**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

**Ch. 5: “Waiting Brings Life, Not a Slow Death”**

Won’t it be nice if everything ran smoothly . . . schedules, work, technology, and the Church?

**Two Mistakes:**

1. No Tension = No Community

If we love the church, we need to love the real church, as it is, rather than some idealized notion of community. A smooth experience is not a sign of life; tension, discord, and even crisis, are. These can become dysfunction, destruction, and dehumanization if not dealt with well. But smooth often means smoothing over serious problems rather than facing them, as with cases of the abuse of power in the church. Compare this to a family. Siblings may have tensions, but they love each other.

1. No Crisis = No God

We long for better days when life, and the life of the church, seems less fragile, but avoiding crisis does not remedy fragility because we worship a God who shows up. We misidentify our crisis as the decline of the church. But the real crisis, the one that we should live in, dwell in, and wait in, is in “encountering a living God who is God.” (88) The mistake is to push that crisis aside to focus on decline or other issues that are not the real task of the church. Our task is to encounter God.

Crises shape our lives. So, we need to choose the right crisis, either the crises that distract us from God and focus our attention on ourselves or the important crisis of encountering God. Church leaders should be concerned with how to help their people experience God, encounter the living God, when we live in a world that “blinds them to anything beyond the here and now.”(89) Life comes out of that crisis.

**The Danish Treat:** Encountering God is a crisis, perhaps, because we must do it on God’s terms. Saul was persecuting the early church because that is what he thought God wanted. In his zeal for God, he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Act. 9). That changed his direction, his action, his very understanding of God and what God wants. It even changed his name to Paul. Paul did not plan on that encounter. It was not what he wanted until he understood it. It was a crisis.

In the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard challenged the national church of Denmark, a church that had everything under control and running smoothly because it was a church that was not facing the crisis of encountering God. They had no decline because they managed everything to their satisfaction, but not to God’s. Kierkegaard pointed out that they had smooth religion but without God, and his criticisms irritated the leadership of the Danish church; he was the crisis that was their encounter with God. We don’t manage God; encountering God will upset smooth.

**The Wild and Unmanageable God:** We cannot manage God. There are no procedures or technologies we can employ to encounter God. We encounter God because God chose to be revealed to us, and always on God’s terms rather than ours.

To be clear, we could not know God if God did not reveal Godself. As creatures, we simply do not have the capacity to know God on our own. When we try, we are as pathetic as a six-year-old trying to explain quantum mechanics to a physicist. But God has revealed, acted, and spoken in ways that we can comprehend; God accommodates this revealing to our capacities. Knowing God is so far beyond our abilities that we cannot manage it; we can only receive it.

We can encounter God because God acts in the world. Not all the books of the Bible have historical content, but they all fit into a large story that scholars call Salvation History, the story of God’s actions in the world to redeem us from our sin and restore our relationship with God. Those actions in history are often not what we would expect—the pregnancies of barren or virgin women, leaders who stutter, leaders who sin, and a weak people who survive against great strength because of the grace of God.

“Faith is the crisis of knowing the true God by how God had revealed Godself in the world. The church has no life other than waiting for and witnessing to the God who reveals Godself in the world in the backward way of love.” (97)

Time and eternity are not the same. To encounter God is to experience eternity, moments when what (really who) is in front of us and the now of that encounter is the focus rather than the passage of time onto what is next. When we truly encounter God or each other in moments of genuine love, we touch eternity. We encounter God in the waiting.

**REFLECTION:** What is your crisis? What is our crisis, as Southminster? Are we working to fix a problem, to end decline, to create a smooth religious experience or community?

What do we need to do to wait and encounter God? Root and Bertrand’s use of the word crisis is provocative, intentionally so, I am sure. What does the word “crisis” mean to you? How is God a crisis to you, to us?