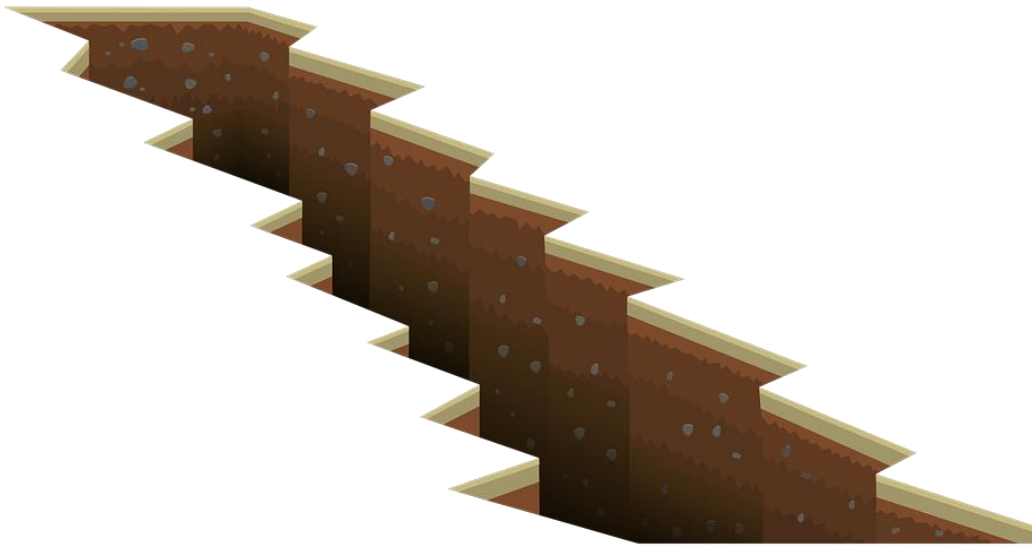


Escaping



the Divide

A Memoir
By
Carla Pustina

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Dedication:

To my dear husband, Karl, who has stood by me steadfast and strong - my great support - through every winding road I've sought the Lord through. The Lord has truly knit us together through this journey of glory and grit. I love you dearly.

August 6, 2024

Preface

This manuscript came out of an effort to write a three-minute testimony. In that exercise I discovered there were parts of my spiritual journey that I would much rather not mention. As I gave this further thought, I realized that I learned my most valuable lessons from the part of my story that I wanted to ignore. And so, the story must be told.

Introduction

Early on in my Catholic Christian education, it became glaringly obvious to me that being a saint was going to be out of my reach.

How heartbreaking it is for a young child to come to this conclusion – that ultimately pleasing God is out of her reach and she may as well lower her expectations in life right now and face the facts.

When in reality, God calls everyone who believes in Him a saint. There are no limitations on one who has put her faith in Jesus Christ, because she is now identified with Him. When God the Father looks at her, he sees His Son in her. I wonder what trajectory my life would have taken if I had known this most precious truth early on.

Chapter One: The Divide from childhood

Crying is stupid – skinned knee.

I grew up on a dairy farm in rural Wisconsin, the third of three girls born in three years. We moved onto the farm when I was four years old and lived in the farmhouse my mom had been raised in since she was 12 years old. Dad built a new house for us, and we welcomed my baby brother, all before I turned five. (Another sister would arrive 8 years later.)

A memory that has stayed with me from when I was approximately 4 years old is skinning my knee on the concrete sidewalk outside of the old farmhouse we lived in. I remember being alone outside when it happened and crying while holding my knee, looking at the blood coming from the torn skin and thinking crying is stupid. It doesn't really accomplish anything. I don't really need to cry. No one is here to listen anyway.

A major event that occurred when I was four is my hospitalization and near death from pneumonia. Afterwards it was discovered that I had asthma, and I often suffered, struggling to breathe. I took allergy shots for years and fondly remember the trips to Madison to the allergy specialist with my mom and grandma. Although I didn't get much of a word in edgewise, I enjoyed the extra attention I got on these excursions and always had an appetite for dining out at the Drive-in on the way home.

Another memory is the death of my four-year-old cousin, David, when I was five years old. The son of my mom's sister, he lived just a few miles down the road to town from us. He had been playing with matches while his dad was out in the barn milking cows. The house caught fire, and he hid under the bed while the house was burning. With the help of a neighbor, they were able to retrieve him from the burning house, but he died of smoke inhalation.

I remember the gloom and sadness that seemed to settle over us all and seeing my dad wipe away tears at the funeral. It's only from the vantage point I stand now, having grandchildren, that I see how close bonds form at such a young age. And how truly heartbreaking it must have been to know that I would never be able to see or play with my cousin again.

Most of my days were spent playing in the sunshine with my little brother in the sandbox, building roads and driving machinery. But also making mud pies and all kinds of other goodies out of the dirt. Dealing with asthma led to some privileges for me. I was exempted from the duties of outside barn chores for several years and was given responsibilities in the house instead. I developed a love of reading and enjoyed trips to the library to pick out new books.

I have a memory as a fourth grader, standing in the school bathroom and vehemently arguing with a school mate for the existence of Santa Claus. It was beyond my comprehension that my parents would tell me something that wasn't true and at that point I would have staked my life on it. I don't even remember when it dawned on me that my conviction was misplaced, but I'm sure it was soon after this. However, I do remember my fierce conviction and trust in my parents at that time in my life.

In school I did fine except in the subject of recess. Because of my asthma problems I was discouraged from running and I grew into a very tall, thin, gangly adolescent. My body type/skill set was not appreciated when choosing teams for Red Rover or Kickball. And I usually found myself with the last two or three other girls being picked. Being the last one was the most feared. The fear of being alone: divided. So of course, in eighth grade I was skipped over for cheerleading and the basketball team which I nonchalantly pretended to not care about. Dark clouds were beginning to form to set the stage for high school.

Chapter Two: The Divide from my parents -

What ugly forces combine with the insecurity of a young girl growing into womanhood that brings her to such a place as this?

I remember looking in the mirror one day and telling myself, 'Don't smile because my smile is ugly'. Although in middle school my sister and I would gather with family friends in the barn and talk about how we would never do drugs and couldn't imagine how anyone would want to do such a thing, by my freshman year we were smoking marijuana in the barn after chores. CCD (Catechism) classes were another opportunity for me to get to town, and then skip out to smoke pot with my friends. In high school I would slip out my bedroom window in the night, having arranged for a friend to pick me up at the end of the driveway to drive me to a party.

Twice during high school, I didn't come home for days. The last time did not end well and I wound up estranged from my parents, living with my boyfriend's family and in trouble.

In these years of my risky behavior, I still had the conviction to save myself for marriage. And I credit the desperate prayers of my parents for never being harmed. Eventually I arrived at a point where I did not care anymore. My desire was to hurt my parents, not realizing I was hurting myself. I didn't care about anything anymore at that point in my life.

While his parents were on vacation, it became very obvious to me that the boyfriend and I were not compatible and I eventually came back home in the spring, humbled and begging for forgiveness.

Chapter Three: The Divide from the religion of my upbringing

I grew up going to church six days a week as the Catholic school day began with a morning church service. Our family was faithfully in church every Sunday as well and my siblings and I went through the festive occasions associated with growing up Catholic: baptism, first communion, graduation from 8th grade.

It happened that guitar lessons were offered through the Catholic school when I was in fourth grade and mom gave me permission to sign up for lessons. She had saved and bought herself a guitar when she was 12 years old and still had the steel string guitar. The strings cut into my fingers and it was sorely out of tune.

One day, soon after I signed up for lessons, mom surprised me with a new guitar when I came home from school. I was thrilled and composed a little musical number that first evening while alone with my new guitar while everyone was out doing chores.

During my middle school years a new 7th grade teacher came on board who also played guitar. She was very influential at this point in my life as she coached me and my girlfriends to lead worship during the church services. This was an important time in the development of my ability to play and sing and my confidence grew through this experience. I took lessons for four years and though not very studious, I discovered that I had an 'ear' for music.

Though for the most part unimpressed with the Catholic church service, leading worship with guitar did have an impact on me as the songs we sang had a degree of life to them not found in the hymns I was so used to. I remember moments of sincerity as I contemplated that God really was listening.

When I was in high school my dad became disillusioned with the Catholic church after a stint on the church board. I remember a particularly odd occasion. My dad received a phone call inviting us all to dinner at the home of the priest. I remember our family getting ready and driving to town, and then waiting

and waiting for the parsonage door to open. But no one ever answered the door to let us in. It was something we never asked questions or talked about, and I never knew if it was a prank by the priest or a person on the church board. I never did find out exactly what it was that led my dad away from the Catholic church, but it was a pretty big deal in those days to walk away from it.

As a senior in high school, I found out I had enough credits to graduate before my last semester and was thrilled to be done. My thought was, why would anyone stay here if they didn't have to? A year later I met my future husband and the following year he proposed. I called the priest to ask if he would perform the marriage outside at my folk's farm. He told me that I had to get married in the church building, and if I didn't, I would be excommunicated. Something deep inside me told me this is ridiculous, and we found another local minister to officiate our wedding. Thus ended my relationship with the Catholic church*.

**Although no longer practicing the Catholic faith, I have enjoyed rich fellowship with friends who are practicing Catholics. It is a sign of maturity when we can fellowship together in open dialogue, agreeing to disagree on minor points as we focus on our common unity in Jesus Christ.*

Chapter Four: The Divide from the world

A Slave to the Law - Into the Worldwide Church of God.

When I met my husband, we both had a general belief in God. He regularly read his bible, and I was impressed by that.

After we married, I began reading a magazine called the Plain Truth, put out by the Worldwide Church of God. Now in my mid-twenties, I became very determined to know the truth about God. I decided that if God existed, he would guide me to know him. I remember sitting down with a Book of Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness Book, a publication from the WWCG called "Which Day is the Christian Sabbath?" and the bible. I was drawn to the Sabbath book and eventually started meeting with this group of Christians.

This group taught that because they observed the Old Testament holy days and Saturday Sabbath, God was pleased with them and revealed "truth" to them. They taught that they alone were the 'true church' and every other church was deceived.

After gathering with this group for several years, the leader of the group miraculously came to the realization that Jesus Christ was actually the Truth, and our focus on keeping the law needed to move to acknowledging Jesus Christ and his saving work on our behalf. This was revolutionary and soon after I began to realize I could find a church that was closer to home.

However, I loved the people I had fellowshiped with for the last several years and didn't want to part with them. That year all the roads accommodating my ninety-minute drive to church were closed due to bridge repairs and I couldn't get to the meetings. As in my departure from the Catholic church, circumstances made it very clear that it was time to move on.

Chapter Five: Back into the World

Freedom in Christ

I learned about the Evangelical Free church near me through a coworker who I had worked with years earlier. Her son was killed in a car accident, and I reconnected with her at his funeral.

After attending church with her for several years, this same friend asked me to take her to a nondenominational church that had been planted in my hometown (she didn't drive).

While accompanying her to visit that church, I felt very drawn to inquire about volunteering on the worship team. But I had grown very close to the Pastor and his wife at the evangelical church. I was torn because I feared my love for music might be stronger than my love for God and I wanted to be very careful that I was following God and not my own desire.

God removed the burden of this decision from me in a remarkable way. At that time, I had cleared out a spot in my closet for prayer and the Lord made it very clear what to do when I asked Him and waited. The scripture "submit to your husband as to the Lord" came very clearly through my mind. I knew God was telling me to see what my husband thought and let him decide.

I was very doubtful that my husband would think this was a good idea. Leading worship was quite a huge commitment requiring a midweek rehearsal and several hours early Sunday morning as well. (And putting this decision in my husband's hands was a bit scary!) But he encouraged me to do it. He told me he thought it would be a good experience for me.

A Different Kind of Bondage

Therefore, I became part of church number four and after several years volunteering on the worship team, I was hired as the director of the worship ministry.

I have an unusually distinct memory of a conversation with an elderly gentleman who attended. He asked me why there are so many denominations and divisions in the church. As an “expert” staff member, my reply was that different personalities tend to gravitate to different worship styles and doctrines. He was not satisfied with my answer and left me with the same question. Why all these denominations?

During this time, I began to feel very dissatisfied with my relationship with God. I thought of the early years when I was getting to know God and how exciting those years were and how delighted I was with God.

Over time I had been listening to teaching that it was my duty (the Christian’s Law) to spend time reading my bible and praying, and if I wasn’t accomplishing enough, then I was disappointing God.

A major part of our weekly staff meeting was comprised of evaluating our spiritual gauge, based upon how much time we spent reading our bible and praying. The only metric for evaluating ourselves was checking off a list of duties. Type A personality thrived in this environment. I did not. My relationship with God became clouded with guilt.

Chapter Six: Back Out of the World – Déjà vu

God rescued me by leading me to a book called Reimagining Church by Frank Viola. This book spoke to my heart about the natural habitat of a Christian is being in community. Face to face speaking Jesus Christ, experiencing him together and sharing the journey of faith with one another.

As we share the burden of walking this earth as vessels holding the hidden Treasure of Jesus Christ in our hearts: We need each other! We know Jesus vertically in our private prayer life. But we also know him horizontally through our brothers and sisters in Christ as the Lord speaks to us through each other.

This was revolutionary! As a church staff member, I had become isolated from the congregation as people tend to put leaders on a pedestal. Also, my relationship with God became indistinguishable from my job, it became very hard to separate the two.

As I was learning these new revelations, the Lord led me out of the church I had been working at as worship leader and into a new role as office manager at the Methodist church in town. There were two requirements for the person they hired: a mature Christian, and someone who did not attend their church. I fit both these requirements well as I came to understand God was leading me out of what I learned to call “Institutional” church. I learned that I had left the institution and now I was on the outside.

I felt like I had learned a rare secret. And I was hesitant to tell my Christian friends as I feared I would be guilty of stealing sheep, or they would just think I was crazy. I often had feelings of déjà vu from the days I was driving 90 minutes to church and keeping the Saturday Sabbath. I remember asking the Lord, is this really what you want for me? Again?

Chapter Seven: Escaping the Divide

As time went on, I began to long for community and experienced fleeting moments of it with other Christians as we met sporadically, trying to grasp just what we were to do when we gathered together. But even gathering outside of the institution, remnants of sectarianism were alive and well as the idea that we had become part of a superior way to meet was somewhat present.

Eventually the Lord led me to another author named Henry Hon. His books focus on the oneness of the body of Christ and how God's goal is that every member of his body come to know we are part of each other in the one body of Christ.

Jesus Christ cannot be divided and although we may see what appear to be divisions in Christ's body, God does not recognize these divisions. We do not have to identify ourselves with any particular group. No denomination. No institution or non-institution. If we choose to attend a church to receive teaching, we are free to do so. But every believer's identity is in Christ alone. And if anything is interfering with that, it is imperative that we identify it and refuse it.

And it's imperative that we welcome each other in fellowship – inside and especially outside of the structure of a worship service. We must know one another in Christ TOGETHER. We are family. We are one body. We are members of Christ! How incredible.

This is the final frontier! This is what God has been after since the day he began to create. It is time for the body of Christ to come alive to this reality. Oh that every member of His body will see for themselves the oneness of the Body of Christ and how we are individually members of one another in Christ. Let's encourage one another in this fantastic reality! Let us "break bread in our homes and eat together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:4-6), honoring our Lord Jesus Christ, remembering Him together and acknowledging His presence within us and our reality as members of His body.

May the Lord's prayer in John 17:20-21 be fulfilled: "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us SO THAT THE WORLD WILL BELIEVE YOU SENT ME."

For Further Study:

Hon, Henry. *One Truth: Liberating-Nourishing-Unifying*. Coppell, TX: One Body Life.

Hon, Henry. *One Ekklesia – The Vision and Practice of God’s Eternal Purpose*. Coppell, TX: One Body Life.

Hon, Henry. *One Life & Glory – Miraculously Normal Living and Service*. Coppell, TX: One Body Life.

Viola, Frank. *Reimagining Church*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

Zens, Jon. *58 to 0 – How Christ Leads through the One Anothers*. Lincoln, NE: Ekklesia Press.

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