

In trying to chart my faith journey, I find that it may be helpful to follow the evolution of my theological beliefs from when I was a Baptist with the outlook I now hold as a member of the United Church of Christ. If I were to sum up the evolution of my theological thought, it might look something like born Baptist, raised right, and moved left. This progression of my thought also mirrors my move towards the United Church of Christ even though my move towards the UCC was not based primarily in moving towards a particular theological perspective.

Certainly both traditions share common beliefs and common practices but there are differences in how they are experienced and reflected upon. Baptists tend to be a less sacramental people and often don't seem to be trying to build a new communal life as much as they are strengthening an already existing group. Much of what I see from the UCC is using the existence of the sacraments to attempt to create a new community.

Looking back on my Baptist upbringing I am struck by how certain beliefs were just assumed to be held by all. Yet, there was a great deal of inquiry and open thinking at the time. This window, however, would be short as Baptist life took a turn toward a much more conservative/fundamentalist theology.

For me, this meant I grew up believing in more or less believing a standard evangelical Christian belief. From my youth the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient deity was drilled into my head. At the same time, I was growing up in an environment that was preparing me to examine my beliefs and move in a different theological direction. I can remember many questions not being answered by with dogma but an invitation to look at the question from a different perspective.

One incident springs clearly to mind. My dad managed Christian bookstores, and one afternoon I was looking through the tracts and came upon a tract about the rapture. On the front of the tract was a picture of what the world would look like if the rapture occurred and inside was a description that could have come from the Left Behind series. At that moment I felt scared and concerned that the drawing of planes crashing and fires breaking out would come true if Jesus were to return. My dad then explained that the book of Revelation does not need to be taken literally or predicatively for the book to have meaning, and that it was possible to read the Bible and not have to take every word as completely and factually true. Initially, I didn't realize how liberating this was but I do remember feeling relieved and also a little curious about how the Bible could be read in a manner other than the fundamentalist method.

My perspective would undergo changes over time and especially as I went to college. One significant area of change was view of God and God's relationship to creation. Up to that point, I don't believe I possessed a well-developed view of God, but I did believe in a God that lorded above creation and intervened only rarely.

In my senior year of college, I took a senior honors class on science and religion co-taught by one of my religion professors and a chemistry professor. Besides being my professors, I attended church with both of the instructors and the chemistry professor was my Sunday school teacher. During the class, we discussed how quantum physics changed science's very understanding of the laws of nature. Much of our focus was on the writings of John Polkinghorne; especially his book Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity. Along with a changing view of nature's working, came a new perspective on God.

I began to view God as not lording above creation but sitting on the very edge of creation and engaged in a continual process of creating and recreating. With some slight adjustments, this remains my view of God and God's relationship with creation. With this perspective, I see God as more involved with creation and with people's lives.

Viewing God like this actually led to some significant revisions in my understanding of God. With this new outlook on God, I soon found that the old descriptions of God no longer worked. For God could no longer sit at the edge of creation, and be engaged in process that involved recreating, and still be all knowing and all powerful. The very act of creating involves letting go of both knowledge and power.

While I can no longer believe that God is all powerful or all knowing, I do believe that God is the most knowing and most powerful.

Most directly this caused me to reconsider and reevaluate God's relationship to evil and tragedy. In my work as a chaplain being able to see God's relationship to evil and tragedy has an immeasurable value. God's relationship to evil and tragedy is closely related to God's relationship to the rest of creation. God is not the cause of all the evil in the world, and I don't believe that God permits evil to happen. Tragedy happens in spite of God's strong desire and effort to prevent it from occurring. However, since God does sit at the edge of creation, God is working to bring new life and healing out of the rubble of tragedy.

Discussing how God interacts with humanity leads directly to exploring my views on Jesus. Growing up in an evangelical Baptist atmosphere, I believed that Jesus was the son of God and that he died to save people from their sins. In many ways this resulted in taking Jesus out of both his culture context, and the context of the Biblical narrative. My college and seminary experience prepared me for reconsidering and deepening my understanding of Jesus. My educational journey focused more on placing Jesus in his historical context. In depth study of the kind I did in college and seminary excited me and it led to a large amount of personal growth.

Through college and seminary much of my spiritual growth came from the process of deconstructing and shedding many of my old beliefs about Jesus. A traditional understanding of the virgin birth and the substitutionary theory of the atonement were no longer necessary to hold to be a good Christian. It felt freeing and liberating to come to understand that it was still possible to be a faithful follower of Christ and still be a person committed to intellectual inquiry. I also felt freed because curiosity, questioning, and skepticism became avenues of spiritual growth.

After leaving seminary, and moving into professional ministry, my views about Jesus continued to evolve and reform. After finding freedom in leaving some old beliefs, I began to find enlightenment and depth in being able to see Jesus anew and placing Jesus back into the full context of the Bible. Placing Jesus back into the complete narrative of the Bible gave me a new perspective on Jesus. Changing views of Jesus also caused me to have changing views of God. My views of Jesus are no longer the traditional or conventional ones I grew up with or entered ministry with. They are, however, views consistent with the Biblical revelation and that I feel deserve to be expressed in the church.

It is not important to me that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. What I believe is Jesus is the fullest expression of God in human form. Since Jesus is the fullest expression of God in human form, Jesus represents the most complete representation of what God is about. Jesus' teachings and the events of his life show that God is chiefly concerned with justice, mercy, healing, and love.

A major element of this view of Jesus is a view on the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection. Theories of the crucifixion in which Jesus dies in our place were a large part of my theological understanding. As I've matured, however, I see that these theories actually distort the message of Jesus. For me, the Easter story demonstrates the God has taken ultimate responsibility for the world, and in so doing opens the door for all to know God and to love each other.

My evolving perspective on Jesus mirrored my evolving perspective on what I believe about the church. At the same time, and I don't think it is mere coincidence, that this evolving theological perspective came at the same time that I was finding a home in the United Church of Christ. Unlike, my views of God and Jesus, my views on Church have remained pretty stable for most of adult life. Since I started attending the Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi while I was in college, I have had a pretty clear idea of what I believe church should be.

I believe that the church should be sacramental. Sacraments are an outward expression of God's grace. Churches should be sacramental in that I believe that a regular celebration of the sacraments should be a part of a church's practice. I have come to be more appreciative of the Lord's Supper and have come around to the view that it should form a regular part of Christian worship. At the same time, I

believe churches are sacramental because they are to be expressions of God's grace in the wider world. Where God's grace is breaking into the world then it is through the church in some way.

One area where my beliefs combine aspects of both Baptist belief and UCC belief is with Baptism. I view Baptism as a sacramental act; which puts my belief closer to the beliefs and practices of the UCC than Baptist who view baptism as being a much symbolic act, and is often referred to as an ordinance. Salvation is a gift of God available to all people and that means that Baptism has no salvific affect. It is a voluntary act, done after thought and reflection, designed to show that a person has decided to follow Christ and wants to enter into membership of the church. This puts me at odds with the general practice of the UCC which tends to emphasize the universal aspect of God's salvation through the practice of infant baptism. However, my beliefs fit more comfortably within the UCC than a person believing in infant baptism would fit in Baptist life.

On a very real level, my view of ministry and the sacrament converge quite easily. Ministry is the act of being a sacrament in the world. This means that ministry is being God's presence wherever that presence is needed and wherever we have been called to provide that presence. In the act of ministry, in whatever form that ministry occurs, we are signs that God is present and is working.

Throughout adulthood my connection to church has been tenuous. At times I have been a committed member and at other times I have barely maintained a relationship. What I have found in those times when my relationship with church was strained is that God creates church where there is no formal or institutional church. This insight has informed my ministry as a chaplain. What I have come to see is that a major part of my vocation as a chaplain is creating church where there is no church. This often is a temporary case but when the need arises, God will create a church and my job as a chaplain is to facilitate God moving through this temporary church to meet needs. Sometimes those needs are bringing the sacraments to illustrate God's presence, sometimes it means representing that God is present in the midst of suffering, and sometimes it means representing God's work in bringing healing to this world.

While viewing my ministry as being part of God creating church, I find myself once again strongly connected to a church and a denomination. I grew up within the Southern Baptist tradition and while there have always been progressive voices within that tradition I had grown to feel a little alienated from the tradition as my theological perspective underwent changes.

As luck and love would have it, I ended up in the United Church of Christ when I married an ordained UCC minister. Now firmly ensconced in the UCC I found a church more secure in its progressive and inclusive vision than the one I left. I also found the UCC a church committed to a sacramental vision of church both in its worship and its understanding of its mission to the world.

It is true that had I not married a UCC minister, I would have probably remained Baptist for the rest of my career. There is much in the Baptist tradition that I admire and that continues to influence how I view church. What I have found in the UCC, and the reason that I am seeking Privilege of Call, is that the UCC is an inclusive and progressive Christian denomination that is clear about its identity and place sacramental views of worship and service at the center of its communal life.

My perspective on theology has matured and changed as I have progressed in my ministry and in my own spiritual journey. It has done so in such a way that I feel as connected to the UCC as I ever felt to my Baptist tradition. My shift in perspective did not lead me to seek out the United Church of Christ but what it did do was to have me ready to expand my conception of faith when the opportunity to join the UCC presented itself.