

FORMED THROUGH DISCIPLESHIP

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MY TRIBUTE TO DAVID ROPER

We are continuing our series on the Celebration of Discipleship through relationships. This week I will focus on those who were foundational for my spiritual formation and, like the apostle Paul, imparted not only the truths of the gospel, but also their own lives as well. The second week, I will conclude our series and my formal employment at pbcc, with the signature text that transformed my life and ministry from teaching the mind to healing the heart.

There are times and places that are critical junctures in your life—those moments that change your life’s gyroscope and take you to new and unheard-of destinations. I often wonder how I ended up at Stanford and not USC, my college of choice since childhood. Looking back the tapestry is clear, and I am forever thankful for the One whose gentle hand redirected my path to a place I had never heard of, nor did I have a clue of the things that were about to take place on that campus that were beyond everyone’s expectations.

I can’t remember when I first met **David Roper**, but however it happened, I suspect others who knew him well took me by the hand and led me to his stage. At our first meeting sophomore year I asked David if he would teach a bible study in my fraternity. His surprising refusal was the turning point in my life: “No, I’m going to teach you and you’re going to teach it.” “But I don’t know anything,” I protested. He was quietly reassuring, yet uncompromisingly bold. “It’s simple. You’ll invite me to dinner at your house and after I’m introduced, you’ll invite everyone to a team meeting after dinner. Then you will share your testimony and I will follow with a presentation of the gospel. At the conclusion you will announce that you’ll be leading a bible study for all those interested on Tuesday nights.” The challenge was as terrifying as it was thrilling. But I mustered the courage to pray that four of the brothers would accept Christ that year.

I have vivid memories of David driving up to my frat house in his humble red VW bug every Tuesday afternoon, precisely at 2:00 pm. For the next hour I would vigorously take notes on everything he said, and then nervously repeat everything to a room full of eager inquirers.

First, we plowed through stories from the gospel of John, and then Paul's arguments from the first eight chapters of Romans. Both yielded life-changing encounters, and at the end of the second quarter, four brothers had accepted Christ (the 4th came at midnight just before I boarded a flight to study overseas in Florence, Italy). My heart burned with delight.

Even though I was thousands of miles away, David still faithfully mentored me. I never forgot the joy of hearing his voice on a cassette tape he recorded while driving in his noisy VW bug to Stanford campus. He was recounting the tumultuous riots the campus was embroiled in to protest the war in Vietnam. His description of campus events impressed upon me the depravity of the human heart: "People will do things in groups they would never think of doing individually." Windows were smashed in almost every classroom, tear gas enveloped the campus, sit-ins were commonplace and at the height of the protests, students burned down the massive administrative center, Encina Hall. Yet in the midst of terror and chaos, David was fearless. In his calm and gentle demeanor, he politely shared the love of Jesus with students in dorms, White Plaza, on sports teams and in the classrooms, inviting any and all to investigate Jesus' claims on their lives. Even the faculty was not exempt from David's loving witness, and everywhere he spoke he kept his disciples in tow, doing the same.

David never allowed me to drift into complacency. Whatever arena I found myself in, David encouraged me to search diligently for an open door to share the gospel with those in my sphere of influence. First it was my fraternity, then with my English professor, then in a religious studies class when I vented my frustration to David about the professor who treated the Scriptures as some ancient myth. David loaded me up with material on Daniel's prophecy regarding Christ's initial coming and sent me back into the fray to share another point of the view with the class. On another occasion I found myself in the middle of White Plaza at the noon hour in front of a microphone preaching the gospel to a hostile crowd.

And then there was the gymnastics team. This was the most difficult area of my life, and more than once I wanted to quit. But then again, there was David. He would show up at practice unannounced and just sit quietly in the stands. Without a word I had the strange sensation that his presence sanctified the chalky air. He saw me perform more in college than my parents did in high school. During one competition, I had the dubious honor of following two-time All-Around National Champion Yoshi Hayasaki from the

University of Washington on the high bar. I did not like high bar and the only reason I was competing was that we needed a 5th competitor to complete the roster. After Hayasaki's near perfect performance brought the house down, I took the stage before a packed house to perform my humble routine. I failed miserably, falling off the bar not once, but twice. The next morning, I came sheepishly to church hoping no one would notice me. Unable to escape David's gaze, he cheerfully walked up to me and embraced me with, "You sure glorified the Lord yesterday." Utterly ashamed, I had no idea what he meant. Surmising my confusion, he persisted, "Brian, you don't glorify God *with* your body; you glorify him *in* your body. It is your attitude that is key." At the time it seemed like small compensation, but over the years I began to catch a glimmer of the truth.

The next year when I shared with him that I was considering quitting the team, he said, "You can't quit! Who will lead those guys to Christ if you quit?" I didn't quit, and sure enough, my senior year I was elected captain of the team and had the opportunity to lead another senior, Bob Tomlinson, to Christ, who was as humbled by the sport as I was.

David faithfully taught us how to control our raging hormones by treating the "younger women as sisters in all purity." He was my constant guide, keeping my passions in check as I joyously courted Emily for four years. I'm not sure what I would have done without him. After Emily and I were married, I had the privilege of translating the Song of Songs with him, a study that became the basis for his book – *Song of a Longing Heart*. His book is an artful study that illuminates the sacred quality of human sexuality as it was created by God and captured by the poet in the Songs.

But beyond the honest physicality of the poetry, David had a keen awareness that our sex drives are really shadow voices of a deeper longing to be known and loved by God. After all those sessions I'm not sure I learned much Hebrew, as the vocabulary is extremely rare and the syntax beyond my comprehension. But I will forever cherish the memories of those quiet, still hours being in the presence of a man who was simply "at rest" and "in love" with Jesus.

As graduation drew near, my desire for economics waned considerably, while my thirst for and passion to teach the Scriptures took off. In the midst of contemplating which graduate programs to apply to, David handed me an application to the intern program at Peninsula Bible Church. It didn't take much convincing to change my life's direction, but I was ill prepared for the rejection I would receive at home or that my parents would

bar David and Carolyn from our rehearsal dinner. In typical Roper fashion, he merely smiled and took his wife out to dinner somewhere else. Not only did he refuse any payment to perform our wedding, he also insisted on paying for their plane tickets, at a time when they had little money.

After our wedding, David played a major role at critical junctures of my life consistently “strengthening my hand on God.” When our newborn son teetered on the brink of death, it was David who I called. One year later when I was anxiously awaiting the news to find if my daughter would live or die, again it was David by my side at the hospital. When I labored over whether to go to seminary or stay at PBC, it was David to whom I looked for counsel. And years later when I faced rejection and felt misunderstood by those in authority, it was David who taught me to respond like Jesus.

For the 17 years that David was senior pastor at Cole Community Church in Boise, and I watched from a distance as David couldn’t keep himself from Idaho’s back roads, high country and natural streams fly fishing and, in the process, he discovered they were teeming with the “little people”—pastors of tiny churches that no one cared for. It was out of this quiet work that Idaho Mountain Ministries took shape.

For one of our annual men’s retreats, I invited Paul Stevens from Regent College to be our speaker. Paul is a godly servant of Christ with a down-to-earth, no-nonsense spirituality. Out of his vast and rich experience counseling Christian leaders for decades, I asked him, “What is the essential thing that makes for great leadership?” He responded that in his experience, the more famous a leader was, most likely, the worse was his marriage. He concluded by saying, “What counts for me is the man who loves his wife to the grave, takes the initiative to be present with his kids on the soccer fields, and when he has the chance to be famous, he steps off the stage to minister to the nobodies.” It was just at this time that David stepped off the stage of public ministry to raise support to “minister to the nobodies.”

My relationship with David began more than fifty years ago, but not a day goes by that I don’t remember him. There is nothing he gave me—whether a truth to trust in, an attitude to adopt, a behavior to emulate, or a way to care for others—that I have been able to improve upon. This is because he learned it all from Jesus and he never stopped learning.

Where would I be had I not crossed David Roper’s path?

MY TRIBUTE TO RAY STEDMAN

My second tribute goes to **Ray Stedman**, Peninsula Bible Church's first pastor. He took the reins in 1950 one year before I was born. He loved mentoring young men who desired to teach the Scriptures and he believed that pastors should be trained in the local church rather than in seminary. Howard Henricks, one of Ray's closest friends from seminary, wrote:

Ray defied every stereotype. He was totally approachable, never wanting to be known as a condescending cleric. He spoke as an ordinary man, but his words seared permanently like a tattoo. He was affable, warm, yet exacting, but he never scarred an earnest seeker. He was spiritual but never churchy; he was impatient with pretense, angry with arrogance, but always at ease with the awkwardness of a crippled sheep seeking spiritual shelter. He loved to laugh and learned to lay his deepest sorrows on his Lord, so that in the midst of disappointment he could still rejoice. His eye was fixed on an eternal objective.¹

Knowing the pain of being abandoned by his father, Ray often made it his habit to adopt sons and whenever he traveled to the far corners of the globe, he would ask one of his "sons" along with him. I count it as one of my greatest privileges and educational opportunities to be one of those "sons." These opportunities came in my early twenties where I was able to witness, not only his absolute genius as a communicator, but also his disarming love that could break open the toughest legalist and lead them into freedom. Under his wings, I felt reborn in my own "sonship."

One anecdote stands out. A former PBC'er was living in Missouri and was discouraged about the present state of legalism in the church he was attending. Ray asked how he was combating the problem. He responded that he was offering a different point of view in the Sunday school class, but then was quickly "shot down." In Ray's typical style, he smiled and said, "Why you're like Don Quixote tilting against the windmills. The way to defeat the 'windmills of tradition' is not to get on your high horse and hit them head on, for you'll just get knocked off your horse. But what you can do is to train a team of commandos, go inside, and blow the place up!" Though the metaphor would be frowned upon in our post 911 era, the explosive image stuck with me and cemented my commitment to disciple men and women behind the scenes as the most effective way to bring change in a culture.

During the late 70's and early 80's Ray often traveled overseas with the entire pastoral staff and board of elders to teach pastors and missionaries on the distinctive themes that shaped his ministry: The New Covenant, spiritual gifts, servant leadership, discipleship and expository preaching. Ray would usually be the keynote speaker, while the rest of us would teach seminars, or, as in the case of Nigeria, lead conferences in more remote areas. We were a motley fun-loving crew as we traveled to Israel, Jordan, Nigeria, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Timor, training pastors and leaders.

Ray was always sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit to fly beneath the radar to discover hidden servants in the backwaters, who were champions of the poor. It was on the island of Timor that we discovered Eli Fangidae, who single handedly established orphanages, built churches, and deeply cared for the education of pastors throughout Indonesia. It wasn't long before he became one of our official missionaries. This has been a hallmark value that has continued in all our ministries. The lessons I learned traveling with Ray proved to be an education far above that of any seminary.

Ray's greatest gift to me was the discipline and privilege of expositing whole books of Scripture. This forced us to stand under the scriptures and to be shaped by them, rather than imposing our views on the text. And the fact that we were full time pastors and part time preachers, enabled us to work through the text in community of others before preaching it in the pulpit. It is that process that allowed me to flourish and not burn out for fifty years.

During my second year of internship Emily and I decided to move closer to church and expand our living situation from a one-bedroom apartment in Menlo Park to a two bedroom in Palo Alto. That was a \$30 rent increase (\$150 to \$180), which I felt we could afford. But an added plus was that Ray lived just one block away, which began a chess competition. I have no idea when it started, but it was a joy for me. Back home we were blessed by Ray's national reputation to have a constant flow of world-class scholars to teach at PBC. In 1976 Ray invited Bruce Waltke to be our guide for our pastors/elders' trip to Israel and Greece.

MY TRIBUTE TO BRUCE WALTKE

At that time Bruce was in transition, leaving Dallas Seminary for Regent College, whose faculty would become a wellspring of biblical studies and spiritual formation for all our pastors. Half-way through the trip, Ray had to leave, so Bruce took over our

morning bible studies. I'll never forget the moment Bruce opened up his Hebrew Scriptures to Proverbs and began to expound the nuances of Hebrew words with meticulous care and precision. Suddenly the black and white text was transformed into living color and my heart burned. I thought, if that is what Bruce gets from knowing Hebrew, I'm going to spend the rest of my life learning Hebrew. This began a close friendship with Bruce, who has been my mentor for over 40 years...and he's still going strong at the age of 94.

His greatest contribution to my life theologically was his ability to trace the development of all the major themes of the Old Testament and see them transformed in the New Testament. The New Covenant is really new, radically new. But one can't appreciate it without a wholistic understanding of the Scriptures. As Paul would write, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

In 1994, I asked Bruce if he would join me and three fellow pastors for my sabbatical in Israel. My quest was to find the Cave of Adullam where David fled from Saul and composed Psalm 142. I was thrilled when Bruce accepted, not knowing that, in his own words, he was spiritually dry and weary. Before leaving, my elder, Bill Hyatt insisted that, while we were in Jerusalem, we splurge and have dinner on him at a landmark French Restaurant called Kady's. We were warmly greeted by Kady, the restaurant's owner, who had a little too much to drink. When she discovered we were pastors, she quickly dismissed herself to the kitchen. The meal, however, lived up to its billing—it was exquisite (in 2020 the New York Times dubbed it "the best restaurant in Jerusalem).

After the main course, I asked Jackson to share his story and poem, and though it was rife with disillusionment and deep grief, it brought each of us to a profound awareness of God's relentless grace. I encouraged Jackson to read his poem to Kady, which he did. She returned to our table in tears, deeply move by what Jackson wrote. Then our waiter came to us rejoicing, since he was a Christian and Jackson and I broke out in song, singing a version of Psalm 25, accompanied by the piano. As the rest of the evening unfolded in merriment well into the early morning hours, Bruce began to do some soul searching.

Bruce would later write,

“Having spent years safely ensconced behind my professorial pulpit, I had lost the freedom to simply love people and to live fully in the present moment with whomever God brought into my life. So rather than continue on the next day to visit Qumran and the Dead Sea, I opted instead to stay behind, rest and ponder. My companion that day would be David Roper’s book, *Psalm 23: The Song of a Passionate Heart*². Roper’s poetic handling of the 23rd Psalm, and the fact that he wrote his book from a spiritually dry place, was a godsend. In its pages, I reacquainted myself with W. H. Auden, Shakespeare and George MacDonald. But it was poetry by George Herbert and T. S. Eliot that called deep unto deep, and by the time Brian found me in the late afternoon, I felt myself to be a new man. God’s word had done its work in me, calling me to come out from hiding behind the academic words of my profession and engage afresh with the people whom God had placed in my life. Though I was still weary, God’s word was energizing and cast the remainder of my trip in an entirely new light.

Being somewhat irrepressible, Brian took me to task for having failed to write a psalms poem. The other four of my companions had complied, but I had no intention of doing such a thing, for I felt incompetent to write a poem. However, to my own surprise, I obeyed Brian and on the last day of our trip—as best I can remember—crafted a poem to express my emotional pilgrimage over the two weeks from melancholy to joy. My poem, which I titled *From the Adullam Cave to the Eremos Cave*, traverses the distance between lament and praise, from a place of earnest contrition to the surprising realization of having been not only forgiven, but restored to teach. So I came to discover, having been a student and teacher of the psalms for three decades at that point, just how powerful the psalms can be to shape our voice of grief and hope, to help us tell our stories and to receive God’s grace and *hesed* love in response.”³

Bruce’s humility and teachability to learn from his students has been a model I hope I can emulate. I’ve always been moved by how carefully Bruce listens and ponders deeply over questions people ask him. When we were in Israel together, he came out for breakfast one morning and said, “Brian, I’ve been thinking about your question all night.” I forgot what my question was.

Fast forward to 2021, I was in Seattle helping Mick and Michelle Burke to manage some of her father's belongings. Bruce lived close by and we took the opportunity to take him to dinner along with Laura and Jim Jones, former pbcc'rs. Once again, I caught Bruce in a moment of deep reflection, listening to Michelle's salvation story that resulted from her bold, brash, almost blasphemous honesty with God. Michelle's story challenged Bruce's theological framework, but I watched as he listened and listened until it brought him to tears. Bruce's premier scholarship is matched by his childlike humility.

Where would I be had I not been mentored by Bruce Waltke?

MY TRIBUTE TO ELDERS AT PBCC

My last tribute goes to the board of elders. Throughout my many years at *pbcc* there has remained one unwavering and steady constant that has characterized the DNA of our board of elders—the generous care and personal support that the board gives the pastoral staff. I believe this sets us uniquely apart, creating an atmosphere where pastors have the opportunity to grow, spiritually thrive, and most importantly, financially provide for their families.

My first elder was **John Landrith** (Mark Landrith's father) when I became junior high pastor. John was no-nonsense salesman with a passion for life and no problem challenging you with the truth. I had utterly no experience working with youth and John noticed that I was somewhat timid about initiating relationships. I was just a couple of weeks into my job when John asked me, "How many junior high boys are you discipling?" I sheepishly answered, "None." He shot back, "I want the names of five boys you're discipling by next week, or you're fired!" Terrified, I wasted no time calling David Miles, Carl Temme, Brian Roper, Jimmy Griffith and David Liston. For three years I would pick up three of them at Valley Christian school, take them to Denny's for hot fudge Sundays and bible study, then we would throw the football around in front of Brian Roper's house. That was a beginning of some endearing relationships that were further deepened and enriched when I became college pastor, and some are still strong to the present day. I am forever grateful for John's "kick in the rear" to jump start me into joy of discipling junior highers.

Jim Heaton was the elder who encouraged me to stay at pbc and promised that the church would provide all the seminary training I wanted while I was a pastor. I had no idea how they would fulfill that promise, but it was the best decision I ever made.

When my son David died, Jim and his wife Marion invited us into their home for dinner once a week for an entire year. They became surrogate parents for us in the darkness time of our lives.

Bill Hyatt also played a significant role of my life. Over years tracing through Old Testament themes and how they landed in the New Testament, my understanding of eschatology changed from the prevailing dispensational point of view. After I presented my views at a staff meeting, Ray Stedman was deeply troubled and wrote a doctrinal statement which, in good conscience, I couldn't sign. He then wrote a letter to the elders at Cupertino explaining his concerns.

Being a man-pleaser, the experience of rejection was good for my soul. From a heavenly perspective, I felt it was more a father/son issue than eschatology. I had deeply disappointed my earthly father by going into ministry and now, I was facing rejection from my spiritual father. I didn't feel it was appropriate to argue with my "father," so, I began exploring other churches. Meanwhile the elders at Cupertino were faced with the issue of firing me or re-writing the doctrinal statement. The elders chose the latter and, to Ray's credit, though it pained him, he submitted to the system of eldership he initiated.

It was a year later when Bill and I were in Gmunden after our ministry in Romania, that he shared with me that he had made a vow to himself that I wasn't going to leave. To make sure that never happened he made a priority to be in every arena I was teaching, from the Men of Wednesday morning, my intern class on Tuesdays and two trips to Romania. The wisdom, courage and care the elders demonstrated resulted in a peaceful transition without an ounce of controversy. Ironically, over time every pastor came to the same conclusion through different roads of study. But Bernard was ahead of all of us. When Ray asked him, "What is your eschatology?" He simply responded, "I'm British."

The elders are the unsung heroes of our church, laboring faithfully on top of their full-time jobs and family needs. It is a result of their sacrificial care and encouragement that I have been able to serve for 50 years. I'm not sure I would have flourished under any other arrangement and I will be forever in their debt. They are the truly the ones who should be celebrated more than me. To God be the glory.

¹ Mark S. Mitchell, *Portrait of Integrity: The Life of Ray C. Stedman* (Discovery House Publishers: Grand Rapids, 2004), Forward.

² David Roper, *Psalm 23: The Song of a Passionate Heart, Hope and Rest from the Shepherd* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1994).

³ Karen Dabaghian, *A Travelogue of the Interior, Finding Your Voice and God's Heart in the Psalms* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), 10-11.