

Your Story in His Story

The 2015 Evangelicals Concerned Autumn Weekend in Ocean Grove

October 9 – 11, 2015 Thornley Chapel

Commemorating the Centennials of Anna Bartlett Warner, Fanny Jane Crosby,

William Howard Doane and Booker T. Washington

Including Three Teachings by Dr. Ralph Blair

“The Bible Tells Me So”, “This is My Story” and “To God be the Glory”

“To God be the Glory”

“What’s the *meaning of life*?” It’s been said that this question is itself, *meaningless*. And some find saying so, a handy posture of sophistication in the face of fears over delving any deeper.

Still, as put, “What’s the meaning of life?” *can* seem so *conveniently abstract* that it’s tempting to *try to distract* ourselves from any *meaningful* inquiry and any serious response. We *try* too simply to dismiss it as simply “unanswerable”. It’s not so simple. Yet, the postured meek, shrug with arrogance and rhetorically ask: “Who am I to say?” – meaning: “Who are you to tell me?” But their condescending remark is itself presented as an *answer* to the question. And, it’s a dogmatically *simplistic* “answer”, at that! Besides, the postured explanation leaves the one who strikes that pose, stuck in the fears that prompted the evasion of the issue in the first place. Those anxieties are not resolved.

So, we really can’t duck out of our responsibility to deal with what’s, at least, *meant* by the question of the *meaning* of life. We do ourselves no favor, *trying* to duck out of our responsibility.

We can’t get away with merely *rationalizing* that we have more *practical* or more pressing *personal* problems to contend with than to waste time with some “ivory tower” speculations on “the meaning of life”. Again, even that “ivory tower” expression of dismissal is as much an *answer*, in effect – and by intent – as a response given after rigorous investigation and contemplation.

Well then, instead of using the so-called *practical* or *pragmatic* or *personal* as a way out of facing the question, a merely rationalized refusal to look into the matter of meaning, let’s *make* the question *practical*, *pragmatic* and *personal* in terms of everyday life. Let’s move it from the seemingly esoteric to the conspicuously egoistic.

In fact, that the question of “the meaning of life” can be, as put, *reasonably* faulted as too impersonal, can be a useful *gift*, suggesting that we ask it in more personal terms. If we do ask it in more personal terms, we find that *the most meaningful* way to ask the question about the meaning of life is to ask, “What’s the meaning of *my* life?” “What’s the meaning of *yours*?” This moves it out of the all too *comfortable* sphere of propositions and theory – often quite *conveniently* judged to be so *unanswerable*, so then we’re so *unaccountable* – into the *discomfiting* zone of one’s very own *personal* life where, our everyday personal responses are our inescapably everyday responsibilities. After all, that’s where we *live*, and where our daily *experience of meaning means* so very much to us.

It was on this day, October 11th, in 1954, that Francis Schaeffer, frank proponent of propositional and rational apologetics, wrote in a letter: “Doctrinal rightness [is] important, but only as a starting point to go on into a *living* relationship – and not as an end” in itself. Schaeffer was right. It’s *on the ground*, where we *live*, where “the rubber meets the road” or, as Yeats put reality more poetically, where “Things fall apart [and] the center cannot hold [and] Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”, that meaning of life questions – and answers – must be *lived* out.

So, since *the most meaningful* form of the question on the *meaning of life* is, indeed, to put it most *personally*, let’s ask: “What was your reason for getting up this morning?” “What’s your intent for this very hour?” “What are your plans for the rest of the day?” “What’s your reason for getting up tomorrow morning?” “What’s your reason for getting up every morning for the rest of your life?”

Such reflections shift the focus from what can prompt a *cop-out* to what can *come out* as *your innermost motivation*, the *meaning* of your *everyday life*, evident in your personal plans and priorities. Such reflections shift attention from indifference and from a theory about “some-grand-scheme-of-things” (an often dismissive expression in itself) to one’s *self*, about which we can be so obsessively concerned, as if, for us, *we, ourselves, are the meaning of life*.

What comes to your mind when you hear these questions and contemplations about the *meaning of life, the meaning of your life*? What would come to your mind if, instead of hearing these questions at a Christian retreat, you heard them at *work* or *out with your friends*? Would what comes to your mind be different in the different settings and circumstances? If so, *how* so? If so *why* so?

The first question of the Westminster Catechism asks: “What is the chief end of man?” That question too, as put, can sound *stilted* and *abstract* enough to be self-servingly dismissed. And, in the opinion of some in this thin-skinned generation, even to recite the question requires a “trigger warning” – as it ends in such politically incorrect, and therefore “unsafe”, “male privilege” lingo: “What is the chief end of *man*?”

Well, Facebook already and dogmatically declared the *end* of “man” – as a term to cover its 58 *gender preferences*!

Seriously, more intelligent folks know very well that they can simply update 17th-century conventions of speech to newer conventions of speech, if they *will*, in order to read the *intended*, “humanity” or “people” in place of, “man”, so as to get on with getting to *the point* of the ages-old question being asked, the question that provokes such paltry evasiveness today.

The Westminster question is a *good* question. Though, again and for the same reasons, many prefer to skip any seriously informed consideration of it.

In our postmodern era, the secular, allegedly progressive elite, insist that it’s still a *meaningless* question even if updated with gender-neutrality or inclusivity, since it claims to be referencing some *ultimate* “meaning”. And the elite “know” that there’s no such *ultimate* meaning even while they’re asserting their own version of *ultimate* meaning. Such is the small-mindedness and shaky security of the distraction of denial! So it’s still stuck in what it otherwise dismisses as embarrassingly rationalist categories that, though it would seek to escape, for the life of it, it cannot.

The Westminster question’s rather *abstract form* may not be as accessible or convicting a frame of reference as the more *personal form* of the question that’s asked up front in the

Heidelberg Catechism. And, after all, hearing the question addressed *personally* is the *point* of asking the question in either case.

So, what's the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism? Here it is: "What is *your only comfort* in *life* and *death*?"

Now, that goes right to the heart, doesn't it! My. Only. Comfort. Life. Death. That's a heads-up for *any* generation, not least for our *selfie* generation. It's unavoidably *personal*.

And, in terms of the Catechism, the response that you *get to give* is this: My only *comfort* in life and death is "that I am not my own, but I belong, body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and He has set me free from all the power of evil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him."

I did *not* say that this beautiful, grace-filled response was the "right answer" to the question, did I? I said that *this* was "the response that you *get to give*" – that you are *privileged to give*, if indeed, you *get the point, the truth* in it. The response is rooted in God-given reality.

That question and response, meets you where you are, in your real need, whether or not you're yet altogether aware of your *real* need. You – and all – are certainly fearfully aware of a need for *something* that's missing. By God's grace, this need is *felt*. And, by God's grace, this need is *filled*.

The Heidelberg's more *personal* question and response is, I think, more helpful than the Westminster's brief and abstract question and response, "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Yet both catechisms do present the *meaning* question and response in terms of God's *relationship* with us and our *relationship* with God. Such *relationship* is what we need and it's what is provided.

Getting "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever", as the one catechism says, is surely getting to *glory in Him*, is it not? And, to *glory* in God is to be in utter awe of the Goodness of the unfathomable Love of our Creator, Savior and Lord. Just as it is in the other catechism's greater detail, *getting* "to belong, body and soul, both in life and death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ [who] has *fully paid for all my sins* with his precious blood ... that, indeed, *all things must work together for my salvation* ... and that, by his Holy Spirit he also *assures me of eternal life* and [by his gift *I get to be*] *heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him*".

To glory in the God who is! What amazing privilege! What great comfort! What reassurance throughout the future!

"Hold on!" says something inside your head. How do you know it's true? Maybe it's just all a bunch of wishful thinking and self-delusion. Self-deception run amok! Lots of smart people say it's all now simply out of date.

Well, do you *want* it *not* to be true? Lots of smart people *want* it *not* to be true. And, of course, they have their *self-serving* reasons.

Do you *want* it to be true? Lots of smart people *want* it to be true. They, too, have their *self-serving* reasons.

Listen, whether one *wants* it to be true or false, *cannot make it* true or false, *doesn't make it* true or false. That's not the sort of Truth we're facing. See, the Truth we're facing is not an "it" – so it's off the mark to ask whether "it" is true. The Truth we must face, whether we like it or not, is God, who is Truth, Himself.

So how can we know Truth Himself? A very early Christian, writing to fellow Christians, told them that they "should *not* believe every *spirit*" that comes along preaching what he or she may be calling "truth". John said that we should, "*test* the spirits to *see* whether they are from God, because", he warned in his letter, "Many *false* prophets have gone out into the world." We're not to be gullible; we're to be aware. So, John gave specific pointers on how we're to *recognize* or *discern* the *true* Spirit of God.

Here's what John wrote. "Every teacher who acknowledges that *Jesus the Christ has come in the flesh is from God*, but whoever does *not*, is *not* from God." (I John 4:2)

John can't mean a merely begrudged concession that even *demons* know, in their distress, is descriptively or objectively the case. [Mk 1:21ff] John doesn't mean one's simply granting that, oh yeah, there probably was a teacher named Jesus back there in the 1st-century, but don't buy into all that superstition about his actually rising from the dead – except perhaps, in the fond memories of his friends who dearly missed him.

No. John doesn't refer simply to someone or other with that common old Hebrew name, *Yeshua*, "Jesus". He's referring to *Yeshua Hamashiach*, Jesus Messiah, Jesus, the Christ.

John goes on with further *evidence*: "Dear friends, let's love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been *born* of God and *knows* God. Whoever does *not* love does *not know* God, since *God is love*. And here's how God demonstrated his love among us: He sent his *one and only Son* into the world *that we might live through him*. *This is love*: not that we loved God, but that *he loved us* and sent his Son as an atoning *sacrifice for our sins*. So, dear friends, *since God so loved us, we ought also to love one another*." (I John 4:7-11)

Then, along the lines of Paul's writing about the *Holy Spirit's* bearing witness with *our spirits* that *we are, indeed, children of God* [Rom 8:16], John tells them that, "we know that *we live in him* and *he in us* for He has given us of his Spirit." John then refers to *eyewitness testimony*: "We have *seen* and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be *the Savior of the world*." He says, therefore, "We know and rely on the *love* God has for us. *God is love*. All who *live in love live in God, and God lives in them*. ... [Therefore] *we love, for he loved us first*. Whoever claims to love God yet doesn't love a brother or sister is a liar. For all who fail to love a brother or sister, whom they've seen, cannot love God, whom they haven't seen. He has given us this command: All who love God must love brother and sister, too." (I John 4:1-21)

Is this testimony believable? We've gone to the original sources to find out. Why? Because they're from the time and place of origins, they are from those who gave their lives to witness to these things.

We're back to Anna Warner's, "*Jesus loves me* this I know, for *the Bible tells me so*" and Fanny Crosby's, "To God be the Glory – *great things He hath done, So loved He the world that He gave us His Son, Who yielded His life an atonement for sin, And opened the Life-gate that all may go in*." With them, we're facing the God who acts!

Anna and Fanny went back to the Bible as *we* must do. We go back *to John*, who wrote of "great things God has done": "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we

saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) *To Paul*, who wrote of “great things God has done”: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness’, is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” (II Cor 4:6)

To the writer to Hebrews: Christ Jesus “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His nature, and He upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down and rested at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” (Heb 1:3) “We see Him who was made, for a little while, lower than angels, namely, Jesus, who, because of the suffering of death, is crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might experience death for all of us.” (Heb 2:9)

And, again, *back to Paul*: “All of us who’ve had the veil lifted from our faces can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord, the Spirit, is transforming us more and more into his glorious image.” (II Cor 3:18)

Do you know this truth in your life? Have you found this to be true in your life? Do you rely on this to be true for the remainder of your life? Do you know Truth Who is *your* only sure comfort in life and *your* only sure comfort in death? If so, to God be the glory!

Is He why *you* got up this morning? Will He be why *you* look forward to getting up tomorrow morning? To have yet another day’s adventure with the risen Jesus by your side! To walk and talk and sing and work once more at his side!

One of Anna Warner’s hymns speaks of: “One More Day’s Work for Jesus, One less of life for me! But Heav’n is nearer, and Christ is clearer, than yesterday, to me.”

If life with Jesus is why you looked forward to getting up this morning and why you look forward to getting up tomorrow morning and all the mornings of the rest of your days here in this present world, until you reach that Great Good Morning that’s beyond the troubles of this present world, then, as Paul wrote to Romans, he writes for us: “I appeal to you, brothers, on the most reasonable basis of God’s many mercies, to present your whole selves to God each day, as living sacrifices.” (Rom 12:1)

Paul connects all the truth of God’s love for us with our response of gratitude expressed in our everyday lifestyle. The meaning of life for a Christian is no abstract theory, but the pragmatically real. Life, for a Christian, means one’s whole life lived, in Paul’s *literal* expression, as “the *logical* response to God’s love”. (Rom 12:1)

Paul adds: “Stop allowing yourselves to be *transfixed* by this world’s distracting traditions, prejudices, passing priorities, preoccupations, cultural norms, fads and ideologies. Instead, *be transformed by God’s renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern His will for what makes sense for your life in Christ.” (Rom 12:2) This is *your life in His life, your story in His story*. And it’s all God’s doing by God’s grace.

If this *does* make sense to you, *that’s* by God’s grace. To God be the glory! If you *want* this to make sense to you, *that’s* by God’s grace. To God be the glory! Amen.