
THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSING PIECES

BY MICHAEL CARD

One of my fellow undergraduates at Western Kentucky University was “different.” He was always coming up with bizarre ways of expressing basic truths. Almost thirty years later, I now consider him to have been one of the most original thinkers I ever knew.

In the middle of a heated philosophical argument one day, he looked at me with infuriating kindness and said, “You only believe your point of view is correct because you thought of it.”

His comment stopped me dead in my tracks. He was correct. The real reason I was fighting so fiercely for my philosophical “position” was simply because *I had* thought of it. Because I thought it, I automatically concluded it must be true. After some time of reflection I realized, with his help, that I was in fact quite wrong. Are you beginning to get a feel for the simple, galling ability he had to speak the truth?

There was a favorite saying of his, one he resorted to when he was being faulted for purposely leaving out some vital piece of information in an argument. “Well,” he would say with a maddening grin, “You can’t say everything all the time.”

Again, it sounds deceptively simple but the truth is you really can’t say everything all the time. Yet this simple lesson is one we, as Christians, urgently need to learn.

It took me years to begin to understand this in the writing of lyrics. I tried always to cram everything I knew on a given subject into a song. But songs, like people, need room to breathe and to listen to another Voice besides yours or mine. I sometimes listen to sermons where, in an attempt to cover all the theological or doctrinal bases, so much is said that in the process that the message is left essentially unsaid or else helplessly covered up. All the points are correct and in the end it all adds up except somewhere my heart was left along the way. My soul was never given the time or the space to catch up. The Holy Spirit was never given a word in edge-wise.

The writers of the gospels knew that it was impossible to say everything all the time. That’s one reason there are so many missing pieces in all of their portrayals of the life of Jesus.

*Except for the precious little window in Luke 2:41-52, where is His childhood?

*I need to hear the content of Jesus’ solitary prayer in Mark 1:35. So early in His ministry and He is already inundated with the suffering and needs of the people. What did He need to say to God?

*And what was the content of the sermons He preached for the thousands He fed? (Mk. 2:13, 6:3ff)

For me one of the most important missing sermons is Luke 24:13ff, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.”

“Luke,” I want to say, “What were you thinking!” And what about the “wonders of God” that those who were filled with

the Spirit were speaking in over fifteen languages. What was it exactly that they heard that caused their hearts to explode at Pentecost? Luke gives us not a single word of it. (Acts 2)

Have you noticed all the missing pieces in the details of the crucifixion? There are no descriptions of Jesus being nailed hand and foot to the cross. We must go to the Old Testament to learn that detail. (Ps. 22:16) (Only after the Resurrection do we read of Jesus showing them His hands and feet.) Matthew 27:35 says simply, “...when they crucified Him.” Mark 15: 24 reads only, “And they crucified Him.” Luke, in 23:33 records, “There they crucified Him.” And John finally, in 19:18 says, “Here they crucified Him.” The single most important event in the history of mankind and we are given almost no detail. The same can be said of the Resurrection. There are no details of the actual event, only of the aftermath. Sooner or later we need to learn to stop and ask “why?”

The easy answer is, of course, that the gospels are not biographies (from which we could rightly expect such detail) but rather, testimonies. They “testify” as to who Jesus is and what He means to us and to the world and this they accomplish with *absolute* perfection. That’s the easy answer, but I believe there’s more.

John, who is the master of missing pieces, (no Nativity, no second Temple cleansing, not a single parable, no last supper) openly admits to this dilemma in, what I consider to be the most frustrating verse in the Bible:

“Jesus did many other things that are not written in this book. But these things have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that believing you might have life in His name.” 20:30

John’s disciples, who I believe appended chapter 21 after his death, echo the same sentiment when they say:

“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” 21:25

Both passages admit to the missing pieces, in fact enough missing pieces to fill the “whole world”! John apparently knows several of the “many other things” to which he alludes but has chosen for some frustrating reason to leave them unsaid. And so it is John’s gospel that best points us to the less easy answer.

The missing pieces, the ones we know to miss and the world-filling multitude we don’t even know to ask about, do have a purpose, like the spaces between words and the silences between notes of music. They force our imaginations to lean in and listen, to strain, uncomfortably to hear what is so often left unsaid. The missing pieces reinforce the mystery. They beg for our attention. They mock those who would presume to know it all. They provide a space for our vital interaction and supposition. They are invitations for us to participate. They provide a connection to our own lives, which are so often filled with frustrating, missing pieces. In one sense, we can fit into some of the spaces left by the missing pieces. Because, after all, you can’t say everything all the time.

So, I believe the invitation is to celebrate the gaps and missing pieces in the story of Jesus and in the story of our own lives. Seek to fill at least some of them with courage and imagination but realize that it requires greater courage still to leave some of the most aching places empty to wait and hope expectantly for His Presence to fill.

