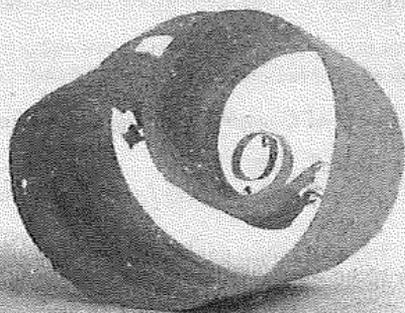


More Than a Carpenter

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Previously published by Tyndale House Publishers under ISBN 978-0-8423-4552-1.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDowell, Josh.

More than a carpenter / Josh McDowell, Sean McDowell. — [New, rev. ed.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-2627-6 (sc : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4143-3380-9 (sc multi-packs)

I. Jesus Christ—Person and offices. I. McDowell, Sean. II. Title.

BT203.M3386 2009

232—dc22

2008054623

Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 18
18 17 16 15 14 13

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My Story

THIRTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER THOMAS AQUINAS writes: “There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.” I first began to feel this thirst when I was a teenager. I wanted to be happy. I wanted my life to have meaning. I became hounded by those three basic questions that haunt every human life: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? I wanted answers, so as a young student, I started searching for them.

Where I was brought up, everyone seemed to be into religion, so I thought I might find my answers in being religious. I got into church 150 percent. I went every time the doors opened—morning, afternoon, or evening. But I must have picked the wrong church because I felt worse inside it than I did outside. From my upbringing on a farm in Michigan I inherited a rural practicality that says when something doesn't work, get rid of it. So I chucked religion.

Then I thought that education might have the answers

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to my quest for meaning, so I enrolled in a university. I soon became the most unpopular student among the professors. I would buttonhole them in their offices and badger them for answers to my questions. When they saw me coming, they would turn out the lights, pull down the shades, and lock their doors. You can learn many things at a university, but I didn't find the answers I was seeking. Faculty members and my fellow students had just as many problems, frustrations, and unanswered questions as I did.

One day on campus I saw a student wearing a T-shirt that read, "Don't follow me, I'm lost." That's how everyone in the university seemed to me. Education, I decided, was not the answer.

What Do You Think?

Do you agree with philosopher Thomas Aquinas that "There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning"?

I began to think maybe I could find happiness and meaning in prestige. I would find a noble cause, dedicate myself to it, and in the process, become well known on

campus. The people with the most prestige in the university were the student leaders, who also controlled the purse strings. So I got elected to various student offices. It was a heady experience to know everyone on campus, to make important decisions, to spend the university's money getting the speakers I wanted and the students' money for throwing parties.

But the thrill of prestige wore off like everything else I had tried. I would wake up on Monday morning, usually with a headache because of the night before, dreading to face another five miserable days. I endured Monday through Friday, living only for the partying nights

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of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Then on Monday the meaningless cycle would begin all over again.

I didn't let on that my life was meaningless; I was too proud for that. Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. They never suspected that my happiness was a sham. It depended on my circumstances. If things were going great for me, I felt great. When things were going lousy, I felt lousy. I just didn't let it show.

I was like a boat out in the ocean, tossed back and forth by the waves. I had no rudder—no direction or control. But I couldn't find anyone living any other way. I couldn't find anyone who could tell me how to live differently. I was frustrated. No, it was worse than that. There's a strong term that describes the life I was living: hell.

About that time I noticed a small group of people—eight students and two faculty members—who seemed different from the others. They seemed to know who they were and where they were going. And they had convictions. It is refreshing to find people with convictions, and I like to be around them. I admire people who believe in something and take a stand for it, even if I don't agree with their beliefs.

It was clear to me that these people had something I didn't have. They were disgustingly

Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. But the life I was living was hell.

What Do You Think?

Do you like being around people with convictions?

What makes it an invigorating experience? What makes it a frustrating one?

happy. And their happiness didn't ride up and down with the circumstances of university life; it was constant. They appeared to possess an inner source of joy, and I wondered where it came from.

Something else about these people caught my attention—their attitudes and actions toward each other. They genuinely loved each other—and not only each other, but the people outside their group as well. And I don't mean they just talked about love; they got involved in people's lives, helping them with their needs and problems. It was all totally foreign to me, yet I was strongly attracted to it.

Like most people, when I see something I want but don't have, I start trying to figure out a way to get it. So I decided to make friends with these intriguing people.

A couple of weeks later I sat around a table in the student union talking to some of the members of this group. The conversation turned to the topic of God. I was pretty skeptical and insecure about this subject, so I put on a big front. I leaned back in my chair, acting as if I couldn't care less.

“Christianity, ha! That’s for unthinking weaklings, not intellectuals.” Of course, under all the bluster I really wanted what these people had.

“Christianity, ha!” I blustered. “That’s for unthinking weaklings, not intellectuals.” Of course, under all the bluster I really wanted what these people had, but my pride didn't

want them to know the aching urgency of my need. The subject bothered me, but I couldn't let go of it. So I turned to one of the students, a good-looking woman (I used to think all Christians were ugly), and I said, “Tell me, why are