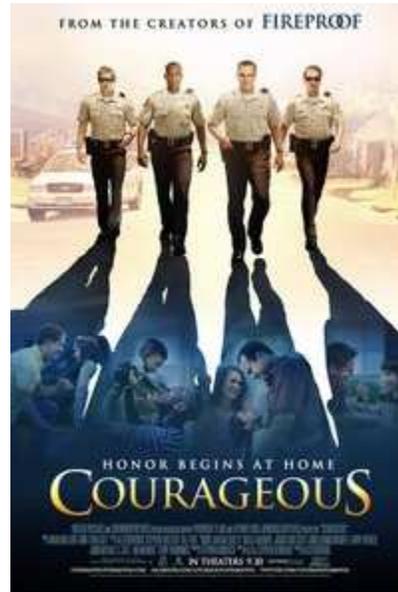


Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

November 19 2011: Courageous

Last night, while Faith was slaving away at her school drama rehearsal, Jerri and I went to a different expression of cultural engagement by the Christian community - the latest Sherwood Baptist Church movie, [Courageous](#) [1]. Of course I had heard about this movie, and read the reviews, and already had my opinion settled: "another preachy Christian movie, and about dashing muscular men like firefighters and policemen. Why is it never ordinary guys? Where are the movies about engineers?" But I went with Jerri to see it anyways.



Yes, it was a bit heavy on the preaching. Yes, it had its policemen to justify the action, with foot chases and gun battles and drug busts. No, there were no engineers (although a main character was a working man). And it was *very* Southern. I'd bet I could make an argument that movies carry a taste of the culture that produced them. Most movies are made in liberal, affluent areas like Los Angeles and New York, and they usually have a whiff of that in the background. Same goes for the national television shows. Westerns made in Old Tucson or Mescal have a faint Arizona feel in spite of the Hollywood actors, and it's more than just sand and sagebrush. Movies made by Sherwood in the Atlanta area are pretty strong with it, including the accents of the actors, the color of the sky, the buildings and trees and sports and all the background setting - you can almost feel the humidity. So just from this perspective, of being a change from the usual Hollywood / Manhattan fare, it was refreshing.

It was also thought-provoking. Not so much from the preachiness. I guess Sherwood and the Kendrick brothers feel an obligation to not pass up an opportunity to preach; I think it would be better to present a good product with a strong message and let the Spirit follow up on the viewers (should there be any who are not already church-going

Christians). No, not the preaching; certainly the main theme on fatherhood.

This theme starts with the statistics about fatherless children and crime, moves on into personal testimonies and experiences of the impact of uninvolved fathers, and ends with the resolution to be godly fathers. I note with approval that the courageousthemovie.com website provides a link to resources for fathers willing to stand up and say "I will". However, the key feature of this resolution aspect in the film is the accountability group that the main characters form on their own. This is the part that I found the most thought-provoking.

First, they do it on their own without any help or involvement from their church. Note that this film is from Georgia, deep in the Bible Belt. Church culture is part of the landscape. Most of the characters in this movie (all but one, actually) claim at least church membership, if not an active relationship with Christ. And, of course, *the movie is produced by a church*. Yet outside of a funeral and a brief conference in the pastor's office, the only role of the characters' church is to allow them to deliver an emotion-stirring speech during the Sunday morning "worship" service. In other words, the church *does nothing intentional* for these men in putting before them the challenge of being godly fathers and setting them up in an accountability group. The main character comes up with the aspects of godly manhood from his own, personal Bible study. Granted, he doesn't embark on this study without the guidance he takes from the pastor's office, but that's the only point at which the pastor does anything. Furthermore, when the men are addressing the church on Sunday morning, it is strictly an emotional appeal without any structure - again, the church has no plan. The church congratulates these men on their commitment and what they are doing, but there is no intent to do anything more. It is clear they are content with their fancy auditorium and their big choir with robes and the orchestra and the pastor who has kindly surrendered his usual sermon time. The message is, *the church is irrelevant*. Or, to be more precise, the accountability group is The Church, and the "church" is an expression of traditional Christian culture and little more.

Second, they do it because they are serious about their commitment to God. The main character does the Bible study on godly manhood in response to the death of his daughter and the awareness that he has a poor relationship with his son. Up to now, he has been a cultural Christian, going to church services on Sunday morning and acknowledging that he is a Christian (which is relatively easy, since most of the people he is around are the same). But now he realizes that,

for the sake of his wife and son, he needs to take the Biblical instructions for men seriously, he drafts the resolution and asks his buddies to hold him accountable for keeping it. When the other men see that he is serious and that the resolution is an answer to their own questions about being men and fathers, they undertake it as well. When their wives discover what they are doing, they encourage the men to formalize their vows and mark them with a ceremony. They hang their framed, signed resolutions on the walls in their homes as a testimony to their wives and children, inviting them as well to hold them accountable.

To some extent, this calls to mind the Promise Keepers movement a while back, which challenged men to take up the Seven Promises. These were serious promises, and lots of men "signed up" to observe them, but I gathered that this was mostly an emotional decision coming out of a stirring PK event with thousands of men and charismatic VIP speakers meeting in a sports stadium. But because it was based on emotion rather than an act of the will, there was really no serious attempt to follow through. I've seen this so many times at youth events that I have come to reject the entire manipulative approach as flawed and ineffective. It takes more than this. It takes a cool-minded, serious, intelligent acceptance of a commitment and then seeking a context of support (an accountability group) for help in keeping it.

Third, the accountability is real, and has real consequences. After making their commitment, each man sets about carrying out the commitment he has made. The two older men start rebuilding their relationships with their sons. The newcomer takes his daughter on a "date" for some serious talk and presents her with a *real* promise ring (as opposed to the "canned" rings available as part of the freeze-dried True Love Waits program churches often do as a bolt-on substitute for a carefully-considered intentional strategy for building up families and marriages and the moral and spiritual development of older youth). The youngest man contacts a girl from his high school who is the mother of his child, to arrange support payment and opportunity for influence on her life as her father. The working man deals with an ethical challenge at his workplace that may cost his job. But the real challenge comes when one of them abandons his commitment to integrity and steals drugs from the evidence vault at the Sheriff's office to sell. The others have to confront him and turn him over for arrest. This is real accountability. But it doesn't end there, as the main character commits to visiting him in jail and mentoring his son.

So much of the time our church "small groups" are mere occasions for

social visits, weak "vending machine" style prayers, and challenge-free Bible studies. Members won't be held accountable even for regular attendance. A real "small group", or accountability group, which would be a small instantiation of The Church, would have some "church discipline" in play - in spite of the fear that this would discourage potential members from joining. There can be no seriousness without a real exclusiveness for serious people.

Before the movie, I was reluctant to see something that I expected to be preachy and off-putting, and prejudicial for "he-man" action types and against the geek type that I identify with more. Afterwards I was glad I went. Yes, it was unnecessarily preachy (such that most/all of the people who bothered to see it were already church-going Christians), and yes, they were sheriff's deputies and not engineers or technicians. However, I recognized my own challenges as a man, a husband and a father in the characters. I also had my thoughts about the shortcomings of the church (including the church in Georgia) confirmed from another (church-produced, ironically) source. And, a new hope for finding others who might be willing to form a *real* church (even a small one), who might be serious along with me.

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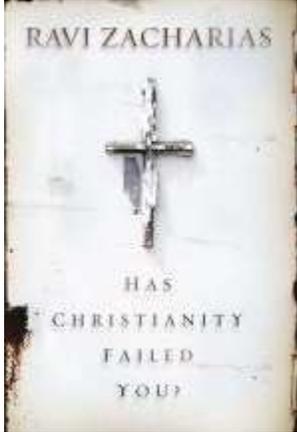
Just to say, while I think (my opinion, but supported by a great deal of evidence) that the institutional church is badly missing its potential, [Sherwood Baptist \[2\]](#) is at least attempting to influence popular culture by making movies and releasing them to theatres. I have to give Sherwood some credit, after visiting their site; if they are really doing what they *say* they are doing, it is more than most churches are. But it's hard to see if their "success" is due to their largeness or the Spirit. Looks like they have an intensively structured ministry of church-wide prayer. They have non-Bible study discipleship classes, including a "Truth Project" worldview class (presumably). Their children and youth ministries are segregated and not family integrated. Most of their non-movie cultural activities - choir, orchestra, even basketball and cheerleading (!?) appear to be inward-focused. So Sherwood appears to me to be a church balancing between Bible Belt tradition and being intentional - and the tradition part is heavier and more significant. But credits for trying, and certainly for being more with-it than anything I've seen in Tucson.

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1. www.courageousthemovie.com

2. www.sherwoodbaptist.net

November 16 2011: Has Christianity Failed You?



A friend of mine who usually tends to theology and Bible doctrine did a change of pace and read [Has Christianity Failed You? \[1\]](#), by Ravi Zacharias. He and I have discussed the shortcomings of the Tucson churches we've experienced, and he recommended it to me, so I figured I would give it a try. I found it at the Tucson public library - we figured that, normally, books by or about Christians wouldn't get past the gatekeepers of the secular marketplace of ideas, but something about Christianity failing might.

The book starts off with a chapter to present Jesus in a new light, in particular, Jesus as the Son, the Son of David, the King; Jesus as the Son of Man and His humanness; Jesus as the Son of God and the doctrine of the Trinity; and Jesus as the Savior, because *I* am sick.

The topic then shifts to the alternative to Christianity - the incoherent worldview of atheism. Out around chapter 5, Zacharias introduces Robert Price who wrote an atheist book *The Reason-Driven Life* (yes, to gain some momentum from Warren's book), and critiques how many of Price's key statements are actually irrational. Much of what Zacharias writes as an assessment of atheism and naturalism is "meta", an analysis of what naturalism entails when carried to its logical conclusion - no place for *mind*, no *meaning* or *purpose*, no basis for *logic* or even *reason* itself. In this, it anticipates the argument of another book I'm reading, *The Ultimate Proof of Creation* by Jason Lisle.

There are two chapters that deal with possible reasons why Christianity "fails" some people. In chapter 6, Zacharias covers unanswered prayer. In chapter 3, he explains the three "tensions": (1) Security; (2) Pain and Suffering; and (3) Sexual Fulfillment; and at the end of this chapter, he makes the point that lies behind the premise of the book:

Is it the Jesus of the gospels that has failed you, or is it the church that bears his name that has failed you?

That point is developed in chapter 7, where he enlarges on the shortcomings of contemporary church culture: Two extremes that many churches fall into, one being complacent about faith and sin, and the other being judgmental and legalistic. An emphasis on entertainment. Dealing in feelings rather than actuality. Trying to treat the symptoms of a society that has rejected God rather than deal with the disease itself. A ringing accusation against church leadership and pastors.

However, in all this, he does not offer any corrective advice to churches. At first, this bothered me, that he would spend so much time and philosophic energy developing the point that it is not Christianity but rather the wayward church that offends, and not attempt to address this problem. But then I closed the book and re-read the title: *Has Christianity Failed You?* A question for whom? The church? No. Rather, to those who have rejected the church and thrown the baby out with the bathwater. This was not a book like many others I have read which are focused on identifying - *and correcting* - problems with the institutional church. It is a book directed to individuals *outside the church*.

With this revised understanding, I could better appreciate the final summation that Zacharias makes:

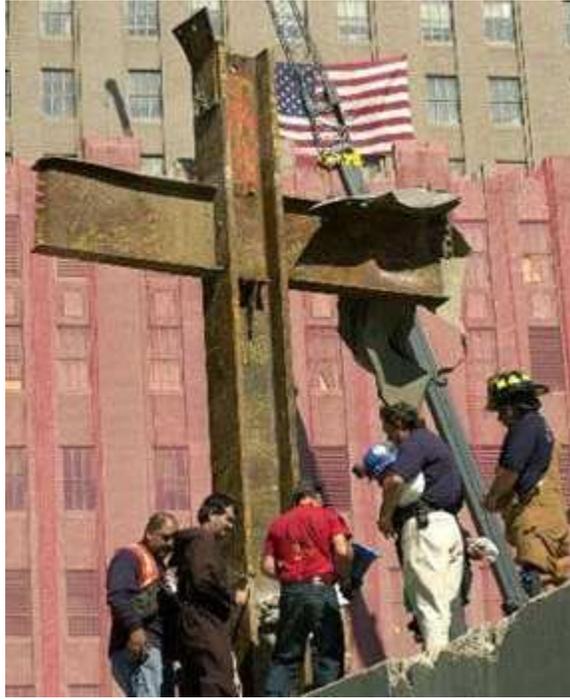
The choice for you, if you are among those who think Christianity has failed you, is either to look at Jesus Christ himself and trust God to carry you through the struggles you experience and to bring you to a place of contentment and victory, or to turn your back on this loving Savior, using the failures of the church to justify your unbelief, and to face a meaningless, purposeless existence without any guide to bring you into a future in the presence of God himself - and sadly, to be brought under the scourge of a freedomless worldview that imposes its belief on all.

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1. rzim.christianbook.com/has-christianity-failed-you/ravi-zacharias/9780310269557/pd/269557

October 13 2011: Tenth Anniversary of 9-11

Last month was the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan. I'm sure there were memorials and ceremonies and such all over the nation - such as the flag ceremony at Raytheon at lunchtime, and a solemn gathering at City Hall, and special church services - but three in particular made an impression on me. Not (as you might expect) very positively.



First is the news of a "Ground Zero" museum at or near the site of the Twin Towers, which would include the serendipitous cross of steel members the rescue workers noticed in the aftermath of that terrible day. This is pictured here where it has been since at an uptown location. At that time, it attracted a lot of attention and even devotion, and for this reason everybody expected its inclusion, and nobody objected... except for the [atheist legal association which is suing to have the cross removed from the collection](#) [1].

Second, along with all the other commemorative ceremonies all over the nation, there was of course one in New York City at the site of the disaster. The most notable difference is that Mayor Bloomberg ruled out [any religious expression at the ceremony](#) [2].

In both these cases, the root problem is how our civilization has abandoned our historic faith tradition of Christianity. Because we cannot recognize one faith tradition (Christianity) as "more true than the others", everyone must be represented, or no-one may be. If Bloomberg permits the Catholic priest who served under that steel cross and hallowed it to pray, then he must allow the muslim mullah to "pray". If the cross is to be included in the museum, then tokens of Judaism, Islam, atheism (whatever *that* might look like), and any others must be included as well.

Our greatest threat as a nation, and actually the reason for the attack,

is that we as Americans are not **UNITED** around a **TRUTH MODEL** that is **CONSISTENT WITH REALITY** and has been **FAIRLY TESTED IN THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS**. The secularists who are largely in control of the instruments of government, media, education, science, and the arts are keen on replacing our traditional Christianity with their own, atheism, and are not willing to allow any discussion. Of course, the main advocate of Christianity, the Church, hasn't exactly made a good case. Hence experience number three:

We went to a unique 9-11 production by the Christian drama group [Waypoint Theatre \[3\]](#) - "September Bears", a recreation of the story of Sue Lucarelli. She and her NYC church experienced miracles of providence as they worked to distribute teddy bears to school children in the area, many of whom were directly affected by the losses in the Twin Towers disaster. She started a ministry, [Hugs Across America \[4\]](#), which is still active. Now, if the story is true that God miraculously provided those donations of bears (and I have no reason to disbelieve it; it sounds and feels just like the sort of thing He would do), then it's a great Christ-honoring story that deserves to be told. I felt, though, that it was a bit... *therapeutic*. No real truth claims. No gospel, outside of a squishy "why don't you ask your rabbi?" prompt to a Jewish student. No basis for the good deed other than being "nice people". This isn't the story that changes a culture. Yes, it's a hard problem to cast the message optimally, in a broadly acceptable yet uncompromising form, and I'm not faulting Waypoint for a condition typical of the larger church - but *it's a condition typical of the church*.

While we sat near the stage during the show, I noticed a flag next to the stage on an easel. After the show, I took a closer look: it was the ["Flag of Honor" \[5\]](#), with the names of the 9-11 deceased printed over the red and white stripes. The "victims" of 9-11. Another expression of the culture of "victimhood" so prevalent in the United States.

We really need to get beyond victimhood and therapy, and take a stand against secularism and atheism - not so much in the courts or the legislature, but in every facet of life, publicly and not just to the choir on Sunday morning. **What is True?** If atheism is true, then the lives and deaths of those who died in the 9-11 disaster meant nothing, the memorials and museums and displays and ceremonies to observe the day are pointless (*nothing* has any meaning), and the faith both of those who flew the airplanes into the towers and those who knelt at the steel cross are idle fantasies. But we know this isn't true. How best to express what is?

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1. www.christianpost.com/news/atheists-want-cross-removed-from-ground-zero-museum-52837
2. blog.beliefnet.com/news/2011/09/no-thanks-to-god-or-first-responders-at-mayors-secular-911-ceremonies.php
3. www.waypoint-theatre.org
4. www.hugsacrossamerica.net
5. www.flagofhonor.org