

Pilgrimage (1)

There is a song that has been recorded by The Byrds, Johnny Cash, Doc Watson, Bill Monroe and others entitled, "I Am a Pilgrim." The first verse goes like this:

*I am a pilgrim and a stranger
Travelling through this wearisome land
I've got a home in that yonder city, good lord
And it's not, not made by hand*

Each year the world observes the Islamic pilgrimage of thousands of faithful Muslims to Mecca in the Saudi Arabian desert. It is not unusual to hear of people being trampled to death as they near the shrine. What draws Hindus to their holy sites, Buddhist to theirs, Jews to theirs, and Christians to theirs? Why do people want to be in a certain place? People want to stand where Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, or Bahá'u'lláh stood. Why? I believe the clearest answer is "Because they want to feel closer to the person." Look at the hordes that flocked to the "holy sites" of Michael Jackson.

The Old Testament feasts provided a clear motivation for pilgrimages. God ordained national celebrations that tied the Jewish people together. Jewish ancestors experienced the Passover in Egypt. The nation observed together the Feast of Tabernacles, recalling the Israelites living in tents in the wilderness. The nation rejoiced together at the Feast of Ingathering (Pentecost) each year to celebrate the bounty and blessings of God. These feasts were observed in Jerusalem, the city in which God placed his Name, the city where the temple was built and the "ark of the covenant" rested in the Most Holy Place. It was the center of the world for the Jews. It was ground zero. It was Mecca. It was the most holy site on the planet, and every Jew wanted to make the journey as often as they could.

The idea of pilgrimage excites our holy imagination. To think of joining others "on the way," with an anticipation of a new experience only dreamed of, causes us to see our lives as a purposeful journey. Pilgrimage cannot be undertaken alone. It is meant to be shared. Chaucer wrote in his Canterbury Tales of a gang composed of knights, squires, shipmen, physicians, yeomen, clerks, and more who by happenstance came together for the journey. He writes:

*Befell that, in that season, on a day
In Southwark, at the Tabard, as I lay
Ready to start upon my pilgrimage
To Canterbury, full of devout homage,
There came at nightfall to that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry persons who had chance to fall
In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
That toward Canterbury town would ride.*

My primary focus for pilgrimage is Psalm 84. The sons of Korah speak of "those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage" (vs.5). The sacred throng embarks on a special journey that ends within the courts of the Lord.

With this introduction to a series of messages on pilgrimage, the truth I intend to explore is how the people of God in our century are making the journey. I fear that we are losing sight of the meaning of pilgrimage, both as individual pilgrims and as the “festive throng.” I fear that the church of our day has lost its way along the trail. Not only do we not share a clear destination, but we have lost our sense of need for one another in the journey. Just as the wagon trains of primitive America making their way along the Oregon Trail depended on the individual families to stay together for the duration of the journey, so the church today needs families who will stay the course to the end.

If we listen to the pilgrims of days gone by we might learn something about making this lifelong journey. We might just see that God intended certain travelers to make the journey together. Just as Chaucer’s cast of characters made up an unlikely fellowship, their intermingled lives provided just the right mix of adventure and provision to enrich the lives of each pilgrim.

I am fighting for a principle and for a practice that I believe is rooted in the unity of the Godhead. This plea is that God’s people will stop splitting apart, ripping the fabric of God’s holy seamless cloth into thousands of pieces, and causing it to become unrecognizable to those who desperately need to join a people “on the way” to the only *somewhere* worth traveling. Won’t you join me in this holy pursuit? Won’t you contend at my side for the unity of God’s people? Won’t you join me and stay with me on the journey?

Rod Myers, July 27, 2009

Pilgrimage (2)

The Pilgrimage of the Church is not going very well. We all claim the same destination, but we do not seem to be enjoying one another’s company along the way. Globally the church seems to be wandering in the wilderness instead of trekking an intentional journey to the Promised Land. We are marked by division, deep seated for thousands of years. If we were to search from a giant satellite in the sky and focus, first, on Protestantism, then on American Evangelicalism, then on any particular group or

denomination, and still further on a local church, we would see that at each level that any one grouping is a sampling of all the other groupings. Division has saturated all who claim Christ as Savior.

The disunity and discontent along the way in the name of Christ is systemic and epidemic. Of course that is my opinion as I look at the signs, symptoms and history of God's people. I quizzed a sister a few days ago about Ephesians 3:10. I asked if she thought the "powers and authorities in the heavenly realms" are impressed with the wisdom of God when they observe the state of the church today. Her response was immediate and unequivocal that God's wisdom when it comes to the church is difficult to see in practice. If we were a wagon train in route to a new land not only would we be surrounded by hostiles, but we would not be too happy with one another inside the camp. We even might be like the Donner party, eating and devouring one another.

I have found hope and insight in recent days in Psalm 84. The sons of Korah have taught me something about pilgrimage that I need to hear. Instead of cursing the darkness, I choose to light a candle and to spread a message of hope among those I can influence that will help us to focus again on the true nature of pilgrimage, a journey lived out together on the way.

In Psa.84:5 we are told that those who have "set their hearts on pilgrimage" are blessed. A reading of verses 1-4 helps us understand the destination of pilgrimage. It is described as "your dwelling place" (vs.1), "the courts of the Lord" (vs.2), "a home" (vs.3), "a place near your altar" (vs.3), and "your house" (vs.4). Could it be that our disunity exists because we have not set our hearts on the same thing? Those intensely focused together on arriving at the same place will more likely help each other get there. A wise man once said, "Be careful what you set your heart on because you will surely get it."

Setting one's heart on pilgrimage is not a simple matter. Remember the Israelites had not been out of Egypt very long on the way to the Promised Land before they began to long for the return to slavery. Remember Lot's wife. Remember the apostles after the crucifixion who decided to go back to their occupation of fishing (John 21:3). It is essential that we get our corporate yearning fixed on dwelling in His courts and searching for the beauty of his face (Psa.84:2; Psa.27:4).

When our heart and flesh cries out for the living God (Psa.84:2) instead of the things of this world, the things that cater to our fleshly desires, and when this is what we choose to talk about together, we will have a more decent opportunity to stay together. I fear our conversations are on too many things that do not contribute to the discovery of the Living God. Paul said it this way: *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."* (Col.3:1-4)

This common focus may seem to oversimplify other weighty and specific theology. I do not believe it does. What one believes directly affects one's ability to arrive at the destination of the pilgrimage. The children of Israel as they were "on the way" made many choices that did not serve them in getting to the Promised Land. The maintenance of their relationship with God, their relationship with God's designated leaders, and their care for one another was undermined by their improper focus. Because they were not set on entering the Promised Land, they did not listen to their leaders who brought them

a message from God, one requiring faith and boldness. Pilgrim travelers must be searchers of truth from God's divine Word as a primary means of knowing God.

Even Paul's words from Colossians makes it clear that the very reason we can set our hearts and minds of things above is because we have experienced a death to sin. This was only possible through an experience with the crucified and risen Lord. Any subject pertinent to this matter is important for us to "get right" if we are to arrive at our pilgrimage destination. We must understand that to set our hearts on pilgrimage" is not just about arriving at the courts of the Lord. It is also about the journey. The church and Jesus are called "the Way" (John 14:6; Acts 9:2). Setting our hearts on pilgrimage means we set our hearts on following the course he has set out for us (Heb.12:1ff).

It seems there has been a shift from the course we share together, revealed by God in his Holy Word, demonstrated by Christ in his personal ministry, and fleshed out by the apostles in their ministries, to a more personalized, designer type course tailor made for each individual, and not necessarily compatible with the course of others. If God is laying out a different theological course for each person, then how can we be united in the same thought and the same judgment (1 Cor.1:10)? There is no question that God leads us individually, but this is always in the context of the leading of the group, the church. My individual path must be consistent with God's good, pleasing and perfect will for the church (Rom.12:1ff). My individual gift is designed by God to build up the body (1 Cor.12), not to serve as a spin off to go my own way.

If this observation is true, then it manifests itself in searching for what makes "me" happy or contented. Here is where we go wrong. Every Christian must find their true contentment and happiness in the same place, i.e. in the "courts of the Lord." (Psa.84:2) What we yearn for, even faint for, is to dwell with Him. When we have that going on in our lives, we are able to cease the struggle to find our contentment in our relationships with others, either in our families or in our local churches. Then an amazing thing happens. When I let go of the struggle to find the perfect situation in life to make me happy, and find my true happiness in Him, then my relationship with others is transformed and our churches and families become havens of refreshment in an otherwise parched world.

My heart is set on pilgrimage. My invitation to you is to join me on the journey and to let our communication with one another be only about what makes the journey real and the adventure God designed it to be.

Rod Myers, July 28, 2009

Pilgrimage (3)

The pilgrims of Psalm 84 are typical of all pilgrims. "They pass through the valley of Baca..." (84:6). Baca may come from the Hebrew for mull-berry tree, but I think not. Seven Hebrew manuscripts have the word which means *mourning*. Clark associates this place with Bokim mentioned in Judges 2:1-5, so named because the people wept over their sins, offering sacrifices to God. (Clark Commentary, Vol. III, p.483) What a fitting metaphor for our own pilgrimage!

This pilgrimage, the journey of the church on the way to our own Promised Land, must pass through Baca, a place of weeping for our own sins. Just as the Israelites were called to completely destroy their enemies, so are we. Re-read Judges 1:27ff to see that the Israelites did not drive out all the enemies of the land. They subjected many of these enemies to forced-labor. Have we not done so? Instead of getting rid of the sins that so easily entangle us we have harnessed these sins to serve us and to provide us with pleasure. God's people learned to cohabit with their enemies. When rebuked by the angel and reminded that God had told them to drive out the people of the land completely, there was nothing left but weeping and sacrifice.

All the Israelites were together in this sin. There was no room for one group to judge another, or for one tribe to break away from another. They all shared the shame of disobedience. They were all equally sinners.

Why is this important? It is because as we, the church, travel on pilgrimage together it is essential that we see that we all are sinners, deficient in knowledge, obedience, and attitude (Romans 1-3). There is no room for us to divide from one another because we deem ourselves morally or spiritually superior. We travel together through the valley of Baca.

The apostles know what I mean. They were far from a perfect band of pilgrims. If anyone should have had the justification to separate himself from a group, it would have been Jesus. Yet he persevered with his travelers on the way to Jerusalem. He took them all with him, including Judas. He did not seek to get rid of anyone of them. In fact after his resurrection when Peter sought to separate himself because of his sin, it was Jesus who told him to stay and feed sheep. He told them to stay in the valley of Baca together.

The Corinthians know what I mean. If ever Paul could have told the good folks at Corinth to run away and start a new church, it would have been at Corinth. Yet, he did the opposite. He told them to love one another. He told them to repent. He told them to agree. He told them to hang tight and weep together over the sins of God's people. He told them to stay in the valley of Baca together.

Euodia and Syntyche know what I mean. (Phil.4:2-3) These two sisters had a falling out. They disagreed. It must have been serious enough to warrant mention of it in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul commanded others to help them work things out, stay together, and continue to contend by his side in the cause of the gospel. He told them to stay in the valley of Baca together.

Too many marriages fall apart because couples are not willing to deal with the pain in the valleys of life. Too many run when it hurts. Instead of crying together, they seek relief. They forget that they are both sinners, if saved, saved only by grace. So in the church, too many run when it gets hard. The pain in the valley is too much to bear. People seek relief. They see no value in pain. They see no value in suffering through something together.

I fear the tempter has convinced too many that pain and communal suffering is not worth it. He has given us a thousand justifications. He has convinced us that we are on the high ground and must not risk traveling with others who are so deceived to know that they are wrong.

Stories abound in literature and history of loyalty or lack of it. One of the most haunting stories I have ever read was Joseph Conrad's book, **Lord Jim**. Jim was on the crew of a British ship called the Patna which carried pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The ship ran into trouble on the high seas and the crew abandoned them. Later the crew was picked up at sea, and assumed that their ship and "cargo" was lost. However, days later the Patna was towed into port with its survivors who told the tale of the disloyal crew. Jim was the only crew member who was tried for the crime, and began to live a life of shame for abandoning his post. He traveled from place to place, until he eventually became the hero of a village called Patusan in Malay. He died in defense of the villagers, thus redeeming himself.

Lord Jim affected me deeply when I read it. I could not imagine the shame of disloyalty. I could not imagine abandoning helpless people I had been commissioned to protect and serve. He was a haunted

man. His Baca was a storm on the open sea. He ran away. However, later his storm was a battle on a remote inland village in Malay, and he took his stand.

As pilgrims we travel the road together. It will lead, not once, but many times, through the valley of Baca. Do we run or stand?

Rod Myers, July 28, 2009

Pilgrimage (4)

Baca is indeed a valley filled with weeping, but those who pass there “make it a place of springs, the autumn rains also cover it with pools.” (Psa.84:6) Someone has said, “Life is what you make it.” I don’t think they mean that we are responsible for everything we experience in life. Rather they mean we are responsible for how we respond to everything we experience in life. Perhaps our weeping is used by God to produce the springs that refresh. When we avoid the weeping we also avoid the springs that can come from the weeping.

We know all about lemonade for lemons, turning a negative into a positive, “keeping on the sunny side.” Positive mental attitude is big business. One of the greatest adrenaline rushes we experience is sitting in a crowd of people listening to a wonderfully articulate motivational speaker telling us that we can overcome any obstacle. We love the Horatio Alger stories and the little engine that could. Movies like “Seabiscuit” pumps us up, making us feel like we can tackle the world.

I don’t think the sons of Korah had that in mind when they wrote Psa.84. First of all it is the group (“they”) that makes Baca a place of springs. This is not an individual enterprise. This is communal. “They” pass through, and “they” make it a place of springs. Second, how in the world could they do that? The only way I know of is to dig. Digging is hard work. Groups that work hard find the springs. Digging is also time-consuming. But, digging for springs is also urgent if you are looking for drinking water. A community that is thirsty has a great bond to hold them together. Third, this is not all a group effort. There are autumn rains that form pools, relief from the sweltering summer. Rain comes from above, cannot be produced by man, and provides drenching refreshment.

Pilgrimage works when each individual is thirsty and realizes they need everyone else to find the source of spring water. Who wants to dig a well alone? Who wants to stand around and watch “leaders” dig a well for everyone? If we are all thirsty, then we all dig together, with an eye to the sky for those gratuitous showers. We all are seeking a common source, a source of eternal life.

When Jesus came to the well dug by his ancestor Jacob nearly 2000 years earlier to find a thirsty Samaritan woman, he taught us something about our need for water. She made her solitary pilgrimage

to the well daily to draw water. She did not dig the well. She was the beneficiary of it. But, for all her coming and going, day after day, she continued to be thirsty. When Jesus suggested he could give her water that would become a spring that would well up to eternal life (John4:13-14), she wanted it given to her. Instead Jesus told her to go get someone else, her husband, which she did not have.

As the conversation continued she decided that this water must have something to do with where she should go to worship, Gerizim or Jerusalem. The water she was seeking was not found in a geographical location. It was found in a person, the Messiah. Eventually this thirsty pilgrim brought a whole village to hear about where this spring of water was to be found. Unfortunately we do not know the rest of the story, but we do know that out of one pilgrim's Baca came a pilgrimage that involved many people.

My relationship with the source of living water, the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39), is made richer and sweeter in community. In community we have been "given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Cor.12:13) It is the Spirit that not only indwells my body (1 Cor.6:19), but also indwells the Body of Christ, the church (1 Cor.3:16-17). We are corporately in fellowship with the Spirit (2 Cor.13:14; Phil.2:1).

There is another point that needs to be made here. Community sharing of the Spring of Life, the Holy Spirit, is not optional. I do not have the choice of having my private Spring. "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..." (1 Cor.12:13). Access to the Spring is community access. There is no "private property" or "no trespassing signs" at the well. We share the water of life. We equally participate in eternal life. It is a gift given freely to each one of us in Christ.

The refreshment that comes from drinking the water only he can give, from the springs dug in the valley of Baca, bring us together. Have you ever watched a watering hole at sunset? The animals come out from their hiding places and gather at the river or the lake. The water draws them together. They share it.

Conservationists care about our water sources. Whether it is the aqua-fir or the everglades, we all have a stake in preserving our common source of water. We have a stake in seeing that it is not polluted or drained. In the summer of 2008 the Atlanta area was in a state of panic because the drought was threatening to dry up the drinking water of this huge metropolitan area. No one person could conserve enough. It was a community matter. Of course, eventually the salvation of Atlanta would be for God who would make it rain. But, the fact remains water is everyone's concern.

In the local church we gather around a common Spring. We drink of the same Spirit. We enjoy the same eternal life. There is something very inconsistent to see squabbling and division around the watering hole that was designed by God to bring us together. Imagine this huge watering hole with various kinds of animals grouped in their own spots. There are raccoons on the south beach; elephants on the north beach; hippos on the west bank; grizzly bears on the east bank. They all know they need this one Spring, but they will not have any personal fellowship with all those who also need it.

Staying together in search of the Spring that will provide life to all who drink is God's design. We leave Baca better than we found it because we leave behind the common Spring we dug, and the common pools we enjoyed. Rod Myers, July 29, 2009

Pilgrimage (5)

The scene repeated in movies and TV shows a parched traveler in the middle of the desert hoping that over the next rise he will find a cool oasis with crystal clear water to renew and revive his body, soul, and spirit. In the old Westerns it was never a good sign to come to a waterhole in the desert to find carcasses of dead animals lying around the pool. An oasis is meant to give us strength to make it to the next oasis.

Psalm 84:7 speaks of this as it says, "They go from strength to strength..." On pilgrimage there is travel time and then there is rest time. I hear of people who walk across America for a cause. Unlike Forrest Gump, they do stop and rest along the way. Pilgrims gain strength from one another. When they stop along the way, they have some type of division of labor. Everyone has a job. Some go draw water. Some gather the fire wood. Some take care of the animals. Some cook the food. Some prepare the tents for sleeping. It is community at work to make the rest stop a time to regain strength.

Imagine if you had ten folks on pilgrimage together and each one had a particular job. Then imagine that at the end of the first day one of the folks decided to cross the river and join another band of pilgrims. Now the first group is down to nine, and the nine have to pick up the slack created by the one who left. Now we have nine doing the work of ten. Then, imagine that the next night two more cross the river to join another band of pilgrims because there are 30 in that band. They reason that it is not fair for nine to do the work of ten. It would better to join up with a larger group because they will not have to work as hard. But, now the first group is down to seven pilgrims who are doing the work of ten. You see what I mean? I know it's not a perfect analogy, so please do not pick it apart. But, it does illustrate how the decision of one can affect the lives of the others.

When *Lord Jim* jumped ship along with the rest of the crew it was increasingly more serious. These were the folks responsible for the lives of all the other pilgrims. The sailors had a special commission and training to make sure everyone got to the destination safely. Now it is not simply that the others have to work a little harder to get to where they are going, but the entire pilgrimage is at risk of failure.

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mt. of Olives, his companions fled as he prophesied. He was left alone. Even before the mob arrived, his disciples could not stay awake while he prayed. They tuned out, leaving him to struggle alone. We readily recognize that this is not right. They should have "been there" for Jesus. Their loyalty should have been more consistent. When Jesus needed strength from his friends, they were not available.

Paul had a similar experience according to 2 Timothy 4:16-18. Listen to his words:

"At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Those he depended on for his strength were not there to support him. But notice the bigger lesson. The Lord models for us the proper response we should make to our brothers and sisters, especially those in our local church. He stood at Paul's side. He gave Paul strength. He assisted Paul in completing the task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. He was there to rescue Paul from evil attacks. He was there to make the pilgrimage to the heavenly kingdom with Paul.

When brothers and sisters in the church do not make the pilgrimage with us, of course, Jesus is always there, and he will always give us strength. However, when the strength that we need from one another is not there, it makes the journey more difficult. My personal experience is that just like Jonathan's eyes brightened when he ate the honey after a long battle (1 Samuel 14:24ff), so my spirit brightens when I come into an assembly and see my brothers and sisters there, eager to be together, and eager to serve and worship. God designed the local church to be a place of strength. When we come together we are to build each other up. But, if we are absent how can we do all the things he commands us to do when we come together?

The transference of strength is a beautiful thing. It might look like CPR. It might look like a cup of cold water. It might look like a pat on the back. It might look like a prayer. It might look like a financial gift. It might look like a passage of Scripture. It might look like a smile. It might look like just being there. A decision to not "be there" temporarily causes one to be missed. But, the decision to not "be there" permanently causes pain and despair.

When a person assumes they will not be missed, or that their role is not essential to the functioning of the body, they make God out to be a liar. I know that is a strong statement, but read 1 Corinthians 12 again. Isn't this one of the points Paul is making? Every part is necessary. You may think you are being modest when you think such thoughts. Or you may be self-deprecating. Or you may be making an excuse for just being somewhere else you would rather be. The reality is that the moral, spiritual, functional, financial, and emotional strength of the group is always diminished when one person goes away.

"From strength to strength" should be our weekly mantra. There are others who need my strength. There are others who might not make it along the journey without me. Instead of "I cannot do this anymore" perhaps we should say, "they cannot do this without me."

One of my favorite movies is "We Were Soldiers." This entry from Wikipedia will say it all.

"Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore (Mel Gibson), a dedicated United States Army officer, is deeply committed to training his troops, who are preparing to be sent to Vietnam. The night before their departure, the unit's officers hold a party to celebrate. Moore learns from a superior officer that his unit will be known as the 1st Battalion / 7th Cavalry regiment.

He is disquieted because the 7th Cavalry regiment was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, who was slaughtered at the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn. Moore is also dismayed because President Lyndon B. Johnson has decreed that the war would be fought "on the cheap," without declaring it a national emergency. As a result, Moore believes he will be deprived of his oldest, best-

trained soldiers (a formal declaration of war would have meant mobilization and extension of the terms of enlistment for volunteer soldiers) - about 25% of his battalion - just prior to shipping out for Vietnam. Before leaving for Vietnam, Moore delivers a poignant speech to his unit:

"Look around you. In the 7th Cavalry, we got a captain from the Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico. We got Japanese, Chinese, blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indians, Jews and Gentiles—all American. Now here in the States, some men in this unit may experience discrimination because of race or creed, but for you and me now, all that is gone. We're moving into the valley of the shadow of death, where you will watch the back of the man next to you, as he will watch yours, and you won't care what color he is or by what name he calls God. They say we're leaving Home. We're going to what home was always supposed to be. Let us understand the situation. We're going into battle against a tough and determined enemy. I can't promise you that I will bring you all home alive, but this I swear, before you and before almighty God: that when we go into battle, I will be the first one to set foot on the field, and I will be the last to step off. And I will leave no one behind. Dead or alive, we will all come home together. So help me God."

Rod Myers, July 30, 2009

Pilgrimage (6)

Psalm 84:7 says, "They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion." Pilgrimage is about destination, the ultimate destination. Fix this thought in your mind. We are going to appear before God. We are not heading for some family reunion. We are not going there for the fried chicken and the watermelon. We are not going because of the scenery. We are not going because it will be nice not to have to work every day. We are going to see God.

The reason pilgrimage made together in loyalty is so important is because we do not want anyone to miss seeing God. You see pilgrimage is not as much about the journey as it is about the destination. We get to see God! I do not want to experience that ultimate high alone. I want people (especially family) who I have lived among, sacrificed for, received their sacrifices for me, sweated with, cried with, laughed with, worked beside, struggled with, dreamed with, suffered disappointment with—all the normal things that make up life—to be there with me.

We have neat little mottos that are often no more than little mottos. "No child left behind" is one we hear. Yet each year 85% of the classmates move on to the next grade and leave 15% behind. (I made up those stats.) Or, we make "vows." And, yes I think we should put vows in quotation marks. I will stay

with you "till death do us part." We admire those who celebrate 50 or 60 years of fidelity to that vow. The phrase that excites much within a man is *Semper Fi*, the slogan of the Marine Corp. Here is what one marine wrote:

For my family, Semper Fidelis is more than a fancy slogan. It is truly a way of life. My father retired from the Marine Corps in the 90s, after serving over twenty years and more than one tour of duty in a combat zone. Therefore, my two brothers and I grew up in a culture that demanded excellence and loyalty of its members, and it showed. It is partially for this reason, I am convinced, that we all joined the Marine Corps when we were of the appropriate age. Because of my upbringing, it is somewhat difficult to imagine what life would be like, had I not grown up surrounded by living, breathing personifications of "Semper Fidelis," and I am increasingly beginning to realize that I do not understand the mindset of those who had not. It is this realization that led me to reflect on the history of the phrase, and speculate the reason it holds such weight with the members of the Marine Corps..

The Marine Corps has never experienced a mutiny. Marines in England were revered for their loyalty to the crown, just as United States Marines are now revered for their downright fanatical dedication to each other, their service, and their country. Using Latin to characterize this quality represents its legitimization--its codification. Significantly, for Marines at least, it also provides a caste--a group that is separate and unique from any other--a group that has no desire to be like any other.

What is left unsaid in the motto is also notable. The phrase is "Always faithful." It isn't "Sometimes Faithful." Nor is it "Usually Faithful," but always. It is not negotiable. It is not relative, but absolute. Who is always faithful, though. and to what, exactly are they faithful? Interestingly, the simplicity of the phrase and the calculated neglect to specify its parameters seems to strengthen it. Marines pride themselves on their straightforward mission and steadfast dedication to accomplish it. Things do not need to be spelled out for them; they know what it means and what to do about it.

The longer I am out of the service, the more I recognize my draw to and longing for the culture of "Semper Fidelis." I suspect that reading this will impart nothing significant to Marines, as they already are aware of their glorious charge. It is my earnest hope, however, that it may help others understand the reason Marines hold the Corps in such high esteem. All those references by former Marines, in their new jobs, to "back when I was in The Corps," will begin to make a little more sense. Marines are imbued with Semper Fidelis, and all it means, and because they lived it for so long, they have difficulty accepting any less from others. (By Cam Beck, <http://www.oo-rah.com/store/editorial/edi52.asp>)

"Motto Christianity" is not for me. As James said, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." (James 2:18b) But, a motto like *Semper Fi* does become meaningful when it is backed up by deeds over the course of years. So it should be in the church.

I confess that I tire of trying to convince others that we need to all cross the line together. It is not acceptable to me to leave anyone behind. It is not in my blood to quit. This longing, to be a part of a band of brothers who will never leave each other no matter what, is strong within me. But, I confess it gets hard to continue to make the commitments to others who might some day leave. I do not say this to moan. I say it because I believe we as a people need to recapture the true meaning of pilgrimage. We are missing out on what the church could be by not totally committing ourselves to one other.

The last line of the Declaration of Independence is this: *“And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”* Read it again. Do you see it? The pledge is made **“to each other.”** That is the spirit of pilgrimage until we each stand before God in Zion. Rod Myers, July 30, 2009