

COMING HOME, PART 1: LEAVING HOME

John 14:1-3, Revelation 21:1-7 (NASB)

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G. K. Chesterton was a prodigious Victorian journalist who authored dozens of books and thousands of articles on many subjects. One fiction book he wanted to write but did not was the story of an English yachtsman who abandons the comforts of his home and country for the deep blue sea. The man sails on and on, discovering many fascinating things about strange peoples and cultures. After months of sailing, he comes to a beach he thinks is in the South Seas. He spies from afar a barbaric temple flying a flag as he strides up the beach, armed to the teeth, to claim the land in the manner of the once-mighty British Empire by planting the flag.

The yachtsman prepares to engage the natives by talking in hand gestures, and as they approach from a distance he has a sneaking suspicion of familiarity. He realizes, to his shock, that the people on the beach are English, and the pagan temple is actually the bathing pavilion at Brighton on the coast of England. The fallacy of sailing the South Seas cracks apart and falls to the ground in a heap. He had left England behind, and by some foolishness and confusion, followed the signs of the sea and sky home again without realizing what he was doing.

Chesterton wrote: "...I am that man in a yacht. I discovered England. ...I am the man who with utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before. ...I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy" [*Orthodoxy*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908) pp. 3-5 *passim*]. His life became the story of a famous conversion to Christianity. After having abandoned, so he thought, the familiar comforts of Christian doctrine and English social Christendom, he set out to explore the many unorthodox views of the faith as well as other religions and the atheistic philosophies so prominent in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Like many modern people then and postmodern people today he sought to pick up bits of truth, clues to God, from every possible source, based on his own judgment.

Perhaps he really was seeking God after all, because his life seemed to be the fulfillment of the verse: "**You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart**" (Jeremiah 29:13). But he was looking in all the wrong places. And although his yachtsman story is amusing, there is nothing funny about people with the Bible in their hands abandoning it in the quest for truth elsewhere. It is like children who repudiate their upbringing, their faith, and their worldview, leaving home to become drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, and worldly lost people of every stripe. Few who abandon the nest in that way ever wander home again.

But we must be clear about what Chesterton says he "discovered." He did not become an evangelical Christian. He wrote in defense of that very simple statement of faith we call the Apostles' Creed, which says: *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost [Spirit], born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from whence He shall come to judge the quick [living] and the dead. I believe in the Holy*

Ghost, the holy catholic Church [all true Christians], the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

This statement is excellent as far as it goes, and for many centuries has drawn a line in the sand dividing historic Christian orthodoxy from the heretics, the cults, and all non-Christian religions. It has been held in common by Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox churches. Believing the truths in this creed is necessary for salvation, but it is not enough. Grace and propitiation are missing, and there is no statement of the need to personally repent and receive Christ as Lord and Savior. That means that many seemingly orthodox people have gone to hell agreeing with the Apostles' Creed. But such trouble with mental assent did not begin with the church. Many in ancient Israel were fierce defenders of their identity and their religion, yet did not personally have faith in God so as to be saved. So said the zealous defender of Judaism, Saul of Tarsus, later Paul the Apostle, who wrote: **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants..."** (Romans 9:6-7).

LEAVING HOME

All that being said, we treasure the Apostles' Creed and we thank Chesterton for defending that summary statement which points the way home for a lost world. For centuries it defined Western culture, yet now is being abandoned by millions the same way a teenager runs away from home to join the circus. Perhaps what saved Chesterton when he left his faith tradition was that he still believed in the concept of truth and was actually seeking it. In the postmodern time the idea of truth itself has largely been discarded. Research done by the Barna Group reveals that only twenty-two percent of Americans believe that absolute moral truth exists (*The Barna Update*, December 17, 2001). It is that very truth, as represented by the Ten Commandments, which convicts us of sin and shows us that we need a savior. So how then do postmodern people find their way home again? When postmoderns find a scrap of general revelation among the ruins of a lost world they say to themselves: *This is interesting, but nothing must be believed as absolutely true. Besides, they think, there is no one Big Story into which all these interesting facts fit.*

If that is true, then we should expect to see an entire culture leaving Western civilization and the Christian worldview for good. And this is the evidence of our time. Barna surveys report that only one out of five young adults who are church-ed as teens attend any church by the age of twenty-nine. Compared to the past twenty years, today's teenagers are the least likely to attend church after they become independent (*The Barna Update*, September 11, 2006). This should cause us to pause when we think: *If only we had played our guitars louder, or installed free internet in the church, or sent kids on more trips, or had a cooler youth pastor--our kids would be worshipping Christ today!*

No. There is a society-wide suction effect which is vacuuming people out of our churches. The "dechurching" of the West is the most prominent spiritual feature of our time. You can do the research on this yourself, but the forces pulling people to leave behind their spiritual home are immense and increasing according to the most recent studies. Our public schools not only do not support religious faith, they make it so that God cannot be the answer to any question. Beyond that, there is now the blunt promotion of fornication, homosexuality, and other religions. Our colleges and universities have become centers for prying young adults away from their faith. Several years ago Columbia University opened its arms to a speech by the most Nazi-like leader of our time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the

President of Iran. Of all the hateful things he said, the only thing to which the students objected was a remark against homosexuality. Know that no Bible-believing Christian will ever be invited to speak there, and if one slips through, the students will riot and prevent the speaker from being heard with no repercussions from the university.

In addition to this impact of our schools, our Western entertainment industry has sought to violently rip the foundation of our culture away. It has worked! Is it impacting the church? At this point in time--prepare to be offended and angered--Mormons are more likely to read the Bible during the week than are Protestants or Catholics. One third of born-again Christians say that co-habitation, gay sex, sexual fantasies, breaking the speed limit, and watching sexually-explicit movies are morally acceptable behaviors (*Barna Update*, see above). Chesterton admitted that he was the butt of his own ironic story about leaving England's Christian religious tradition by following his own wisdom, and ending up ignorantly arriving back at the place he had left. But there is nothing amusing about fornicating, porno-watching Christians. Western culture has left its home in Christian tradition, and the suction is so powerful that lukewarm Christians are being pulled away as well.

Christ's powerful inward reaction to a wandering Israel is no doubt applied to his church at this point in history: "**When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes'"** (Luke 19:41-42).

THE HOME YOU ALWAYS YEARNED FOR

Everyone yearns for a place to call home. Trips are fun, but there is something wonderful about coming home. I remember as a little kid coming home from a family trip in the car. I would always fall asleep in the back seat, and Dad would scoop me up in his arms and carry me into the house where Mom would tuck me into bed. It remains a powerfully sweet memory for me to this day. Even people we call homeless usually set up a little home area where they can sleep, eat, and hang out. Sometimes it is under a bridge, or in a tunnel beneath the city, or in an abandoned shipping container, but there they assemble the basic accouterments of life. They will defend that space as vigorously as any homeowner. People often gripe about the shortcomings of their hometown, but if you criticize it they will turn and defend it: "Hey, that's my hometown you're talking about!"

There is something in the human heart which yearns for a home, yet the reality of this earth never quite lives up to the yearning. C. S. Lewis argued that if we taste good, beautiful, and true things here on earth which only increase our yearning, then we are yearning for heaven. Jesus Christ responded to this yearning with a set of teachings found in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. He began: "**Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also"** (John 14:1-3).

There are many reasons for us to be troubled in heart, but why were Jesus' disciples disturbed within themselves? They had left everything to follow Jesus, and at this point in his ministry he had begun telling them of his crucifixion, resurrection, and departure from them. He said: "**Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to**

you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.' Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later'" (John 13:33-36).

I would have been troubled at such news myself. We observe older folks who live beyond the age of their peers and gradually watch them all die. Their hearts grieve the losses, but when the time comes to move them from their beloved home into an assisted-living facility, they often fight like tigers to prevent it. This is perfectly understandable. I am expecting to do the same thing! They are not only losing convenience and comfort, the very concept of home is being torn away. The new living situation never quite qualifies as home.

Name whatever concerns you. Jesus says: **"Do not be troubled!"** And what means should we use to obtain this cure for our troubled hearts? He says: **"...believe in God, believe also in Me..."** Faith in Christ is the path to the peace our hearts seek. To his own disciples he said: "Trust me." He says the same thing to us. Name the problem, then let the Lord grant you his peace. Paul described the means to live in this peace: **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"** (Philippians 4:6-7). Faith in Christ is the cure for a troubled heart. We appropriate that peace by bringing every concern to the Lord in prayer.

Jesus went on to address our instinctive yearning for home by saying that when we trust him, we are coming home--the home for which our hearts yearn: **"In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you"** (John 14:2). In response to their troubled hearts Christ invited his disciples into a new home with their heavenly Father. They would not go there immediately, but it would be waiting for them in heaven. They would get a taste of it through fellowship with the Father and the Son while still on earth.

How did Christ prepare a home where everyone who trusts in him would have their own room? It was not merely by fluffing pillows! He had already told them of his crucifixion: **"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.' But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die"** (John 12:32-33). The purchase of our redemption by his death on the cross for our sins was the preparation of our heavenly home.

Let your troubled heart be comforted with these words. You will never have to defend your heavenly home against someone trying to encroach upon you. War will never touch you there. Tears will not fall in that home, sickness will not invade, and you will walk with your Redeemer. The picture of our satisfaction in God in heaven is painted in the Book of Revelation: **"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things**

have passed away.' And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' And He said, 'Write, for these words are faithful and true.' Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son'" (Revelation 21:1-7). How can we be sure to go there? Simply by trusting him, that he faithfully prepares this home for those who repent of their sins and follow him as his disciples.

Christ slays one last fear in John 14:3. What if we are not paying attention, or sinning a little bit, or distracted by earthly battles? Will we miss our opportunity to go to our heavenly home? We cannot fail to reach that blessed state if we trust in him, for as he promised: **"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also"** (John 14:3). Christ is coming back for his own to take us to the home for which we have always yearned! This is a hope which cannot fail.

If you are one of those who abandoned their faith and has not yet come back, I invite you to realize that you can sail completely around this world, investigate every religion and philosophy, and you will have to sail back home to Christ to find the satisfaction your heart seeks. Chesterton discovered home in England, in Christ, where he had always lived.

And if you have received Christ, yet find yourself being suctioned away by the tide of our Western culture which is bent on leaving home and never returning--watch out! Don't you treasure the possession of the hope of a heavenly home with the God who made you? I advise you to swim like mad against the current of our lost world! Cast all your cares upon the Lord, and refuse the deceits of the sin nature! You will never find your peace on the stormy seas of this world's ocean.

And let us endeavor to trumpet the message of Christ to a culture which has already discarded the thing they need most, the home for which they have always yearned. Let us speak peace into the troubled hearts of our day, and tell people of their heavenly home if they will trust in Christ. For he is coming back to take his people there, and for him we eagerly look. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!