

Todd D. Hunter

Foreword by Eugene H. Peterson

CHRISTIANITY BEYOND BELIEF

Following Jesus for the Sake of Others



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FOREWORD

We live in a country that is becoming less Christian by the day. People who make a living compiling statistics on these kinds of things tell us that we have an epidemic of people leaving the church. Recently I was told that one of these pollsters has concluded that nonbelievers are the fastest growing “faith” group in America. The alarm has been sounded and panic is widespread. There is considerable finger-pointing at the failure of the church to stanch the hemorrhage of membership.

Todd Hunter is not one of them. Todd Hunter has been intimately involved in the American church scene for thirty years now. He has experienced the good, the bad and the indifferent from the inside. He hasn’t wasted even as much as ten minutes of those thirty years as a spectator criticizing or kibitzing from the sidelines. He knows the American church world firsthand and in detail. He is not alarmed. “Nothing was ever accomplished in a stampede” (von Hugel). I detect no hint of panic.

What he has done is give careful attention to what is going on in American culture these days, accept it without complaint as his congregation, and work out ways of living, talking about and inviting others to enter into what God is doing in this kingdom-of-God world that has been given to us. He doesn’t bash the churches. He doesn’t attack the so-called postmodern age as the enemy. He embraces the huge gospel announcement that the kingdom Jesus announced is, in fact, at hand (and has been “at hand” for a long time) and God is at work

in daily life, real life. Quietly and without fanfare he tells us how and why he is choosing to live his life as “a cooperative friend of Jesus.”

This is refreshing, this quiet voice. There is urgency conveyed in these pages, certainly, but not desperation. There is no business-as-usual complacency in his approach, but a carefully thought out and practiced engagement with men and women conversationally on their terms.

And story. This book gives us a thorough reorientation in story as the comprehensive way to understand and experience the following of Jesus. We have all grown up in an American culture that “knew not Joseph.” We live in a world of information and news. We learn to think and feel and use language in Flip Wilson’s “church of what’s happening now.” Verbally pummeled by disconnected and random things and events, facts and ideas, but increasingly hungry for a story into which we can live, find a plot, experience relationships, explore meaning. Story—the Jesus story, the king story, my story—takes priority over information or argument in the way we go about following Jesus and talking to others about following Jesus. Hunter reorders our imaginations to give priority to living in relationship with others and with God. Doctrines and morals are still important, but if there is not story, there is no relationship, no plot, no named people to love and serve.

When we depersonalize the gospel into concepts or institutionalize it into a collective identity or program it into a good cause or individualize it into a ticket into heaven, we suck the life out of it. Todd Hunter recovers the large, capacious, biblically storied context for us so that we can live *biblically*—in his words, as “cooperative friends of Jesus, in creative goodness, for the sake of others, through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Martin Thornton, a man from whom I learned much, wrote that when he finished reading a book he would flip back through the pages and find YBH scribbled on many of the margins: *Yes, but how?* “Won-

derful ideas, great sentences, moving expositions. Yes, but how?" I think I can assure you that when you come to the end of this book there will not be a single "Wonderful ideas, great sentences, moving expositions. Yes, but how?" I think I can assure you that when you come to the end of this book there will not be a single YBH in the margins. And why? Because Todd Hunter provides a simple but strategic *how* for maintaining and practicing the integrity of the Christian life in the real-life places where we spend most of our time in the particular cultural conditions handed to us by postmodern America. He names the *how* "Three Is Enough." I will let him tell you how it works. Read with expectation.

Eugene Peterson

Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology
Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.