

## **Coming to Christ, Calling to Ministry, and Ministry Convictions**

Coming to Christ. When I was 36 years old, Jesus rescued me and my wife from our very secular and selfish lives. As I look back over those thirty-six years, I see God's tenacious pursuit of me, how God would not let me settle for lesser loves, lesser lights, lesser life. I saw all the ways that I resisted and avoided the pursuing Spirit of God. I was fearful of the reality and the separation that comes with the call of Christ – all those seemingly delicious selfish things that I knew I would have to surrender. But, as I now see, all the good things that I desperately wanted and I feared God would take from me, God wanted to give me.

I now realize how God used my whole “conversion experience” to shape me for ministry. I understand what it is like to be deceived, to think that you are too “something” to need God. I understand the relational carnage that goes along with being wounded and lost. I understand how and why “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). I “get” how people can fill up their lives with noise and activity and alcohol and sex and sports and TV because that emptiness inside is too big and too hungry to face. I want to help people look into their own lives and see how God was seeking them even when they were actively avoiding Him. My heart goes out to people like that because I was like that.

Becoming Part of the Church. Even though my wife and I encountered Jesus outside the church, we soon realized that we needed to be part of one. We joined Second Baptist. At the time, we had no idea what it meant to be a Christian or a good church member. Out of our excitement we volunteered for just about anything. We weren't spiritually mature, but we did run hot. To humble and season us, the Lord guided us into some important shaping experiences. My wife and I taught RA/GA – and that experience will humble anyone! We moved on to teach youth Sunday school for several years. Jamie led SBC's CARITAS program for years and was active on the Mission Council. I coached Upward basketball, led mission trips to South Africa, and started a community Bible study.

In those early Bible study and teaching experiences, I came to appreciate the Baptist tradition of “Bible Freedom” – with every follower of Jesus having both the freedom and responsibility to interpret and apply Scripture according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Early in my faith journey, I was thankful for the wise leadership that I received from clergy and spiritually mature lay leaders, as well as the collected wisdom of tradition and scholars that I received from reading books, commentaries, and academic resources. All those influences helped broaden and season my personal experiences, and they helped me to take hold of the freedom and responsibility to “rightly handl[e] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Outside of Second Baptist, my wife served with inner-city community development and ministry programs, and I became part of a community reconciliation ministry. We were being exposed to injustice, particularly the darkness that surrounds issues of race and class. He was convicting us about these serious Kingdom things, things that we were called to engage but had wrongfully ignored. Along the way, God taught us some significant lessons about doing ministry with people who are not like us.

Because of these experiences, we thought Christ was calling us to live as a part of an incarnational faith community in the east end of our city. Well, we got the “moving east” part right, but God had something more extreme in mind. We were sent to on a corporate expat assignment to live in Shanghai, China.

Moving to Shanghai, China. Living in Shanghai was one of the most significant spiritual experiences of my life. There, we were part of a very healthy and very diverse church. We experienced radical hospitality. Through great teaching and shared practices, our intimacy with God deepened, and we began to know God as Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. For me, my faith and relationship with Christ became less intellectual and more practiced, less predictable and more Spirit-led. I began to understand some of what Paul was saying to the Corinthian church, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (1 Cor. 4:20).

In our Shanghai church, I became an elder and started to preach regularly. I saw what it looks like for church leaders to pray, humbly and fervently and almost desperately, about how to lead and serve the “Bride of Christ.” I saw that God would work through me as I communicated the gospel of the Kingdom, whether from the pulpit or in small group or at a Bible study. I felt the growth that happens only within challenging and loving community. I saw the Holy Spirit work through faithful servants to deliver people from dark patterns and life-defeating strongholds. I wanted everyone to experience what God could do through a healthy church. There, I first began to hear the call of vocational ministry.

While in China, preaching became a particular passion. As I learned from my experiences in Shanghai and here at 2BC, good preaching should be accessible to the spiritually unformed, should rouse the spiritually sleepy, and should create longing in the spiritually lost. Good preaching names the dark realities like I was living in, and it witnesses to the reality of a Savior who lovingly seeks people stranded in those realities. Good preaching should do what my wife did for me when Christ rescued her and she was reaching out to me, it should pull back the veil of this world and offer testimony to the grace, forgiveness, truth, holiness, and love of the God-Who-Really-Is. Good preaching should help people see how God has been pursuing them, help bring about a face-to-face encounter with Christ, or at least capture their imagination so that they might wonder about – or even long for – such an encounter.

My experiences in China helped me appreciate two additional Baptist freedoms. First, I saw first-hand what it looks like for people made in God’s image to suffer because of a lack of “Religious Freedom.” The Chinese government strongly intervened in the religious life of its citizens – actively encouraging them away from religion while monitoring, controlling, and limiting the freedoms of those who wished to practice religion. Whether brutally repressing the minority Muslim Uighurs or dictating the teaching and doctrines of the State-controlled Christian church, the government was interfering in a sacred realm that they should not enter.

At the same time, I came to appreciate the grace and faith that is woven into the Baptist notion of “Soul Freedom.” In the context of our international church, with deeply committed and mature believers from Mennonite, Pentecostal, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Charismatic, and non-denomination traditions who

hailed from every region in the world, the church leaders actively preached, taught, and practiced the reality that each person was accountable to the Triune God without any controlling human creed or confession. While none of the leaders of my international church came from the Baptist tradition, they talked about the “priesthood of all believers” as both a freedom and a responsibility that was to be exercised humbly under the leadership of the Spirit and within a covenant faith community. Given the diversity of backgrounds and faith traditions, it was the healthiest and most Christ-centered church that I have ever experienced.

Returning to the U.S. and Second Baptist. In 2014, we returned home to the U.S., and God called us back to Second Baptist. My ministry call continued to grow and was sharpened by leading *The Well* Core Team, preaching regularly, and serving as a Sunday School teacher. I began to understand that I was not just being called to ministry, I was being called to ministry here at 2BC.

Through my time in China and in those early years of leading the Core Team, I began to see the essential role of Christian community for personal and corporate spiritual formation. In those small group settings, I thought I was merely enjoying the friendship of devoted Christians who were deeply immersed with me in a phatic, transformative experience. But there was more to it. It was not merely good friends following Christ together; in community I was experiencing more of Christ through them. C.S. Lewis, in his essay *The Four Loves*, captures well what I was experiencing:

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. ... Friendship exhibits a glorious “nearness by resemblance” to heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each of us has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are crying “Holy, Holy, Holy” to one another (Isaiah 6:3). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have.”<sup>1</sup>

To be truly transformational, Christian community requires intentional and overt commitment to formation and accountability, which is challenging. This discipline is invasive and exposing, it requires vulnerability and humility. “Community life brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness; the unexpected discovery of the monsters within us.”<sup>2</sup> Despite being wired for genuine community, we have to contend for it in light of the competing desire for “frivolity, possessions, domination, or success ... to be surrounded by approving friends, who will ward off sadness, depression or aggression.”<sup>3</sup> Forming a true experience of togetherness is

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1960), 79-80  
<https://www.ccearlsfield.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/the-four-loves.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 165.

slow and painful work, requiring realistic and earnest commitment. “In the posture of contending, we learn to fight for God’s Kingdom when everything tells us to give up, give in, protect ourselves, and live what’s comfortable.”<sup>4</sup>

Those experiences have shaped my vision for the church and discipleship. Following Jesus is fully individual and fully communal – it is the “both/and” of worship, discipleship, and mission. Thus, in addition to our existing Sunday School and Bible Study offerings, I believe that 2BC church needs a vibrant, in-home small group ministry to provide the viral Christian community for which so many of our people have expressed a deep desire. I want to lead and participate in that effort.

Call to Vocational Ministry. In January 2019, as I was concluding my morning devotional at work, I wrote in my prayer journal, “*Lord, if I am supposed to be someplace else, doing something else, please make that very clear to me.*” A week later, the company eliminated my entire department. God answered my prayer, though not exactly in the way that I imagined. I was forced into a season of prayer, reflection, and discernment – God had me right where he wanted me.

At the suggestion of John Chandler, I enrolled at Fuller Theological Seminary as a means of refining my sense of calling to vocational ministry. Fuller Seminary has been another significant source of challenge and confirmation. In my first class, we delved deeply into the concept of “calling.” I recall reading, and resonating with, these words, “If the God who made us has figured out something we are supposed to do, however – something that fits how we were made, so that doing it will enable us to glorify God, serve others, and be most richly ourselves – then life stops seeming so empty; my story has meaning as part of a larger story ultimately shaped by God.”<sup>5</sup> Through this class, my sense of call started to eclipse my fear of the profound change that would be required to answer it. Even as I continued to discern, I was consistently reminded that my primary call would always be to Christ himself. “First and foremost we are called to *Someone* (God), not to *something* (such as motherhood, ministry, politics, or teaching) or to *somewhere* (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia).”<sup>6</sup>

My classwork at Fuller also helped make sense of my previous mission experiences and refine my understanding of the church’s identity and purpose. One resource recast my sense of the church’s calling by observing that “The church is the sign, foretaste, instrument and witness of the kingdom of God. The church is the primary means through which God loves the world.”<sup>7</sup> The church is God’s mission to the world, continuing the very mission of Christ. Thus, rather than emphasizing human agency to devise strategies or create programs, the “church is called and sent to participate in

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Huckins and Rob Yackley, *Thin Places: 6 Postures for Creating & Practicing Missional Community* (Kansas City: The House Studio, 2012), 88.

<sup>5</sup> William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 2005), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 27.

God's mission in the world. The responsibility of the church is to discern where and how this mission is unfolding."<sup>8</sup> These concepts have been reorienting and clarifying to me regarding how to participate and lead the missional expression of 2BC.

The missional call to local congregational discernment also makes me appreciate the Baptist concept of "Church Freedom." Second Baptist is free under the Lordship of Christ and leading of the Holy Spirit to determine our membership, leadership, practice, and missional call. While we can and should enter into fellowship and partnerships with other churches and groups, at all times we are free to follow the leading of the Spirit and the word of God to follow faithfully after Christ. By exercising this kind of freedom, we have engaged in or continued with impactful activities with CrossOver Clinic, Bridging RVA, Little Hands, ForRichmond, CHAT, ReEstablish Richmond, Comfort Cases, and others as a witness to the love and service of Christ.

The Lord used all the above experiences of the Spirit to prepare me for where I am now. I came to faith at 2BC, and I love the people here. Christ has developed my walk with him through serving here, inner-city ministry, mission trips to South Africa, and serving in a church in China. I have seen how a healthy and vibrant church – one that cherishes Christ and loves and prays and serves and battles – can be the instrument that God uses to change lives now and for eternity. God is moving at 2BC, and I rejoice to be a part of that!

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<sup>8</sup> Branson and Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches*, 179 (quoting Craig Van Gelder).