

Heart Appreciation: The Beat Goes On

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By Dixon Cartwright

BIG SANDY, Texas—I don't recall any warning signs, except I seemed especially tired in the days just before I experienced what I've learned that medical people like to call a myocardial infarction.

Now I know what a heart attack feels like. I woke up at 5:45 on the morning of Monday, July 11, 2011, with portentous pains in my chest, neck and left arm. I knew something was wrong. I wasn't sure what.

I woke Linda up and asked her about the deductible on our insurance policy. I waited a few minutes and noticed the situation was not improving.

I asked her to call a friend to see if he could drive me to a hospital. She tried but, even though the friend was home, he didn't answer his phone. We figured later that maybe she had misdialed.

While I was dressing, I found a bottle of aspirin and took one. I had heard that was a good idea in the event of a heart attack.

On the road

Linda drove me while I sat in the passenger seat leaned all the way back. I noticed that the pain was worse if I sat up or stood.

The hospital was 15 miles away. The staff there did an electrocardiogram. A doctor told me I was having a heart attack and I needed to go immediately to one of the downtown hospitals. "Which one should it be?" he asked.

Linda told him that because of our insurance policy's requirements we needed to go East Texas Medical Center.

I said Linda could drive me. The doctor said, no, the ambulance would transport me, and it would make haste with sirens and horns blaring and lights blazing.

A lead to the heart

At the second hospital came a few more tests quickly administered, and then I was wheeled atop a gurney into a room (that I don't remember much about)

in which the doctor and his assistants installed a “sheath” inside and at the top of my right leg, near the groin, to access a major artery that leads to the heart.

With X rays and an echocardiogram, Dr. Kyle Smith determined I had a “big old blood clot” (as he described it later) and three blocked heart arteries.

One of them, the main one in the front of the heart, was 99 percent obstructed. Two others nearby were clogged 30 percent and 40 percent.

Technical terminology

First he sucked the clot out through the artery and the small entry incision at the top of my leg.

Then, using the same artery as a passageway, he managed to magically snake a flexible cable within a long, thin conduit to install two stents, which are short springlike metal-mesh tubes that when inserted into a clogged or collapsed blood vessel force it to open up and begin allowing blood to flow to blood-starved regions of the heart.

Although I was conscious during the procedure, I don’t remember much about it.

I heard over the next several days from doctors and nurses that most people who have my particular set of symptoms do not survive. One doctor told me the technical term for what I had was a widow maker.

Now I’m taking several medicines I wasn’t taking before. In fact, I had hardly ever taken any medicines at all. At least one of my remedies leaves me light-headed. It’s an alpha and beta blocker to control blood pressure and to lower strain on the heart.

I write these words from inside a fog, yet I’m feeling a little better as each week goes by.

Twinkling of an eye

So what conclusions should I draw from my recent experience?

One is that a life can change in the twinkling of an eye.

Another is that it’s nice to have family and friends. Thank you, family and friends, for the well-wishing E-mails, cards, letters, visits and phone calls and the prayers.

A related conclusion, subjective, is that it wasn’t my time to die.

But if I’m privileged to reside several more years on the planet, what are the implications for me? Are there things I need to do I haven’t done? Do I need to shift to another gear, either higher or lower?

The Journal, an independent Church of God newspaper, has been my pride and joy in many ways for nearly 15 years, since February 1997. Some of my reasons for publishing *The Journal* are the same as they were back then. Some are different.

The similarities and differences in my reasoning in 1997 compared with 2011 have been on my mind since I left the hospital a few weeks ago.

Colorful pronouncements

Some 1997 vs. 2011 similarities:

- I think it's helpful for members of the Churches of God to have access to a medium that lets them read about each other because, thanks to our beliefs and traditions, many COG publications will typically say nothing about the people in other groups—unless it's to criticize them or even mark somebody as a heretic.

I don't mean to be critical here. I know people, our churches' leaders included, are doing what they believe God wants them to do, even when it can be unpleasant to sit on the receiving end of some of their more colorful pronouncements.

- I think the Churches of God (and everybody) should have access to a free press: freedom of speech, freedom of expression.

- I believe in peer review, and I think a free press, including *The Journal*, can help with the ideal of inviting one's peers to examine one's doctrinal ideas. Otherwise we end up with a bunch of what a friend refers to as farmer theologians out there.

They have creative thoughts and genuinely spiritual impulses but little access to the course corrections that would come if they shared their conclusions in interactive discussions rather than dogmatic pronouncements.

Salvation is durable

Some 1997 vs. 2011 differences:

- I no longer think efforts such as publications and radio and TV broadcasts are as important as I once thought. That doesn't mean I don't think *The Journal* is helpful and that God hasn't blessed its production.

I just mean that no one is remotely in danger of losing his salvation based on whether anyone publishes anything or not.

In other words, I think our calling, our favorable status in God's sight, is much more durable than I believed it was in 1997. I believe God is not nearly as picky as we are about religion.

- I have a different view of the significance and importance of doctrine compared with my view in 1997. I think doctrine is overrated.

As I've written here a few times, I've noticed the obvious divisions among churches and the brethren that doctrine causes.

A small example: The more detailed, and longer, a group's statement of beliefs, the more exclusivist that group, by definition, is.

The more we spell out and insist on imposing our doctrines, the more people we exclude from our fellowship.

Yet, in my opinion, God does not exclude those people from His fellowship. God accepts them whether we accept them or not.

A sane way to handle the question of doctrine is to let people work out their own salvation, which is a time-honored biblical principle. Yes, there are trunk-of-the-tree doctrines, but they're fewer than I once believed.

What's the difference?

What are they? I'd say they are implied in the Two Great Commandments of Matthew 22 and the Golden Rule (Leviticus 19; Matthew 7; Luke 6). Christians can draw inferences from those three great overlapping principles, and their handling of those inferences should remain between them and God.

Am I saying anything different from what most of us already believe? Maybe.

The Churches of God—and other expressions of conservative, fundamentalist Christianity—are overwhelmingly exclusivist. Such exclusivism—the belief and teaching that I am right and everybody else is suspect—is easy to notice when we're talking about the Church of God wars and the internecine battles of other conservative Christians.

But is there a remedy for the sad state of affairs in fundamentalist religion as a whole, including conservative Christianity?

I think the problem boils down to preachers, traditions, mighty edifices and vain babblings usurping God's prerogative to value the content of people's hearts. That godly principle lies at the heart of worthy scriptures like Philip-pines 2:12: "Work out your own salvation."

I'm not as fond of the "fear and trembling" part of the verse, because I don't believe God is a tyrant. Maybe "fear and trembling" is a mistranslation or was inserted by a well-meaning monk laboring under a hard deadline in the Dark Ages.

People's intents of the heart are what matters to God. This is not a polemic for grace and against law. God's grace—His love—makes little sense without the existence of eternal right.

Beyond the Two Great Commandments and the Golden Rule, we draw inferences based on our understanding and sense of the eternal.

We work out our salvation. In doing so, we acknowledge the folly of judgmentalism, and we grant everybody else the freedom and responsibility God graciously grants us.

What could change our hearts to enable some of these ideals to gain acceptance? It would probably take another Reformation, at least one within COG Christianity.