

## *The Safety Net*

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*“A Tale of Three Tragedies”*

Dear ones,

This month I want to talk about three different things that are all sobering, and all related. A challenge and admonition will follow.

A couple of weeks ago Meagan and I turned out of our driveway to take a wonderful Chinese student back to where she is staying in Portland. It was a Sunday afternoon and we wanted to get to Portland in time for a church assembly.

A few hundred yards after we turned onto Dee Highway we saw a horrifying sight. As we drew closer, we saw there had been an accident. A pick-up truck was overturned and lying on its side. A car had been hit head-on by the truck and was so demolished that we could not even tell the make of car.

We were among the very first to come upon the accident scene. Only one other person got there first. I took my cell phone and began calling 9-1-1. It took a few seconds to get through. I gave them the information of what we were seeing and they said police and an ambulance would be dispatched immediately.

By that time, a number of farm workers had come running out of nearby orchards where pear harvest was going on. People were also running from cars that had stopped in the oncoming direction. The workers were climbing on the cars and looking for survivors. No one was emerging from the damaged vehicles. Feeling that we had done all that we could, we turned around and started the other direction to take another road to Hood River and on to Portland. We didn't know until the next day that the young woman driving the truck was apparently under the influence of alcohol and had crossed over the center line and hit the car head-on. In the car were two adults and two children. One of the children, a 2-year-old girl, was dead. Neither she nor her 3-year-old brother were in car seats. Her brother and parents were severely injured. All the people in the accident were local, and known by many people in the area.

I am still in disbelief that such a tragedy could occur in our quiet, rural neighborhood. All week I have thought of the fragile nature of life and how quickly it can be snuffed out. I've thought of life and death a lot anyhow, since Edna Mae died three years ago today.

That's event one.

Event two began to take place fifty years ago. In the summer of 1956, I was a sixteen-year-old junior in high school and had already started preaching. Though living in Texas, I was in love with the Northwest and had spent the previous two summers visiting Christians in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. In the spring of 1956 I wrote perhaps fifty churches whose addresses I found in a West Coast directory of churches. I was asking them if they would allow me to come and preach a week or weekend seminar during my summer vacation. To my amazement, eight places responded and invited me to come. I think they just wanted to help me out since I was young and may have even been motivated by the fact that I said I'd come for free and would provide my own bus fare.

That was an eventful summer for me. I met some wonderful people, saw some lovely country, and traveled thousands of miles criss-crossing the West. I had two meetings in Idaho, and one each in Washington, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado. I left Texas before Memorial Day and got home on Labor Day. During the summer I had preached almost eighty sermons, conducted various home studies, and had seen several dozen people saved. It was a life-forming adventure. I'm sure I gained more than anyone else.

But that was fifty years ago. About a year ago I began thinking about the possibility of retracing my earlier steps. I didn't know how I'd afford to take three months off. But I made some effort to contact the places and see whether a "reunion tour" could possibly take place.

But then the shock. Almost as much as I felt a few days ago when I came up to the wreck and fatality. Of the eight churches I had visited, they all still exist, but six of them are much smaller now than they were fifty years ago! Only one of the eight has actually grown. But all of the locales have grown tremendously! In some cases populations have increased many, many times. But the churches are smaller. Some of them are near extinction.

Why? (Jokesters may say I must have done some pretty poor preaching back there. But this isn't funny.)

So, complex as it is, that whole scenario from fifty years ago to the present is event two.

Event three goes back to another summer, thirty-two years ago. 1974. Edna Mae and I were living in Wenatchee, Washington, the second time. (We lived there in the mid-60's and then again in the mid-70's.)

In July of 1974 there was a meeting of four thousand believers in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was called the "International Congress on World Evangelization." People had been invited from over 150 countries. Most were "laymen" and most were from places other than the United States. No meeting on that scale had ever been held before.

Through an odd series of events I was one of two delegates to be invited from Churches of Christ. And I went, taking the whole family. It gave us an opportunity, not only to attend the Lausanne meeting but also to visit missionary families that we loved in

Germany and Scotland.

At the Lausanne congress there were dozens of lectures, and scores of classes. Everything was translated into eight languages. I got to meet and listen to Billy Graham, Rex Humbard, John Stott, Corrie ten Boom, Juan Carlos Ortiz, and many others. I benefited most from spending ten days with Dr. Francis Schaeffer. My idea for a retreat center was born in Switzerland that summer at two places: L'Abri and Emmaus.

But what did the Lausanne congress have to do with the other two incidents I related about physical and spiritual "death?"

I'll tell you. Of the many meetings I attended at the congress, the most memorable was a class concerning the integration of new Christians into established congregations. Even though it was a "class," there were probably 300 people present.

The class began with a panel. Each panel member gave a prepared speech. They talked about the need for and difficulty of spiritual integration. None of the panel members gave any real insight toward accomplishing the task.

So then we went to a floor discussion, everything again being translated into several languages. The first audience member who stood, speaking French, was from the African island of Madagascar (east of Mozambique). He told about some recent Christian crusades on his island that had brought multitudes to faith in Christ. But all these new people threatened established churches because they often outnumbered the established group. Because they were being rejected by the established groups, most of the new converts were dying spiritually and going back quickly to their former views. The Christian leader was pleading for a solution.

The next man to stand and speak was from Australia. He had a similar story to the man from Madagascar. The gospel preached, souls converted, churches threatened. Little assimilation. But no solution, only a restatement of the problem.

And then others spoke from Latin America, Africa, and even America. But still no answers. The feelings of frustration in the room were obvious and growing.

The moderator said, "Does ANYONE have a solution or recommendation?" The room became very quiet.

Finally, an old German layman arose. I can't quote his words exactly, but I'll never forget the essence of what he said. With slow, heartfelt sentiment, he said the following: "My brothers in Christ: The problem that is being described here is not a new problem. Our Lord Jesus addressed it in the First Century. He said, 'You CANNOT put new wine in old wineskins.'"

Having said that, and allowing a few seconds of silence to follow, he then said, "This problem will only be solved when we become more concerned about saving the new wine than protecting the old wineskins." Everyone in the room knew he was right. His words ended the meeting and we went away silently.

I am drawing your attention in this letter, to the fragile nature of life. Life is wonderful! It is robust and exciting, and brings much joy. But it is also easily LOST!

A life was snuffed out and lifelong injuries were sustained near the entrance to my driveway by unthinking, careless, and possibly criminal behavior!

And in another scenario, over a period of years, churches languished because of a variety of personal and corporate problems, even while the communities around them flourished.

Finally, people from all over the world were acknowledging a problem that should never have occurred. Jesus came to bring life, and too many people have preferred death over life.

All this says to me that life must be cherished. It must not be taken for granted. It is not enough to start out right, we must be equally concerned about subsequent actions as well.

What we do, affects others. Even for eternity. And those that are harmed or even killed, are often innocent little victims.

None of us want the lives of others on our consciences. We've got to make some good choices. And keep making them. Souls are at stake.

Yours in Christ,

Silas Shotwell