

The Padded Pew

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Brennan Manning says, “Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is true self. Every other identity is illusion.” The moment of finding this true identity, the identity in Christ, is the “padded pew” moment. The padded pew can mean exactly that—a padded pew in a large or small church or for this story, a small, white country church. The padded pew could also mean a friend’s couch, a workplace meeting room, a school’s bleachers, or an open field. The padded pew represents a place in the memory of any individual who, at one time, grappled with an identity crisis—identity in the world or identity in Christ. The place where identity is finally accepted in relation to Christ and in spite of the life lived before that moment forever changes a person’s life, perspective, and future.

There are moments and places throughout a lifetime that have great significance, but none have the supernatural power to change a life as much as the padded pew. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (1959) A green-covered padded pew sitting in a small, white country church that could barely hold 50 people in the sanctuary wields that power, or at least it did for one little girl and one young man. The little girl sits by her momma during a hot, August revival as the preacher talks about Jesus. She does not remember the words exactly, but she does remember when the preacher held an invitation to any and all who wanted a new identity, an identity only Jesus could give. So, she rose from the padded pew, knelt at the altar as just a little girl but rose from that same altar a daughter in Christ.

Ten years later, same church but different padded pew, a young man sits Sunday after Sunday hearing about a new life Jesus could offer him. He had lived and was still living a hard life, and this young man wanted something different. He wanted a new life and a new identity. He wanted Jesus but was scared of giving up the world and all he had known, but on one

beautiful, May Sunday, that young man gave up fighting. He rose from the padded pew, knelt at that same altar, and came away a new person.

In the new life given with this new identity, individuals must learn to imitate Jesus Christ. However, this new life “is not achieved overnight; even for Christ, this transformation was a process, and so followers of Jesus are called to a process of maturity” (Maqoma 2). It begins on that pew the moment they choose Christ over the world and will continue until Christ’s return. In Philippians 1:6, Paul says, “I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (2000). This work in the life of the individual comes in the form of self-denial or putting away those old things from the former life.

Accepting “the call to follow Jesus is possible only if we commit to denying ourselves and taking up the cross” (Maqoma 3). It means that if life pursuits contradict Christ’s plan, the choice is Christ’s plan. It means to “deny oneself the pleasures and profits of this world, when in competition with Christ” (Maqoma 3). This is a daily task; if practiced continually, it will become a lifestyle. This practice makes individuals look a little more like Christ every day, and it becomes their new identity, giving them a new life. Eugene Peterson sums it up the best in *The Message Bible* when he writes Ephesians 4:24 in this way, “Take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you” (1616). The God-fashioned life is the identity the padded pew provides for those who choose it.

With the new identity and the new life inevitably comes a new perspective. This perspective affects all aspects of the interactions that individuals have with the secular world and the people living in it. There is also a perspective shift as individuals look at themselves. They must look at the world through a servant’s eyes because that is how Jesus looked at the world—

“you cannot serve effectively if all you are concerned about is your status” (Maqoma 5). What a radical shift in perspective—from thinking about oneself to thinking about others first!

Another perspective change is for individuals to live a life of humility. Humility is hard to define but “the best way to understand humility is to find out what it is not. Humility is the antithesis of pride, and pride itself seems to be one of the biggest problems in human relations” (Maqoma 5). Again, humility is about putting others first, which is not how this society lives or interacts with one another. Paul says it best in Philippians 1:3-4—“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interest, but also for the interests of others” (2000). Christ humbles himself enough to die a sinner’s death on a cross to give His children this new identity and new life. He asks that they do the same for others. He asks that His children gain a new perspective from the padded pew.

Finally, as identity in Christ gives individuals a new life with a new perspective, it also gives them what may be the most important—a new future. This is a future that includes eternal life, a mansion in Heaven, and a new, transformed body. This future is available because of the life of Jesus Christ, and His “exaltation speaks of Jesus as a human becoming a being that is divine through this whole process of transformation” (Maqoma 6). As John 3:16 says, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (1801). Because this new identity resides in Jesus Christ, it means that after the padded pew moment, the future is sealed with His blood. As imitators of Christ, individuals have the same inheritance as Christ.

As individuals move forward in life from the padded pew with their new identity proudly on display, it can become very easy to forget. God warns people about forgetting Him in

Deuteronomy 8:19 as He says, “If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve them and bow in worship to them, I testify against you today that you will perish” (269). Of course, ‘perish’ means eternal damnation and not eternal life. Mark Twain even warns about forgetting the place that makes such a strong impression in a person’s life in his passage “Two Ways to See a River.” He writes, “I had lost something that could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! (Twain, 738). As Twain moves further away from that first experience down the river and gains more knowledge of the river’s nuances, the more often he forgets how amazing the river once was. The further away individuals move away from their salvation moment, the more likely they are to forget. The little girl and the young man need not forget their padded pew—the place where their identity changed forever.

In truth, for very few people will the padded pew be a green-covered cushioned pew sitting in a small, white country church. However, for most people, the padded pew will be a place that they will remember for the rest of their lives. The little girl remembers the moment she felt that nudge to move to the altar and the moment that she felt that unexplainable sensation in her heart as she asked Jesus to become Lord of her life—a sensation like a door opening and closing as Jesus entered. For the young man, he remembers the moment his knuckles turned white as he gripped the pew in front of him trying to hold onto the past and the life he knew, and the moment his grip loosened as he accepted his new identity and the future Christ was offering him. Now, that little girl and that young man, with their new identities, share, not only a new life, perspective, and future, but now, they also share a last name. And it was all because of the most unexpected place—the padded pew.

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