

---

***“Ways to the Way”***

John 10:1-10

April 23, 2006

Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

**Dr. Douglas B. Skinner**

---

He was a poster child for teenagers in Southern California in the late 1960's and early 1970's. His hair was long; his jeans were torn, his shirt was tie-dyed, his feet were sandaled, and his eyes were glazed. Getting high was more important to him than going to high school. And so he just sort of drifted through our freshman and sophomore years always sitting on the back row, never cracking a book, never making a contribution, and just barely scraping by. But when we were juniors something remarkable happened.

He showed up one Monday morning at school and there something was different about him. His appearance hadn't really changed all that much; he was still *“hippie chic,”* but his eyes were clearer than we'd ever seen them before, and in his hand he held a Bible. You see, over the weekend he had gotten saved. Those were the days of the Jesus Revolution when there was a mighty move of God among the street people in Southern California. People the traditional church could never have touched; young men and women who had dropped out and turned on to drugs, promiscuity and rock and roll, were suddenly being reached in droves by innovative ministries like Calvary Chapel and the *“JC Light and Power House.”* And he was one of them. His conversion was real.

Oh, he didn't cut his hair and he was still wearing sandals and torn jeans when we graduated from high school together, but I never saw him stoned in class again. In fact, it was in class that I saw the biggest change in him. Instead of dozing on the back row like he had for his first two years of high school, in his last two years he was in the middle of every class discussion, trying to work out the implications of his new found allegiance to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Sure, he could be spiritually clumsy and even foolish about his faith at times, so was I, but there was no doubt about the change of ownership that had taken place in his heart. He had become a Christian. But he was not a Christian like me.

Remember, I was raised in church, traditional church, the *“smells and bells”* high Episcopal church. My life changing encounter with the living God didn't happen on a Hollywood street corner in a marijuana haze, but at a Benedictine monastery during a silent weekend retreat with the scent of incense wafting in the air. In the days of the Jesus Revolution I took excursions into that other Christian world. I listened to the music of Larry Norman and Barry McGuire, I attended Jesus People rallies at the Hollywood Bowl and the Hollywood Palladium, and I spent more than one Friday evening at a Christian

coffeehouse “*rapping*” with some new found friends about Jesus. But it never really “*fit*.” It just wasn’t me.

Now understand, my passion for Jesus Christ was no less intense than theirs, and my experience of salvation was just as real, but my journey was very different from the one they had taken. That didn’t really bother me. What did bother me was the way that my traditional church friends were always voicing suspicions about the sincerity of the faith of those street Christians, and the way that the street Christians that I knew were forever expressing skepticism about the sincerity of the faith of us traditional church folks. I still hear it today, and it still makes me want to scream.

It makes me mad to hear the leaders of other churches call churches like ours “*dead*” just because our style is more traditional and formal than theirs is. We are not “*pathetic*,” “*boring*,” “*lifeless*” or “*irrelevant*” just because we use an organ rather than electric guitars, and sing hymns rather than praise choruses on most Sunday mornings. My momma used to tell me not to judge a book by its cover; but spiritually I find that we do this all the time.

We are so busy making snap judgments about other Christians and churches based on cosmetics that we never get around to knowing what’s in each other’s hearts. I am not a dead Christian just because my heart is moved more consistently by “*Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*” than it is by “*I Could Sing of Your Love Forever*,” and you are not a vital Christian just because your heart responds differently than does mine. Shouldn’t we really be rejoicing in the fact that our hearts are both being moved by an encounter with the living, loving God in Jesus Christ rather than fussing and feuding with each other about the different catalysts that are bringing those encounters about?

This is the “*One Way*” button that I wore in my spiritual childhood. I got it at one of those Jesus People rallies that I attended when I was in high school. It was one of the marks of a Christian in those days. It was supposed to be a button about Jesus, an affirmation of the clear Biblical idea that He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). But what I gradually and painfully discovered was that it was really more about one’s experience of Jesus than it was about Jesus Himself. You see, when I wore this button on the street, the Christians I met there just automatically assumed that it meant that I had a testimony about how Jesus rescued me from the gutter. And when I told them no, that I had come to Christ as an acolyte after I had been confirmed by a Bishop, they dismissed me as a poser. And when I wore it in church, the Christians there recoiled and treated me like I ought to be seated at the children’s table for Thanksgiving dinner. All of them were guilty of the imperialism of experience that says that if you didn’t come to Jesus like I did or relate to Jesus like I do, then you probably don’t know Jesus at all. It’s spiritual hogwash.

The Wesleyan theologian Kenneth Cain Kinghorn in one of his books taught me one of the most important spiritual truths I know. He wrote –

*While Christian conversion does impart new life to every believer, it does not produce identical Christians. God created every person as a unique and special human being. God never gives any two Christians exactly the same conversion experience. Although an individual relationship with Christ remains common to all instances of spiritual*

*regeneration, God customizes a personal encounter for each individual. When we try to force every person into the same religious experience, we fail to honor the uniqueness of persons or the creativity of the Holy Spirit.*

“One Way” means there’s just one Savior. As our Scripture lesson this morning put it, Jesus is the gate through which we pass into life abundant and eternal. He is our point of entry, the provision God has made for our access into His presence. We can hold this truth generously and graciously as we try to do around here, or narrowly and arrogantly as some other Christians unfortunately do, but either way Biblical Christianity clearly teaches there is just *“one God and also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus... who gave Himself as a ransom for all (I Timothy 2:5).*

The Gospel persuades me that anybody who is saved will finally be saved by what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. But I’m also persuaded that Biblically there is not just one way of getting to Jesus Christ as Savior. And that’s what I hear Kenneth Kinghorn saying. The encounter with Jesus Christ is common to all instances of spiritual regeneration, but every saving encounter with Jesus Christ is tailored to the uniqueness of human personality and the creativity of the Holy Spirit. People come to Jesus Christ in a rich variety of ways and then they relate to Jesus Christ in an equally rich variety of ways, and it is both unnecessary and unfortunate to try to restrict God’s saving work in Jesus Christ by our own limited experiences. The door that leads us to God is Jesus Christ, but the doors that lead to Jesus Christ are manifold.

Evangelist Tom Skinner’s clever retort to the traditional evangelistic slogan, “Christ is the Answer!” was to always ask, “So, what’s the question?” And it turns out that Biblically there are a number of questions to which Jesus Christ is the answer.

- ***Are you bound by things that grip and drive and torment you? And do you wish that things could be different? Then Jesus is the answer; and the way to get to Him is through the Deliverance and Transformation Gates.***
- ***Are you battling illness and pain; frantic to find a remedy? Then Jesus is the answer, and the way to get to Him is through the Suffering Gate.***
- ***Have you done things that have left you feeling contaminated and ashamed? Are you overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and haunted by your past? Then the way to Jesus is through the Cleansing and Forgiveness Gates.***
- ***Are you looking for a purpose to your life, something to live for and maybe even to die for? Are you trying to be a leader and make a real difference in the world? Then Jesus is the answer, and the way to get to Him is through the Service, Martyrdom and Leadership Gates.***
- ***Have you fallen out with others – fighting, squabbling, hurting and hating all the time? And do you wish that you could find harmony and***

***unity again? Then Jesus is the answer, and the way to get to Him is through the Peace and Family Gates.***

For the next five weeks of Eastertide we are going to be exploring these different needs that people have, and the effective gates through which they can pass into the presence of Jesus who is the answer. And I can't overemphasize the importance of this sermon series. Strategically, Northway has named need-based evangelism to be our greatest weakness as a church. We know, love and trust Jesus Christ in here, but we're not real good at helping others know, love and trust Him. God needs Northway to become a "gate church" and for each one of us who are members to become "gate people."

It was the great theologian Karl Barth who said that when people come to the church for help "they do not really want to learn more about living: they want to learn more about what is on the farther edge of living --- God" (189). And so our task as a church is and always has been fundamentally spiritual. We are here to help people find God in Jesus Christ. An author I read this week spoke this blessing over a friend, "May all those who are around you belong a little more to God because of you" (Peyriguere 96). And that's what a gate church does.

Similarly, a gate person is somebody who knows that Jesus Christ is the answer to their own need, who can tell you all about the gate that they personally passed through into His presence, and who are now willing to help those who have the same need that they do to find their way into Him. It's the felt need of people that determines which gate they need to be directed to. You are not personally responsible for manning all the gates to Jesus that exist; just the one through which you yourself have already passed.

Nobody has written about this responsibility to be door-keepers or gate people more powerfully than did the late Sam Shoemaker. In fact, he wrote the poem "I Stand by the Door" as his life's mission statement. And in part it reads –

*I stand by the door.  
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out,  
The door is the most important door in the world-  
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.  
There's no use my going way inside, and staying there,  
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,  
Crave to know where the door is.  
And all that so many ever find  
Is only the wall where a door ought to be.  
They creep along the wall like blind people,  
With outstretched, groping hands.  
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,  
Yet they never find it ...  
So I stand by the door.*

*The most tremendous thing in the world  
Is for people to find that door--the door to God.  
The most important thing any person can do  
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,  
And put it on the latch--the latch that only clicks*

*And opens to the person's own touch.  
 People die outside that door, as starving beggars die  
 On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter—  
 Die for want of what is within their grasp.  
 They live, on the other side of it--live because they have not found it.  
 Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,  
 And open it, and walk in, and find Him ...  
 So I stand by the door.*

Members of Northway, will we stand by the door? If we are not committed to taking hold of those groping hands and placing them on the latch that opens them to the saving presence of Christ, God will still love us but I'm not sure that God will be able to use us. But if we will – if we will commit to becoming a gate church and gate people – then there's just no limit to what God in Jesus Christ might do through us.

“One Way” means that there is a Savior who is adequate for any human need. We already know that. We already believe that. Now, are we prepared to act on it? In these weeks between Easter and Pentecost our challenge as a church and as Christians is to decide if we will let God in Jesus Christ use us to bring those who are around us just a little closer to Him because of us? How we answer will determine our future as a church.

## Sources

Barth, Karl. The Word of God and the Word of Man. Peter Smith. 1928.

Driver, John. Understanding the Atonement. Herald Press. 1986.

Miller, Gordon. Leadership Letter. World Vision New Zealand.

*#115 – That Easter Experiment (March/April 1991)*

*# 124 – Reaching Secular People (November/December 1992)*

*#168 – Rediscovering the Ten Gates [1] (September/October 2001)*

*#169 - Rediscovering the Ten Gates [2] (November/December 2001)*

*#170 - Rediscovering the Ten Gates [3] (March/April 2002)*

Peyriguere, Albert. Voice from the Desert. Sheed & Ward. 1967.

Shoemaker, Helen Smith. I Stand by the Door. Word. 1978.