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## From the Third Floor to the Garage

by Spencer Burke

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### From the Third Floor to the Garage

*The Story of THEOOZE*

By Spencer Burke

I used to be a pastor. More than that, I was a pastor at Mariners Church in Irvine, California—a bona fide mega church with a 25-acre property and a \$7.8 million dollar budget.

By most accounts, Mariners is a great American success story. Founded in 1963 by a few families in a Newport Beach living room, the church has become one of the fastest growing congregations in the country. Each weekend, some 4,500 adults pass through its doors, with nearly 10,000 people attending its services and midweek activities. The church has everything a modern evangelical pastor could want. Great people, great programs and great pay. The only problem is, I'm not a modern evangelical pastor.

Try as I might, I'm troubled by things like parking lot ministry. I guess I'm just not sure that helping well-dressed families in SUVs find the next available parking space is really my spiritual gift. To be perfectly honest, I'm not really even comfortable with some of the less sensational aspects of evangelicalism. Three-point sermons, four-law gospel presentations and 10-step discipleship programs have never really rung true to me. And yet, in seminary, to suggest anything else was heresy. To dare question my alma mater's pre-millennial, pre-tribulation doctrinal position, for instance, was to risk expulsion at worst and public humiliation at best. So like all the other students, I bought in. I read all the right books, went to all the right conferences and said all the right things. For years, I played by the rules and tried hard not to think too much about the lingering questions in my soul. Doubt, after all, was dangerous. Who knew where it might lead?

During my time at Mariners, however, I grew tired of keeping up appearances. After 18 years in ministry, the evangelical package had started to unwrap itself. Swallowing my questions for the sake of the status quo no longer seemed to be a viable option. Sensing my anguish, Senior Pastor Kenton Beshore presented me with an opportunity. He asked if I'd like to start a Saturday night service. You know, try some new things and put a "postmodern" spin on the Sunday message. After much deliberation, I decided to accept his offer.

The new service did well. I was glad to see students I'd met years earlier as a youth pastor coming out on Saturday nights toting kids of their own. Even more gratifying, a whole new crop of people started attending—people who'd heard about the service from others in the community and had decided to come see for themselves.

On my part, I tried to make the sermons less topical and more narrative in style. To me, stories weren't just convenient illustrations, but sermons in themselves. And yet, even with the new speaking style, I felt unsettled. Though I couldn't quite put my finger on it at the time, I knew something was wrong. It was as if the service was cross-wired. Some elements, like the music, were thoroughly modern. Others, like my message, were something quite different. Even more problematic, the more I identified with the new mindset of the congregation, the less connected I felt to the rest of the church's program.

Eventually, I knew something had to give. When the pain of staying at Mariners began to seem worse than the pain of leaving, I submitted my resignation. I packed up my desk, loaded up my car and drove back to my tiny, 700-square-foot beach shack. Five years later, here I sit.

Actually, that's not quite true. I'm in the garage at the moment. I turned it into a make-shift office a little over a year ago. For a long time, my wife Lisa and I shared a nook in our living room. Her P.R. files were on one side, my old pastor's stuff on the other. In the corner, was a giant papier mache tree that we made together for our son. We thought it would be a cool place to read with him someday. Anyway, one day last year we finally got tired of competing for desk space. With every other room in the house spoken for, there was no place to go but out.



The new digs aren't bad, actually. A little crowded, perhaps-and hot--but otherwise all right. And hey, if I want to strike up a conversation with my neighbors, I just have to smile and wave. Ditto for Travis my postman. It's kind of surreal, really. From a luxurious third-floor office-complete with a personal assistant and panoramic view--to an old weather-beaten garage. Who would have thought?

It's funny, since resigning at Mariners, the reasons why I had to leave the professional pastorate have begun to crystallize in my mind. Although it's taken a few years, I've come to realize that my discontent was never with Mariners as a church, but contemporary Christianity as an institution.

### **Spiritual McCarthyism**

One of the most significant issues for me is leadership. When it comes right down to it, I guess I'm just not sure that pastors should function like the chief executive officer of a large corporation. In a linear, analytical world, it's very important to have those kind of clear leadership lines-to know who's in charge and how decisions get made. If you've hung around the church for any amount of time, you've no doubt seen the business-style hierarchy in action. There may be dozens of committees, a board of elders and a handful of pastoral staff, but someone almost always has the final say. Enter the senior pastor.

In Christendom, we spend a lot of time talking about building the kingdom-regrettably, however, I think it's often the kingdom of man. Recently, I've noticed more and more evidence of what I call "Spiritual McCarthyism." It's what happens, I think, when the pastor-as-CEO model goes bad-or when well-meaning people get too much power.

In today's evangelical world, one of the worst things you can ever be called is liberal. Challenge an accepted belief or confess doubt and you're the equivalent of a card-carrying Communist. Brows furrow. Eyes narrow. Lips purse. Want to earn a place on the Colorado Springs...er, I mean, Hollywood black list? Admit your uncertainty about homosexuality as a Biblically-condemned sin. Want to be branded a traitor in your own church? Admit your ambivalence about a denomination-defining symbol such as baptism.

And yet, as I look at history, I'm struck by how many times the church has changed its mind on controversial issues. In antebellum America, for example, there were many Christians who not only embraced, but Biblically defended slavery. No doubt they could quote passage after passage of Scripture supporting their rights to own African Americans as property. Today, however, most Christians reject those arguments. In fact, most Americans-Christian or not-feel slavery is morally reprehensible.

Similarly, there was a time when women were prevented from voting or owning property-a position the church heartily endorsed. Throughout history, Christians have been eager to shackle women both in and out of the church. Given a less-than-stellar track record, is it really so heretical to think that the evangelical church may just be wrong about homosexuality as well? I mean, isn't it wise to

at least ask the "What if?" question from time to time, if for no other reason than to test our contemporary application of Scripture?

Not if you want to keep your reputation as a Bible-believing evangelical. Suggesting that homosexuality might not be as wrong as everyone thinks is a surefire way to get oneself branded with a capital L.

I've wondered too, about communion. Growing up, I remember hearing about the dangers of drinking the cup in an unworthy manner-how the Lord's Supper was only for professing Christians. The proof text, of course, was always 1 Corinthians 11:29-"For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." And yet, here's the thing. Since most Christians assume that all humanity is doomed apart from Christ, just how much would taking the elements really affect an "unbeliever's" fate? Would they go to Hell twice? Or might it be a powerful first experience with the story of Christ? In a subculture where Spiritual McCarthyism has taken hold, those aren't good questions to ask.

Being blackballed by the local church is one thing, being blackballed by the evangelical community as a whole is quite another. In recent years, I've become increasingly concerned about the power certain evangelical personalities have over popular opinion. Call me crazy, but it seems like many of my church friends live more on every word that comes from the mouth of the James Dobsons of the world than from the mouth of God. It isn't that what Dobson and others say is necessarily wrong, it's just that so many people have stopped thinking for themselves-and those who haven't, no longer feel safe to express a dissenting opinion.

To me, Spiritual McCarthyism is really about idolatry. It's about finding righteousness in something other than Christ. Every time I put on some kind of mask for the sake of my reputation and career, I'm guilty of a sin far more serious than not believing whatever it is I'm supposed to believe. Rather than behaving as a son or daughter of God, I'm showing myself to be a slave to the law. I'm drawing my identity from what I do or don't do-and expecting other people to do the same.

Jesus challenged the religious establishment in his day. He answered his critics with powerful, thought-provoking questions. He wasn't afraid to take on tough topics or discuss contentious issues. Spiritual McCarthyism, meanwhile, promotes exactly the opposite. It encourages people to orchestrate their lives to avoid censure and minimize risk. In short, it teaches people to live in fear-to put up and shut up. I don't know. I guess I'm just not sure that fear, intimidation and control should be the defining hallmarks of Christianity.

### **Spiritual Isolationism**

At the time I left Mariners, I was also troubled by the increasing separation I saw between evangelical churches and their communities. Everywhere I looked, Christian churches and parachurch organizations were pulling up stakes in major cities and heading for the suburbs. I remember driving author Os Guinness to the airport once and talking with him about the creation of the Christian ghetto-a safe, sheltered place where real people with real problems can be kept at arm's length. It's a fascinating idea, really, especially given the nature of Jesus' ministry.

On the surface, the shift to the suburbs would appear to be driven by the desire for expansion and cheap land, but surely the move offers other benefits. I imagine it's simpler for families to arrive at church without having to step over a drunk or watch drug deals go down in the alley. That may sound harsh, but let's be honest: church in the city can be a messy affair. Dealing with a homeless man who wanders into the service shouting expletives or cleaning up vomit from the back steps is a long way from parsing Greek verbs in seminary.

Spiritual McCarthyism no doubt also plays a role. If you believe that you alone have a lock on spiritual truth, cooperation with other religious groups and organizations becomes complicated. Even sharing facilities with the community can be challenging. The solution? The all-inclusive Christian package-a Christian Disneyland, of sorts, with everything from on-campus coffee shops to outdoor amphitheatres.

On the one hand, I admire the bold vision of mega-churches. They're not afraid to announce \$90 million dollar building projects and ask God to provide. There's another part of me, however, that's saddened by such prayers. Do we really need to have our own basketball courts and aerobics classes when there is a fabulous community recreation area across the street?

I remember hearing about a mega-church in Orange County that literally forced itself on the community. Many people in the area had serious objections to the amount of traffic and congestion the new facility would generate. Although the property wasn't zoned for a church and didn't have adequate access roads, the building committee was determined to proceed. After upsetting the residents and putting up a legal fight to get the project approved, the church finally opened its doors.

I'm just not sure how to process that kind of situation. I mean, at what point do we begin to teach the gospel? Is it once a facility is built and pews installed-or should it happen throughout construction? And can a church really claim to be a part of the community if no one in the community wants anything to do with it?

Growing up, I believed in isolationism. I heard lots of people I respected talk about how important it was to come out of the world and be separate. Over time, however, I began to meet people who challenged that belief. As it turned out, a lot of my heroes weren't as separate as I once thought.

In 1977, I moved to Berkley from a conservative Baptist Church. I joined a Christian commune, took a vow of poverty and set about learning everything I could about Jesus. I remember going to a local eatery one night with the man I'd asked to disciple me. We were just about to start doing a Bible study when Gary ordered a beer. I was stunned. What? How could this happen?

That same year I was asked to photograph Chuck Colson. I remember being in his hotel room and noticing a pipe sitting on the dresser. In the world I grew up in, you couldn't smoke and still be a Christian so I asked him about it. Come to find out Colson had been given the pipe by the C.S. Lewis foundation. Lewis, too, had smoked! I was devastated. In just one afternoon, I lost two pillars of the faith.

Over time, I seemed to meet more and more people who didn't fit with the stereotype of the good Christian. By their very lives, these people challenged me to stop speaking the code language of my youth--"Breaker, Breaker. Smoky the Antichrist dead ahead,"--and start engaging with the wider culture around me.

Throughout my last years in professional ministry, I felt a particular tension between my life as an artist and my calling as a pastor. It was so bizarre to sip wine at a gallery opening of my photography on Saturday night then slap on a suit and preach Sunday morning. When the gallery folks found out I was a pastor, they were stunned. Likewise, my friends at church struggled to understand the arts community. If the acquaintances I'd made in both these circles were to somehow wind up in the same room together, I knew they would have nothing to say to each other. That fact saddened me because in my heart, I knew that their spiritual journeys were painfully alike. Somehow though, boundaries had been drawn. Both sides had cloistered themselves away for so long they no longer had the words-or even the desire--to communicate with each other.

### **Spiritual Darwinism**

Permeating much of my experience in ministry was also the underlying assumption that bigger is always better. I can remember going to conferences and seeing a kind of Spiritual Darwinism at work. The people with a platform-the ones everyone wanted to hear and shake hands with-were always the guys from the big churches. Pastoral credibility seemed to have everything to do with how big a budget you had and how many worshippers came to the Sunday event. If your church decreased in size, one could only assume that you weren't doing God's will and your books destined to appear on the discount rack.

While the church growth movement encouraged people to become more intentional about evangelism and dream big dreams, it also fostered a kind of program-envy. The Christian

community was quick to start shrink-wrapping strategies for success. As a pastor, I was expected to buy these ideas and implement them. There wasn't a lot of room to say, "Yeah, but..." to the latest hot book or video series. In fact, looking back, it seems like I spent a good part of the 1980s and '90s going from conference to conference learning how to high ride someone else's success.

As a seminary student, I quickly learned how important it was to evolve and advance up the food chain. You might start out as a youth pastor at a small church, but you wouldn't want to stall out there. You'd want to keep moving into positions of greater responsibility and prominence. Work hard and be faithful and God would grow your ministry. If everything went well, someday you'd be the one on stage everyone wanted to meet. It wasn't enough to just shepherd a church. You wanted to have the "fastest growing congregation" or some other such label attached to you. It was survival of the fittest with a thin spiritual veneer.

It's funny though, at the time, I didn't see any of these issues with much clarity. My discontent with contemporary Christianity was something I felt more than understood. I didn't yet have words to communicate my concerns. Instead, I just had a deep sense of frustration and a gnawing sadness.

I remember going on a three-day silent retreat with Brennan Manning while I was still at Mariners. To my horror, Brennan told us we should not read any books during this time-even the Bible. Instead, we should just sit and let God speak to us. I remember going to Brennan and telling him I felt like a phony. I even wrote a poem about it-how I was a mockingbird that didn't have any authentic voice. He nodded then asked why I was so angry at God. Angry? Was I angry?

You know, I was. Lisa and I had just lost two kids early in pregnancy and nothing seemed to be going right. I was angry that God had robbed me of being a dad and mad that the evangelical program hadn't worked for me. I mean, I'd done everything I was supposed to and this is what I got?

Brennan encouraged me to go back outside and meet Jesus. I was incensed. And yet as I sat there fuming, a strange thing happened. I felt like I could see Jesus standing there asking to come and be with me. In my anger, I refused. I could barely even look at him. Still, there he stood. When I finally relented, he sat down next to me and gently wrapped his arms around me. He didn't say anything, he just held me in my pain.

In that moment, I think I realized that God could handle severe honesty. Authenticity, in all its messiness, was not offensive to him. There was room for doubt and anger and confusion. There was room for the real me.

### **The Search for Authentic Expression**

That experience seemed to mark a turning point in my faith. Shortly afterward, I stopped reading from the approved evangelical reading list and began to distance myself from the evangelical agenda. I discovered new authors and new voices at the bookstore-Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and St. Teresa of Avila. The more I read, the more intrigued I became. Contemplative spirituality seemed to open up a whole new way for me to understand and experience God. I was deeply moved by works like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Dark Night of the Soul* and the *Early Writings of the Desert Fathers*.

As my journey continued, I began to feel it might be time for me to leave professional ministry. I needed to find a place where I could safely un-package my faith and continue to ask "Why?" A mega-church in the suburbs just didn't seem to be that place. Within a few months, it seemed clear that I needed to follow my heart and resign-just cast myself on God's mercy and see where I ended up. I had no idea it would be in my own garage.

In many ways, however, these last four years have been the most exciting in my ministry. Although I am not a professional pastor anymore, I still have the sense that I am called to serve the church. By choosing to live out the questions in my heart, I'm able to dialogue with people in a way I never have before. I no longer consider myself a tour guide, but a fellow traveler and as Robert Frost said, "that has made all the difference."

In 1998, I started **THEOOZE**.com. To be honest, it's the kind of environment I've always yearned for as a Christian. Born out of my own personal need to have a safe place to ask questions and work through issues, it has since grown into a thriving online community. Every day, people from all over the world, log on and dialogue with each other about spirituality and life. The conversations that happen on the message boards raise Spiritual McCarthyists' ire and yet, through the Internet, we're able to enter into meaningful, honest discussion with each other.

A lot of people ask me about the name, **THEOOZE**-what it means and how I chose it. It's actually a metaphor. The idea is that the various parts of the faith community are like mercury. At times we will roll together, at times we will roll apart. Try to touch the liquid or constrain it, and the substance will resist. Rather than force people to fall into line, an ooze-y community tolerates differences and treats people with opposing views with great dignity. To me, that's the essence of the emerging church.

I have to say, I love the word 'emerging.' As I look back at my own journey, I realize just how much of a process it has been. For sure, I went through an adolescent phase where I could only define myself by who I wasn't, rather than by who I was. And yet, I'm happy to report that I think I've now moved beyond that stage. Rather than just offering up criticism-as good and necessary as that may be-- I'm also starting to take action. I'm making a conscious effort to orchestrate my life around a new set of priorities and try new things.

One of the ways I've tried to address the Spiritual Isolationism of my youth, for example, is to become much more intentional about dialoguing with opposing points of view. I've already mentioned **THEOOZE**, but I also sit on the board of the **Damah Film Festival**. The entries-all under 30 minutes in length-explore a variety of different spiritual perspectives and come from independent filmmakers around the world. The jurors too, also come from a variety of traditions-everything from Judaism to the metaphysical. After years of having to separate my art from my spirituality, it's refreshing to see them finally come together. Even more exciting, I've been able to build significant friendships with people I never would have been exposed to as a professional pastor. Hollywood producers and directors, even-the very people my upbringing taught me to avoid.

Although Spiritual Darwinism continues to plague the Christian community, I'm seeing positive signs in this area as well. Through TheOoze, I'm hearing more and more people question whether bigger is necessarily better. Each year, **THEOOZE** hosts a learning party called Soularize where we invite the members of our online community to come and share with each other. In 2001, we went out on a limb and offered a Native American potlatch as part of the conference. It was an incredibly moving experience.

Under Spiritual Darwinism, the Native American voice has been all but lost. During Soularize, however, we were able to reject the survival of the fittest mentality and instead, invite Native Americans to share with us in their own way. For Ray Levesque, a Tlingi who belongs to the 1000 Tipis tribe, the conference was the first time area native Americans who follow the teachings of Christ had been given the opportunity to address members of "the majority church" through their own cultural traditions.

More and more, my heart is to create safe places for leaders to ask questions and learn from each other. I'm realizing that my passion is to network people and facilitate the learning process. In **ETREK** learning groups, for example, 14 learners and a facilitator meet face-to-face and via phone conferences over a period of nine months to explore topics chosen by the group. While guest authors, speakers, reading lists and online learning tools are part of the program, the emphasis is on relational learning and peer-to-peer exchanges. The first groups have just started so it's going to be interesting to see how it turns out.

I joke sometimes about **THEOOZE** being a support group for crazy people in their garages-individuals who are struggling to fit in their churches and understand how the cultural shift affects their faith. I laugh about it, but it's actually true and you know what? I think it's needed. There's something wonderfully freeing about knowing that you're not the only one.



So no matter where you are in the process, I want to encourage you to continue on your journey. The fact is you're not the only crazy one out there. I can say with confidence, there are at least two.

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