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On the High Wire

Why are we so fascinated? There he stands, thirty feet, three hundred feet, or even a thousand feet above the ground, on a wire barely three inches wide. Whether he is walking across a circus ring, Niagara Falls, or a New York thoroughfare, we marvel at the wire walker or tight-rope walker. Why? Because against all odds he keeps his balance. One mistake will send him plummeting; but he doesn't make that mistake. And so we marvel.

And yet in so many ways we are that wire walker. We balance life and career, family and friends, children and sanity. Even in our Christian walk, we have to maintain that balance. We have to be careful about extremes. We have to balance a hatred of sin with love for people. We balance on the wire between temptation and self-righteousness. There is another balancing act that many people seem to fail at. That is the balancing act between free-will and God's control.

The one extreme is that man has no free will, that everything is controlled by God. There are, of course, variations on this theme. Proponents of predestination vary from "our eventual outcome is predestined" to "God controls every event and aspect of your life." Even some who believe in free will may constantly sing that "God is in control." And it is true. God has an ultimate plan for man and "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) The question is whether this takes all control from man. The comfort of this doctrine is that everything will work out well, ultimately. The danger of this doctrine is that, if God is in control then man has no control, and therefore no responsibility. In the extreme, this says that if God controls every aspect and action of my life, then anything bad that happens is God's fault. Rather than "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights," (Jas 1:17) God becomes either both good and evil or neither good nor evil. The terms good and evil become meaningless. Instead of "whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?" (Jas 4:1), the answer is that they come from God. This relieves man of any guilt; this negates the doctrine of sin.

The other extreme is that God created man and then stepped out of the picture altogether. Some have said that the Deist philosophy was that God created the world as a great clock, then wound it up and walked away while it wound itself down. This is actually the God that many of the Founding Fathers of America believed in. God created, but then relinquished all control. This means that man is ultimately "the master of my fate; ... the captain of my soul." (Henley, in "Invictus") The ultimate doctrine of this belief is that right and wrong are determined by man and circumstance. Then Hamlet is right that "nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so." If God has left control of my life up to me, then he cannot fault me for that control. Again, there is no sin.

If God is in control in the big picture, but not in the details, then is that control at all? Some Renaissance art is attributed to a master, but some of the backgrounds or smaller details were actually painted by apprentices. So who painted the work? Should it be attributed to Leonardo, or to the school of Leonardo? Is God like that, taking credit for the work of men? Actually, this may be the wire we walk. As somebody says, "Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes that reason is that you are stupid and make bad decisions." God has a plan and a purpose, but he lets us make mistakes. Because he has expressed his will, then he has the right to punish those mistakes. Sin exists. But sin exists because God is in control, but not altogether in control.

How do we walk this tightrope? Maybe we don't. Maybe we accept that God is in control, but we have free will. Maybe our job is just to surrender that free will to God's control. We don't have to understand it; we just have to do it.

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Ohana

By all objective measures, the 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates should not have won the World Series. They were down three games to one, had been outscored almost two-to-one, and still had to face Cy Young winner Mike Flannagan and future Hall-of-Famer Jim Palmer. They had to, and did, shut down a hot hitting young future Hall-of-Famer named Eddie Murray. It seemed that Willie Stargell took Murray's hitting prowess and turned it into a Most Valuable Player award for himself and an unbelievable Series victory for the Pirates. It is not the World Series victory, perhaps, for which that team is most famous. The team, which included Stargell, Dave Parker, John Candelaria, Kent Tekulve, Phil Garner, and Bill Madlock (all big names in baseball history), may be more famous for their theme song. They adopted the Sister Sledge hit, "We Are Family," and turned that philosophy into a win.

The "We Are Family" Pirates knew the value of working together in spite of differences. They understood the Hawaiian concept of Ohana. Loosely translated, ohana means family; but it is broader than blood ties, it is whomever you choose to consider as family. Ohana may be your immediate or extended family. Ohana may be a military unit with a philosophy of "leave nobody behind."

It used to be that Sunday included "dinner on the grounds."

It may be a never-say-quit sports team like the '79 Pirates. Or it may be the church.

We are family

As late as the 1950s and 1960s it was common, even expected, in the church to use the titles "Brother" and "Sister" for members of the church. A child was expected to refer to an adult by one of those titles and their last name. We have gotten away from that, so that the closest most children get is calling someone brother and the first name. Occasionally you may hear older Christians continue to refer to others by those titles. In a way this is bad, because it takes away a sense of family. On the other hand, it may be good because it always sounded a little too formal for family. After all, parents may still expect not to be called by their first names by their children, but siblings rarely use anything but first names. (Well, maybe sometimes they use other epithets, but only when angry or hurt.)

Scripture never uses the word "family" to describe the church. It does, however, use family as a picture of the

church. Paul goes into a lengthy discourse in Ephesians 5 about the obligations of wives and husbands to each other. Then he says he is not really talking about that familial relationship, but ohana.

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord ... Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. ... For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph 5:22, 25-28, 31-32)

Paul then goes on to describe the relationship between parents and children. But again one senses that he is still talking about the family of the church.

If as the adopted sons and daughters of God we are family, then there are certain obligations we owe to one another. In *Anna Karenina*, Lev Tolstoy said, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." If we are to be a happy family, we must be alike in certain traits.

Eating together

Many people today decry the loss of the family sitting around the dinner table, discussing the events of the day. Instead soccer practice, work, chorus, or even Facebook or Snapchat all keep the family from gathering to share. Without this time of sharing, families become fragmented, with no common ground to hold them together. Even ten minutes of daily family Bible reading and discussion gives some commonality.

The church as a family suffers from the same splintering. It used to be that Sundays included "dinner on the grounds." One congregation in Hong Kong, made up of English, Chinese, and Filipino families has, or used to have, a shared lunch after every Sunday assembly. On the other hand, one American congregation designates four groups of about 80 people each, and each group has a pot-luck lunch one Sunday a week, and it is sometimes difficult to get five people to show up. Most congregations today don't even attempt anything like that. They are like a family that sees each other once, twice, or at most three times a week. How is that family? How is that ohana?

There is much to be said for putting your legs under the same table, but it doesn't have to be for food. Any gathering on a regular basis, other than the worship assembly or Bible class, would be just as good. Families

should get together regularly, and just for fun. If it just in the worship assembly you may end up with a situation where somebody says, "I'll sit on the other side of the building today; maybe I will see someone I haven't seen for years." It gets even worse in the standard auditorium seating where you may see somebody regularly by the back of their head, but might never see their face.

Support each other

The old family rule is, "I can say anything I want about my brother, but if an outsider bad-mouths him I will make them regret it." Ohana means nobody is left behind, and nobody talks against the family. Families stick together through thick and thin. The "in sickness and in health" of the traditional wedding vows goes beyond just the bride and groom. It means sitting at the bedside of a seriously ill child. It means going to basketball games when you just hate basketball. Sometimes it means learning to share the radio in the car.

The letter of James is, in many ways, a handbook on family relationships. It is just that the family he is addressing is the church. Don't cater to the rich uncle, while putting Cinderella to work cleaning the fireplace. (Jas 2:1-4, paraphrased) Fulfil your promises. (1:22-25) Help family members in need. (1:26-27) don't be selfish. (4:1-3) Don't grumble about each other. (5:9) Protect each other. (5:19-20) Stick with the sick. (5:13-18)

The best-known passage about this, however, comes from the pen of Paul. We hear it frequently.

Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. (Rom 12:15-16)

Both Paul and James are saying that families stick together and support each other. Robert Frost wrote, "'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in.'" But people tend to forget the next line. "I should have called it/ Something you somehow haven't to deserve." The hired man of Frost's poem is ohana. So is the family member getting an award. Good and bad. Family.

Dirty Laundry

When you walk into someone else's home, you don't expect the laundry baskets to be in the middle of the living room floor. We don't air our dirty laundry in public. So it should be with the church. Family quarrels should stay in the family. Church disputes don't belong in the public domain.

James didn't miss this one. Among his advice to families, we find, "Speak not evil of one another, brethren." (Jas 4:11) Paul, though, addresses airing dirty linen in another passage.

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do

ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren. (1 Cor 6:1-8)

Paul equates taking disputes outside the family to fraud. Even Tolstoy's happy families have disputes. The

The letter of James is, in many ways, a handbook on family relationships.

difference between the happy families and the unhappy ones is the way they deal with those disputes.

Paul's restriction should go beyond not taking arguments to those outside the church. Perhaps it should extend to individual congregations in some instances. If a person leaves one congregation because of a dispute, he should not willingly continue to fight that dispute in the congregation where he ends up. That gives his new brothers only one side of the story, and that is gossip. Perhaps in the first century they did not often have the option to change congregations, but in many places today we do. That has led to problems. By gossiping about the former congregation, one may give a false impression. This has, at times, ended up with a congregation trying to "disfellowship" another congregation, a practice neither found nor taught in the Bible. If we are not to air our dirty laundry to those outside the church, how much more so to other congregations who don't have the advantage of hearing the full story. (As if it is their business even if they could hear both sides.)

Paul rather teaches that, like families, we should learn to live together. Sometimes this means taking a hurt and letting it go. Sometimes it means giving as good as you get, and then making up afterward. If that sounds like marriage, well, it should. If that sounds like your children, it should. Healthy families get things out in the open, and then move on.

Like the '79 Pirates, we are family. We can do great things, and make great comebacks. After all, we are the Ohana of God.

Consistently Inconsistent

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.” (Emerson)

Not every consistency is foolish. But then, neither is every inconsistency smart. Consistency is sometimes hard to find. This is especially true when it comes to politics and doctrine. These disciplines (or lack thereof) are so riddled with emotion that consistency is nearly impossible. The only hope is to be as consistent as possible. In doctrine, the only way to do that is by careful consideration of the Bible.

Today when anyone proposes that a particular doctrine is inconsistent with the scriptures, it is often countered with, “That’s just your interpretation.” To be fair, sometimes it is. And if it is “just” your interpretation, then it probably doesn’t matter much. But if that interpretation is supported by some biblical scholars it may have more weight. (Although to be honest, some of the worst interpretations of scripture are held by large numbers of scholars.) If it is supported directly by scripture, then it is really no longer interpretation.

As an example, some people oppose, or at least do not support, the idea that the devil is a fallen angel. Those that say he is often base their doctrine primarily on Isaiah 14:12-15 and the mention of Lucifer.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Interestingly, they say this must be about the devil because it calls him Lucifer, and Lucifer is a name for the devil. How do they know Lucifer is a name for the devil? Because this passage uses the name and it is about the devil. That is known as circular reasoning. Fortunately, many translations newer than the King James Version translate the word rather than making it a name.

If you challenge these people, they use a variant on the “that’s your interpretation” argument. But when you point out that verse 4 says it is about the king of Babylon, and verse 16 says it is about a man, they respond that it is symbolic language. And there is where the inconsistency comes in. This passage, that clearly states to whom it is addressed, must be figurative, but other passages that appear figurative must be taken literally. A reign of “a thousand years” must be literal, even though it is in the middle of an obviously figurative passage (bottomless pit, devil as a dragon). If the passage in the Revelation is a literally specific thousand years (no more, no less), then why is a passage that is more literal necessarily figurative. Only because it fits a specific doctrine, emotionally held.

Eventually, the response is to stop listening. “The Bible is the true word of God, so stop trying to change it.” (An interesting response from one trying to change what the Bible clearly says.) “I’m not going to argue with you about this.” (Because you know you are losing the argument, but that’s fine because we are getting nowhere.)

The problem with much interpretation of prophecy is that the holder of a doctrine is not consistent in how they interpret prophecy. Sometimes to counteract that inconsistency one needs to look at what the scripture specifically says. Then it is no longer interpretation.

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