

The Path of Life



Near the end of my favorite movie, *Dances with Wolves*, Lakota Sioux holy man Kicking Bird asks John Dunbar/Dances with Wolves to join him on a ride to a far place. At a resting place, he encourages Dunbar.

"Of all the trails in this life, there is one that matters most," Kicking Bird says. "It is the trail of a true human being. I think you are on this trail and it is good to see."

The idea of life as a path or a journey is common among almost all spiritual belief systems. Hindus, Moslems, B'Hai, and others all refer to a path. Taoism, other eastern religions in fact, specifically means "way" or "path."

The imagery of a path implies movement from one place to another with value in both the journey and in reaching the destination. But most belief systems base the path and the destination on human wisdom—in that way, they are more like bush-whacking than smooth paths, wandering around until one finds what appears to be a good direction.

Then

The Old Testament is full of references to life as a path, the most well-known today probably being in the 23rd Psalm: "*He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake*" (23:3b)

As Moses recounted God's provision for Israel before they crossed the Jordan, he prophesied that they would turn away from the Lord and be scattered across the nations. "*But from there,*" he told them, "*you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.*"

(Deuteronomy 4:29) He warned them to stick to God's paths: "*So you shall observe to do just as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you will possess.*" (Deuteronomy 5:32-33)

Then God gave Israel the Law—a detailed guidebook to the Path of Life. Do these things, God said, and you will be my children. "*Only be very careful,*" Joshua reminded them later, "*to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.*"

The Psalms frequently praise God's Word:

o "*You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.*" (Psalm 16:11)

o "*Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way. All the paths of the LORD are lovingkindness and truth to those who keep His covenant and His testimonies.*" (Psalm 25:8-10)

o "*Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your*

name." (Psalm 86:11)

o "How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness; they walk in His ways." (Psalm 119:1-3)

o "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105)

But the Law could not make men righteous because we are all incapable of keeping to it. The Law was perfect, but human beings are not. Just as even the best travel guide cannot guarantee that you'll find every sight in an unfamiliar city, God's guidebook was not the ultimate vehicle for leading people to salvation. That's why we needed a Messiah.

Jesus followed God's guidebook to perfection, giving us an example to follow. But Jesus Himself told us how difficult it is for people to follow his example: "*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*" (Matthew 7:13-14). And He acknowledged that it is impossible for people to attain their own salvation: "*When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, 'Then who can be saved?' And looking at them Jesus said to them, 'With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'*"

A guidebook and an example are not sufficient—people cannot completely follow God's Law, nor can we completely follow Jesus' example. One of the best ways to be sure you catch the best sights and avoid disappointments in an unfamiliar city is to hire a personal guide who knows it like the back of his or her hand. Jesus had been through this life as a human being and had "*been tempted in all things as we are*" (Hebrews 4:15), so He is qualified to serve as the ideal personal guide. And that's just what God gives us in the Holy Spirit—an internal guide to the Path of Life, always there and always right.

The early church understood that the Path of Life is a journey. In fact, being a disciple of Jesus was referred to as "The Way" (Greek **hodos** – way, path, road, street) before the term "Christianity" was coined:

o "*Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*" (Acts 9:1-2)

o "*But when some [in the synagogues] were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.*" (Acts 19:9)

o "*About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.*" (Acts 19:23)

The Hebrew writer provided one of the most succinct descriptions of The Way (my favorite passage):

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way [hodos] which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not

forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:19-25)

This passage not only refers to our personal **hodos**, but also to the role the *ekklesia* plays in helping us stay the course—stimulating and encouraging one another.

Ultimately, Paul and particularly John defined the primary attribute of the Way:
o *"And I show you a still more excellent way...[love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* (1 Corinthians 10:31b, 11:7)
o *"For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."* (1 John 3:11)

It wasn't long, however, before people started turning the Gospel into a rulebook. Two early post-Apostolic documents, *The Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve) and *The Epistle of Barnabas* described "two ways, one of life and one of death" (Didache 1:1). Much of the instruction that follows mirrors Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. While the instruction is certainly valid, it changes the emphasis of The Way from God's work to people's. You can read the text of [The Didache](#) or [The Epistle of Barnabas](#) by clicking the links.

Now

How much of today's institutional church emphasizes The Way versus theology and doctrine?

Jesus described the path as narrow, but there is no implication that there is a single, one-size-fits-all Path of Life. It should be obvious that the details of my path will differ markedly from that of a Christian living in an African village or even from those of my brothers and sisters across the aisle during the assembly, or even from those of my wife and children.

Think about the turning points in your life for a moment—times when you had to make decisions or when something out of your control occurred. If things had happened differently, how would your life be different? I can think of many such moments that would have taken me down a very different path. If my future wife, only a neighbor at the time, had not called to come over to my house to visit my parents, I probably would have married someone different, never later moved to Atlanta, and never known the couple that led us to the Lord. Would God's provision have afforded me another opportunity if my wife had never called?

Our modern version of Christianity is event-oriented. Church services, communion, baptism, confirmation, praying Jesus into your heart, Bible classes—all these are important, but they are really only pauses along a longer path, one that leads us either closer or further from God and Life. In ancient Judaism at least, the only way to become a Jew was to be born one. While a Jew might be more or less faithful, there was nothing he or she could do to become more Jewish. Not so with Christianity because The Way is a process, not one or more events—the process of allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us on a path to become more like Jesus.

It's a process because we'll never really accomplish the perfection Jesus embodied. We don't suddenly become like Jesus in the waters of baptism or kneeling at an altar call or any other event. Each day God allows us to make choices to stay on the path or stray away on a side trail. Our worship of God is not primarily found in the "religious" events of our lives, but in our everyday lives.

Kicking Bird was right—of all the trails in this life, there is one that matters most, but it is not a mystical path of becoming a real human being, it is the Path of Life, of becoming more and more a child of God and honoring Him by emulating his Son. Maybe everything about the Path of Life is not clear now, and staying on that path can be difficult, but in His Son, God gave us everything we need to enter the narrow gate.

Discussion

One ET&N subscriber sent the following note

A point of detail from your newsletter this week. Regarding this passage:

"Our modern version of Christianity is event-oriented. Church services, communion, baptism, confirmation, praying Jesus into your heart, Bible classes—all these are important, but they are really only pauses along a longer path, one that leads us either closer or further from God and Life."

I guess I would insist that "confirmation" (whatever that is) and "praying Jesus into your heart" are actually not important at all because they are not scriptural concepts and, in my view, don't belong in a list of equals with principles like baptism. I know this is a side issue to the intent of your article, but it is a deviation from my understanding of God's Word I thought worth mentioning.

DS: I think this subscriber has a point if someone is replacing scriptural concepts with non-scriptural ones, and there was no implication that the things in that short list were "equal."

On the other hand, retreats, marriage encounters, rallies, prayer circles, and many other activities Christians sometimes practice are also not specifically scriptural. It seems to me that anything that encourages an individual to be more of a disciple of Christ can be a valuable part of a Path of Life.

As far as "confirmation" is concerned, I'd like to address that in a future ET&N.

"The Path of Life" was been selected for inclusion on the <http://www.radicalgrace.org> website, another inJesus (associated with Destiny Image publishers) group that I highly recommend.

NEXT ISSUE: Christmas (December 16)

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