

Welcome to Camelot

Fantasy #2 - Jesus is the Prince of Spiritual Camelot.

In the previous section of this book we have looked at the importance and power of sharing the story of Jesus. We now turn our attention to the tendency within each of us to distort that story. It is tempting to believe and follow a distorted version of the story; one that is shaped by our culture's aspirations, fears, and commitments. It is a story that does not allow us to come close to the Suffering Servant, Jesus, but rather keeps us from him.

Giving Jesus and his Kingdom a "make over" has always been a temptation. The New Testament epistles were written to correct misconceptions held by early Christians, concerning Christ and his Kingdom. The Jesus of our fantasies may be more compatible with the tastes of our modern culture but he is not the resurrected Jesus of the cross. The power of Jesus' resurrection is for those who have died. No, for those who have entered his suffering and died. Neither Jesus nor we can get to the resurrection by wishing away or denying the suffering that precedes it. Our pain is a part of the story of our hope and salvation. But the made-over Jesus we want or the Messiah we picture in our distorted dreams is one that took away all of our suffering in his suffering. What we fail to remember is that he asked his followers to pick up their cross and follow him. In the lives of the early Apostles, the path of Jesus was one that included suffering.

In following this new Jesus we act like refugees from reality, looking for a new home where the longings of our souls can be satisfied apart from suffering. Not finding it, we create a fantasy world, trying to tell ourselves that if we can just find the key, we will enter Camelot. We fancy ourselves as tourists in the land of reality, where pain and confusion are everywhere and cannot be denied but should not be our lot. Like tourists in this fallen world, we feel as though we should be able to observe suffering but be exempt from such pain ourselves.

The popularity of an unrealistic world of fantasy is seen in our broader culture. Movies, advertisements, and political speeches all tend to portray life in unrealistic ways. The sexual revolution of the sixties, for example, was motivated by a belief that if society could just rid itself of irrational inhibitions, it would be a happier, healthier place for all. Social scientists have since discovered that such an expectation was greatly overstated. STD's along with a negative correlation between personal fulfillment and free sex have been sobering reminders that health and happiness are not byproducts of free love. In spite of this acknowledgement, Hollywood continues to parade sexual freedom as a human right with little or no negative consequences. This is a fantasy, a world-view that has no correlation with the real experience of most people. In the same way, the Christian community has too often pictured spirituality in such a way that it is not grounded in reality. We make faith easy, life simple, and community superficial and then penalize those among us who dare raise hard questions or live lives that openly challenge our story of "the Kingdom of God." Such a spiritual fantasy

tends to discredit the gospel message in the eyes of many sensitive people inside and outside the faith. In this chapter we will look at some popular but fanciful notions of Christian faith.

Recognize the negative aspect of positive thinking.

Camelot is a word I choose to describe the fantasy world of pop-Christianity's unrealistic hopes of avoiding the brokenness of life. Camelot has no place for unexplained suffering and pain. Camelot is a world of hopes that are shaped more by our "wished for" environment than by the wisdom of God. Camelot is an expression of our ideal kingdom more than His. False hopes encourage us to avoid pain at all cost, repress or deny what we cannot avoid, and medicate what we cannot deny.

As a pastor, there are two ways that I can abuse people in giving advice. I can encourage people to be someone they cannot and will never be or I can discourage people from being someone they are called and meant to be. Knowing the difference is an important part of pastoral wisdom. While it is easy to error on either side of this issue in offering hope, I have found that it is easier and more common for me to give unrealistic positive encouragement than to throw cold water on the dreams of those who hurt. I don't want to be negative. But I am greatly concerned that I might underestimate the negative aspect of positive thinking. I am concerned that I may give positive but unrealistic hope.

In the early years of my Christian life I was led to believe that there would come a time, after a reasonable period of growth, where I would no longer struggle with temptation or doubts about my faith. As I grew older, however, I found that the changes that took place in my life were not nearly as dramatic as I had been led to believe. In some cases the expected changes seemed more like hype than reality. Many of the struggles of my early life as a believer seemed to become more complicated and intractable as I grew in my faith. For a time, I even asked myself, is this whole thing just a psychological game where I am trying to live out a spiritual vision that is nothing more than the construct of my own mind or culture? I eventually came to understand that my expectation of easy answers, simple explanations, and quick fixes came from a view of Jesus and his Kingdom that reflected a Christian subculture that was heavily influenced by what I now label as a Camelot spirituality. Don't misunderstand me. I still believe that the answers to life's challenges are very simple. Jesus and faith are the answers. But what I now also understand is that the faith must be seasoned with wisdom and the Jesus must be the real Jesus and not the spiritual "make-over" of Camelot.

Too often, in our rush to escape the pain we embrace a false hope, a Camelot world of spiritual easy answers and quick fixes. This seems more like hype than hope and inevitably leads to deep disappointment and anger with self, others, and ultimately, God. Camelot is an unrealistic spiritual world where nothing is really broken, a world untouched by the fall where there are no real problems. And if a problem should arise in this fantasy world, it is handled with a simple, easy answer. In this Camelot world, suffering is always of Satan and is to be avoided or removed quickly by the power of prayer and faith.

When a person is told that by paying a tithe of money to the church, they can count on receiving financial rewards from God, they may be unpleasantly surprised and bitter when the money does not come in as expected. When a person believes that God will not allow bad things to happen to them because God loves them and they trust God, they may in time have some hard experiences to explain. When believers expect that living the Christian life will not have its serious setbacks and failures even after years of fellowship with Jesus, they may be deeply disappointed to find themselves back at square one even after years of success.

It is not uncommon to hear exhortations against negative thinking. “Speak words of faith.” “Don’t let a negative spirit guide you.” All of this is good advice if it is grounded in the reality of God’s purposes for us. But so often, there is little attention given to the real possibility that my positive expectations might be completely unrealistic. The fact that I would like to play basketball like Michael Jordan, or golf like Tiger Woods does not mean that I can do it, if I just exercise enough faith and acquire enough discipline. Faith without the wisdom of living in touch with reality is fanaticism. Wisdom without hope exercised in faith is little more than academic religion. We are called to walk by faith but also to walk in the light. Faith and hope make good friends but only if joined by light.

Challenge the Jesus of Camelot.

In the fourth chapter of Matthew we have a dramatic encounter between Satan the tempter and the recently baptized Jesus. In many ways, this story of temptation challenges our expectations of the nature of the evil that we will face in the world. Jesus is not tempted to murder, steal, kill, or commit adultery. In this encounter, the commandments that Moses gives are not in view as we might expect. What we do find is a powerful challenge to Jesus’ expectations of life. Satan challenges Jesus to alter the nature of his hope in ways that are not unlike the way he tries to challenge our hope today. The temptation to satisfy a natural desire (for food) by appealing to the supernatural intervention of God seems innocent enough. It certainly seems consistent with God’s nature and promise to provide for our needs. But then we are reminded that there are some things far more important than physical comfort and more satisfying than material bread. The temptation to be rescued from danger seems rather insignificant in that God had also promised to keep his people safe. Yet, Jesus sees the hope of a dramatic testimony to God’s power as a misuse of God’s power. While Satan will be quick to test Jesus, Jesus will not test God. The final temptation to achieve power through carnal means is also unexpected. If the ends are good, how can the means be rejected? Jesus seems more concerned about means than ends. He seems more concerned about holding to the integrity of faith in God that is a mystery in many ways than getting things to look good at the end of the day. Are these temptations not close to home in your life? They are in mine.

Let me ask you, how often have you expected God to satisfy your deep longings for basic needs in life, for a powerful witness, for the rule of God in our culture, only to discover that He has seemed disinterested in answering your prayers in spite of the proof texts that you have claimed?

Don't overlook the fact that the Devil is inviting Jesus to pray for reasonable requests on the basis of the Word of God. The fact that I have a verse in the Bible to justify my Camelot is no excuse. What is needed in the hour of temptation is not just a verse but wisdom that is grounded in deep insight and knowledge of the real Jesus and his Kingdom.

Hollywood has become an interesting modern-day example of Satan's work. I am not thinking at all about the sex and violence. Nor am I thinking of the false characterization of Christianity and the panning of religious moral themes. What strikes me as the hand of Satan in Hollywood is the idyllic way in which it longs for the Kingdom without the King. Hollywood understands a lot about the kingdom of God as do we all. A kingdom that is an environment where we are fulfilled, at peace, and living in harmony with each other. The cynicism that we see and feel from Hollywood has its origin in a deeply felt longing for the Kingdom of God among us. To be sure, Hollywood is not committed to nor is it interested in the King. In keeping with Satan's style, it wants life without the Word of Life. We all want things to be clearer, black and white, right and wrong. This is an idealism that will enable us to make sense of the pain and suffering, giving it meaning, enabling us to manage it and not go crazy. Hollywood's picture of life is full of good guys who are always completely good and bad guys that are completely bad. It often pictures life as exciting, romantic, clearly understood, and always with adequate closure. We leave a good movie wondering why our experience has never been like the movie. War is seldom so heroic, love is seldom so romantic, heroes are seldom so consistent, and villains are seldom so evil. Real life never works out like the movie script, but we somehow keep expecting that it should. Satan's temptation of Christ is a prototype of Satan's temptation of us.

Strangely enough, Satan could never tempt us, had we not been made in the image of God with an inner longing for a perfect world of justice, peace, love, and joy. We can thank Hollywood for reminding us that we, who long for justice, peace, love, and joy, and who are cynical of a world that falls short of our longings, do so because we bear the image of God. We resist Hollywood's message that our hopes can and should be realized in this life and apart from Jesus. Get behind us, Satan.

Camelot has a reasonable, popular, and attractive series of hopes. But they are hopes that are misguided, desperate fantasies for an unrealistic existence, clinging to inadequate interpretations of Scripture and massive denials of human experience. These modern temptations of Satan are fueled by a religious subculture that does not mind being inconsistent and too often lacks a proper theology of suffering and death, a community that forces its own agenda on the Kingdom of God.

Camelot is a demonic false hope that will eventually undermine a person's confidence and love of God. It will destroy the credibility of one's witness to a world awash in hopelessness but neck deep in the chaos of suffering. It will lead one's brothers and sisters to deeper despair, as they are encouraged to believe what eventually becomes impossible to believe.

Camelot Christianity is what Paul faced when he addressed the Corinthian church in I Corinthians 4. The Corinthian church embraced a theology of realized hope, where all the promises of the kingdom were fulfilled (or should be), where spirituality was defined in terms of escape from pain and suffering. This impulse has never left the church and we struggle with it today.

Identify and reject a distorted story.

I want to run through a number of ideas that I believe are a part of Camelot Christianity. These ideas are popular sacred cows in our faith communities but are too often out of touch with the harsh realities of life on a broken planet. While I admit that sacred cows are easier to hit than to kill, I nonetheless set my sights on a number of particularly fat ones.

1. If we could “get back to” or be like the glorious New Testament Church we would be more spiritual and would not suffer as we do.

In some Christian circles there is a nostalgic vision of “the good old days.” This fanciful reconstruction of reality can be focused on the last generation, which was, we are convinced, much more together than our present generation. It can and often does focus upon an idealized vision of the first century church. Are you ever tempted to ask those who longingly call the present church back to New Testament Christianity: Just which New Testament church do you want to be like - Ephesus with its racism, Galatia with its legalism, or maybe Corinth? Each of the letters of Paul were written to congregations that had problems, big problems just like the problems that churches face today. Human nature has not changed. It has not become worse or better over the years. And unfortunately the church has tended to reflect human nature. The hope of a glorious New Testament Church model is a Camelot hope that may exist only in our dreams. Most of us hold, as an ideal, the Apostle’s teaching of how the church should behave, but this body of teaching was not modeled in the New Testament Church. Paul’s letters were written because churches were not living up to those standards. These early congregations were not unlike modern congregations made up of more sinners than saints, more spiritual babes than adults, more folks in process than having arrived. Oh yes, there were periods of glory and power, as in Jerusalem just after Pentecost, but such periods seemed short lived. This Camelot view of the good old days leaves us with a false hope that if we can just find our way back to true spirituality, we will avoid all this confusion, pain, and disappointment. We should not be suffering. It is an embarrassment and commentary on our lack of spirituality.

2. Spiritual leaders should not have unresolved problems.

Here is another version of idealism that leads us to question the positive purpose of suffering. It is often assumed that there are people who are living the life that I aspire to live and because they live this idyllic life I can have hope that it is possible for me to some day get there also. A friend who works closely with John Stott shared with me his observation of John Stott’s prayers of confession. He said that John’s prayers, “sounded like the pleas for

mercy of an ax murderer.” I can recall hearing John Stott introduced before a distinguished audience at the University of North Carolina. The introduction was full of Dr. Stott’s many accomplishments and virtues. When he stood up to speak, Dr. Stott said, “In your introduction, you left out the greatest characteristic of my life, I am a sinner.” It is not insignificant that King David killed Goliath when he was a young immature lad and killed Uriah to cover up his adultery when he was a mature older man. In Camelot it shouldn’t happen that way. The sins belong to the immature part of our lives and the victories to the mature later years. Does this mean that we should not expect a high level of conduct from our leaders? We certainly should, but we must never forget that all of us stand in the need of grace and can fall. We all need to be forgiven and to be helped up from our failures now and then. Tenure in holiness or virtue will have to wait until we get to heaven. Every true saint is painfully aware of the shame of personal sin, suggesting that true heroes are those who display a broken and humble spirit, needing and receiving grace. Only the blind fool is proud of his or her soul’s state under the Law and under sin. The dramatic stories of the Prodigal Son and the parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector clearly underscore this point.

3. The normal Christian life is free from sin.

In Romans 7, Paul confesses that he is a wretched person who does what he knows is wrong and does not do what he knows is right. In writing to Timothy he calls himself the chief of sinners. Paul’s confession in Romans 7 is labeled by some interpreters as a testimony of Paul’s pre-Christian experience. This suggests that as an Apostle, Paul would not have such struggles with sin. Is this to suggest that he is going to return to being the Pharisee he prided himself in being before he was converted? Of course, now he has the power of the Spirit to be better at it. We are led to believe that the only sins that Paul should ever have to confess are the sins of others. Just like the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector, his prayers should be shouts of thanksgiving rather than confession. I don’t think that was the point Paul wanted us to take from Romans 7. The fact is, we continue to struggle with sin, realizing that its grip on us is subtle and pervasive. Whenever the holy character of God is placed before us we see the dirt in our own lives.

Now, most of us know that we are not free from all known sins, but we defend to the death the notion that other “heroes” of the faith experience such freedom and we could also if we just could find the key to the “victorious” Christian life.

Our full freedom from sin in this life is not through our experience. It is not even through our experience of power through the Holy Spirit, for there will always be some subconscious motive that is selfish and in need of redemption. It is through the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith that we have victory in this life.

This is not to say that we do not have power to discipline our lives in specific areas of conduct, nor is it to suggest that we can never expect to experience inner freedom from sins. But while we are in this flesh we will groan, awaiting our full deliverance from a fallen world and body. Only in the fantasy of Camelot are we in heaven on earth.

4. Keep it superficial (I mean simple).

“Law lite” exposes “sin lite” which calls for “repentance lite” and “grace lite.” In order to live with our image and our sin, we are forced to define sin in such a way that it can be managed. This means that we will operate with two levels of sin. The big sins like murder, adultery, stealing, etc. are correctly identified as sins and they should be managed - or more precisely, avoided - through self-discipline. Other sins like hatred, lust, envy, etc. are not really treated as sins. They are more often weaknesses that we tolerate and learn to live with.

Of course, Jesus had something to say about all this in Matthew 5 through 7. It is this superficial treatment of sin that I call “sin lite”. It is often accompanied by “law lite” which convicts only of superficial sins, “repentance lite” which is simply a matter of identifying and confessing a known sin, and “grace lite” which is only needed now and then for the times when we might happen to stumble. Camelot Christianity has no place for radical sin, radical repentance, and radical grace. Camelot Christianity is a manageable faith where we have our lives under control.

5. Life is fair when you follow Jesus.

Most of us expect life to be fair. We expect hard work and virtue to be rewarded with blessings. We expect God to cooperate with us and meet our expectations of reward for faithfulness. But life so often is not fair. As someone put it, “A pessimist is an optimist with experience.” It’s not that life is never fair. We often have our expectations met and our fears realized. It is just that we cannot always count on life being what we expect. There are things that just don’t make sense. Children die, marriages fail, friends forsake us, and happiness eludes us.

Camelot Christianity expects life to be fair. But in Camelot we must do a lot of pretending. We must ignore the challenge that suffering poses to our faith, We must make up reasons for life being the way it is. In Camelot we must disagree with Solomon when he concludes, “life is vanity” or impossible to understand.

6. Happiness, health, and holiness always go together.

Many of God’s people have assumed that the call to holiness is never going to also be a challenge to our personal wholeness, defined in terms of our happiness and health. While it is expected that following God’s Word will often result in a long, prosperous, and satisfying life, it is not always going to be appreciated as such. A difficult marriage between two Christians may not be emotionally edifying or pleasant even though the covenant is to be honored as holy. Sometimes we may be asked to follow Christ in paths that put us at great risk in terms of personal health and temporal happiness. This was the calling of Jesus, Paul, and others throughout the history of the church.

A great danger in equating holiness with wholeness is that we may make decisions based on wholeness and assume that it is consistent with God’s will. The familiar assumption, “God does not want me to be unhappy, and I am unhappy and not being edified in this relationship,

therefore it is God's will that I get out" may be guided by a worldly view of wholeness rather than a Biblical view of holiness.

7. I should be able to manipulate God or at least manage life.

Perhaps the greatest example of human pride is illustrated in our stubborn perception that life can or should be manageable. Usually the key to managing life is found in the manipulation of God. If I just trust and obey God, I can do what the Pharisees of Jesus' day thought they could do – manage life, keep things in control, and determine my own fate in this world. After all, is not God bound by his word to be faithful to His promises? All we have to do is find a Biblical promise, claim it by faith, obey its conditions and we should be home free. Unfortunately it does not seem to work that way for many of us. I wonder why? As Job discovered, we too are left confused and disappointed by the cards that are dealt us in life. Our attempts to get things right, keep them under control, etc., are more often frustrated than successful. We are quick to celebrate the promises in Scripture concerning God's deliverance and healing, being convinced that suffering is largely the result of Satan's work. But what do we do with those texts that seem to suggest that God's hand is sometimes behind the suffering. That which was "*a gift*" from God in II Cor. 12:7 is also a "*a messenger of Satan.*" This thorn in the flesh which caused Paul much discomfort was not removed in spite of the prayer of faith (vs.8-10).

I am not suggesting that we do not have a great deal of control over some aspects of our existence, but I am suggesting that our sense of control is greatly exaggerated. The motivational speaker who tells us that we can be anything we want to be, the faith healer who challenges us to believe God is removing our suffering both are in danger of missing an important point. Suffering will not be fully removed in this life because we are sinners living in a fallen world. We are forced to ask if such optimists really live on the same planet with the rest of us. Reality has this nasty tendency to not cooperate with our will and work. We can play at being God, but it does not take long for us to realize that it is just play. We really aren't very good at it. We can blame ourselves for not having enough faith. We can strive to cultivate a more positive outlook but the pain remains. What we need to realize is that the suffering of this life is not without its positive benefits. It can play a powerful role in shaping our spiritual character.

8. Rules of moral law will make and keep us (especially our children) straight.

Perhaps the most deeply entrenched principle of Camelot Christianity is that the law will bring in a kingdom of righteousness and preserve it for our children. But as we know from experience and the teaching of Paul in Galatians, the law can make nothing perfect. Even with the power of the Spirit it is not capable of doing anything but showing us our need for grace. But as much as we hate the law, we are more afraid of grace, so we keep coming back and trying harder. As long as the law is upon us, we feel safe. Its score-keeping presence assures us that something out there was keeping the books. Salvation by bookkeeping feels good only if the books are cooked.

9. We have it all figured out or should if we know the Bible.

This model deserves a chapter-long treatment, in that it is best examined in the context of the tension between modern and postmodern ways of understanding. In the next chapter, I want to help us see how postmodernism has been nothing less than a reality check on an over-confident, often arrogant, and superficial view of a fallen world.

Before we leave this chapter let's be sure we get the point of it all. If we expect to know Jesus through the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his suffering, and the sharing of his death, then we have got to declare war on Camelot Christianity. We have got to recognize that hope that is misplaced will lead us down a path that passes by disappointment, disillusionment, and disengagement on its way to death.

The Jesus of Camelot may be attractive but he is not the resurrected Jesus of the cross. The power of his resurrection is for those who have died. No, for those who have entered his suffering and died. We can't get to the resurrection by wishing away or denying the suffering. As we will see in the next chapter, sharing common experiences is an important part of knowing. An important part of knowing Jesus is sharing his story.

10. Spiritual problems have simple, quick, easy answers.

Perhaps the most damaging lie of Satan in his campaign against the truth is that the problems of life have easy answers. Sin and the problems that it produces are often complex and deeply rooted. While the answer may be simply put in terms of Jesus and repentance, it is not always clear as to what we are to repent of and what repentance may involve. The young wife who struggles in a relationship with her husband may find it difficult to easily set aside the fear and scarring of early experiences of sexual abuse by her father. The young man who expresses his deep insecurity by withdrawing from social situations may discipline himself to be outgoing and lovingly engaged with others, while failing to address the deeper fears that motivated his withdrawal. Has he repented while the underlying fears remain? In each of these cases it is easy to address the superficial sin while failing to go through the process of repenting of the deeper sin.

It is amazing to me to realize how complicated my sinful, self-defensive, strategies can be. I have often excused sinful attitudes and conduct by mistaking them as virtue. For example, for several years as a pastor, I excused my selfish autonomy and passive attitude in

leadership as a sign of humility, faith, and respect for the space of others. In reality it was more accurately explained as a fear of failure and a disinterest in the welfare of others.

12. God is a “cosmic public servant.”

When the founding fathers of the American republic set up our system of government they adapted many characteristics from their European roots but there was one characteristic that did not make it across the Atlantic: it was the notion of state royalty or a “king.” Our governing officials would be “public servants” not royalty. They would exist for our pleasure not we for theirs. They would be elected and accountable to “we the people.” It would be shocking to hear someone refer to our president as a king because we do not think of our leaders as worthy of our service. The American impulse to view leaders as public servants has crept into our Christian faith in some unhealthy ways. We tend to view God as a public servant who exists to serve us. After all, if we voted for Him He should serve our interests. The ultimate purpose of God has become the comfort and happiness of His people. If He loves us He should obey our commandments, give us the desire of our hearts, and serve our interests. When we think of God as a public servant who exists for our pleasure we make perhaps the greatest mistake imaginable in that we reverse the most basic decree of the universe: the creature is to serve the Creator not visa-versa.

Recognize that you will pay a price for not seeing suffering as a valuable part of your story and fellowship with God.

The list of the characteristics of Camelot could go on. You could no doubt add many points from your own experience. The point, however, should not be lost in the details. Camelot is an attempt to avoid the issue of suffering. By avoiding the sufferings of life, which were sufferings that Jesus experienced for us and invited us to experience with him, we miss an opportunity to know him. This is because we fail to share what is a most important part of his life story. And as we have seen in chapter two, we know someone by sharing their story.