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Moore to the Point

Newsletter

Hello fellow wayfarers,

Why I was wrong about Beth Moore...why I was right about Tim Keller...why I was both right *and* wrong about the year of the pandemic...country songs that sum up the human experience...This is this week's Moore to the Point.



Russell Moore

I Was Wrong About Beth Moore

In the early years of my time as a seminary professor, sometimes in a classroom or at a conference somewhere, someone would preface a question with a long list of critiques against the Bible teacher Beth Moore—who was then, as now, one of the most popular writers and speakers in the evangelical world. I would often preface my response with, “Well, she’s my Mom and I love her...” I did this because I could see the blood drain out of the questioner’s face as he (and it was always “he”) had the word “Moore” flash across his face. I would then, of course, say that I was kidding and move on.

My wife Maria would often say at that time: “She is nowhere near old enough to be your mother.” This is, of course, true, but the joke landed better with “mom” than with “sister” or “cousin.” So I kept doing it for a while, even though, as I often have to say these days, we are of no relation.

But, looking back now, I can see that the assumption behind the question—and my answer—was that Beth Moore was not “one of us”—the theologically rigorous “confessional” tribe. She was, I guess I assumed, a “pragmatist” or “seeker sensitive” or maybe even as some called her a “mystic.” I suppose I never questioned any of that, and by my not questioning it, I more than contributed to it.

The same thing was true with Rick Warren. Early in my headstrong years, I made—or laughed at—my share of jokes about Hawaiian shirt-wearing “purpose-driven” pastors. I listened as people, supposedly in my “tribe,” lambasted John Piper for having Rick Warren at his conference (and for speaking alongside Beth Moore at the Passion conferences), and I assumed there must be fire somewhere in all that smoke.

That was until, working in the orphan care movement, I came to know Rick Warren. I found that, first of all, I never saw him in a Hawaiian shirt (not once), and I also found that he was more theologically convictional and more biblically rigorous than many of the people I had heard criticize him. The two most fascinating and illuminating conversations I have ever had about the theology of Jonathan Edwards were with Rick Warren and with the novelist Marilynne Robinson—and both knew far more about their subject than some of the people I had known with Jonathan Edwards’ face on their T-shirts. But, more than that, I found that Rick Warren was—unlike many of the so-called evangelical “celebrities” I had come to know—someone who really demonstrated

the fruit of the Spirit, who would pray with a younger Christian, like me, who needed it. And I watched Rick and his wife Kay in the company of non-Christians, both of them unashamedly and joyfully bearing witness to the gospel, while genuinely demonstrating love to the person to whom they spoke. I came to see, very quickly, that whatever I had heard about Rick was wrong—and I came not only to revere him (and, more so, Kay), but also to love the Warrens. That respect and love has only grown over the years—and I still haven't seen him in a Hawaiian shirt (not that there would be anything wrong with that).

Back to Beth. I started to realize that my perceptions of her might be wrong when a staff member of mine, Brenna Whitley (now Norwood), who had also worked with Living Proof, came aboard my team at Southern Seminary. Brenna was brilliant and focused and Christlike (and is now one of the most important and amazing leaders of prison ministry in the world). I took seriously the high view she had of Beth. Through Brenna, I met Beth's daughter Melissa—a brilliant theological and philosophical mind of top-rank that I really wanted to recruit as one of my students. I was starting to see behind the caricatures into the actual world of Beth Moore.

But I really did not know Beth Moore until two world-shaking realities came to define much of my world: Donald Trump and church sexual abuse. She and I saw these things much the same way—and both of us were, I think, surprised to see that so few other people did.

This year, I told my wife on our anniversary that I'm glad that we were married years ago and not now because I would be afraid the officiating minister would say, "Maria, will you take this man, longtime Trump critic Russell Moore, as your lawfully-wedded husband..." The joke references the way that for so much of the last five years, *everything* was defined in almost every segment of American life around Donald Trump. In 2012, some evangelicals thought Mitt Romney's Latter-day Saints church membership disqualified him from the presidency, others of us (including me) thought it did not. But no one was defined as "pro-Romney" or "Never-Romney," because he just didn't take up such overwhelming attention of the whole country.

And Beth and I found ourselves confronting the same issues of sexual abuse and assault within the church—she as a brave survivor of such, and I as someone trying to equip churches to prevent such and to minister to people who had survived it. I think I was—and am—surprised by the level of opposition to morally defining and opposing this scourge, but I don't think Beth was surprised at all.

And so we found ourselves in the same orbit, and came to know each other. And, through that, I came to see that Beth Moore was no "theological lightweight," but that I was.

As I've written before, early on in my Christian life, I became alarmed by the sort of theologically-anemic cultural Christianity I had seen around me, which had manifested itself in, among other

things, racism and a kind of means-to-an-end politicized Christianity. I came to believe that the answer to this sort of cultural Christianity was a robust and maximalist theology. I was partly right. No matter how orthodox or evangelistic, a Christianity that doesn't know how the Bible fits together into a coherent Word from God is going to end up replacing that Word with something else—whether revival experiences that are emotional but not transformative or culture wars that are political but not gospel-anchored or whatever. Theology is necessary, but theology—at least theology as defined as systems and “worldviews”—is not enough.

Over time I came to see that some—though by no means all—of those who were the most adept at drawing boundaries were sometimes the most spiritually immature. Some who could identify and pounce on anything that might be deemed theologically suspect—even on what were sometimes far from essential issues—were given over to constant rivalries or to fits of rage or to alcoholism. Some who were thought to brace in “standing up” to the enemies of the faith and to a secularizing culture or church proved to be those who just wanted to “stand up” to everyone, and for whom every relationship was dispensable. Sometimes those I thought were champions of orthodoxy—again, by no means all—were insisting not so much on the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” as much as a clone-like uniformity on an ever-narrowing list of issues.

And some of the people I had previously dismissed as theological “lightweights” turned out to be the

people who actually prayed, who really displayed the fruit of the Spirit, to be the sort of people one could turn to not for ammunition to win a coffee-shop argument but for counsel about how to be faithful when God seems silent or how to weep for a hurting son or daughter or how to crucify one's pride. I learned this from, among others, Beth Moore.

She was supposedly a "mystic." That wasn't, and isn't, true—unless by comparison to the sort of proposition-by-proposition hyper-rationalism in which any mystery short of a syllogism is suspect. When the night of the soul turned dark for me, I needed that sort of "mystic" much more than I needed an Inquisitor. And it's a good thing, because they were almost all gone.

The people who were there for me—for counsel, for prayer, for encouragement—were largely not the people who had loved me for my communications savvy or my writing ability or my confident quipping in conference settings or my resume or my "future potential." Those people were distant—waiting to see how "toxic" I would turn out to be, whether those who said (laughably) that I was a "Marxist" would be able to drive me away.

But a woman I had been taught to dismiss as a "mystic" and a "lightweight" never left me alone. She was constantly checking in, calling and texting Bible verses, praying with me in person or over Zoom. She was able to call me back to what I believe—and more to the point, to *Who* I believe. And she could make me laugh, to stop taking myself so seriously. She was no pragmatist. She

stood by her beliefs when others vilified her. She was no lightweight. She pointed me to the weight of glory just beyond the horizon.

And then I stood back up. I reclaimed my sense of mission and purpose. But I didn't stand up by myself. There were a lot of Aarons and Hurs—and Miriams and Priscillas—holding my arms up. She was one of them.

Does Beth agree with me on everything? By no means. But who cares? My best friends in Christ disagree with me on all kinds of things—church polity, eschatology, whether prophecy and tongues continue or have ceased, the way to do social or political engagement, whatever. We are united on those things of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3-9), and they are willing to bear with me where they think I'm wrong on less central things.

Beth's in the news this week, but I'm not really here to discuss the news. Instead, I am just thinking instead about her as a person the Lord used in my life—among other things to show me how much I have to learn. And, really, the reason I feel compelled to write this has nothing to do with Beth or me or any other Christian leader. It's because the same thing tends to happen to all of us. I've been surprised by the way the Lord gives us the friendships we need—even when we have done everything we can to silo ourselves off from the very people from whom we will one day find grace and mercy and compassion. And that, too, is grace.

Maria wants it known that she was *not* wrong

about Beth—she knew all along that she was great. Maria also objects to the title of this newsletter. “Don’t write ‘The Beth Years of Our Lives,’” Maria says. “That sounds like they are *over*, and they’re not.” But just like with the “She’s my mom” joke, I am saying, “But I like how it sounds. Think of it this way—‘The Beth Years of Our Lives Have Only Just Begun,’ right?”

But all I know is this: if you see me somewhere and ask me about Beth Moore, don’t be expecting me to dismiss her or criticize her. You’ll know that I owe her a lot. And you’ll hear me say, “Well, she’s my sister and I love her.”

I Was Right About Tim Keller

Now, lest I sink into too much self-effacement, let me write quickly about someone I was *right* about all along, and that’s Tim Keller. Tim, of course, is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and founder of the Redeemer City to City church-planting network. These days Tim is battling pancreatic cancer, and he [wrote](#) about it this week in *The Atlantic*. As I read this piece, I was reminded all over again why I love and respect this great man. I’ve seen him share the gospel with people who don’t believe yet, with what I can only call a combination of Samaritan-like compassion and ninja-like skill.

This article echoes some of that. Tim here demonstrates a refusal to smile through adversity—which can bring not just an inauthentic vision of human experience but which can also give the impression that death is just an illusion, which is

false to the gospel. At the same time, he communicates the hope that comes for those who are in Christ. Writing as he does here to readers, a large number of whom will be mostly secular, Tim is careful to clarify that his faith is not about abstractions about the triumph of the good or the sun coming up in the morning. The Resurrection, he writes, is not a metaphor for wellness, but is instead about something that actually happened in space and in time—the tomb is empty, the body is raised, Jesus is alive.

And through all of this he has a word for how the gospel should shape life now. “Since my diagnosis, Kathy and I have come to see that the more we tried to make a heaven out of this world—the more we grounded our comfort and security in it—the less we were able to enjoy it.” What they have discovered, he writes, is that “the less we attempt to make this world into a heaven, the more we are able to enjoy it.”

“No longer are we burdening it with demands impossible for it to fulfill,” he writes. “We have found that the simplest things—from sun on the water and flowers in the vase to our own embraces, sex, and conversation—bring more joy than ever. This has taken us by surprise.”

When I read this piece, I almost hesitated to post it, for the same reason Tim hesitated to write it. It might seem that this is a goodbye piece, and it’s not. Tim is being treated and—I hope and expect—will be writing for many years to come. But he wanted to communicate—while it’s on his mind—what he learned in the valley of the shadow of

death. And—as with everything else we learn from Tim Keller—he tells us with calm, reasonable, beautiful, biblical logic what we might not think we need to know now, but that we will all need to know later.

You will die one day in the future. You must live today in the present. Tim’s piece will help you to do both.

A Year of Pandemic: What We Learned

This past week, the whole world noted the day the pandemic really started to get real—when the NBA cancelled its season, when Tom Hanks tested positive, when things started to shut down. I noticed on my Timehop app that one year ago I posted a picture of my son Taylor with me at my parents’ house back home in Biloxi, eating shrimp po-boys and drinking Barq’s root beer (as one does in my hometown). Taylor came along with me as I was scheduled to preach at my alma mater, New Orleans Seminary.

And then the world changed.

I didn’t know, at the time, that this would persist for over a year. I didn’t know, at the time, that we would lose over half a million Americans to this plague. And, more personally, I did not know that walking out the front door that day would be the last time I ever would see my Dad in this life.

The year has been one of death and disease and disaster, for all of us. Most of us have lost someone we loved. All of us have faced isolation and

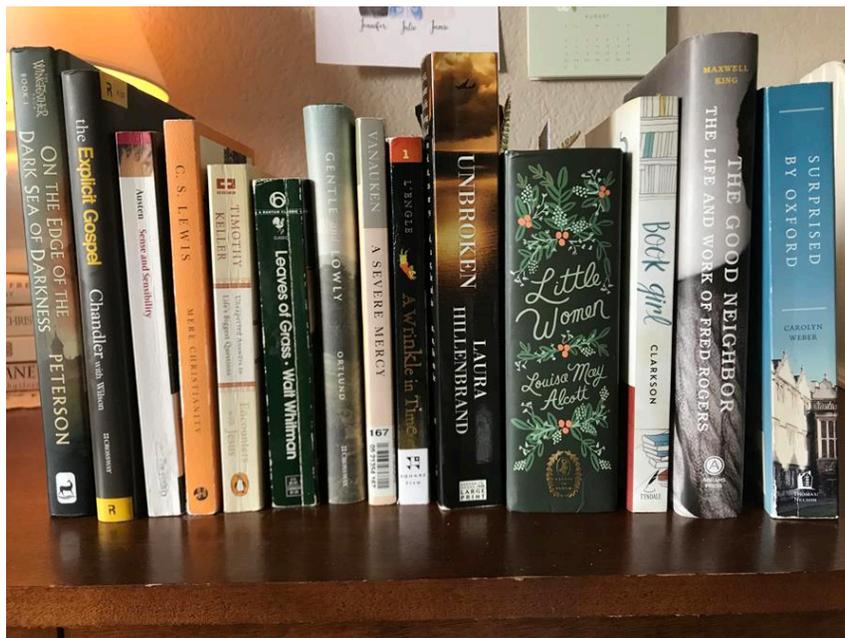
uncertainty. And yet, in the midst of all of this, God has been present—in ways I didn't expect.

Last week I received the first shot of the vaccine. We can see the contours of this awful year coming to an end, of “normal” just around the horizon. And I realize that I've come out of this year closer than ever to my family. We have new rhythms—and we know each other better. I come out of this year—though isolated—feeling more dependent than ever on my friends. What's brought me through this has been gathering (socially-distanced and outside) with my T.S. Eliot-reading group or gathering by Zoom with my friends in my book club (even when one of them was down with COVID) and even getting to know through a mask the people I see every day at the drive-in at Sonic (driving to and from which has become my time for most intense thinking and reflection).

And I come out of this year more renewed than maybe ever in my love for Jesus. I was struck this year by Jesus' statement that “I know where I came from and where I am going” (Jn. 8:14). I feel clearer than ever about where I have come from and where I am headed, in Him.

I would not ever want to repeat this year. But I also would never want to give up the grace I've seen in the midst of it.

Desert Island Bookshelf



This week's shelf of books to be taken onto a desert island is from **Jamie Mitchell**. I smiled at how many of us in this newsletter community like the same books—and how often I can find books included that I think, “That sounds interesting!” and then read.

What do you think? If you could have one bookshelf with you to last you the rest of your life, what volumes would you choose? [Send](#) a picture to me with as much or as little explanation of your choices as you would like.

Songs That Sum Up the Human Experience

Last week **Andy Taylor** wrote in and offered a list of five country songs that could try to sum up the human experience. He asked me what I would choose (and I haven't answered yet, because I asked y'all to go first). The rules are up to five songs that are non-religious but are trying to sum up human existence.

Sarah Mielke offered the following, and says they're not in any order:

1. Rascal Flatts, "Life Is a Highway"
2. Tony Martin, "I'll Think of a Reason Later"
3. Brad Paisley, "Those Crazy Christians"
4. Counting Crows, "Big Yellow Taxi"
5. Patsy Cline, "If I Could See the World"

Jason Keel offered up:

1. The Eagles, "Hotel California" (RDM note: dark!)
2. The Beatles, "Something"
3. Don McLean, "American Pie" (RDM note: even darker!)
4. James Taylor, "Fire and Rain"
5. Andrew Peterson, "World Traveler" (Jason writes, "I know he's a Christian, but this song is basically about my life" RDM note: I'll allow it.)

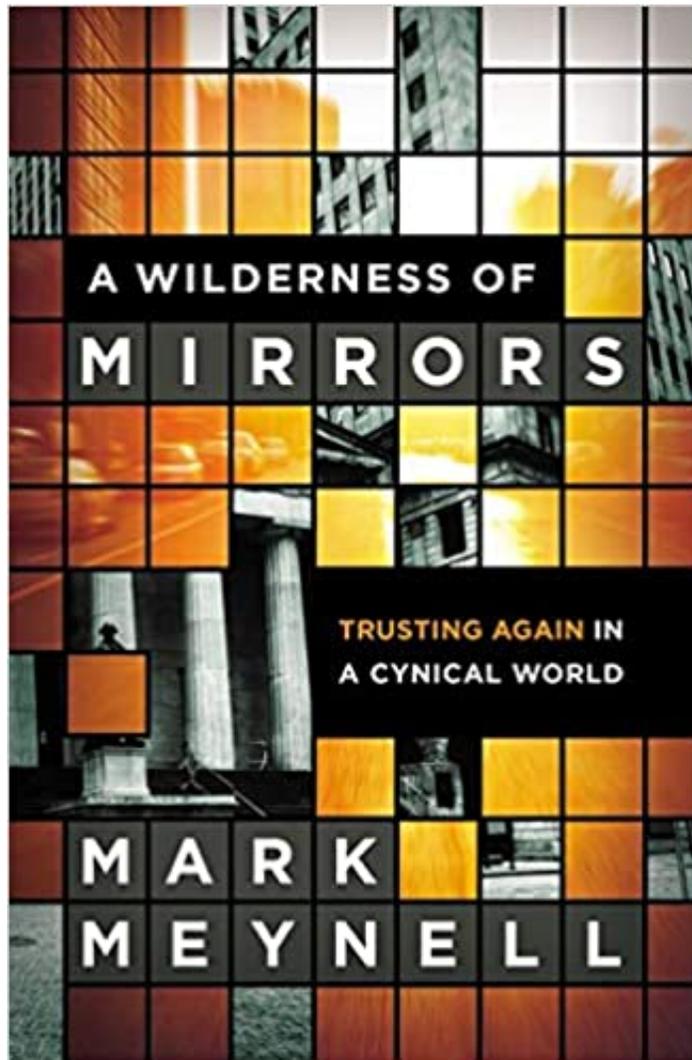
What songs would you choose?

Quote of the Moment

"Our culture has long been driven by information; many people are inclined to believe only what can

be verified and rationally ascertained. More recently, we have been surprised by our vulnerability to ‘fake news’ and false information delivered through the ‘trusted’ mediums of the Internet; we seem to ‘verify’ by relying on the ‘rationality’ of technology, but indeed, we are easily manipulated because we trust in the form, rather than the content.”

— Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (Yale University Press)



Currently Reading (or Re-Reading)

Mark Meynell, [*A Wilderness of Mirrors: Trusting Again in a Cynical World*](#) (Zondervan)

Jessica Winter, [*The Fourth Child: A Novel*](#) (Harper)

Geoffrey H. Fulkerson and Joel Thomas Chopp, eds., [*Science and the Doctrine of Creation: The Approaches of Ten Modern Theologians*](#) (InterVarsity)

Peter L. Berger, [*The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith*](#) (Doubleday)

D. Michael Lindsay, [*Hinge Moments: Making the Most of Life's Transitions*](#) (InterVarsity)

Currently Listening

I am loving Marc Scibilia's album *Seed of Joy*, especially his song "90's." You can watch it [here](#).

The Courage to Stand

You can order a copy of my newest book, *The Courage to Stand: Facing Your Fear Without Losing Your Soul* (B&H) [here](#) (or wherever you buy books).

Questions and Ethics

I have re-launched the "Questions and Ethics" part of my podcast. You can subscribe [here](#). Please send me your moral dilemmas—about life, school, work, spirituality, family, whatever—and I'll do my best to answer (and I'll never, of course, use your name, unless you ask me to do so). You can send your questions to questions@russellmoore.com.

Say Hello

And, of course, I would love to hear from you. [Send](#) me an email if you have any questions or comments about this newsletter, other things you would like to see discussed here, or if you would just like to say hello!

If you have a friend who might like this, please forward it along, and if you've gotten this from a friend, please [subscribe](#)!

Onward,

Russell Moore



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