

Student's prayer: 'I take hands off'

During his freshman year at Yale University, Bill Borden wrote this prayer in his journal: "Lord Jesus, I take hands off as far as my life is concerned. I put thee on the throne of my heart. Change, cleanse, use me as thou shalt choose. I take the full power of thy Holy Spirit. I thank thee" (William Borden, Mrs. Howard Taylor, pg. 116, Moody Press.)

This faith event changed Borden's life and set in motion a shift of direction that had a profound effect upon his student years at Yale and Princeton Theological Seminary, and his brief career as a missionary to Egypt. Borden died in Cairo of cerebral meningitis at the age of 25; his life was short but fully lived. His commitment to Jesus Christ and the world missionary mandate of the gospel still challenges those of us who know his story.

Taking our hands off

Borden's journal entry suggests the narrow and fragile dividing line that makes the difference between active commitment to life on the one hand, and apathy toward life on the other. In both, we make a choice that could be described by Borden's words as a freshman: "I take hands off."

It is remarkable that the same brief sentence — "I take my hands off" — could be the key opening thought for motivated action on the one side and demotivation of all action on the other.

How can this be true? In both instances, we "take hands off" when we realize the limitations of human power; in both instances, we become disillusioned with human achievement and success; in both, we feel a disappointment with people who fall short of our expectations. Nevertheless, what we do with these feelings of disappointment, inadequacy or fatigue makes all the difference between commitment and apathy.



From Your Pastor

Earl F. Palmer

know I've dropped the ball). For those few key moments, I am standing at a crossroads.

This is the moment where Borden stood as a young man. Borden put it in a straightforward way. He knew himself well enough not to place himself at the center of his life ("on the throne of my heart"). This is why he took "hands off" as far as his life is concerned. He also knew too well the inadequacy of the people and institutions around him, and the futility of enthroning in his heart the church, Yale, or any idealistic program.

Instead, Borden decided in favor of Jesus Christ as the living center for his life. He chose to be available to live under Christ's will, and he claimed the assurance of the Holy Spirit. This act of commitment to life in Christ made all the difference.

Institutionalizing disappointment

Apathy has the same starting place as commitment: It

This choice goes through my mind whenever I have just failed to really make a go of a project, task or concern that was important to me. The important question is: Which way do I go now?

I have felt this question in the middle of a day at work, or as a parent and spouse (especially at those moments when I was supposed to "stand tall" and yet I

begins with surrender. The apathetic attitude actually agrees with Borden's prayer to "take hands off" — but it stops there. In this way, apathy institutionalizes disappointment. The soul settles down into a relaxation of all effort at discovery, and eventually decides to stop deciding. This is what the word means: *away from pathos* — away from suffering or any intense experience.

Apathy takes "hands off" as far as all decisions are concerned. Yet there is a double irony in such a no-choice "choice." The first is that all human choices against experiencing strong feelings, and the involvements that go with feelings, are self-defeating. They inevitably result in the very emotions we have hoped to avoid. The reality is that we cannot escape pathos by deciding against pathos.

Most of the arguments I have heard for not caring are that "I'm too tired to care anymore," or "I've had it," or "I'm burned out." Now for the bad news: Apathy protects me against further fatigue about as much as smoking a clove cigarette actually soothes a raw throat. The apparent relief is imaginary, because the basic irritation in my throat is actually made worse, though the cloves have a side effect that blocks the pain.

Is there a cure? Yes. We can be thankful that because God exists, there is a cure for everything, including the complicated life patterns of apathy and all its companion non-possibilities. The cure happens in stages for most people, but ultimately it requires us to join up with the rest of the human race and take off the dark glasses.

It finally demands that we, as William Borden did, decide to decide. It finally draws us into the rich colors of human feeling where the rewards are better than the possible dangers. Best of all, the cure draws us into fellowship with the *non*-apathetic Lord of life.

All of this takes time — but that's one of the best parts of the cure.