweeping endorsement or condemnation.

People are looking at all this and saying, "Just as I suspected—the church is a waste of time," or worse, "the church is less relevant than I even suspected." I hear it in my city—Seattle—and though I don't agree, I understand how people come to such conclusions. They see the church painting ugliness, arrogance, and lust on the canvas of this world, and so they walk or run away.

There's only one way to address this: We need to be painting different pictures—of justice, mercy, love, hospitality, celebration, and hope. This book is about learning to be the kind of

people who live with this vision, who develop our collective skills as artisans.

It is urgent work, because splashes of beauty are needed on our world's canvas, now more than ever.



PART ONE

VISION

*To know what you prefer, instead of humbly saying Amen
to what the world tells you you ought to prefer,
is to have kept your soul alive.*

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

*He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work
he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do,
work we had better be doing.¹*

—PAUL THE APOSTLE

Because I'm a pastor, I've a foot in two utterly different worlds. I'm exposed, daily, to what I call the "Christian Economic Machine." My inbox is stuffed with unsolicited invitations to conferences about how to grow my church and make it "sticky" (so that new people don't leave), how to shrink my church by dividing it into little churches, how to hire staff and fire them, expand budgets and cut them, run programs and learn why programs are from the devil. Magazines offer more of the same: endless tinkering with structure in the hope that adding coffee or taking it away, adding the word *emergent* or despising it, will make our church better.

My second world is among people who don't get those e-mails. My calling is to shepherd them and teach them, and the truth is they don't care about the issues in those e-mails at all. They're trying to figure out what difference knowing Jesus and following him is supposed to make in their daily living. They're dealing with boatloads of suffering and joys, fears and hopes. They're trying to hold their singleness faithfully, or their marriage. They're trying to figure out what to do with the rest of their lives, whether they're university students, nearing retirement, or somewhere in between. They're dealing with issues related to health and sexuality, money and employment. And a common thread that runs through all their questioning is "What does following Christ have to do with these things?"

As a pastor I'd be wise to clear 90 percent of my inbox from the first world, and absorb *all* the questions and conversations

related to the second. The first world feels like endless discussions about window dressing, as if changing our mission statement or adding candles to worship will make a church healthy. I know too many pastors who've been perpetually frustrated by such tinkering to believe that it's the right track. The second world, however, the world of real people seeking to live faithfully, contributes to the shaping of my own faith in profound ways.

I've been listening to people ask questions and tell me stories about the relationship of their faith to their real lives for the past twenty-five years. These conversations and my own study of the Bible have reshaped my understanding of what it means to be Christ followers.

I began my faith journey thinking we were lawyers on a mission. We understood the legal status of humanity as condemned and could explain, with great precision, why Christ's deity, humanity, death, and resurrection could change our sentence, in spite of our guilt. While that legal element remains foundational and important, I've come to discover that our calling is less lawyer, more artist.

Each of us is endowed by our Creator, through the gift of Christ's life, with the capacity to impart great gifts of beauty to this world. "Blessed to be a blessing" is how God said it to Abraham, and since we're in his great big family, as followers of Christ, his calling is our calling. There are particular offerings of beauty ("good works," Paul calls them in his letter to the Ephesians) that we are invited to share with our world. We are, in other words, artists.

This way of seeing my calling, of seeing our calling, has made all the difference. Becoming a faith artist is an invitation to joy, creativity, and profound adventure.

Unfortunately the tide of faith culture pushes away from art, toward law. This first section addresses these issues of identity because, until I see myself as an artist, I'll never get on with the work of painting the colors of God's good reign on my world.

Let the adventure begin.

FAITH ART

Cure for the Common Consumer

When we drug ourselves to blot out our soul's call, we are being good Americans and exemplary consumers.¹

—STEVEN PRESSFIELD

There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by.

—ANNIE DILLARD

I was sixteen years old when my high school band went to Europe. All of us had worked hard to get there. We did fundraising, mostly by selling raffle tickets for a Pontiac Firebird that a local dealer had donated to the cause. I decided to try selling my required allotment of tickets to the richest people possible. We were the Highlanders, so after school I'd get into my kilt and walk around Fresno, California, looking for doctors, dentists, and lawyers. I'd walk into their offices looking like a freak, tell them the story of our planned trip, and sell tickets. Most of these rich professionals would buy ten or twenty at a time.

My plan was wildly successful. Tickets sold. Music was learned. One night shortly after school ended in June, we loaded our instruments into big buses and drove all night down to Los Angeles, where we boarded a flight to London. Though we didn't know it at the time, dozens of life-changing experiences awaited us, from sledding in the Alps to standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower at midnight. Whole worlds opened before us we didn't even know existed, as most of us had never been on a plane, never been outside California. It was quite an education.

A moment of truth, though, early on, sort of divided the group into two camps. Our first part of the tour was in England, and just trying to cross the street nearly killed me, as I kept looking the wrong way before stepping out. By the time we arrived in Scotland, I was bone tired, suspicious of the many unknowns, and ready to go home. After a day that included an afternoon concert, we boarded a bus and made our way to Dunblane, where we stayed at a remarkable old hotel, sitting on the crest of a hill.

"You've free time tonight," we were told, "and there's Scottish folk dancing on the main floor, starting at nine, if you're interested." After supper, I made my way back to my room, where I intended to get lost in a Friday-night round of Crazy Eights with my roommates. It was a little after ten when the three of us, astonishingly, got a clue. We looked at each other, and someone said, "This is pathetic. We're in Scotland. We worked hard to get here. None of our friends have been to Europe. People are dancing and singing downstairs, and we're hiding in our room, playing cards! What are we doing?"

"We hate dancing," another chimed in, stating the obvious. The reality, though, wasn't that I hated dancing; it's just that I'd never danced, except for that one very painful time at middle-school homecoming when I summoned the courage of ten thousand warriors, approached Suzanne, and asked

her to dance. Suzanne smiled that perfect, confident smile that makes eighth-grade boys feel like less evolved forms of life. “Yes,” she said, holding out her hand as we made our way to the dance floor. Just touching her skin nearly made me faint. She danced like a goddess, which only contributed to my feelings of vast inferiority, leading me to believe I was her one “charity dance” for the evening. I swore then, I’d never dance again.

Nevertheless, when one brave soul stood up and said, “I’m going dancing anyway,” I followed, leaving the other roommate alone to play solitaire. “It will be fun to watch,” I said to myself as we entered the large ballroom of the eighteenth-century castle, turned hotel. I’d settled the matter in my mind by convincing myself that guys always do the asking, and the simple way to save face would be to remain on the sidelines. My call. No problem. The room was full of townsfolk, as this was a real Scottish gathering, a monthly event. Everyone was dancing, laughing, shouting, and swinging each other around while we stood and watched.

Then it happened. A lovely lass, surely older but not by much, came over and, scarcely even asking, took my hand and led me onto the floor. I began to protest, but she just smiled and said, “It’s fine, lad. Ye’ll learn it soon enough!” With my heart in my throat, I listened as the teacher gave instructions, and then the fun began.

That’s all it took. I stayed on the floor until the last dance at three A.M. The night ended with a bagpiper playing “Scotland the Brave” as the townsfolk held hands and sang, hugged, and wept. My dance partner thanked me, kissed me on the cheek, and walked into the night. I’ve loved the bagpipes and Scotland ever since. Of course, I could have played Crazy Eights instead and gone to sleep at eleven. The tragedy with such a course of action is that I would never have known what I missed.

FAITH DANCING OR CHURCH SITTING?

Every Sunday, in churches across the land, something profound will happen just before the preacher ascends to the pulpit to talk: the children will leave the building. They'll go somewhere else to be cared for by others, because, as God and all the rest of us know, children aren't wired to sit and listen to somebody talk for twenty, thirty, or forty minutes.

There are, of course, theories about developmental stages and children's limited capacity for thinking conceptually. They're not likely to be interested in the talk I'm going to give this weekend about imputed righteousness and the value of propitiation. In fact, if they were in the room and I started chatting about such stuff, I'd know immediately I was boring them; it would show in their active little bodies and wandering little eyes. They're not made for this.

They're made for dancing.

At the risk of losing my job (after all, I'm the guy who talks for forty minutes each Sunday), I'm going out on a limb to suggest we're not made for this either, at least not without some serious conditions and qualifications. The children are on to something. Yes, we adults have the developmental capacities for dealing with abstract ideas, and in this sense what I do each Sunday has value. But here's the problem: If we're only *hearing*, and not *doing*, we're playing Crazy Eights. Not only that, we are party to the massive deception that is spiritual consumerism.² It's numbing souls, weakening our churches, and so dimming the glorious light of Christ—the light God intends to shine through his people—that the darkness in the land is palpable.

If we'd been more like children, this wouldn't have happened. Children won't just sit; they must do something. Watch them sometime, intently, so you can learn how to play. We were with friends in Germany this past winter. Their three-year-old

son and I were able to bridge the language barrier by playing catch. I'd toss him a ball and he'd try to catch it, sometimes even succeeding. The grin wouldn't leave his face. You could offer him any sort of passive activity instead: television, reading a book, discussing theology, and he'd prefer the doing. The same thing happens when small children have Play-Doh or paint. They'll do, and do, and do some more. *Creating* is what they live for.

Consuming is what they're taught. Over time we learn it's easier, and less risky to one's esteem, to watch passively than jump in, to sit on the sidelines rather than dance. As we grow older, we refine the skill of consumption until it becomes us. We watch TV instead of lingering in conversation over meals. We collect paintings rather than make them. We watch sports rather than play them. We eat out rather than try new recipes and create incredible (or sometimes, less so) meals.

Of course, I'm generalizing. All of us have moments and areas where we shine. But it's important to see this trajectory from childhood to adulthood: we seem to move inexorably toward habits of consumption that wound, sometimes fatally, our creative self.

Too often, our God-given creative capacities and calling are buried beneath layers of obligations and cultural expectations. Many are missing out on finding the joy and energy that comes from creating because we've been schooled in consumerism more than creativity. We've learned what we can't do; learned that the professionals will always outclass us so it's better not to try; learned that it's easier to consume than create; learned to avoid the risk of failure. As a result, we're sitting in the concert hall rather than standing on stage; or we're in the bleachers rather than on the field.

Everything that will unfold in these pages is based on the premise that there's artistry and beauty in all of us waiting to

find expression, like seeds waiting to germinate. Each of us is made by God with specific creative capacities, as the great apostle spelled out in his letter to the Ephesians.³ We're invited to use these capacities to bless, painting the colors *hope* and *beauty* onto the canvas of our broken world, each of us in unique ways. When this happens, hospitals are built, wells are dug, women are freed from sexual slavery, warring tribes reconcile and forgive, neighbors are loved and served, parties are thrown, forests are restored, art is created, children are taught, schools are built, the elderly are dignified, cars are repaired. You get the picture.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

My wife and I ran a Bible school in the wilderness for many years. When guests would come to us, one of our favorite things to do was guide them up a mountain and throw them off—attached to a rope, of course. We call that rappelling, and our guests loved it. We found, though, we often needed to give the knot-tying lecture more than once. We'd give it the first time, talking about how to examine the rope for fraying, demonstrating its strength, explaining how to wear, tighten, and check the harness, and showing how to tie the right knots. Then we'd go outside to a climbing wall on the side of our house, and they'd watch as we showed them how to descend and how to protect someone who was descending by belaying them.

They'd listen politely, but in truth most of them were either bored or eager to do what they'd come there to do—get up on the mountains and have adventures. Our last word was: “Now that we've shown all this, you'll be able to tie knots for each other, and check each other's harnesses for safety. Oh, and you'll be doing the belaying too.”

That's when everything would stop, and the color would

drain from everyone's faces. Sheepishly, but invariably, they'd ask, "Can you run through that once more?" Happy to accommodate, we'd explain everything a second time, fully aware that in reality this was the first time most of them were paying attention, because this time the stuff we were talking about had immediate, first-person relevance to their situation. People listened like their life depended on it, because it did!

Jesus did the spiritual equivalent of this all the time; for instance, when he sent his followers out and told them to do things like heal the sick and cleanse lepers.⁴ It was the doing that gave relevance to the hearing, and the hearing that energized them for the doing. We seem to have misplaced this marvelous synergy. Too often the church has fallen into the trap of equating knowledge with maturity. We've elevated sitting, listening, and absorbing content—with the goal of improving our personal condition—to the pinnacle of maturity. We reward children when they memorize chunks of the Bible.

Now, I'm a big fan of encountering God through reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible. Jesus knew the Bible well; however, he also knew the dangerous possibilities of its misuse.⁵ If those big chunks that are flooding little heads don't find application in real activities, the only motivation they have for getting Bible knowledge is the sticker they'll win. As soon as they graduate and the stickers stop coming, we'll have taught them that knowing the Bible is good for awards and nothing more. Some of them will become part of the large statistical crowd between ages eighteen and thirty that's leaving the church.

I don't blame them for leaving. After all, they've been taught that following Jesus means sitting and listening to someone talk. It means poring over the minutia of a book as if it's a legal code to be memorized and debated. They've learned that

the big issues of the church have to do with whether this brand of Christianity is “more right” than that brand, and whether “emergent” is better than “neo-Calvinist,” as if these labels are somehow important. Thus it is that Jesus’ followers fight each other over minutiae while sometimes ignoring clearly pressing matters.⁶ Meanwhile, all they’re taught about the grey and tattered canvas of this world is that it’s going to get worse before it gets better, and burned up in the end, so don’t waste your time painting. They’ve been taught, in other words, that following Jesus has little to do with their longings for meaning and making a difference. As consumers, they move on in search of a better product.

SPIRITUAL CONSUMERISM GETS UGLY

I remember meeting someone whose mother attended a church that met for Bible study six nights a week. People would bring big notebooks and learn about the original Greek and Hebrew meaning of every word. The teacher went through the whole thing, literally verse by verse, for years. My friend’s mom amassed closets full of notes along with cassette tapes of every sermon. She could tell you the meaning of every Hebrew phrase in Isaiah 53, could explain how Jesus would return, and make some educated guesses regarding when. She knew her Bible better than anyone I’d met.

And she hated her daughter. *Hated* her. She’d write scathing letters, sickly weaving together tender hints of affection with violent threats should her daughter continue in her “wicked ways,” which meant nothing more than living a life of her own choosing. Apparently all that Bible teaching and information didn’t lead to any sort of decency or charity on the part of the mom. To the contrary, it became ammunition for manipulation. The Bible became a weapon, and in

the hands of someone who attends church six nights a week, learning every linguistic nuance of the text, it can be a wicked weapon indeed.

My friend's mom didn't invent the misuse of Scripture and religion. The Crusades and the Inquisition were murder, torture, and theft in Jesus' name. Colonialism? One African pastor said, "You told us to close our eyes and pray to receive Jesus, and when we opened them, you'd stolen our land." People have quoted directly from the Bible to justify slavery, genocide, and abusive patriarchy, all in Jesus' name.

When people of faith begin believing their highest calling is to sit and listen to their teachers, they'll become prey to all sorts of destructive ideas, as history has so amply displayed. Passive religionists will flow like water along the path of least resistance, and if this means they're called to hate Jews, they'll hate Jews while continuing to sit in church and sing hymns. If it means they're called to treat Africans as subhuman and steal their land, they'll treat Africans as subhuman and steal their land. If they're called to worship free markets, or socialist markets, they'll worship free markets or socialist markets. Consumers are passive and open to manipulation.⁷ This is most assuredly not what Jesus had in mind for us.

Those who see themselves as artists, however, aren't so easily swayed. They've spent long hours looking at Jesus' vision for the canvas that is this world. They've come to understand the beauty of justice, the glory of intimacy, the joy of service and hospitality, the profound life-giving character of generosity, and the stunning colors of grace. They know what belongs on the canvas. When a teacher comes along advocating anti-Semitism, they won't blindly follow, they'll resist.⁸ Their commitment isn't to attending religious shows, it's to painting the colors of hope onto the canvas of our world. They're artists, and they know it.

THE LORD OF THE DANCE

The moments of truth come in our lives when Jesus invites us to dance. He walks up to us and holds out his hand, tells us there's dancing work to be done. It's joyous, creative, life-giving work. We're intimidated by the boatloads of our own failure, by the chains of consumerism that have kept us shackled to the recliner in front of the TV. His hand is there waiting. We recoil, but like the Scottish lass, he says, "It's fine. Ye'll learn soon enough," and we need to decide. Will we become artists or remain consumers?

Moses is chilling in the desert and God invites him to become an artist instead. He does this same thing with Jeremiah, and Hannah, and Mary, and Paul. And you. His hand is outstretched, as he invites you to the dance of creativity and beauty, and you need to choose: artist, or consumer?

When Jesus was wrapping up his days on earth, he didn't tell us to go to church. He didn't tell us to engage in a spiritualized version of channel surfing, as we hop from place to place in search of just the right programming to entertain us. He told us to get out and actually do the stuff he'd already been doing, painting the hope of God's reign on the canvas of God's world. He told us we're *artists*.

The learning begins by following Jesus into the real world, leaving consumerism behind, and learning to see what's actually there on the canvas that is our glorious and broken world.