

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

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Everyone knows what a crisis is. A crisis is an event—an event that speeds up the heartbeat, reduces skin temperature, and makes your hands sweat.

But it is more than that. A crisis has two halves to it. One half is the event; the other half is the decision or indecision with which one responds to the event. Because of the decision-making aspect of crises, our discussion about the meaning of crisis is more complicated than simply determining what events are grave (or exciting) enough to be rated as crises. For example, an event that for one individual is relatively non-threatening, causing little stress with regard to decision-making, may for another person initiate an emergency response.

Also, the way that people respond to an identical crisis event is different. The breakdown of the church van at a ski retreat is a crisis by most definitions. Its impact, however, upon each member of the group—the youth pastor, the parents at home, and the kids themselves—is so varied that it would take a book to catalogue each interlocking decision and response in the face of the one event.

CRISIS AS A WAY OF LIFE

There are some people for whom crisis is a permanent way of life due to their inability to make decisions. They live in a permanent, passive blur of experiences and situations that are always “happening” to them.

Woody Allen is that kind of person. Every day for Woody Allen is a struggle with irresolvable problems. He tells of the great crisis he had in his relationship with a girl he had hoped to marry. He put it this way: “We had a religious conflict. She was an atheist; I was an agnostic. We couldn’t decide what religion not to raise our children in.”

Notice that the double ingredients *event* and *decision* that make up this Woody Allen crisis are common to all crises, whether of milder or more dangerous intensity than the one he describes. A situation emerges that by its nature creates a moment of such importance that it demands a decisive move on our part. The English word *crisis* comes to us directly from the Greek word *krisis*, which in first century usage had the meaning “judgment, decision.” The verb *krino* (“to decide”) is the root word for such English words as *critical*, *crisis*, *criminal*, *crime*.

A working definition of “crisis,” therefore, should keep together both the sense of *the moment* that is the event and *the decision* that must be made because of that moment. Crisis in its first half, the critical moment, becomes in its second half the event decision.

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF CRISIS

My own experience as a Christian and as a pastor has given me my share of crises. I cannot say I have enjoyed most of them, though all have been important; and there are a few which have been for me what Tolkien calls *eucatastrophic* (good catastrophes)—becoming a Christian, falling in love, the births of our three children.

But there have been others much like the ski van incident that have been less dangerous; yet, they were crisis moments in my life and ministry because I was compelled to make major decisions about priorities and meanings as a result of the event. In most cases, I learned more about myself, the people around me and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a result of each crisis event.

The big questions, for us as Christians and as youth workers, are these: What does a crisis do to us? What do we do with a crisis? What does God have to do with the crisis?

How should we prepare for crises? And, why are there crises in the first place?

THE BIBLE ON CRISIS

The whole idea of crisis is first introduced in the Bible when the word *dominion* comes into the text: “Let man and women have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds . . .” (Genesis 1:26). This is the beginning of the freedom theology of the Bible and, therefore, of the crisis theology of the Bible.

Crisis and freedom cannot be separated from each other in Biblical faith. God by His own sovereign decision has enabled our freedom, our authentic dominion. God must be very sure of Himself to grant such a powerful gift to the human family because our choices have had far-reaching consequences, both for good and for harm. The human journey tells us the story of these consequences; all of those crisis that we know as interpersonal or moral crises are the result of the exercise of human dominion.

But there are two other kinds of crises: *natural*, such as earthquakes, floods, birth, death—that exist apart from our initiation; and *cosmic*, which confront us as the result of the battle between God’s will and the opposition of cosmic evil—the Devil. Both of these kinds of crises have real impact upon us, but we do not have a role to play in their creation.

Dominion-related crisis has its origins in our freedom. We must, therefore, begin coping with such crises earlier on. For example, the medical affliction of lung cancer caused by cigarette smoking is a crisis event that had its gradual beginning in a thousand early decisions and indecisions made years before the present event.

I have classified these three kinds of crisis in terms of their dependence upon or independence of human dominion and human responsibility. Each of the three is an event, each is dangerous, and each has the possibility of catastrophe—either good catastrophe or bad catastrophe. This is what a crisis is—the mixture of danger and opportunity.

One final theological certainty must be put into focus before it is possible to draw out practical implications from all of this. Every crisis, whether natural, cosmic or moral-interpersonal, is boundaried by the freedom of God, by His decision. The “past-tense” side of that boundary is God’s decision by which He made heaven and earth. The “future-tense” side of that boundary is God’s decision by which all of human and cosmic history is to be fulfilled in judgment and grace.

Jesus Christ stands at each boundary as the Lord through whom everything was created and through whom heaven and earth shall be fulfilled. This means that there is no crisis in life, regardless of its origin, that is ultimate or final in itself. Every crisis is boundaried by the Lord of history. This does not downgrade the historical and contemporary importance of the events of our lives. They have vital importance as real events which happen to real people in real places, and the decisions that we make in the middle of each crisis are of real impact upon history. Since God has granted authentic dominion to us as human beings, our acts in history have consequences. These consequences are boundaried by God’s judgment and

love, but they are consequences nevertheless.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

What does all of this mean for me as a Christian?

First, because every crisis, regardless of its origin, needs my decisive act as its second half, I can ~~now~~ concentrate my primary attention on deciding “What do I do now?” rather than “Whom shall I blame?” This puts the major emphasis upon present-tense problem solving. The fact is that whether the cause of the particular crisis event is due to bad weather, bad temptations of the Devil or bad driving, the second half of the crisis is identical. We as God’s servants must decide what to do in the light of the justice and the love of Jesus Christ.

We as Christians can be better at decision-making because we have a theology of freedom that really means something. In this we are unlike the materialist, the determinist, the Marxist, or the pantheist. We know of God’s outer boundaries. Jesus Christ has resolved the ultimate crisis—the crisis of sin. Knowing this keeps us from overestimating the danger of any crisis so that the panic of despair takes over our souls.

But best of all, the Lord of the boundaries is the Lord of the middle places too. Right at the heart of crisis, where the hard choices are being made, we have the living presence of Jesus Christ, not as the one who takes away our choices, but as the Lord of freedom who enlarges the possibilities of our choices.

We live every day with the possibility of crisis; and every day we make the best decisions we can, thankful for the presence of the Lord of the beginning, the end, and the middle places too. ♦



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