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A New Approach to Sharing Common Ground

Mark Simpson

Abstract: As the Common Ground Journal enters its thirteenth year of online publication, a new approach to sharing Common Ground is defined.

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The Availability of Information and Timely Access to It

When Fritz Machlup developed the concept of the half-life of knowledge in 1962, he was referring to the amount of time it takes for knowledge to be superseded by new knowledge (Oliver 2016, half-life). In the web article, "The Half-Life of Knowledge," Oliver describes how the decay of knowledge is accelerating, "not because knowledge becomes untrue, but because it is irrelevant" (Oliver 2016, irrelevant).

When the *Common Ground Journal* published its first issue in 2003, the goal was to release at least two issues a year, typically one in the fall and one in the spring. The hope was the CGJ could reduce the lag time between the submission of an article and its publication. Whereas a hardcopy journal can take several months of advanced planning for it to become available to its audience, an online journal can be made available more quickly. That provided the opportunity for the CGJ to share common ground issues that were fairly recent or currently unfolding in ministry.

But as Oliver noted, knowledge can quickly become irrelevant. Even an online journal publishing two issues a year can experience a loss of usability of the knowledge shared even that short amount of time. What might increase the lifespan of shared common ground would be to create a way to publish information more quickly. Blogs are one way to do that, but blogs are not designed for the same audiences and purposes targeted by an online journal. And thus was born a redesigned *Common Ground Journal.*

Rather than publish two issues of the journal per year at relatively equidistant points in time, the redesigned CGJ will now publish an open-ended issue spanning a 12-month period. As publishable articles are received and vetted, they will be added to the issue. At the end of the twelve months—currently October 1st of the current year through September 30th of the following year—the issue will be considered complete and closed for any new submissions, ending that volume. Then the next volume begins with an open-ended issue, and so on.

The CGJ has primarily focused on ministries in a variety of context that can be summarized in three common ground broad categories: organizational leadership (ministry), international engagement (missions), and higher education (Christian higher learning).

Articles do not have to be long to be scholarly, so even short monographs are welcome for consideration. For example, to begin Volume 13, a short reflective piece is presented on the benefits of aligning ministry compensation with ministry expectations for the good of both the church and the minister.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

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CHURCHES BENEFIT WHEN MINISTRY COMPENSATION REFLECTS TERMS OF SERVICE AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Steve Custer

Abstract: Churches benefit from being cognizant concerning compensation issues of the minister. Ministry leadership tasked with the responsibility of filling pastoral vacancies should seek relevant data on compensation and benefit trends to help guide their search process, and also to shape the planning of the annual budget. Ultimately, these issues greatly affect the work-life balance of the minister and the minister's family, and consequently the health of the church as ministry expectations are aligned or not aligned with ministry compensation.

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UNDERSTANDING MINISTRY COMPENSATION

Ministry costs. From the vantage point of the minister who has surrendered to the call of the Lord to serve in ministry at an occupational level, the price on work-life balance can be quite high. Compared to practitioners in other fields, ministers typically earn advanced degrees without the expectation church salary packages and benefits will match those of other professions. As a result, when times of hardship occur for the minister, the impact on the minister's family can be devastating if the ministry compensation package has not sufficiently covered common hardships.

Proactive finance committees, elders, deacons, trustees, or other leadership bodies have a golden opportunity to craft compensation benefits that will best accommodate the needs of the minister and the minister's family throughout the time serving the congregation. The annual reassessment of ministerial compensation during budgetary discussions is usually the prime time when ministry compensation is evaluated. At that time the work-life balance for the minister and the minister's family should be taken into consideration in crafting the compensation package. Similarly, when the church is on the lookout for new ministers to complement the existing ministry team or fill a ministry vacancy, church leaders have an opportunity to revisit compensation packages for all ministerial staff. It is important for the health of the ministry team to evaluate how existing benefit packages align with the package being proposed for the new team member.

Allow me to share a particular story that spotlights one misunderstanding of ministerial compensation and benefits. I had been charged with the duty of recommending to a ministry executive board an associational ministry leader be allowed to spend additional time with a spouse who was experiencing a serious health condition. At the executive board meeting the overwhelming sentiment was to offer the ministry leader additional time away to care for his spouse. While there was no opposition, and everyone clearly echoed support for the minister, one member of the committee suggested that the leader should fall under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) benefits instead. Although the suggestion was well intentioned, it was clear there was some misunderstanding about benefits available to ministers apart from those provided by the church.

According to the Wage and Hour Division of the United States Department of Labor, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) "entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job

protected leave for specified family and medical reasons" (www.dol.gov). One problem with FMLA is that most churches would not fall under the definition of a covered employer. Even if the minister did qualify, the compensation and benefits packages provided by some churches would make it impossible for the minister to have saved financial resources to cover unpaid leave. Unfortunately, it is when hard times befall the minister that compensation packages are found to be inadequate, and as a result, the minister, the minister's family, and the church itself all suffer loss.

If a ministry position is to be full-time, the compensation and benefits package needs to be crafted to be sufficient to provide for the daily needs of the minister as well as potential longer-term needs while serving in a full-time capacity. If the congregation only has the ability to provide what are essentially part-time benefits, that congregation would do better to acknowledge that financial reality upfront and hire a ministry team member part-time. In so doing the benefits package will more accurately reflect the church's ability to provide for the minister in terms of salary, housing allowance, insurance, etc. That package will also honestly inform the minister that supplemental part-time work may be necessary to meet the minister's daily and potential long-term financial needs. Then when work-life balance is threatened by times of hardship, the minister will have had opportunity to be prepared for them.

In determining ministry compensation, church leaders and members will sometimes get "sticker shock" when crafting compensation and benefit packages. This sticker shock especially occurs when filling a ministry vacancy or adding a member to the ministry team. Sticker shock can result in a benefits package being crafted on the basis of opinion rather than factual need. When that happens, the end result is usually the equivalent of part-time benefits being offered to the minister, but with the expectation of full-time service. Eventually this expectation will hurt the church as a whole, and the minister and the minister's family in particular.

In our challenging times under Coronavirus (COVID-19) that has prevented churches from gathering face-to-face, congregations have struggled with attracting or even retaining highly qualified ministry team members. Now more than ever it is critical that expectations in ministry terms of service (full-time or part-time) align with the compensation offered as these positions are refilled. That is, what can the church realistically offer the minister now in terms of the work-life balance of a benefits package, whether or not the church can sustain that package over time, and if the church is committed to building upon that package as the church grows. While these considerations are true at any time, essentially that's the dilemma churches face now in a nutshell. Or as Shakespeare once said, "Ay, there's the rub."

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Steve Custer teaches courses in human resources and compensation and benefits in the School of Business at Oakland City University. He has also taught ministry courses at Rockbridge Seminary and has served 26 years in ministry as an ordained pastor in a combination of full-time and bi-vocational capacities. He is a Senior Certified Professional with the Society for Human Resource Management and a Senior Professional in Human Resources with the Human Resource Certification Institute. Dr. Custer delights in writing about topics ranging from workplace trends to ministry issues. He continues to pursue a research agenda of examining areas that impact the work-life balance of individuals in various callings and career paths.

SAILING THROUGH STORMS: LEADERSHIP IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

Jana Holiday

Abstract: Fostering steady and forward-moving leadership (termed "helmscoping") allows for stability and growth whatever storms may come. When leaders reflect on purpose as well as meaning-making, they are led into developing positivity and courage, two key leadership characteristics. Excellent decisions are made using emotional/social intelligence, effective communication, and agility. The biblical example of Joseph is an exemplar of helmscoping—someone who practiced these qualities and found God's faithfulness sustained him through the storms.

Holiday, Jan. 2021. Sailing Through Storms: Leadership in Tumultuous Times. *Common Ground Journal.* Volume 13 (2020-2021). ISSN: 15479129. www.commongroundjournal.org. Publisher: EDCOT®. Form: eJournal. Pages: 07-11. Keywords: helmscoping, emotional intelligence, social intelligence.

KEEPING STEADY WHILE MOVING FORWARD

My father loves dinner cruises. Any birthday or anniversary where he can talk the family into it, he'll drive us down to the Potomac River and load us on a boat for a meal. Well, at least he did for many years until my seasickness put a stop to it. On my last dinner cruise, I spent much of the evening outside—it was December and we were celebrating my sister's birthday. While reflecting on how much I hated the whole experience, with the foggy, damp air providing respite from nausea, I noticed several important things about the situation: our captain was keeping us as steady as he could (not enough for me, however), while pressing on in our journey (much to my chagrin). This dual action of keeping steady while moving forward is a key leadership capacity (what I will refer to as "helmscoping"), allowing for stability and growth whatever the environment. After exploring the notion of helmscoping, and the kind of leadership needed for it, we will look at the biblical illustration of this in Joseph.

HELMSCOPING

The action of helmscoping is a portmanteau of "helmsman," the person who steers the ship, and "gyroscope," the apparatus used for stability. To "helmscope" is to both lead with forward movement while providing a steadying hand. The helmsman, etymologically speaking, is someone who handles the situation, and the gyroscope makes sure one does not go topsy-turvy while trying to do so. A gyroscope is literally a "circle watcher"—a measuring device to ensure the ship stays upright. Leadership in the midst of the storm requires one to lead *through* the challenges, responsibly stewarding the people, events, and resources within one's care.

GUIDING AND PRACTICE METAPHORS

Before we dive into how to become helmscopers, let's explore how and why an image such as this can benefit our leadership formation.

Metaphors are often how we understand both our work's purpose (this is known as a guiding metaphor) as well as the means by which we engage with it (described as a practice metaphor). For instance, if I understand my leadership as forming students and that formation looks like pushing back against cultural norms and expectations, this provides me with the patience and persistence needed to continually remind students that they should expect difficulty in this season of preparation when we are tempted to assume that a clear path signals favor. That metaphor of "pushing back" against what is necessary to journey on guides me and helps me move forward.

Practice metaphors, however, give us meaning in the minutia. If I look at meetings not as a waste of time, but as the creation of a space to metaphorically grab the hand of the person next to me and say "What do you think? Will you go THIS way with me?" suddenly those 30 minutes have much more hope and energy within them. I'm cultivating a relationship with an ally, not communicating with an adversary. Guiding and practice metaphors help us attend to the meaning within our work which allows us to steady the ship and move toward the goal.

CHARACTERISTICS: POSITIVITY AND COURAGE

Two key characteristics of helmscopers are that they are positive and courageous. Often our visualization of someone with positivity is a cheerleader, or hype-man—someone with exceptionally high energy who invariably hopes for the best. And that's often what organizations and people need from their leaders, with appropriate scaling back of that energy for the particular social situation and personalities present. The gift of the person who approaches the world with a positive spin is that the spin pulls us into their orbit and we walk that journey toward a particular destination. The danger of positivity is inadvertently fostering of a lack of trust because others perceive apparent inattention to the storm. Overcoming that requires skilled communication which demonstrates an accurate understanding of difficulties, but also a dogged determination to see the good, even if the blessing is something merely dreamed up at that moment.

Positivity can take the form of humor, which provides levity, reframes difficult times, calms others down, and releases fear as a response to anxiety. Positivity is about forward movement because we are an eschatological people who belong to an exceptionally well-resourced Heavenly father. All shall be well, and we can trust in God's provision in the meantime. We are called out toward something new so that we leave our context of constraints-maybe this comes naturally, or it something we cultivate.

Living with positivity requires courage—standing against the prevailing winds, choosing strength and bravery when we may not really wish to do so. Courage comes through prayer in partnership with developing a thick skin. The biblical exhortations to courage are predominantly accompanied by a specific assurance: "I am with you" (for example, Deuteronomy 31:6 and Isaiah 41:10). A practice of prayer which intentionally attaches one's mind to that of the Lord's is one which yields the fruit of courage.

The thickness of one's skin is something that may be affected by personality, upbringing, or experience, but ultimately is a choice of belonging. If I am thoroughly consumed by my identity in the family of God, the attacks of enemies are opportunities for reflection and maturation as I pray God's blessing for them (see Jim Wilder's *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church that Transforms,* 2020, for an exploration of this idea). Possessing thick skin does not allow one to ignore the arguments or the personhood of the attacker.

CAPACITY: DECISION-MAKING

Positive and courageous leaders in the midst of a storm ought not just sit there, keeping the ship steady, they must do something, which necessitates choosing a direction. Excellence in decision-making includes three skills: emotional/social intelligence, communication, and agility.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso 2008, 514), researchers in emotional intelligence, understand emotional intelligence as the "intersection between emotions and intelligence—specifically limited to the set of abilities involved in reasoning about emotions and using emotions to enhance reasoning." Hughes and Terrell (Hughes and Terrell 2007, 17), who have studied the intersection of teams and emotional intelligence, add the component of social intelligence, describing it as "the ability to…recognize and respond effectively to the emotions of others." Bobby Moore (Moore

2009, 22), researcher of emotional intelligence development in the field of education, observes that, "with emotional information, leaders can build trust and cooperation, display empathy to employees, display social awareness, develop collaboration, understand the loss that people experience during the change process and display skill in addressing issues and solving problems." Emotional and social intelligence gives a leader the ability to negotiate challenges that would otherwise have led to an impasse. For example, being able to "read the room" creates effective communication protocol. If I can sense Steve is irritated because his idea got shot down by Tom, I can mitigate that with a new kind of space for communication in a meeting and re-direct so that triads have time to discuss the question at hand, for example. Having awareness of whatever the underlying narrative is and knowing the emotions present can provide the leader with the information necessary to swap out a saw for a scalpel to thereby fix the issue with as little collateral damage as possible.

Another key use for emotional and social intelligence is being able to identify anxiety or insecurity in the room. When I observe someone else's anxiety or insecurity (without judging it), while they are not mine to fix ultimately, I can help cultivate a space in which that person can safely address them, and I can help foster an environment where fear is diminished in the future. If I am the only person in the room, knowing my own strengths and weaknesses, grounded in an identity apart from my job or ministry helps me know which burdens are mine to carry, and which I am free to leave behind.

Emotional intelligence facilitates the navigation of expectations, whether from ourselves or others, or manage stress through security in ourselves, and trust of others. Emotional intelligence provides a greater chance to make wise and empathetic choices, especially in anxious systems.

COMMUNICATION

If there were one "right" way to communicate, our jobs would be far simpler and less taxing. Leaders who helmscope prioritize a shared mental picture of the vision, as well as how to get there—sometimes through metaphors, story, charts or graphs, or other ways of fostering collaboration. Communication should be clear, timely and transparent. Transparency is key to stewarding power in a healthy way. Partnered with transparency, empathy protects power from isolating the leader. Empathy allows us to understand what is at stake for this group of people with whom we are working. We cannot keep the ship steady and moving without sailors having a relationship with their leader.

During the time of COVID-19 at my institution, we grasped on to a picture of a caravan on a journey which has faced both a sandstorm (pandemic) and a drought (financial challenges). We talked about the kind of people we want to be in the midst of these challenges. We've shared observations about what it seems like God is doing among us, as well as naming our anxiety due to the unknown of how things will all turn out so that we can empathetically share our burdens on our way.

AGILITY

Steady and forward-moving decision-making means that the leader is agile—able to quickly pivot as the situation demands. Leadership is iterative, with continuous development (requiring a multitude of decisions toward that growth including course correction). Agile decision making requires discernment, planning and timing—it's like following a map in the days before the internet. When we know the destination, we look at the space between where we are and where we need to go, calculating the best way to get there--which turns happen when, what we may see along the way, and how long it should take for us to arrive. In the case of a surprise detour, as long as we know the direction we are heading, we can figure out how to keep moving toward the goal.

Sometimes, of course, on a good road trip the detour changes the destination because of what find along the way—the best things may not be in the plan. Stumbling upon that which is unplanned requires the perfect timing—something which is out of our control, but completely in the purview of the Holy Spirit.

Agility in decision making may require long seasons of waiting, and is always dependent on hearing the divine nudge that says “now!”

Whether it’s a willfully wrong choice, decision fatigue, or inadequate information, the pitfalls around making decisions abound due in part to toxic relationships, poor communication, and stiff movement. A leader attending to emotional and social intelligence who communicates appropriately and then easily moves as needed will be equipped to provide steady guidance to develop his or her followers or organization. These characteristics and capacities come together to help reduce the anxiety of a system, creating a culture ready to follow wherever their mission takes them.

JOSEPH

Joseph is an exemplar of a helmscoping leader. His story, from upstart young dreamer, to seasoned administrator of Egypt is one of developing key competencies to enable him to save his family as well as Egypt in dire times. While Joseph was young, a mixture of both naivete and positivity contributed his decision to share with his family the dreams he had been having. Maybe he didn’t realize the depth of animosity his brothers had toward him, or perhaps he simply hoped they wouldn’t go as far as they did when they attempted to murder him in jealousy. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of Joseph’s positivity, which is interwoven with his trust in God, is in how he treats his brothers when he is in the position of power: “Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save your lives that God sent me ahead of you” (Gen 45:5). Joseph’s courage is seen throughout his life as he endured much hardship and did not give up—from his first night in the cistern, to the unfamiliarity of being in an Egyptian’s house, to negotiating life in jail, to organizing relief for the world—Joseph kept on with the tasks before him.

Joseph’s emotional and social intelligence was put to the test when his brothers came to Egypt for food. From not lashing out in anger, to developing a shrewd plan to test if their hearts had changed, to calming their anxiety once his identity was revealed, Joseph attended to his own emotional state while kindly looking out for that of others. His communication in this story is indeed clear and helpful, demonstrated by moving quickly into his leadership position of being second to Pharaoh and immediately mobilizing the country for the seasons of abundance and hardship coming. The agility by which his leadership competencies could be contextualized in each opportunity is amazing. No matter the challenge, he rose to meet it and was successful.

At the end of his father Isaac’s life, Jacob blesses his sons and as he speaks to Joseph, evidence of Joseph’s ability to helmscope is present: “Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attack him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of this hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel…” (Gen 49:22-24). Joseph was effective, growing and bearing fruit in spite of profound challenges—he was steady and forward moving. Jacob’s assessment of how that happened speaks to the foundation for all leaders: we lead because of our relationship with God. Jacob saw what the key is for all who would strive to helmscope: because of the greatness of the Shepherd, because of the security of our Rock, we can journey through--whatever sandstorm or drought may come. Thanks be to our Shepherd and Rock!

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AWAITING YOUR REPLY: WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS THE BLUES

Ronald Mercer

Abstract: This paper phenomenologically investigates the similar origins of lament in scripture and blues music. It argues that both creations offer a healing effect even in their expressions of sorrow in two ways. On the one hand, the speaker or singer is open to others who suffer in kind and, on the other hand, becomes open to awaiting a reply from God, which is a true act of worship.

Mercer, Ronald. 2021. Awaiting Your reply: Why the Church Needs the Blues. *Common Ground Journal.* Volume 13 (2020-2021). ISSN: 15479129. www.commongroundjournal.org. Publisher: EDCOT®. Form: eJournal. Pages: 12-18. Keywords: blues, healing, phenomenological, sorrow.

LAMENTATIONS AND THE BLUES

Commonly known as Lamentations, this book is titled in the Hebrew after the first word in the text, the book of "Alas!" The Jewish Publication Society chose this English translation over a more literal reading that employs an adverbial cry of "How can this be?!" Both together, however, paint a vivid picture of one in extreme distress. The word הכיא (ʾekkah) forces air from the lungs as though the speaker is unable to hold anything inside; the cry of mourning equates the senselessness experienced within with the senselessness of the world – "How can this *BE*?"[1] The five laments that follow "alas" elegize the loss of the First Temple in 586 BCE and the subsequent suffering over the loss of identity and the dislocation of imposed exile. The Jewish liturgy remembers this event, as well as the destruction of the Second Temple, every year on the 9th of Av (the Jewish month that occurs typically around July or August). This

[1] To regard *'ek/'ekkah* as probable onomatopoeia requires considering its primitive form and sound. Bi-consonantal words often represent very basic ideas. With regard to the form of the word *'ay*, the letters *aleph* and *yodh* are almost certainly pictographs predating the Phoenician alphabet. The former represents an ox, the latter a hand. As a word *'ek*/*'ekah* is a "demonstrative sound "(Gesenius). One may imagine *'ekah* to be an exhalation, a "long, drawn out sigh" (Delitzsch), while the shorter *'ek* chokes off the breath abruptly. *Aleph* represents a soft breathing affecting the uvula (a "glottal stop"), but the sound is lost to history, making *aleph* a silent letter (analogous to the Greek smooth breathing mark).The guttural letter *aleph* normally suggests an e-class vowel is present. In this case it is *tsere-yodh.* The letter *yodh* is a "post-palatal approximant" common to Semitic languages generally. It is created by narrowing the vocal cords and raising the tongue to the back of the palate. This creates a stoppage of air flow, which sharpens the word. The further developed adverb *'ekaka* may represent repetitive inhalation/exhalation typical of sobbing. It may be no accident, therefore, that in Lamentations 1:2 a blubbering sound may be indicated by the alliterative three-fold repetition of words beginning with *beth* (Ben Zvi, Camp, Gunn).

Yet "a word of caution is necessary when speaking of onomatopoeia in translation, for different languages and contexts do not always share the same idea of what sounds (words) echo or imitate what phenomena" (Ben Zvi, Camp, Gunn).

See *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. by E. Kautzsch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 296; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), I:100-101; Leo Irwin Weinstock, Ehud Ben Zevi, Claudia V. Camp, and David M. Gunn, *Poets, Prophets, and Texts in Play* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2015. Most commentaries do not address the issue at hand.

annual service of lament not only remembers past wrongs but recognizes that Lamentations is "the eternal lament for all Jewish catastrophes, past, present, and future."[2]

In contradistinction to Jewish liturgy, which regularly inserts lament into liturgical practice, protestant churches clearly avoid such expression in favor of worship styles that reflect joy and praise. In her book, *The Music Architect*, Cherry writes, "In fact, there is growing concern that the church has *overemphasized* jubilant praise while songs of lament are so prominent in Scripture."[3] This dearth of mournful cries was most greatly felt after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Church leaders who were accustomed to a liturgy that uplifts and encourages did not have the tools for that time when the nation needed to cry out to God. Cherry's own experience with this left her to ask, "Where were the laments when you needed them?"[4] To this question, I would like to propose an unconventional answer, one which could potentially shock the traditional church attender who is comfortable in the pew. If we take Lamentations as a model and recognize that the five poems written therein express the brokenness of a people alienated and tossed into a strange land, there is a remarkable analogue in American history that has produced a similar response. In the opening lines of the Preface to *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Alan Lomax writes, "Although this has been called the age of anxiety, it might better be termed the century of the blues….Feelings of anomie and alienation, of orphaning and rootlessness – the sense of being a commodity rather than a person; the loss of love and of family and of place – this modern syndrome was the norm for the cotton farmers and the transient laborers of the Deep South a century ago."[5] In short, the church needs the blues.

Bringing the blues to church, however, involves sanctifying a genre of music known as the Devil's music in the early twentieth century. Ragtime and blues were popular styles in the juke joints of the South where the vices of alcohol, sex, and violence in the form of the occasional knife fight were welcome. In the 1800s, the term blue was synonymous with being drunk, and regardless of the connection to lament and misery, the blues were just as easily associated with drunken Saturday nights. Female singers who performed in the choirs of their local churches left the church to make money singing bawdy blues songs that left nothing to the imagination. The most prominent of devilry, though, occurs with the myth of Robert Johnson, a blues guitarist of legendary renown, who makes a Faustian deal with Satan for the talent to play the guitar in exchange for his soul.

Nevertheless, this present essay is not the first to suggest that the church and the blues have common ground. In *Broken Hallelujahs*, Christian Scharen argues for a continuity between the blues sung in bars attended on Saturday nights and spirituals sung by congregants in church on Sunday mornings. The blues, he declares, after substantial analysis of historical, musical connection, takes the form of a secular spiritual.[6] This idea echoes the earlier work of James Cone, who, in the 1970s, admirably took seriously the study of the connection between spirituals and blues and argued that the blues "depict the 'secular'

[2] Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1982): 20.

[3] Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 109. [My Italics]

[4] Ibid., 48. This is not to say, though, that there are no laments in Christian worship, only subdued. Laments appear as part of Advent and Lent. For example, in the lectionary year B, Psalm 80 is read for the first Sunday of Advent, and in year C, Psalm 63 is read for Lent as a prayer of deliverance from lament.

[5] Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: The New Press, 2002).

[6] Christian Scharen, *Broken Hallelujahs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 73.

dimension of Black experience."[7] Although secular, "the blues and the spirituals flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of Black life without the…other."[8] Both address, in Cone's estimation, the struggle and suffering and ultimate will to survive that characterize Black identity. A musician might sing of the hope of escape from the current conditions, hitting the road, taking a train, meeting people along the way, all in an effort to find a better life.

Being the secular and religious side of the same coin, the same experience, does not automatically sanctify the blues to be utilized liturgically. I argue, however, that in addition to the connection between the blues and southern spirituals, there is an even deeper connection in the phenomenology of the blues and Biblical lament that qualifies the blues for a liturgical place in worship. At these crossroads one finds the blues and lament as originating from the experience of evil, as a call that awaits a response, and a call that affirms and heals.

As Cone and Lomax suggest, the beginning of a phenomenology of the blues must begin in struggle. In the words of Howlin' Wolf, "When you're thinkin' evil, you're thinkin' 'bout the blues."[9]

EVIL IS GOIN' ON WRONG – WILLIE DIXON (SUNG BY HOWLIN' WOLF)

Evil, for our purposes, is a phenomenologically experienced meaningless suffering. Nietzsche has already pointed out, I think quite rightly, that human beings are not opposed to pain and suffering as long as one can recognize the purposefulness of it. "The meaninglessness of suffering," Nietzsche argues, "not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind."[10] Consequently, it becomes necessary to describe the phenomenology of meaningless suffering.

Let us consider the example of Job's children. During Job's trials, his ten children (seven boys and three girls) were killed by a roof collapse after they had gathered at the house of their oldest brother. At the conclusion of the story, God grants restoration to Job, but Fackenheim tells us to pay attention: "His [Job's] former possessions are doubled, but the number of children remains the same."[11] A. S. Peake refers to this economic discrepancy as a "fine trait."[12] This would be 1904 British English for God showing good taste by not insulting Job with a progeny pay-off. Lose one house, get two; lose one sheep, get two; all woes are forgiven. Receiving two children to replace one…no, there is no economic restitution as Fackenheim asserts: "Abraham dies 'in good old age,' 'full of years' (Genesis 25:8), for Isaac lives: how can Job die 'full of days' (Job 42:17), when his first seven sons and three daughters are dead, remain dead – and are irreplaceable?"[13]

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[7] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* reprint edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 97.

[8] Ibid., 100.

[9] James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 231.

[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophical Writings*, eds. Reinhold Grimm and Caroline Molina y Vedia (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1995), 189.

[11] Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-Reading* (selections), in *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*, eds. Daniel Frank, Oliver Leaman, and Charles Manekin (London: Routeledge, 2000), 543.

[12] Arthur S. Peake, *Job* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1904), 346.

[13] Fackenheim, The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust, 543.

Job's children and the analysis of Fackenheim and Peake lead us to the phenomenology of evil as described by Emmanuel Levinas. "In its evil malice," Levinas writes, "evil is excess…Suffering as such is only a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the non-integratable, of the non-justifiable."[14] The self lives in a world of meaning, synthesized from experience. Evil, as excess, does more than simply disrupt this world, for what is disrupted can always be brought back to order. Evil displaces the self such that there is no home with the monstrosity; the loss of home, of security, and especially children, for example, shakes the immanent structure of the ego by undermining foundations of identity. Scriptural laments and the blues both describe the encounter with meaningless evil overwhelming the sufferer. The alienation described by Lomax experienced by cotton farmers and transient laborers as well as the utter displacement experienced by the Jews who lost their temple are featured in these songs and poetry.

For Howlin' Wolf's second album, *Moanin' in the Moonlight*, the Chicago blues performer recorded an old standard by Willie Dixon, a song titled "Evil (Is Going On)." At the recording session, Wolf was documented giving his insight regarding the nature of the blues.

> A lot of people's wonderin', 'What is the blues?'…But I'm gonna tell you what the blues is:…when you ain't got no money and can't pay your house rent and can't buy you no food, you damn sure got the blues. That's where it's at, let me tell you. That's where it's at. If you ain't got no money, you got the blues, 'cause you're thinkin' evil. That's right. Any time you thinkin' evil, you thinkin' 'bout the blues.[15]

Wolf clearly focuses on a lack of money as a cause of distress, which could, erroneously, lead one to believe that a better economy is the answer. The real disruption arises in a life-threatening milieu, one where food and shelter are in jeopardy. The song itself, "Evil," addresses the experience. While the lyrics tell the story of a man worrying about the fidelity of his partner in sometimes humorous words (you know another mule is kickin' in your stall), the repeated chorus declares, "That's evil / Evil is goin' on wrong." To intellectualize this visceral song, let us understand the copula as the equal sign. Evil is an adverbial going on that registers as wrong, as outside of any putting of the world aright. It is the cry of the one disrupted by evil.

THE BLUES WERE HERE WHEN THE WORLD WAS BORN – JOHN LEE HOOKER

Perhaps, though, from the twentieth century continental perspective of phenomenologists, we are too used to oppressive language. Violence from totalitarian egos, wounds from inescapable calls, the anxiety of death, and existential absurdity permeate our philosophy.[16] Let us add to these the insightful claim of a little known transcendental phenomenologist, John Lee Hooker, who boldly declares, "The blues were here when the world was born."[17] Such language demands deciphering. Chrétien's call that wounds will stand as representative for the violent language of continental philosophers, and due to his polyphonic voice and the call and response nature of the blues, we can compare Chrétien's call and Hooker's ever present blues.

[14] Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 173.

[15] Segrest, Moanin' at Midnight, 231.

[16] A list of sources is unnecessary here, for the works of Levinas, Chrétien, Heidegger, and Sartre regularly address these concerns, echoed in many others as well.

[17] John Lee Hooker, Interview at Newport Jazz Festival, at 1:36/4:26, August 17, 1991, accessed November 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DaQ0gf0Gy4.

Call and response lines appear in all styles of Hebrew poetry, not simply laments, as a clear liturgical structure. Responsive reading and responsive phrases occur as an accepted part of church services. Call and response appears in the music of the blues as lines are often repeated. Amiri Baraka explains that this style, at least for the blues, goes back to tribal Africa. A warrior would return from the hunt and declare, "I caught that!" And the tribe would cry back, "You sure caught that!"[18] Any first call, if we can say there is one, is lost to history. Language has been going on long before us, and we recognize, along with Heidegger, that "we always have already listened to the language."[19] Moreover, the use of "always, already" signals more than just a temporal measure that can no longer be traced. The phrase operates as a phenomenological signpost that designates an originative milieu out of which the human arises to meaningfully encounter the world. Chrétien describes the situation as such: "every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice. We always speak to the world, we are always already in the act of speaking."[20] Consequently, our speech is a response to a call already in the world, not a single audible call from an identifiable source, nor a historical call from a source in the past, but a calling out that exists in the interplay of voice and language within which the self is situated. Chrétien argues this call is related to the beautiful, but there is an underlying violence in the beauty: "The call of the beautiful is a call that recalls itself to us by recalling us to ourselves. To wound us in the heart brings its utterance to life."[21]

Likewise, Hooker's assertion of an ever present blues cannot be related to a historical period. Blues music is a phenomenon of the post-Civil War United States, regardless of how deep its roots may go, yet there is a sense of the always/already in his claim. There is a parallel, although not complete congruence, between the call that wounds and blues if we properly understand Chrétien's call as origin and the blues as an undergoing of excessive evil. Both rely upon the passivity and openness of self.

Bruce Benson explicates Chretien: "As someone who speaks with many voices, *I* am not simply my own voice but a polyphony of voices. Thus, the *I* for Chretien is no 'self-contained' or 'self-constituted' *I*. Instead, it is composed of multiple voices. But if the *I* has the polyphonic character, then it has always already been *wounded*."[22] The milieu of the call that wounds opens the self to the other. The polyphony of voices makes it impossible for the self to claim that it ever has its own words. The self has already been overwhelmed, and this structure of being open and potentially overwhelmed is also disclosed in the excess of evil that produced blues music. Where I believe the congruence ends is the fertility of the milieu surrounding the self. The wounding call is the ground out of which the speaking *I* is birthed. Blues is the voice of the decentered who remains decentered by evil, awaiting a reply from somewhere outside that will end the alienation, a reply that is anticipated, expected, but not yet present.

THE BLUES A HEALER – JOHN LEE HOOKER

The idea that the blues bemoans evil and awaits a reply that it knows may never come is mirrored in the Jewish lament. Brueggemann declares that "the lament psalms insist upon Israel's finding voice, a voice

[18] "The Story of the Blues 01,"at 14:43/27:33, February 25, 2014, accessed November 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTCH6qfAYaE&t=63s.

[19] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: HarperOne, 1982), 124.

[20] Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 1.

[21] Ibid., 10.

[22] Bruce Benson, "Chrétien on the Call that Wounds," ed. Bruce Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 211.

that tends to be abrasive and insistent. The lament psalm is a Jewish refusal of silence before God."[23] In each lament, the powerless finds enough voice to challenge a theological, sociological, and psychological hegemony over a voice which speaks out against oppressive power. Typically, the psalm follows a recognizable pattern wherein the speaker voices rage against the evil done, places the anger before God, and finally gives the rage up. If this pattern had no exceptions, then the comparison with the blues would end here. Blues music does not have to declare an end to the misery or a hope for a brighter future. Brueggemann notes, however, that Psalm 39 and Psalm 88 do not end with the hope of positive resolution. These cries also await reply.

Both Psalm 39 and 88 contain a curious twist. Psalm 39 pleads, "O LORD, what do I wait for? My hope is in you," but it changes tone within the space of a verse and the writer laments, "I am silent: I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke from me."[24] Psalm 88 mirrors this turn, first crying out to God, "in the morning my prayer comes before you," but the result of the cry is not acceptance, "O LORD, why do you cast me off?"[25] The author of these laments has arrived at a place of brokenness, where one is overwhelmed by something Other, but also something evil, as Nemo describes: "Overtaken by evil, then, I am suddenly separated from the world, and the world itself shifts from something embodying ultimate power and inclusivity to a second-rate reality, passed into the hands of a will that is obviously *much more interested in me than in the world*."[26] So why speak at all? These laments reach out to the almighty God who is feared to be causing the suffering. Could there be some ground even when one's world is thoroughly shaken?

A similar question can be asked with regard to B. B. King's, "Why I Sing the Blues." With a wide sweeping story line, the song encompasses the alienation and travail of the African American experience, detailing why King has a right to be blue, but the song never truly addresses why he sings. Why cry out at all, and better yet, why sing about it, unless the singing in itself is the answer to the blues. John Lee Hooker expressed this with his own work, "The Healer," wherein the blues lifted Hooker out of his blues. Singing in a style that mirrors the fundamental call and response of the world does not end the alienation, but it does situate the self in such a way as to move past the evil, not by avoiding suffering or imagining it gone, but by one's voice declaring to fight against it.[27] In this way, the one singing is aligned with the good and the just even if the good and the just never respond.

This strange juxtaposition of aligning oneself with the good that is absent finds analogy with the Jewish liturgy on Yom Kippur. During the afternoon service, the theme of worship becomes "For these things I weep."[28] A lament poem, the ***Eileh Ezk'rah***, remembers ten rabbis who were executed by Rome in the first two centuries of the Common Era. Venerating the martyred on this day in lament speaks to a double

[23] Walter Brueggemann, "Voice as Counter to Violence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, (2001): 22.

[24] Psalm 39: 7, 9-10a (NRSV).

[25] Psalm 88: 13-14 (NRSV).

[26] Nemo, *Excess of Evil*, 116.

[27] Nemo describes this as the turning moment in Job, where Job moves past his despair and finds voice to declare himself righteous and the suffering around him to be unrighteous: "Thus the innocence that Job avers is of another order; it is the *present* innocence of his heart, that is, the innocence of his *intention*. This innocence, which is of a very special purity, consists in a resoluteness for the future: *a will to sin no more,* to evermore *struggle against evil*, to make this struggle the *orientation of his entire life*" (132).

[28] Goldberg, Edwin C. et al., eds., *Mishkan Hanefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2015), xiii.

purpose. On the one hand, according to the liturgy, "Our ancestors believed that death atones for sin. Thus they saw a connection between martyrdom and the Day of Atonement,"[29] but just as the lament connects the congregants to the atoned and righteous, the poetry of the afternoon creates an opposing reaction as well. "The traditional *Eileh Ezk'rah* (the lament poem) of the Middle Ages might also be read as a crisis of faith, presented annually as a challenge to God: Why do we, the innocent, suffer? What has become of the covenant? Where are You?"[30] The cry that attunes the worshipper to God also questions and challenges. The blues, as both attunement to justice and challenge to the excess of evil, carries this same duality.

Feeling better about feeling bad, however, does not necessarily earn a spot in liturgy. Finding a place for the blues in worship amounts to understanding the kind of religious voice that is found from our comparison of the blues and lament. The experience of evil and the aversion to the wrongness of it encourages the sufferer to cry out to God, even against God; to demand the good; and in the words of Nemo, to "force God to be God."[31] While sounding potentially blasphemous, this approach is truly the voice of the prophet. Kenneth Seeskin describes the role of the prophet in scripture:

> In view of the precedent established by Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah, intercession involves trust in God's saving power but falls short of what is normally meant by submission. The prophet is someone who pleads with God, even argues with Him, not someone who accepts divine decrees without question. As Abraham J. Heschel put it, the soul of the prophet exhibits an extreme sensitivity to human suffering: when he is with the people, he takes the side of God; but when he is with God, he takes the side of the people.[32]

As free moral agents, we are birthed out of a call to be with others, but when evil overwhelms, we cry out, we sing the blues, for the sake of justice, for the sake of the people awaiting a reply.

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[29] Ibid., 516.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Nemo, *Excess of Evil*, 134.

[32] Kenneth Seeskin, "Job and the Problem of Evil," in *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*, eds. Daniel Frank, Oliver Leaman, and Charles Manekin (London: Routeledge, 2000), 70.

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The *Common Ground Journal* (CGJ) is a resource for Christian leaders seeking to understand and faithfully live out their calling to serve God in the world as catalysts for growth in their ministries and communities. These leaders continually ask, "What does it mean to be a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world today?"

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