

## **“Nothing Will Ever Come of This!” Why We Know Better**

by Allan J. McNicol

At the end of this school year it will be forty-five years since I drove up to the University Church parking lot with my worldly possessions packed inside a Buick. I was there because I was freshly minted out of Vanderbilt Graduate School and the parking lot functioned as the entrance to the place where I was about to begin my teaching career in Bible. Now Austin Grad at that time was known as the Biblical Studies Center. It primarily functioned as one of the Bible Chairs at the University of Texas.

Located next to the university the property was once a two-story rooming house! Even after it was freshly renovated in size it did not look especially impressive. Indeed it no longer exists in that form since, like so many different things in the university area, it has succumbed to the wrecking ball.

Nevertheless, it was a pivotal time for me. I still remember quite a bit about that day. After meeting the staff and supporters of the school I began to internalize future hopes. The school with various sorts of interludes had already been around for over fifty years. During that period of time we managed to move across the parking lot! A question was what would we need to do to make faster progress in the next fifty years?

I can't recall exactly my thoughts, but thinking theologically I wasn't exactly discouraged. We know from our story that God doesn't always do things as fast as we like to think he should; and he does think in different ways. The fact that he worked through a wandering wisdom teacher from tiny Nazareth who became the decisive figure of the biblical narrative was, to say the least, unexpected. People in those days had reason to wonder about his ministry and say, "What is this? Can anything come of it?" To this day we overlook how many unlikely situations and settings God chose to fulfill his purposes for humankind. Could this be another of those times?

Most probably I didn't theologize all of that. I was young and excited about the future. But I did realize that the future is always problematic. What would become of all of this?

In retrospect it was a special time. My work was closely tied in with the University. For those who were not there in those days it is difficult to explain how small Austin was at that time. I remember that my sister in Australia came to visit and I took her for a drive to show her downtown. After seeing it she sniffed and said, "Is that all the Capital of Texas is?" No matter! I was enjoying the place and through a series of happy coincidences I came to know a lot of the key figures at the University who contributed greatly to my love of Austin.

There are more stories I can tell about these times. But that is not my purpose today. I sketch this setting to make one point. It centers on the students who took my classes in the University Bible Chair. Before coming to Austin for the previous half-decade I had been involved in studying intensely Bible and Theology. I knew the names and the theological positions of the chief players; and also in the wider world of American life. I was in Chicago during the 1968 tumultuous Democratic Convention and lived in Hartford during the last major urban riot. In short, I was ready to walk into the classroom and enlighten the students about the real meaning of both Bible and the contemporary American scene.

Was I in for a shock! To say the least this was not where the great majority of my students found themselves. In those days most of them at the University were Methodists,

Catholics or Baptists. Their level of Bible knowledge was what they found at their High School Young Life or Sunday School. They had never heard of Von Rad or Bultmann and didn't intend to read them in the future. What they wanted to know was Bible. Why was the Bible important? What did Jesus say and why should we care about him? How could a course like mine give structure and inform daily life? In other words they were traditional believers with conventional moral standards of the time. All of the turmoil of the sixties and changes that were beginning to take place in wider society didn't seem to have affected them one bit. For the most part the churches around campus were full, and as far as they could see that would always remain so.

So I soon left most of the works I studied in graduate seminars out of lectures. I saw what I was doing as a kind of basic catechism on Christianity...What is in the Bible? What is it saying? What is its narrative and why is it important? If I have any legacy from those years it will be that I worked to explain the Christian Story to ordinary people; to succeed in that will be enough. I think that was what we were about in those special years.

Historians no doubt will conclude that based on numbers these were golden years for the school. But it was not because of good planning or the quality of the faculty. As we now can see we were living in a kind of 'Indian Summer.' Religion participated in the great surge of confidence in our major institutions that followed World War II. Even when I came here in the early seventies these factors were still strong in Texas. The Bible Chairs were in the right place at the right time. The influence of 'the Greatest Generation' was still strong.

That realization came back to me this past summer. Patricia and I went to Dallas to attend the funeral of an uncle, a long-time elder in the church in that area. It was one of those events when the remembrances of multiple members of the family were aired and the dear uncle's life was rightly celebrated. But in the midst of this cacophony of praise one small word caught my attention. After serving in the navy during the war this man came home and never left the area again. For the next forty years he worked as a clerk in local-area post offices until his long retirement. All of this time he had the same schedule. He would get up at 3:00 am to prepare to begin the morning shift. First, of course, he would have breakfast at home. Then the Word. As one of the grandchildren related every day, without fail, he could be seen reading his Bible and studying carefully from a set passage. In other words even his grandchildren could see what was most important in his life: faithfulness to the God of the Bible.

In these days when parents are desperate to find ways to preserve keeping conventional societal standards by their children, we could do worse than follow the example of this humble man. I may add, it goes without saying that his children and grandchildren are believers.

So, for the most part, in the early years of my teaching at UT I was privileged in that 'Indian Summer' to teach the children of the greatest generation. It was a blessed time; but it was not to last.

### **Where Are We Today?**

As we all know the cultural changes started in the sixties and seventies had a growing impact. Real changes followed in their wake. Now a generation later as the school grew and now exists as an independent entity, along with these institutional changes, Austin Grad confronts a vastly different cultural situation. Every generation a school must ask itself how to justify its existence. We must ask ourselves what are we doing now that can help our students and like-minded churches confront the contemporary cultural changes? In our case, these changes constitute the fruits of what began in the sixties and seventies.

Let us go back to our founding narrative! As with the spies who went into the land and reported the presence of giants it is no secret that we face some difficult foes. The conventional

analysts of our culture have done a competent job reporting how the authority of the biblical story has lost influence among Western people. Look at our culture. That is obvious. Let me ask that you give careful consideration to the following comment that comes from a European Catholic journalist several decades ago. This is her story.

I grew up in my home church in Cologne. I was satisfied for a little while. After that, I drifted away, like a boat without sail or rudder, driven only by the current. The current was those who were dear to me: my daughter not married at the altar and eventually leaving the church; my unbaptized grandchildren. Many of my friends were not interested anymore. Why did we, in the course of time, turn away from the congregation and from Mass, and from the Bible and prayer, finally from any kind of openly expressed piety at all? Now I drift farther and farther away into emptiness, where there is no one else, not even an echo when I try to call out. I hope that He is; that He will be there at my hour of death and allow me to be with Him in the never and nowhere in which He dwells. At the same time I shudder at the idea that it may be different.<sup>1</sup>

That was Europe under secular progressivism a generation ago. I submit to you this morning that, increasingly, this is Austin, Dallas and Houston today. And don't think it is taking place only outside the church! It hurts me to say this; but, increasingly I believe this seems to be the story for many of the extended families within the church.

D. G. Hart, a contemporary church historian describes it as a sustained rejection of the values that informed the traditional faith communities of past generations. In place of a life built around traditional family, faith and service communities we now have a generation engaged in a frantic search for what Hart calls "an inwardly derived, original and authentic self." "I want to find true self" is the primary question for the millennials we teach. Ethically this plays out in a claim that no one has the right to judge what is truth for me or you. In fact in an Orwellian sense truth is what I feel at any given time. In the midst of this time of solipsism is it any wonder that the number of "nones" continue to pile up in religious listings? If not the greatest, this is one of the most formidable challenges we face as we seek to recruit students from this generation to be our future church leaders.

### **A Word of Hope**

Today I am speaking to many who have spent a lifetime in church service. For years I sat in elders' meetings and quietly wondered where are we going to find fresh leaders who, with a spirit of optimism, can master the strength and enthusiasm to do battle with the giants we face. At Austin Grad we exist to help you in this task. Now retired, I can say we have a competent faculty which understands these things. But let me assert that there are no shortcuts if we are going to meet our responsibilities in these matters.

Recently I heard of a fellowship that openly boasted that of the twenty persons they had on staff, only one had some kind of traditional training from a theological school. This is not an isolated instance. Let me humbly say that the church will be poorly served if it capitulates to the popular trends of the day. Ultimately the only thing we have to offer people is the biblical narrative about God's revelation of Himself and his plans for his people. It has stood the test of

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 317-318. Some slight changes in order for oral delivery.

time. But I can speak from a lifetime of teaching and writing that it is a complicated narrative and, for the most part, it can best be explicated by those who have entered into a disciplined study of it.

Each day as I come to my office I pass a large church that is plastered with signs that feature “grace.” For years I didn’t think too much about it. We are all in favor of grace. But as wonderful a role grace plays in the biblical story it is only part of the biblical narrative. While tying up my preparation for this talk it was Yom Kippur, the day when the Jewish people of God openly confess their sins and penitentially seek forgiveness resolving not to do them again. The apostle Paul, a Jew, who knew a thing or two about grace, reminds us that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jesus “will render to every man according to his works” (Rom 2:6-8). As I said, it is a complicated story. Grace is a big part of it; but given our present society I think a lot of the people who drive by this church hear “cheap grace.” Our culture needs to hear the whole story. We do not need people who are poorly trained fooling around with this narrative in our key teaching positions or in the pulpits of the churches.

But a word of hope. In times of stress we are prone to forget the foundational structures and most important factor in this enterprise; we have a God who does not abandon his people! In the most unpredictable times and in ways that are totally unconventional our narrative tells us, time and time again, that God sustains his people and fulfills his purposes for the creation. That is what the Catholic lady in Europe and many of our millennial children who torment themselves in a vain search for their inner selves miss today. God has shown that he keeps his promises. And on these grounds He hasn’t finished with us yet! The words of the writer to the Hebrews still resound, “Here we have no lasting city; we seek a city that is to come” (Heb 13:14). Our God will bring us home. But as our narrative shows it may not be in exactly the way we anticipate.

A word of reminder: you know the first anniversary has passed since those 21 Coptic Christians were slaughtered on the coast of Libya. As their blood poured into the sea you may recall that place was selected as a sign that the same thing was going to happen for people who named Christ as Redeemer on the other side of the Mediterranean. Narratives matter. Earlier this year I was finishing a manuscript on how God keeps his promises and I couldn’t get this incident and the accompanying pictures in the press out of my mind; and so I concluded my book with the full story about this time. You see there was a postscript to this terrible event. There was another man there: a young African of uncertain origin and religion. The terrorists wanted to know about his religious convictions. He said he didn’t know anything about these Christian people or their faith history. But then after witnessing the whole episode, he blurted out, “Whoever their god is, He is my God.” Even in the face of this terrible event the knowledge and hope of what this faith expresses stands. It is the last word.

People tell us, “Do you really mean to think that a theological school like this can still have an impact on this culture?” Our narrative assures us that stranger things have happened!

AJM/rk

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