

ConnEction2020

EC's 80th *ConnEction* over 40 Summers

“Awakening from Fear to Faith in Christ”

By Ralph Blair

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. He saw they were anxious and as helpless as lost sheep without a shepherd.” (Matt 9:36) Jesus saw what Hebrew Prophets and the Psalmist saw and grieved over, so many centuries earlier: “*All, like sheep, have gone astray. All, have turned to their own way.*” (Isa 53:6; Jer 50:6; Ps 119:176, et al.)

Ever since Eden, it's been humanity's fatal flaw to seek self-centered, yet, self-deceiving and self-defeating, *fantasies*. No outcome matches narrow-minded, egocentric *fantasies*, but we so seldom learn the lesson.

What could be more tragic than being *lost* for *going one's own way*, yet *going on* in that wayward way, *not admitting* to being lost, and *refusing* to change direction! This willful obstinance allows no room for any contrary evidence nor an intervening variable. Thus, nothing changes for the better.

The single, truly significant Intervening Variable in all of our fallen human history was Christ Jesus' compassionately coming to earth, 2,000 years ago, as “the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world”, for, “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, so that, whoever *trusts in him* shall *not perish* but shall have *eternal life.*” (Rev 13:8; John 3:16)

On the night before his crucifixion, after this Lamb of God, in flesh and blood, observed the Passover with his disciples, he went out to the Garden of Gethsemane and his disciples followed him. He told them to pray so they wouldn't fall into temptation. Then, moving a distance away from them, he fell to his knees, and prayed to his Father in deep agony and deeper fidelity.

He knew what he was facing, not only the very most excruciating form of execution ever devised by the Roman Empire, but death on that cross as

the *supreme* Sacrificial Lamb, to make full atonement for sinners. This would entail what we cannot even begin to imagine, disruption of his eternal union with the Father. There on his knees, he prayed: “Father, if it be Your will, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, Your will be done, not mine.”

Then, an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. As he prayed, his sweat was already like drops of blood falling to the ground.

After praying, he rejoined his disciples. Finding them asleep, he asked, “Why are you sleeping? Get up, and pray you won’t yield to temptation.” (Luke 22:39ff)

In those darkest of all days, Jesus bore the wages of sin, death, – *for us*. And after those three days, he was gloriously raised from death – *for us*.

Earlier in his earthly ministry, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “Our Father in heaven: May Your name [*authority*] be honored; may Your Kingdom [*reign*] come; and *may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” (Luke 11:9f) Jesus taught us to pray what he, himself, prayed.

In praying, we approach our heavenly Father with a reassuring reminder, a reality check, that we may put all our requests into God’s wisely loving and omnipotent will and way. We, thus, leave “our way” in the Hands of *God’s Way*. What better assurance could we have that our very *truest* needs will be fulfilled according to God’s truly generous love and omniscient wisdom!

On another of those days of his Incarnation, Jesus was in the home of his friends, Mary and Martha. Mary’s attention was on Jesus’ every word. But Martha was troubling herself with trivia. So, Jesus gently chided Martha for distracting herself with what really didn’t matter. He told her that Mary had made the *wise* choice in attending to his every word.

How is it that *we, too*, can get ourselves so distracted with worrying over matters that don’t *really* matter, even if some matter more than others. But, of those that do matter, we have all the more reason to pay close attention to *Jesus’ words*, now reliably preserved for us to read again and take to heart.

People nowadays, in self-centered, self-delusional self-defense say: “Had *I* been there back then, to *see* him and *hear* him *in person*, *I’d* have paid him the proper attention!” Yeah, yeah. Let’s all get rid of such nonsense in *us*.

As Christians, we have the *abiding Presence* of Christ *with us*, each day and each night. How much do *we* really, readily attend to His abiding Presence?

Peter, writing to those in whom he perceived his own past failures and his own rescue, said: “You were like sheep that had lost their way. But you’ve been brought back to follow the Shepherd of your souls.” (I Pet 2:25)

There’s nothing *outdated* in these details of daily life, nor in the *diagnoses* from these ancient days. The *divine remedy* is every bit as *relevant* today and every bit as *available* for our *receiving* it.

Still, after these twenty centuries, we yet fret and fill up on our fears, our frustrations and our retaliating fury, when things don’t go *our* way. That’s always the tragic trajectory – from self-obsessing images of lurking dangers, to anxiety that follows these projections, and with consequent frustrations over how we can get out from under it all on our own, we vent our anger. Ironically, instead of looking to the Shepherd of our souls, we insist on *our own way of saving ourselves*, and we resort to a pious self-defense that even *we* can’t buy into, and to angry blaming and hostile attack against *whoever* or *whatever*, for, to us, *it really doesn’t matter who or what*.

Then, we reap what we sowed – the predictable retaliation from those we blamed. Denying any responsibility for this sequence into yet more trouble, we pity ourselves as “victims”, losing the opportunity to take responsibility for what *we* brought onto ourselves that was all so very foreseeable. That’s self-righteous sin’s stupidity.

How irrationally self-centered and counter-productive is all of this *self-righteousness*! How tragic is our negligence and refusal of Christ’s gift of *His righteousness* in redemptive exchange for all of *our unrighteousness*!

There are still so many *lost sheep*, stumbling all around in the dark, *all on their own*, or, with *cohorts* and *cronies* gone awry, distracting themselves and each other, neglecting, and refusing to recognize that the Shepherd of their souls came to save them and to bring them safely Home. (Matt 28:20)

Well, forty summers ago, EC was up on the Appalachian Trail, high in the Pennsylvania mountains, at Kirkridge. It was EC’s first of eighty summer retreats over four decades at Kirkridge and at venues all across America.

This was five years after EC's founding to support *the wise integration of an unchosen same-sex orientation with an appropriate same-sex life partner in continuing commitment to live for Christ in everything*. We deduced this goal from Jesus' Golden Rule: "In everything, treat all others as you want to be treated, for *this is basic* to the entire Law and the Prophets." (Matt 7:12)

Most persons, in *their unchosen heterosexual* orientation, value a partner with whom to share their intimate life. Most persons of *same-sex* attraction have the very same need. Christians are called to identify with others, to see *their* needs in *our* needs. Jesus' Golden Rule is thus, the most intuitive of all rules for life together: Extrapolate from *your* needs to recognize *their* needs.

But *all of same-sex orientation* were *judged and rejected* as "*the other*", a deplorable category, based in a dirty trick to prevent empathic identification in Golden Rule terms. It resisted changing of *one's own way* of seeing them, preventing seeing what all have in common in terms of intimate partnership. It was easier to insist that *they change their "disgusting ways"*. Sadly, this view was held by all Fundamentalists and by most evangelicals.

This evangelical resistance was not so surprising, though, in terms of the Golden Rule, it was pathetic. It was particularly pathetic in the prominent, thus, most cautious, of evangelical leadership families with their own same-sex oriented members. Their surnames and institutions are familiar. Most such families have been anything but welcoming, although some, later on, became even affirming. Even without the skittishness of celebrity status, "religious" families could be cruel, especially to their very own. But it was also rough on gays and lesbians reared in non-religious families where no Golden Rule could even be referenced against cruel and rampant prejudice.

It should not be surprising that *same-sex oriented* members of the family include *even parents* as well as sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, and some relatives beyond the nuclear family. This conflicted and conflictingly sad situation for all concerned was another of the many reasons it was necessary to found Evangelicals Concerned.

Having researched the etiology and treatment of homosexuality for my doctoral dissertation and from the biblical, historical and anthropological research in the field, homosexuality as we know it today was *unknown* before the phenomenon of romantic love and limerence. This means that Christians must now re-examine the

church's habituated condemnation of modern homosexual phenomena that it *reads into* the Bible.

In ancient times, for a man to use another man *sexually*, as he'd use a woman, was seen as *contemptuous abuse* of the other man. So, same-sex acts inevitably involved vicious abuse of slaves, prisoners of war and other foreigners. Same-sex rites were also found in some of the pagan religions. But there was no parity status, no romance, in any of these same-sex acts.

So, reading *into* Bible "proof texts" what did not exist in biblical culture, i.e., loving, parity partnerships of persons of unchangeable same-sex orientation, is clearly *not*, "rightly dividing the word of God". (II Tim 2:15)

The men of Sodom, furiously raging at Lot's door, weren't looking for gay dates. They were intent on shaming, by violent rape, those whom they took to be *foreigners*. Ezekiel states plainly: "*Sodom's sin* was its *self-centered arrogance* in its abundance, and its *total unconcern for the poor and needy*." (16:49f) So, it's tragically ironic that, antigay Christians now duplicate the Sodomites' unconcern for "the other", while insisting that *their own* needs in *their own unchosen sexual orientation and partners of choice*, be respected.

My Westminster Seminary professor, Ed Palmer, whom I'd known since college, when I invited him to be our IVCF speaker for Religious Emphasis Week, asked us in seminary: "How can an owl be turned into a porcupine?" His punchline made his point: "By translation!" By incongruous translation, *today's same-sex oriented persons* are mistaken for the violent rapists of old.

From my doctoral research into the *etiology* of homosexuality, I concluded that a simplistic, so-called, "cause", can't be said to be *this* or *that*. From my doctoral research on *treatment* of homosexuality, and contrary to both secular and religious claims, nothing *reverses* homosexual orientation. The conclusions from my mid-1960s doctoral research not only still hold, but are confirmed by some six decades of further research and evidence. There does seem to be more fluidity in *women's* sexual orientation than in that of *men*.

My keynote at 1980's ConnECTION was, "Getting Close: Steps Toward Intimacy". I cited the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 4, noting that, "two are better off than one alone", not only for their safety but, as that old sage puts it, for "sleeping together to keep warm". The talk was meant to help folks do a better job of realistically screening for a committed, long-term meeting of needs for a life of fullest connection and sexual intimacy based in (1) *shared values*, (2) *willingness*

and ability to be a team player, and (3) what's too often the only screening that's done – *involuntary attraction to fascinating otherness* experienced in each person's version of the other.

Wherever there's *fascinating* otherness, however, there's sure to be some *frustrating* otherness, for, the two people are not two peas in a pod. Each can be, as euphemism puts it, “complicated”. So: It's all the more important to screen for *really significant shared values* and *will* and *skill* to be a team player so they're up to working through all the normal challenges of any intimate couple. These guidelines apply to *heterosexual* couples as well.

EC's support of same-sex couples in their search for meeting such needs was *totally rejected* by Fundamentalists and by most evangelical churches. To them, no accommodation could be made to “hell-bound sodomites”.

And, EC's view was *rejected* by most gay lib activists who pushed for “open relationships” and promiscuity. Though gay “couples” may “agree” to foolish arrangements, cultural and clinical evidence and common sense find that, where *parity* is culturally expected, hurt and jealousy easily abound when parity is threatened. Again, the unintended consequences of seeking *one's own way into fantasies* – the other's needs and reality be damned – brokenness, loneliness and worse are the predictable results.

Much of the blame for these irrationally-conceived alternative lifestyles was due to self-righteous rejection of same-sex folks by “polite society” and the loss of better support, indeed, their abandonment, by their own families.

Yet, in the mid-70s, America's major gay lib newspaper, *The Advocate*, did promote our *Homosexual Counseling Journal's* nationwide workshop tour, “Counseling and Homosexuality”, in which I presented the need for stable and faithful same-sex partnerships. *The Advocate* said that we “must be commended for [our] creativity and vision, as well as [our] leadership in the field of counseling and homosexuality.” Later, as I'll note, *The Advocate* positively plugged my booklet, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*.

On March 3, 1975, I was on the first year's 14-city tour of *H CJ* lectures and workshops. Bob Rayburn, founding president of Covenant College and Seminary and an *H CJ* charter subscriber, drove over to Kansas City from St. Louis with a fellow seminary faculty member, to hear my lecture. I'd first met Bob when he gave the 1961 dedication sermon for my hometown's (later PCA) congregation's

new church building in Boardman, a suburb of Youngstown, Ohio. I gave the dedicatory prayer.

Four days after the Kansas City event, Bob wrote to say how glad he was to hear my lecture and workshop and apologized for having to leave early, but his Covenant colleague had duties that night in St. Louis. He hoped we could talk more and he suggested we meet at the end of the month, on March 31, when I'd be speaking in Detroit. He closed by saying, "Every good wish for you and your work. May the Lord bless your witness for Him."

I replied that I'd be hurrying from Detroit to Toledo to visit my family, but that, I'd very much like to talk in the near future. My schedule was tight. In addition to my psychotherapy practice, I had yet eight more cities through May for 1975's tour of "Counseling and Homosexuality" and, I was to speak at the American Psychiatric Association's national convention in California.

On November 2, 1975, Bob flew to New York City in order to talk further. I'd wondered if he might want to try to change my mind on homosexuality. But, during our good conversation at dinner at the old Gov'nor on Madison Avenue, I told him about my idea of starting EC and he endorsed it whole-heartedly. He even suggested that EC be launched, just three months hence, at the 1976 National Association of Evangelicals Convention in Washington.

That's exactly what we did – with some discreetness, for, as I'd discover, there, on the NAE Convention's floor, with a booth of his own, was Guy Charles, the most publicized pusher of the fraudulent "ex-gay" claims.

Three months later, on May 19, 1976, I debated a highly agitated Guy Charles and his black Pentecostal preacher-advocate, B. Sam Hart, on talk radio pioneer Barry Farber's nationwide program.

Guy Charles was finally exposed as a fraud and seducer of young gay men coming to him to become "ex-gay". Fired by his anti-gay Charismatic Episcopal sponsors, he left Virginia for Chicago, and got right back into the gay scene. As those naïve Charismatic Episcopalians had seduced him, he'd seduced naïve young gay men.

In organizing EC, I appointed leaders for 5 regions across America. One was on Billy Graham's staff and he used a pseudonym, as did two of the other four: a gay black CUNY counselor, a gay man raising a family with his wife, and an out gay man. Our fifth regional leader was Leonard Patterson, an associate pastor with

Martin Luther King, Sr., at the legendary Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Leonard was in church on the Sunday a Black Hebrew Israelite murdered Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mother as she played the organ in front of her husband, "Daddy King", who then soon retired.

Ebenezer's new senior pastor, Joseph Roberts, told Leonard that he'd "go far in the ministry", but that he must first get rid of his *white* gay partner who "can't pass as your cousin". Leonard rejected this demeaning demand and was constantly harassed. He and his partner soon left Ebenezer, but they stayed in touch with EC.

On June 23, 1976, Eugenia Price, popular bestselling evangelical author of historical novels and devotional books, especially for women, one of which I'd given to my mother some 20 years before, wrote to me about my booklet, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*. Genie said: "YOUR MATERIAL IS, IN MY OPINION, ON DEAD CENTER. True, true, true. I receive so many booklets and literature on projects of one kind or another, I confess I can't read it all. But I did read yours and am more enthusiastic than these few hastily written (and poorly typed!) lines will convey. Right on, man! Jesus Christ backs you up every step of the way. From my heart (and my mind) I thank you again for sharing with me. The big need in the past has been (in my 'humble-dogmatic' opinion) God's blind people even more than homosexuals. Why set us apart in little villages anyway? Any of us?"

A couple months earlier, again in that major national gay-lib newspaper, *The Advocate* (April 7, 1976), Dean Gengle, the associate editor, wrote this: "*An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality* by Dr. Ralph Blair 'does the job' on Bible-beating fundamentalists. ... Dr. Blair makes a short but powerful case to call every Biblical bluff. ... For people who grew up as I did (with Assemblies of God relatives and a Bible-thumping set of uncles), this pamphlet can bridge the gap between Evangelical theory and practice. It is yet another link in the contemporary chain of change."

These several examples show clearly that, EC, from the start in the mid-1970's, had positive support from both *evangelical* and *gay lib* leaders,

All through church history – including the history of the most *antigay* denominations of the 1970's and 1980's – there'd been so-called "biblical" beliefs that were, much later, confessed to have been *unbiblical*, and the "proof tests" that had been used for so long, were discarded or reinterpreted.

Not long before EC's founding, churches that were now preaching against gay men and lesbians on an allegedly *biblical* basis, preached against *racial integration* on an allegedly *biblical* basis. Earlier, they'd preached an allegedly *biblical basis for slavery*. But over 600,000 Americans died in the Civil War, as *Northern* Christians fought *Southern* Christians to *free the African slaves* that were held in terribly brutal bondage by Southerners.

Not all Christians read the Bible the same way, for not all are hunting up "proof texts" to justify socio-political, economic or moralistic agendas rooted in their self-righteous prejudices.

Well, in 1980, our very first session at our very first EC ConnEction was on Friday evening. NIV's English style advisor, Virginia Mollenkott, was presenting her keynote. Suddenly, loud shattering thunder rolls and strikes of lightning hammered the Lodge as a tremendous downpour gushed into our meeting room from under all of the doors of the surrounding decks.

In all of our rushing around to try to stanch the flooding, some eyebrows were raised in impromptu interpretation of this seeming disapproval from above. But, of course, more than what *we* were about, was going on in those same mountains that evening and under that same turbulent thunderstorm.

Job learned a thing or two about what so many self-appointed assessors don't get: "God's voice thunders wondrously, doing great things *that we can't comprehend*." (Job 37:5)

YAHWEH asked Job a searching question for his and for our meditation: "Who cuts a channel for torrents of rain and makes a way for thunderstorms to water the lonely land where no one lives, to refresh an even desolate land, making that ground sprout with grass?" (Job 38:25ff)

Lonely lives, lived alone, needing to sprout, were on our mountain retreat under Friday night's thunderstorm. By morning, the rains had refreshed us.

And, sure enough, our EC ConnEctions have survived that thunderstorm and much more. In these forty years since then, our EC keynoters have included bestselling authors such as Rosalind Rinker, Charlie Shedd, Kay Linskoog, Lewis B. Smedes, Nicholas Wolterstorff and many other writers. Walt Hearn, of the evangelical American Scientific Affiliation, keynoted. Anderson, Messiah, Nyack, Trinity (Deerfield), Samford, Hope and Calvin College faculty, as well as faculty at Fuller, Beeson, Western, and Northern Baptist seminaries and at the Institute for

Christian Studies in Toronto have keynoted. Wheaton, BJU, Gordon, and Houghton College students, both gay and straight, keynoted. We've had great preaching from Roy Clements and R. Maurice Boyd. Former IVCF, Cru and YFC staff keynoted. Singers and songwriters Cynthia Clawson, Marsha Stevens, Kirk Talley, and Ken Medema have all performed in concert, Tom Key did his role as C. S. Lewis, Ron Drummond performed as Henry Drummond, and screenwriter Todd Komarnicki gave his testimony. Social activists who've keynoted include John F. Alexander and Mark and Joan Olson from *The Other Side*, Nancy Hardesty, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, Mel White, and GCN's founder, Justin Lee. We've heard from *former* "ex-gay" leaders who've confessed to their self-delusions, hoaxes and cover-ups in that damaging movement. And, many parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters keynoted, including Mildred Pearson, a black Pentecostal mother from Brooklyn who'd lost a son to AIDS and who, on route to Kirkridge to keynote our 1989 ConnECtion, told us from the back seat of our car, where she sat with her husband, that they'd lost another son that very morning. She said she knew she couldn't do any more for *her* boys, "Maybe I can help *you boys*."

Some keynoters have come from well-known evangelical families, e.g., Young Life founder Jim Rayburn's son and Bob Rayburn's nephew, a son of Moral Majority leader Ed Dobson, a son of Chuck Smith, Sr., founder of the Calvary Chapel Movement, and a granddaughter of Ruth and Billy Graham.

I've never invited a keynoter back to the same venue, but I've asked some to speak at yet an additional venue across America. I didn't want it said that EC simply recirculated a few supporters whom we'd managed to scrape up.

We've had far more supportive evangelical leaders than we've had slots for keynoters. Of those who were up for keynoting, but, due to scheduling conflicts, serious illness or even death, did not have opportunity to do so were IVCF's President, Stephen A. Hayner, Westmont's philosopher, Bob Wennberg, NIV's OT translation chair and the President of the Evangelical Theological Society, Marten H. Woudstra, Fuller Seminary's Paul King Jewett, Harry R. Boer, editor of *The Reformed Journal*, Gospel song writer Doris Akers of "Sweet, Sweet Spirit", Barbara Johnson of Spatula Ministries and Ray McAfee, the longtime and closest associate of A. W. Tozer.

Well, any worries we had in 1980 can't actually be *relived* now, because it's impossible to *experience* anxiety as it *was felt* before what's since been lived as a *mixed* experience instead of the *unmixed* terror we'd imagined.

Of course, there *were* worries in 1980. Indeed, what drew at least some of our attendees to EC's groundbreaking first retreat was concern over some of what was to be looked into, shared and prayed about on that very weekend.

But we can't *feel* the old fears now, for what we worry ourselves about *is always a fantasy of the future*, the actual experience of which, we can't know ahead of time, but we tell ourselves it's going to be awful. When whatever situation that prompted our fear-filled fantasies actually arrives, if it ever does, it's more workable than what was only imagined, for now, we get to get our hands on something.

So much of what was in our future back in 1980 is, of course, now in our past. We've already *lived* through four decades of *that* "future". The *unmixed* experience that we fantasized and feared in 1980 was *displaced* by the *mixed* experience of our actually *lived* lives. That's *reality!*

Clearly on the *upside* for many, your anxieties and distress prompted you to find some *relief* and *resolution* at our first retreat, and then in the therapy you entered into, and then, in many years of more reasonable thinking, decision making and living. You moved into more serious Christian living and, together with others, into EC's ministry. In your EC involvement, you've grown in your faith and you've helped others to grow in faith.

Nowadays, as always, there are *new*, and some frankly serious dangers that need to be taken into account. That's why we're not all up at that memory-packed Kirkridge Lodge for our 40th year's Eastern ConnECtion, as we'd planned to be. Taking reasonable precautions with one another's welfare during this pandemic, we're engaged in some sensible social distancing. We're apart but, in Christ, we're together.

When Jesus was on earth, he told those around him, and he tells us who read his words: "*Don't worry* about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself." (Matt 6:34) Tomorrow will, indeed, have problems. But, today, we can't get our hands on whatever will be the *actual* situation in the future. It's important for us to do whatever we can do that needs to be done while it's still *today*. And that, itself, is at least some preparation for the future.

Jesus forewarned us to *prepare now* for what will *truly matter* for our future: "Don't be afraid of who or what can destroy only your body, but be in great awe of the One who can destroy *both body and soul*." (Matt 10:28)

Jesus' warning about the futility of *self-imposed worry* based only in one's superficial interpretations, was given *by* the one *of whom* the angel told the shepherds who'd jumped to their fearfully premature conclusions: "Don't be afraid, *because*: I bring you *good* news of *great joy* for *all* people, for to you, is born, this day, in the City of David, a *Savior*, who is *Christ, the Lord*." (Luke 2:10f) That's *not* what the shepherds assumed the sudden appearance of angels meant. Clearly, even *such* very *Good News* can, at first, *terrify* those who jump to unwarranted interpretations and mere speculation.

Recall too, that what *Jesus* said about not worrying was said *by* the one who chose to come to earth as "the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world." (John 1:29) To do so, he willingly suffered what, to us, is really incomprehensible: the strain of his wilderness temptations, the impenetrable ordeal of his struggle in Gethsemane, and those hours of unimaginable physical and spiritual suffering on the cross at Golgotha, loaded down with the sins and the guilt of the world. And for *this*, he came!

Jesus' righteousness crosses out all *our unrighteousness* in his sacrifice of himself for us. *God declares us righteous*. (Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15; Rom 8:33). *God's justifying us* is the Gospel's Truth. (Rom 1:17, 3:25, 5:17)

And, again, what was said about not worrying, was said *by* the one who, through all of his own suffering, relied on the Wise and Loving Heavenly Father. Resurrection and ascension back to the Father followed his own obedience. And, it's from the Father that He'll return to bring *us*, His redeemed, Home to be with Him in the Father's House. This, indeed, is the Good News that replaces all anxiety, depression and anger with the sound Hope and assured Peace in the Lord's Gift of eternal righteousness in Him.

Remember, too, that, so far as not worrying is concerned, we have the witness of the chief persecutor of those earliest Christians, who, on his self-righteously religious way to persecute still more of them, was stopped in his tracks by the blinding presence of the risen Christ's asking him: "Saul, Saul, *why* do you persecute *Me*." (Acts 9:4)

After his soul-shaking conversion to Christ on that road to Damascus, the now redeemed *Christian apostle* Paul, was maliciously persecuted for his own all-out allegiance to Christ. As he told Corinthians, his ordeals were so painful, he'd "despaired of life itself." (II Cor 1:8) He said he'd been "afflicted in every way",

e.g., “persecuted”, “struck down” “repeatedly imprisoned”, “beatings”, “hardships”, “hunger”. (II Cor 1:8)

And after so many learning experiences in suffering, Paul wrote to the Romans: “We know that, in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” And, he added: “Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” (Rom 8:28, 39) *Nothing!*

Later, he’d be *martyred* for his faith in Christ. But he knew that *real Life* was so far *more* and so much *something else*, than *this* life. It was *life in God’s eternal love*.

One crucial point on the *eternal life* that we have in Christ, now and forever, is that, *utterly unlike* what old Greek myths, atheists, skeptics and cynics caricature and deplore as a *never ending, inescapable duration* that one would get sick and tired of, and find *unlivable*, is, that, in the New Testament, *eternal life is with Christ Himself, here and now and forever with the Lord*. Who, among Christ’s gratefully redeemed people, could ever, ever tire of intimate, eternal life in God’s unfathomable Love?

This summer marks our 80th summer ConnEction – counting *all* of our EC ConnEctions across the country through these 40 summers. Whatever else was on our minds up at that first retreat at Kirkridge, we were, indeed, making strides in our *integrating* of same-sex orientation with rationality and seriously biblical Christian faith.

In 1980, I invited Eastern College sociologist Tony Campolo and, as I’ve mentioned, Virginia Mollenkott, to join me as our first retreat’s keynoters.

Tony accepted my invitation. But then, a bit of a blip came up. He told me he’d *not* be able to endorse *same-sex couples*. I told him that, even if he left that out of his talk, it would come up in Q&A, and it would discourage those in same-sex partnership who were just beginning to look into Christian faith. It would also discourage Christians who saw that, at last, they’d be able to integrate their faith in a same-sex partnership with another Christian someday. So, I *disinvited* Tony. In 2016, following Peggy’s good example set in 1993, Tony did keynote our Connection.

Just after I disinvited Tony, I heard from a James S. Tinney, whom I didn’t know. He was an *openly gay, black Pentecostal preacher, editor of a black*

Pentecostal journal, a Nazarene Seminary graduate, and teaching at Howard University. He said he was glad to hear of EC and he offered to speak at our 1980 ConnEction.

There I was, needing *someone* to replace Tony, rather late in the process, and I get an offer from *someone* with such a seemingly appropriate resume! What could go wrong? I invited him to come and share what he had to say.

Now, to set the scene I'm about to recall, as many of you know, during a guest keynoter's talk, the other guest keynoter and I sit *behind* the attendees, on a couple of pillowed sofas, over in a corner of the room.

Well, it was *after* Tinney's Saturday morning keynote and during his Q&A that he launched into his enthusiastic endorsement of *promiscuity* in *gay bath houses*, even by some sort of a rationalized "baptizing" of it all.

A young Asbury College student whom we'd rescued from Guy Charles' sex abuse, whispered to the man beside him: "Ralph just ate his pillow."

My *non-Christian* clients, who were just beginning to look into Christian faith, rigorously pushed back against Tinney's naivete. They'd learned the hard way that such promiscuity not only failed to give them what they were looking for, but it gave them what they weren't looking for.

Oddly, Tinney hadn't anticipated this critical push back and, unprepared to defend himself, he fled the mountain right after Q&A, even skipping lunch.

The following summer, 1981, on this very date, June 5th, the CDC reported on a rare lung infection in five previously healthy gay men in LA. It was Pneumocystis pneumonia! On that same day, some New York City gay men were diagnosed with a very aggressive cancer. Kaposi sarcoma! These reports were frightening. First called, "*The Gay Plague*", it later came to be known as HIV/AIDS. There was *no known cure!* It seemed that nothing lay ahead for gay men but *condemnation, dread* and *immanent death*.

A few of my *non-Christian* clients, now diagnosed with this dreaded new disease, turned from their little Zen altars, self-help guru Louise Hay, and Marianne Williamson's "visualizations" or heretofore religious indifference, to seek my *spiritual* guidance, for they were aware of my EC involvement.

One of them, a high fashion fabric designer, who'd been indifferent to all religion, turned to Christ after his partner, an Emmy winning art deco artist, turned from his Zen altars to Christ following our conversations and his own reading of C. S. Lewis. Just before the designer died, he said to his partner, the artist, "How do they do it without Christ?!" After he passed away, his partner got more involved with EC and asked to share their Christian testimony at EC's Bible study. It was an unforgettably inspiring evening! Not long after that, he, too, was in the nearer presence of their Savior.

By 1995, the U.S. had half a million AIDS cases. 50,000 would die *that* year. And again, surrounded by the sad *presence* of *absences*, yet with confidence of their whereabouts in Christ, we were up at Kirkridge for our 38th ConnECtion, counting our Eastern, Midwestern and Western retreats.

As usual, fear and consequent anger, were overwhelming emotions in those days. So, I keyed on the topic of *Anger*.

I began by noting a promo for New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center in which cartoonist Howard Cruse, who liked to say, he "came out, artistically" in his work on our first issue of the *Homosexual Counseling Journal* in 1974. In the promo, Howard depicts "a gay guy asking a lesbian friend: 'Where's the meeting for people who're mad as hell and aren't going to take it anymore?' She consults the Center's schedule and replies: 'Hm – depends on what night of the week it is.' " Howard's ironic and irenic sense of humor, captured the mood – anxiety driven anger – with *perspective*.

I noted that another friend, gay columnist Bruce Bawer, "rightly objects to the fact that, 'many gay leaders and commentators persist in *encouraging* us to *celebrate rage*.'" A quarter century later, rage is celebrated with newer technologies, so it's amplified and more coordinated – but, still it's just as *unsuccessful*, for it now throws even more gasoline on the flames of fear.

I assured us that, "lesbians and gay men aren't the only ones feeling angry these days". I cited Southern Seminary's Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism's saying: "The whole Christian Right movement feeds off of a theology of resentment." (Kenneth Chafin) I noted that the *Christian Left* and *anti-Christian Left* also feed off of *religious* or *secular* ideologies of *rationalized resentment*, for fear and anger creep across all ideologies.

Anger boils up in *left-wingers* and *right-wingers*, for *all* are *left-wingers* and *all* are *right-wingers*. How so?

All complain: “I’m left out!” They’re not – thank God! Yet, they think they are. So, they’re stressed out. But no one can strut out of stress. So, in spite of their strutting, they’re still anxious and angry.

And everyone’s a right-winger. Everyone claims: “I’m right!” Yet, they fear they aren’t. Thank God, down deep, they know they’re not right. So, they’re defensive. They’re stressed out. So, they, too, try to strut out of stress. Again, no efforts to strut out of stress succeed. All such strutting only fuels their fears and frustration. So, they’re all still anxious and angry.

A few of us recall a “feel-good” mantra from the ‘60s: the self-righteous mantra of a counterfeit reconciliation, “I’m OK, You’re OK”. It was supposed to be the cutting-edge of “self-help”. But it was only a “let’s pretend”, failing to face reality. Now, it’s just a joke. It was always a joke. But that joke has been replaced by another bad joke, the latest in self-righteous “self-help” – virtue signaling for affirmation from those like us.

That ‘60s “OK” now gets framed with “W” and “E”, “W O K E!” WE are the woke! THEY are not! But, “woke” won’t work! In strutting to show we’re “woke”, we keep tripping up over what we’re trying to cover up, our own sensed failure to measure up. And we resent what we imagine to be others’ privilege, but this, too, is mere projection. So, we feel sorry for us and resent them. Of course, the others do it from their side – they feel sorry for themselves and resent us. We feel our feeling; we don’t feel theirs. They feel theirs; they don’t feel ours. What a deadlock! Lacking any adequate empathy for “the other”, we’re stuck in own versions of ourselves with self-centered, self-defeating delusions. And, as with all unwanted feelings, our “solution”, then, is anger. That’ll help?? Again: Woke won’t work!!

Instead of the wisely pragmatic Golden Rule, where we identify with all by seeing them in ourselves and by seeing us in them, “woke” is self-righteous segregation from “them” and no integration with “them”.

*Gerard Alessandrini has a new edition of his *Forbidden Broadway*. It’s his frankly funny poke at “woke”. *The New York Times* raved: he “sticks it to the Great Woke Way!” His new edition has a spoof, *Woke-lahoma!*, and revisions such as, “Oh, what a miserable mornin’!” with staccato grumbles throughout the song, “I’m so angry”, “I’m so angry”, “I’m so angry”.*

It's all so readily relatable. So, lest *we* relate only by relegating *ridiculous wokeness* to *others*, let's be "woke" to *our own* lust for wobbly *wokeness*.

The self-opinions we buy into about *ourselves* are our sense of inadequacy and deficiency. Why else would we be so *defensively* boastful? But our self-opinions are inside our own brain cells; they don't leak out into others' brain cells. Others' brain cells are already clogged up with *their own* measly self-assessments. That's why they, too, boast without believing their boast.

This all adds up to the folly of our fallen human nature, so unable to save ourselves through our own self-righteous self-help schemes. If we'd be even a bit less self-centered and recognize that others have their own versions of us, not ours, and they, too, trip over their own versions of themselves, we'd have a better grasp of the fools *we all are*. And again, that Golden Rule helps here. We'd have an even better grasp on *reality* if we'd admit to not measuring up at far, far deeper, far, far more serious levels and that Jesus measured up, *on our behalf*, in his life and in his death and in the confirming resurrection.

Given the present pandemic, we're rightfully observing social distancing. But, *self-righteous subcultures of rage observe no such social distancing*. Each gets right up in your face and blasts away. *Each* age rages in its own *self-righteousness*. *Self-obsessive* rage has been "all the rage" in every age. It metastasizes, whether just across the room or around the world, in *more* fear, *more* frustration, *more* ferocity. We're surrounded by and in the middle of self-righteous ideological animosity, trying to take over wherever, whenever, whatever, and whoever it can. But it can't!

So, "What the hell's *wrong* with *the world*?" That's such a routinely revealing, yet *useless*, question! Is it asked in *forgetfulness*? No. Is it clueless or careless *inattention*? Certainly not! Indeed, it's a matter of quite *deliberate* and *self-serving*, even *cold-blooded, reaction formation*.

It's an *intentionally rhetorical* question. "What the hell's wrong with the world" is always asked about *others*, i.e., *all* the others, "*the world!*". It's very seldom or *never really* asked of *oneself*. There's too much "me, me, me" to allow *me* to be *honest* with *me*. Indeed, the question is deliberately posed to *deflect* any and all boomeranging onto the questioner. Reference is always to *outsiders*, "the other", "them".

Throughout history, the *honest question* has been ignored and *dishonest answers* have been lies. What's *wrong* with the world is always said to be *them!* Not *us!* *You, not me!* And, *whose* fault is this?

Adam blamed God for giving him Eve, *his* "tempter", yet he was so glad when God first gave her to him. And Eve blamed a snake for being *her* "tempter". Yet, each *readily yielded* to personal temptations sparked by a *fantasy*, a damned substitute for the Creator's revealed love and truth. What has really been *wrong* all along is *common* knowledge to all concerned, evident in psychopathological denial as old and inadequate as fig leaves.

Across this wide world's multiple cultures, there's awareness of something profoundly *wrong with us*, prompting all people groups to try to put their projected gods and goddesses in their debt, to control them and to escape the inevitable consequences of what they sense is wrong with *themselves*.

However, what's really wrong with us requires a *far greater* remedy than a projected god or goddess that we try to manipulate or a virtue signaling of wokeness to those from whom we covet affirmation and esteem. "Woke" won't do, for all are in the deepest need of a truly *Great Awakening!*

And all across church history, God has blessed Great Awakenings – in the ministries of Apostolic, Greek and Latin fathers, and more recently, through Luther, Calvin, the Wesley brothers, John Newton, Jonathan Edwards, Charles G. Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Graham. The great common denominator of all those Great Awakenings is John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever *trusts* in him shall not *perish*, but have *life eternal*."

In this weary and overburdened world of sin that leads to fear, despair and ruin, Jesus' graciously invites us to turn to him. "I will give you rest. Take *my yoke* upon you, learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy. My burden is light." (Matt 11:28ff) *Yoked together* with the loving Son of God, how could it not be easier than trying to struggle through this fallen world by trying to see yourself as "woke" when, the very effort is spawned by your not believing it.

Trying to be "woke" with *self-righteousness* or any mere ideological self-defense can never give us the *real, true righteousness* and *the support* that's found only in being *yoked* with Christ the Savior. Yoked with him, we find our burdens lightened and there's the deepest rest for our deepest selves.

Around A.D. 55, Paul wrote to Romans, alluding to what was behind this world's deepest misery. Putting it plainly, he said: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the evil in us all, for what may be known about God is plain to all. God makes it plain. Since the creation of the world, God's invisible power and His divine nature have been seen in what He's made, so that *all are without excuse*. They're all *aware* of God, but they *refuse to recognize* God. Claiming to be wise, they make fools of themselves. So, God gave them up to their own sinful ways". (Rom 1:18f)

Here, as always, Paul, in no way excludes himself. In a letter to Timothy, he called himself, "the chief of sinners." (I Tim 1:15) To Corinthians, he said: "I am the least of the apostles; I don't even deserve to be called an apostle, for I persecuted God's people." (I Cor 15:9).

Paul goes on to explain what, to many of us, are very familiar passages in his letters. But, sadly, to so many people today, they're totally *unfamiliar*.

Recently, some faithful Christian students attending a secular university here in America, distributed around their campus, the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Guess what! These students were immediately summoned into a disciplinary meeting by university administrators. And, what do you suppose these Christian students were told to bring with them to this emergency disciplinary meeting with the administrators?

They were told to bring the offensive flyer's *author!* So much for the height, breadth and depth of the, oh, so *deliberately ill-educated secular elites!* The refusal to recognize God continues *with a vengeance*.

And this incident was only a *recent* example of the sad truth of Paul's profoundly realistic argument on humanity's awareness of the evil in us all. Why else did the administrators find it so distastefully disturbing? It's also evidence of the illiteracy among the allegedly *educated*, allegedly "woke".

When these university officials were told that this hateful, politically incorrect author was unavailable for their meeting since he was killed for his Christian faith in the 1st century, they were, of course, a bit *embarrassed* and, of course, even *angrier*, but, predictably, they were unrepentant.

"What's wrong with the world?" was a newspaper's query to which G. K. Chesterton replied. As a devout Christian, he got right to the point. He answered with just two words: "*I am.*" His frank response was neither modesty nor an

attempt to be a wise-ass. It was an honest expression of his *self*-awareness. It showed that he knew himself well enough to know *his own part* in what's wrong with the world. And, it's about *our own* part of what's wrong with the world, that *we* have choices to make, to do, at least what *we* can do about *our own* part of "what's wrong with *the world*".

But what's so repeatedly and self-righteously *said* to be *wrong* with the world is, neither *me*, nor *myself* nor *I*. Nor is it even, *us*! It's *them*! Them, *who*? *Doesn't matter*! It's *them*! *Any and all of "them"* will do, in a guilt-ridden pinch, for a sensed need for *denial* and *blame*! Yet, this sensed need for denial and blame, is, itself, the crucial clue: It's *me*! It's *us*! It's *others*, too – but *we* can't behave for *others*, nor can we escape *our* guilt by *blaming others*. We must admit what's wrong with *us* and address *that* as we should.

So, look, since this is, indeed, the case, there's something for *me*, for *you*, for *us*, to do about it. But if, as we try to insist, it's *not* the case, then, there's *nothing you* or *I* or *we* can do about it, except to hopelessly drown in all of our own damned and deadly denial.

What the hell's wrong? *We are*! We're *depraved* and so, *we're in denial*. But that denial is the trademark of our depravity. It shows us that *we do know* that we're *not* what we *pretend* to be, nor are we what we *should* be.

Malcolm Muggeridge, that talented British journalist and agnostic satirist who only later in life, came to the Lord, finally so perceptively observed: "The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality, but at the same time, the most intellectually resisted fact."

Helmut Thielicke, that brilliant Hamburg pastor and theologian who lived under Hitler's hateful, oppressively anti-Semitic and anti-Christian regime, recognized in that horrible experience, that, as he put it so realistically: "The wish to be free of God is the deepest yearning of humanity. It is greater than the yearning for God."

But British essayist and mystery writer, Dorothy L. Sayers, concluded so beautifully in thanksgiving for our rescue in Christ. She said: "God did not abolish the fact of evil; He transformed it. He did not stop the Crucifixion; He rose from the dead."

On May 9, 1945, the day after Nazi Germany signed its final unconditional surrender, Muggeridge wrote in his diary: "We went to church yesterday. The parson said, 'Let us pray for a new world'". St. Mugg was repelled by such

heretical gibberish and replied in his diary: “What a foolish prayer! Better the old prayer for that peace which the world cannot give.”

He was recalling Jesus’ encouraging words to his disciples: “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives peace. So, don’t let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14:27)

How does the world give peace? It does so under threat, and so it’s dicey. It’s to escape further *threat*, at least for now. Each side agrees to a standoff for its own protection, but it’s no substitute for reconciliation and true peace.

That’s not at all the case with the peace that Christ gives to those he died to redeem. His peace is eternal and entirely based in God’s eternal love.

Just a few paragraphs later, in this same Gospel of John, we read Jesus’ further words to prepare his disciples for a hostile world. He said: “When”, not *if*, but, “When this world hates you, keep in mind, it first hated me. *If you belonged to this world*, it would love you as it loves itself. But you don’t belong to this world. I have chosen you out of this world. That’s why this world hates you. If they persecuted me, they’ll persecute you, too.” (John 15:18ff)

A few chapters later, we read of Jesus’ arrest by those of *this* world, and of his being cruelly tortured and crucified. Only after this, do we read of *his victorious and reassuring resurrection* that so transformed his discouraged disciples that they willingly accepting this persecution and death for proclaiming their undying faith in him.

A decade after Muggerridge’s critique of that vicar’s foolish prayer, he noted, in his diary, a conversation he’d just had with a Scottish minister about their upcoming meeting with Billy Graham. Dated June 21, 1954, he says: “If Christianity identifies itself with causes of this world, however enlightened, it is sucked into this world and thereby destroyed.” Mugg knew full well, as a seasoned commentator on worldliness, which he knew full well from his own, long participation in it, that this world’s obsessions, do, indeed, *distract us* from what’s so vitally important, and *can* indeed, *do* indeed, *bury us* in our obsessive oblivion.

Four months later, as editor of *Punch*, the popular old British weekly, Mugg replied in a letter: “Of course I agree with you that every nation to a greater or smaller extent is open to the charge of faithlessness. ... At the same time, I remain impenitently skeptical about the possibility of making new agreements with those

who have systematically broken whole series of former ones.” Such are the insecurities of this world’s peace promises.

He’d learned the lesson Jesus taught: “Look, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, so, be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.” (Matt 10:16) Sadly, all too often, the *hopelessly naïve* are as harmless as snakes in the underbrush and as wise as sitting ducks.

If we’re to be as wise and as harmless as Jesus called us to be, we’ll not fall for being “woke” in the ways of this fallen world, but we’ll be as *truly awake* to what God is doing in this fallen world as any of the multitudes who have come to God through the many *Great Awakenings* with which God has blessed us across the generations.

Fallen human nature! We’re all in it *together*. It’s the largest *identity* group in history. But most are not up for *identifying* with it, choosing to hunker down in their own self-identified, self-righteously separate tribes – whether by race, color, sexual orientation, ideology, political party, etc.

But we’re also all together in another *identity* group, for we’re all *created in God’s image* and this is the *original, basic* identity of all human beings, from the moment of conception on through to the rest of life.

Is the Answer in wokeness or in The Great Awakening? Let’s wake up, while it’s still day, for night is well-nigh.

One day, Jesus and his disciples were walking out of the Temple. The disciples distracted themselves with stones of this impressive structure and directed Jesus’ attention to the stones. Jesus, the Capstone, said: “The time is coming when not one stone will be left standing on another.” (Matt 24:2)

How much do *we* attend to what truly matters? Are *we* as distracted as these early disciples? We, *living* in our *living* Lord’s presence, do distract ourselves with the latest of this or that, that’s here today and gone tomorrow.

These days we’re distracted, and not unreasonably, by the coronavirus. No virus had ever been discovered until the end of the 19th Century, yet millions across the centuries and around the world had been victims of viruses.

Are we as clueless as those millions were as to what’s wrong with *us*, what’s killing *us*? We’re in a fallen, sinful world, coping under limited lifespans for, no

matter whether it's a virus, drug overdose, a stroke, cancer, a car wreck, "natural disaster" or just "old age", the *underlying condition* is, as Paul wrote to Romans, *death-borne sin*. "But", he added, "the free gift of God is *eternal life* in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Romans 6:23) He went on to affirm with the confidence of one who'd met the risen Lord: "I am convinced that *nothing, neither death nor life*, neither angels nor demons, not the present nor the future, nor any powers whatsoever, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38f)

And *who* are "us"? Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way, I know my sheep and they know me. I am willing to die for them. There are *other* sheep which belong to me that are not in *this* sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they *all* will become *one flock* with *one shepherd*." (John 10:14ff) His one flock is, indeed, found all around the world today.

Jesus told a parable in which a Samaritan, despised by Jews, went way out of his way to take good care of a mugging victim, left half dead in the road. Both a Levite and a priest, coming down from Jerusalem, deliberately passed by this victim without giving him any help at all. (Luke 10:30ff)

Remember when Jesus *met* and saw fit to *speak with* an outcast Samaritan woman? (John 4) Given her past, she herself, was rudely rejected by her Samaritan neighbors. So, she found it safest to go to the well to draw water in the heat of the day so she'd avoid them. It was there, at Jacob's Well, that she met a Jew who broke with culture's petty piety and spoke to her.

Jesus offered her the water that would quench her thirst and well up into springs of eternal life, though he'd indicated his awareness of her sordid life that she knew no stranger could have known. So, she ran the risk of telling her judgmental neighbors of her encounter with this Jew. Roused to intense curiosity at such an irregular interaction and revelation, her neighbors ran out to the well to see and hear this Jew for themselves. Then, they, too, were amazed, and exclaimed, "We no longer believe him just because of what you said; now we've heard him for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4:42) In those days, the term, "Savior of the world", was *never* used to reference *a mere mortal*.

Today, we have so much more knowledge and even personal experience of Jesus than those women of Samaria had when they met him as a complete stranger in the

flesh of a Jew. Despite their predisposition and prejudice to distrust any and all Jews, they heard him and saw him for who he really is.

Can we pay better attention and hear him ourselves, and awaken to a faith that really does take this Savior of the world, our risen Lord, much more seriously than we so often do in our everyday lives? If we can – and we *sure can, by God's grace* – it'll be another God-given *great awakening* from *fear* to *faith* in Christ, the incarnation of our Creator and Redeemer.