

The Start of a Shared Journey

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As a baby boomer, my journey of faith began in a large, mainline church whose Sunday School curriculum was heavily steeped in the Social Gospel. The closest thing to evangelism that my peers and I experienced was the Friday Night "Service at the Cross" at a nearby church camp. Sparse were the recollections of any church member to anything approaching revival in that congregation. Its aged matriarch once confided in my mother, "I can't remember the last time someone was saved in this church." It was in such a faith environment that my spiritual formation began.

I had an experience of God's calling upon my life one summer at church camp; predictably, as one can imagine, it was on a Friday night. I was fully aware of medical issues that had challenged my very survival during my first years of life. However, it wasn't until that service that I appreciated the magnitude of God's intervention in my past. For the first time, my mother's admonition that "He has a special purpose for your life" resonated in my spirit. The calling to serve Him and those with whom He would entrust me was unmistakable.

I firmly believe that the years since that "Service at the Cross" have been an extended season of preparation for the phase of my ministry that God has set before me now. I can't discount the fruitful years of ministry that I have humbly experienced or His faithful servants with whom I have had the privilege to walk alongside. However, as I begin the process of formalizing my doctoral dissertation, I am struck by an awkward dichotomy in modern-day Christianity with which I feel challenged to address.

At one extreme of the Christian experience is the understanding of faith and its practice epitomized by the mainline church of my childhood. The Social Gospel was at the heart of that congregation's identity and ministry. Only in retrospect would I appreciate that it also permeated the professional education I received from a seminary which did not offer a single course in evangelism. In response to that realization, I chose to pursue post-graduate studies at a seminary whose philosophy of ministry is permeated in evangelistic fervor.

Both extremes have influenced my journey of faith in a manner that prompts me to reexamine the faith and practice of previous generations of American Christians, understand how societal influences have created the modern-day dichotomy, and propose how we can reclaim an appreciation of social action and evangelism as parts of a whole, rather than separate expressions, of 21st century American Christianity.

This is the challenge I lay before us as we begin a shared journey of faith that strives to reflect the fullness of the life, example, and teachings of our Lord. I look forward to this journey and our discussions along the way!