

Consensus

Volume 20

Issue 1 *A Ministry Miscellany*

Article 9

5-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Buck, Erwin (1994) "Called to Walk on Water," *Consensus*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss1/9>

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Called to Walk on Water¹

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Text: Matthew 4:22-33

Graduands, this is your night of celebration and reflection. The focus is on you, and you have selected the text on which this sermon is based. But I am sure that you want us to think of this auspicious occasion in much broader perspective. You want us to think about the life which all of us gathered here tonight share together. You want us to reflect upon the challenges and the promises addressed to all of us, as we attempt to follow the invitation of Jesus to venture out of safe space, into uncertain waters.

In Matthew's story the disciples have at this point been with Jesus for quite some time already. They have heard Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, they have seen Jesus heal people's diseases, they have seen Jesus liberate people from the oppression of various kinds of demons; they have experienced Jesus relating to people of all sorts. They have seen him calm a storm, feed multitudes in the wilderness, and even raise people from the dead. They had even been on a brief internship of sorts when they went on a missionary journey at Jesus' request.

Now it is time for them to launch out on their own, literally and figuratively. Jesus virtually pushes them away from himself to embark on their own journey. He does the kind of thing mother-birds do when they push their young out of the nest and so force them to begin to rely on their own wings.

For the little birds—and maybe for us bigger birds, too—this is at once threatening and exhilarating. Threatening, as the fledgling takes a leap into—you know not what. Threatening in that down there in the underbrush lurk cats and other

dangers. But exhilarating in their discovery that by relying on nothing but thin air, they can learn to soar to new heights and experience a previously unknown freedom.

It is an awesome venture (not just for recent seminary graduates, but for all of God's people). It is an awesome venture to become involved with people at a deeper level, at the level where one addresses life's essential questions and where one explores one's relationship with God and with God's people on a personal, an interpersonal, even an inter-national level. It is an awesome venture to engage fragile human beings and to become vulnerable yourself in the process. If it is an awesome risk to accept the responsibilities of parenthood, it may be even more demanding to relate intimately to others as peers.

At practically every juncture one encounters the potential for conflict. Practically every issue that arises touches people on a level at which they are likely to respond on the basis of deeply engrained patterns of behaviour.

Human feelings and relationships are so tender and fragile, and human emotions so unpredictable and volatile. And people's expectations and needs are so varied in all areas of life, that it is hardly likely that you will satisfy the hopes and desires of the people for whom you care. As pastors you will be expected to provide responsible leadership in liturgical worship, people will look to you for a model of spirituality which they can emulate, they thirst for intellectual stimulation, and for theological insight. And those people may look for quick results.

A pastor after 17 years in the ministry recently observed: "When I started my ministry... congregations allowed a young pastor to make mistakes. Today this is no longer the case."

Furthermore, ministry inevitably deals with controversial issues, as we try to come to grips with root causes of problems, even though we do not have absolute or ready-made answers to offer.

"Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man does not have a place to rest his head."

Anyone who follows the beckoning call of Jesus to get involved with people is going to have to walk on water, or, more appropriate to our climate: to skate on thin ice.

Every issue of substance creates conflict. Closing of hospitals/holding the line on taxes; cutting jobs, the elimination of

certain services, reducing the national and provincial deficit, downsizing of businesses and institutions, enhancing the self-respect of minorities, safeguarding the dignity of people. All of these often laudable objectives pose immense problems such as increasing unemployment and decay of the social fabric, problems with which national and international governments seem unable to cope. And yet, responsible ministry must deal with all of these things on a daily basis. We are to become involved with people on the deepest level and so not only to attempt to walk on *water*, but on eggshells.

Jesus issues an invitation to dare to undertake what seems humanly and scientifically impossible, to attempt to live as though the structures which constrain and circumscribe our existence have ultimately no ultimate power over us.

Obviously it is inappropriate for us to attempt to approach such issues in an over-confident sort of way. To jump off the pinnacle of the temple in order to force God's hand is not a venture of faith. Nevertheless, faith does require us to attempt the impossible and to emulate none other than Jesus himself.

Indeed, this is precisely what Jesus asks his disciples to do when he sends them out to duplicate what he had done, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, and even to raise the dead. Walking on water seems a rather simple thing to do in comparison.

Scary stuff!

But lo and behold, as the fledgling bird discovers that the air will sustain it in bold flight, the disciple discovers that the inviting word of Jesus will sustain those who venture out onto the water.

Not for long, maybe, but for just long enough. As by a miracle you experience the incredible actually happening—*as long as you don't look down!*

Years ago, in University, in Physical Education class, when that was still a compulsory subject in every undergraduate degree program, I learned an amazing lesson: In the gymnasium I had not been successful in jumping over the vaulting horse, no matter how hard I tried. The whole exercise was intimidating, to say the least. The wooden horse is a rather high and cumbersome structure; one approaches it at considerable speed, and after clearing it one hurtles through thin air before

coming back down to earth. And back to earth I did come, usually with a tumble, or worse, a thud.

The instructor insisted that there was only one thing I was doing wrong: I was looking downwards. "Lift your head high," he would encourage me. "Look up!" But that is scary. It is disorienting. If you look up, you cannot tell how high off the ground you are, and whether you are on target.

"Never mind," the instructor insisted! "Just do it. Your body goes where your head points. Raise your head, and your body will follow." It didn't make sense, but I tried it. And it worked! I found that I could clear the horse with ease. What an exhilarating experience it was!

"Take a run, jump on the springboard, touch the back of the horse with your outstretched fingers; spread your legs in a straight V—and soar! And land on the mat in a straight upright posture! Whatever you do: keep your head up! Don't worry about what is below. Trust me, the ground is level and there is a mat at the place where your feet will come down. Don't look down to check and double check that that is really so! Keep your head up!"

And it worked, beautifully.

That got me to think: maybe the same thing applies in other areas of life as well. Maybe it is true that if we are not overly anxious about the solid state of *terra firma* below us, maybe if we are not too concerned about our visible means of support, maybe then we will be set free to follow the invitation of one who encourages us to *walk on water*.

Oh you of little faith! Why are you afraid? Keep your head up!

It is all too tempting to focus so much attention on all the things that could possibly go wrong that we become stymied and ineffective. The future of the church, the commitment of God's people, the apathy of society around us. All of this—and much more besides—can fill us with fear and foreboding.

The readers of Matthew's Gospel knew a lot about depressing statistics. In the sower's field only a few grains of wheat bore hundred-fold. The invitation to the banquet was accepted only by some. False prophets were making inroads in the congregation. It was enough to make anyone timid and fearful. The water outside the boat looked even more treacherous.

Nevertheless, on Jesus' invitation, Peter did venture out. Not that he was spectacularly successful, mind you. But that did not matter.

What did matter was that in the midst of his failure he could hear a voice and feel the touch of a hand. "It is I, don't be afraid!"

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the graduation exercises of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, 7 May 1993.