



CHAPTER ONE: ROOTS

February 21, 2024

**“As by the grace of God we are what we are,
so by His grace it is we are not what we are not.”**

– Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864–1935)

The first day of 2006 dawned crisp and clear in Muskoka, Ontario. Up early, I thought about the previous night, when I’d held my 18-month-old grandson on my lap at the cottage table. Together, we’d had fun throwing poker chips into the pot during a family game.

As I reflected, it occurred to me that Wade was the same age that I had been when my Grandfather MacLennan died.

I have seen only one picture of my grandfather holding me, but my parents had told me stories of his love and pleasure at my arrival. On that Muskoka morning, I imagined him praying the same blessings over me that I prayed for my grandson. I felt happy at the thought that if somehow this were to be the last day that I should have with Wade, in the years ahead he would be assured as I had been—by picture and story—of my love for him and my joy at his presence in our family.

Such thoughts that morning created another point of connection for me to my mother’s father.

My Grandfather MacLennan was a hard worker. A blacksmith, he emigrated from Scotland to Canada, where he founded MacLennan Ornamental Iron Works in Toronto. But he was also a man of faith and a disciplined follower of Jesus, who lived his faith with rigour and consistency. Central to his and his family’s life was the Free Church of Scotland. And he conversed regularly—by letter and personal visit—with the brilliant Bible teacher, Dr. John Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary.

I had come to believe that my entrepreneurial, spiritual journey could be traced directly back to this grandfather. I felt connected to his entrepreneurship because I’ve started two ministries from scratch, but also to his lay theological hunger. Like him, I’ve never had formal theological training or been ordained by a denomination. But I’ve pursued a lifetime of conversations with people like Dr. John Murray, as friends and authors.

We all come from somewhere, birthed out of and into an ongoing stream of lives once lived and being lived. A viral meme on social media makes the point, “For you to be born today from 12 previous generations, you needed a total sum of 4,094 ancestors over the last 400 years.”

My two most immediate ancestors, my parents, both had immigrant roots. Mom came to Canada with her family in the 1920's, while my dad's parents were born in England. After they met and married, my parents created our little family of four: I arrived as the firstborn; my brother came along when I was almost five. Ours was a home shaped by Dad's overseas service in the Canadian Army, my parents' shared survival of the Depression, and the fact of their relatively recent embrace of a Baptist church community. Mom brought her Free Church history into that context, and while Dad's family had not been churchgoers, he had come to embrace faith in Christ as a young man, through the owners of a small grocery store where he had worked.

With only a Grade 8 education, Dad drove a streetcar. Mom was a trained stenographer, a typist who could take shorthand and type with high speed and accuracy. But after the Second World War, women tended not to work outside the home, and she stayed home until both my brother and I were in late public school.

Our family was a strong, loving place from which to venture out into the world to live life. It wasn't perfect of course but was shaped by the baggage my parents brought to it. I don't know if Dad had post-traumatic stress disorder from his years overseas in the army, but he was subject to sudden, dramatic emotional changes.

Mom on the other hand was controlled and level-headed. But she shared with Dad a very clear desire to keep all our family business inside our four walls and never allow anything but the image of a perfect family to face the world around us, particularly at church. Both parents also had significant administrative and leadership abilities, which they generously devoted to our church—in both Sunday school and other ministries—setting an example for my brother and I, which has worked to motivate and inspire.

Perhaps being the keepers of family secrets contributed to the bond I share with my brother to this day. Ours is a deep friendship, and we have shared ministry together. Paul made our parents very happy when he became an ordained Baptist minister; I suppose that was easier for them to understand than the path that I took.

Both sides of our family carried a strong anti-Catholic bias. That bias was reflected in our home attitudes and conversations, and in the preaching and teaching at our church. It was a different time and place; the Protestant/Catholic divide echoed throughout society. In the park near our home, for example, the Catholic kids played at one end of the field and we Protestants—of whatever denominational stripe—played at the other.

Our family were members of Runnymede Baptist Church, led by its pastor Dr. W. Gordon Brown who was as formal as his name sounds. (It was a long time before I realized that not many Baptist ministers wore a wing collar and tails when they preached.) From an early age and right up until Susan and I were married, Runnymede Baptist Church played an important spiritual, relational, and community place in my life.

At Runnymede, I was cared for by Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, and friends. It was a great place to grow up even though it had an isolationist streak, a sense that we were right and everyone else was wrong. We had rituals that I followed early on. At the age of 12, feeling a heavy conviction of my sinfulness, I went forward at an altar call one Sunday morning. I remember it being a time of deep feelings about life and God, and soon after, I chose to be baptized by immersion, and then joined the church. I had been “saved,” “converted.”

I believed that it was the most important decision I would ever make. Today I recognize that while something real went on back then, it was but a mini step on a journey of conversion over a lifetime that continues to this day.

During my teens, I took responsibility in the youth group, participating actively, and often argumentatively, in church meetings. I have a contrarian streak that can be a problem at times, but which has been very helpful for my spiritual life.

I remember organizing a meeting to oppose the hiring of a youth ministry guy who had the temerity to argue that John the Baptist wrote the Gospel of John. Teenage sarcasm gilded my response, “It might have been hard for him to do when he is executed early in the story.” The candidate held his ground. But his nomination was defeated, due in part because I had drummed up an unexpectedly large attendance for the meeting by phoning and encouraging people to be there to vote.

Amid all of this, I felt a distinct attraction to the Jesus of the gospels. Our church encouraged the study of scripture—deeply and regularly—but the motivation for all this study seemed to be to arrive at the right interpretation, or answer to questions. Central to our ethos was having the right belief system and the right behaviour. Some of that was healthy—it gave me great respect for scripture (which we considered the revelation of God’s mind to us in written form), the desire to take it seriously, and to test what I believed against it. I recall less emphasis on the revelation of God in Jesus himself, which became a much greater fascination for me as time went on.

In my Baptist Church, I was trained well, taught well, and we had a great community; but there was this sense that if you smoked, or you drank, or you went to movies or whatever, you were not a follower of God. Yet, the more I read the scriptures that I had been taught to test everything by, the more I began to question those assumptions. Because as I got to know Jesus and listen to him, he seemed to be emphasizing things that were much more about love, and forgiveness, and being reconciled to your brother. As I searched the scriptures, I learned that how one handles scripture—as literature and document—is critical.

I remember one day reading the apostle Peter say, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” And I thought, “That’s what I want to do.” It became a stark contrast to what I had been thinking I ought to do: study the Bible, read the Bible, almost adore the Bible. Suddenly, the whole point of all such effort became to study the life, work, words, behaviour, attitudes, and manners of Jesus. And to grow in Him.

That is a very different thing than just being a scholar of text.

I had friends in high school who were also interested in conversations around God. One was a charismatic and one an Anglican. Intrigued by our differences, I began to explore the charismatic side of Christianity and became mildly interested in Anglicanism.

My charismatic friend's church had retreats I attended, which were taught by Derek Prince, who I later discovered was one of the godfathers of the charismatic movement. So, in the mid-60's some of what I learned about the Holy Spirit challenged a lot of assumptions that I'd acquired through my Baptist Church. I continued in my own tradition, but this exposure to a charismatic community opened a window to the Spirit that remains open for me today. I found myself drawn to charismatic communities because of their emphasis on experiencing God in our whole being—as opposed to a more cognitive approach.

But my explorations were somewhat unusual amongst my generation, which was raised to stay true to our own little tribes. As I have become friends with people from different faith backgrounds over the years, we have laughed about how we tended to stay within our own circles and avoid the “other.” There simply wasn't as much cross-pollination amongst people then as there is today.

I remember a weekend away in high school with my friend Ted Smith (now a retired lawyer). He had invited me to a cottage near Collingwood on Georgian Bay for a few days. We went to a movie one evening, and that was the first time I had ever been to a movie. My tribe just didn't go to movies—doing so would have been considered morally questionable. Then on the Sunday, we went to a little Anglican church in Creemore.

I laugh when I think of it today, but I had this fear that Jesus was going to return and find me in an embarrassing spot for a believer. “Do you want him to find you in a movie theatre?” It was a question I'd often heard, and which that weekend, I asked myself. The funny thing is, I remember not being sure whether I would be more embarrassed to be found in an Anglican church or in a theatre. That was the kind of cultural environment I grew up in.

What started to give me hints of hope, to prove to me that my little tribe wasn't the only authentic expression of Christian faith, was people like author C.S. Lewis. In his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, Lewis discussed worshipping in an Anglican church and not caring whether the person next to him raised their hands, or kneeled, or stood, or sat, because his job was just to do what he had to do within the worship service. His words opened my eyes to the reality that worship was not so much about one style of worship practice or group of practices, but something deeper. By the time I hit university, the Nobel prize winning poet T.S. Eliot became another doorway of invitation for me, through his “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Waste Land,” and *Four Quartets*. Here was somebody with intellect, creativity, artistic talent, but also faith in Jesus Christ. Discovering these two credible scholars—who were also faith-people—led me down a freer path.

C.S. Lewis introduced me to G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton had a big influence on Lewis, so I sought out his books. I learned he was a big, cigar-smoking, beer-drinking Roman Catholic, but he had a charm and a wit about him that was attractive to me. I first read his book, *Orthodoxy*, and then *The Everlasting Man*, and then I read a host of other things by him, including his “Father Brown” mysteries.

Chesterton introduced me to a way of thinking that combined reason and faith. He could engage in argument and disagreement around spiritual issues without being contentious. He was kind and had a remarkable humility about him. Reading this Roman Catholic (who, I had been raised to believe, didn't even qualify as a real "Christian") I was enriched in mind, faith, and spirit.

These were some of the key influences on my life during my late teens and early 20's, as I followed a holy curiosity along threads that connected one source to another.

One thread led me to Jean Vanier (who sadly, turned out to be not what he seemed) but who opened me up to first glimpses of contemplative prayer. Another led to Thomas Merton, who was attracting public attention at the time for some of his books. I found his little book, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, very helpful. Merton was another influence who moved me further along a path of exploration into different historic Christian traditions, that I had previously known little or nothing about.

I was deeply curious, and as I asked questions, I believed I wasn't doing so into a void, but into a universe where there is a God who loves us, and who communicates back—even if sometimes only in a whisper.

Such were the things capturing my attention as I finished up university studies in English Literature, entered the business world, and tried to figure out what my vocation was ultimately going to be.

But at the core of my being, through all kinds of conflicts and compromises, I was always mystified by Jesus, and attracted mightily to him.

A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

Growing up with Norm as my older brother I had the natural admiration and desire to emulate of a little brother. Our almost five-year age difference separated much of our social, school, and sports lives. We lived under the same roof for 17 years and certainly had our conflicts, particularly in road hockey and ping-pong. Most who know us would agree we have different personalities, gifts, and a resulting difference in our ministry style. Our relationship at times could best be described, "As iron sharpens iron."

We had the same church family but even that experience was affected by our age difference. Possibly some of the jagged edges were rounded down a bit by Norm's and others' efforts. We joke now about how our memories of shared family and church events are quite distinct.

But our Good Shepherd has been continually gracious in both of our lives. Norm is a voracious reader exploring the broad streams of spirituality, resulting in his observable and determined exploration of all that is Jesus. While I may have gone down a less voracious and more theological reading path, he has introduced me to a greater breadth of Jesus' Church.

Following and encouraging others to walk with Jesus is always relational in nature. My experience of teaching in a seminary during the civil war in Angola, being senior minister with two Toronto churches, and pioneering hockey chaplaincy in Ontario grew from Jesus' grace, a call to care and build up one another in community. Having said that; the organizational expectations of some of these institutions can get in the way of the life-giving organic nature of Jesus' church. Touchstone did well to avoid many of the organizational hindrances, allowing Norm to be free and present in our lives. I like to think that Touchstone enables Norm to be a tour guide for diverse friends walking together with Jesus.

Norm is my brother and my friend, and I have been blessed through his giftedness as a retreat facilitator. For over three decades I have been part of a group of leaders that enjoys gathering twice a year, as Norm leads us in rich times of prayer, silence, sacrament, and conversation underpinned by Holy Spirit joy. Each of us in the group have experienced periods of loss, confusion, and pain in which Norm's spiritual nudges returned us into the lap of our good Father.

- Paul Allen

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION:

1. Norm begins this chapter with a memory of holding his infant grandson and recalls praying blessings over the baby. Who in your life have you prayed blessings over or for? Who has prayed such blessings for you? Whose prayers and blessings do you or have you yearned for?
2. "We all come from somewhere, birthed out of and into an ongoing stream of lives once lived and being lived." As you think about this statement where have you come from? What is the legacy you will leave when you are gone?
3. Norm hints at parental disapproval of his spiritual journey when he writes of his parents' joy at his brother's choice to become a Baptist minister and notes, "I suppose that was easier for them to understand than the path that I took." How did (or do) your parents (or other close relatives) feel about your own faith journey? What are your feelings about their feelings?
4. Norm writes about the broader culture at the time when he was growing up, and how people tended to stick to their own faith "tribes." As you look back over the course of your own life, what changes in faith and faith practices have you observed, experienced, or been impacted by?
5. Norm writes of significant influences in the earliest years of his journey of faith—of relatives, friends, his church community, and authors. As you think about your own journey, who or what have been some of your major influences?
6. Is there anything about Jesus that mystifies you? What is it about Jesus that attracts you most?