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Our Sunshine

A Christian Understanding of Life

Excerpts from a book by Dr. Byron Bitar



Learning from Byron Bitar

BY SENIOR PASTOR NATE DEVLIN

I believe that God uses certain people in our lives to teach us what we need to learn. I have been blessed over my life to have been the beneficiary of three profound, godly teachers.

Dr. Don Collett, Old Testament professor at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, taught me how to read and interpret the Bible. Rev. Dr. Rick Wolling, my pastor and mentor for nearly 15 years, taught me what it means to be a pastor. But before meeting these two outstanding teachers, my eyes and ears learned from Dr. Byron Bitar. He taught me how to think and what it meant to live in the pursuit of God's glory and excellence.

Dr. Bitar was a philosopher, but a different kind than what you might associate with a person who studies and teaches philosophy. He was completely uninterested in the stuffy, academic and esoteric variety of philosophy often associated with the Enlightenment, the European intellectual movement of the 18th century which gave rise to such men as Rene Descartes or David Hume. Perhaps you remember hearing those names in a freshman humanities course,

reading for the first time the now famous dictum, "I think therefore I am."

Dr. Bitar had little interest in abstractions. He wanted to know and teach what it meant to be a human being fully alive, made glorious through friendship and virtue. In short, he was deeply concerned about how people lived because he knew that every person would either live well or horribly. He not only had a general concern for right living, but a particular concern for Christians living well.

As I'm sure many of you have discovered, he knew that Christians can end up living very poorly, sometimes even worse than unbelievers. That is why, later in his career, Dr. Bitar became somewhat obsessed with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous German philosopher of the 19th century. Nietzsche was no friend of Christians; in fact, he wrote a book titled

The Antichrist, which really meant the anti-Christian.

Throughout his career, Nietzsche produced scathing criticisms of the Christianity of his day. He believed Christians were nihilists. Nihilism is the school of thought that life is essentially meaningless. According to Nietzsche, Christians were nihilists because they actually hated the good world that God made, rejecting it in the belief that it would all burn in judgment and our only hope was in escape.

For Nietzsche, Christians lived by cheap grace. They had no tolerance for suffering and avoided courageous engagement with the world. They instead opted for shallow, sequestered subsistence living, all while waiting for the second coming of Christ. It is a withering criticism, and sadly, Dr. Bitar found it to be all too accurate.

In the years before Dr. Bitar's untimely death from cancer in 2003, at the age of 55, he set out to try and correct the deficiencies he believed Nietzsche had accurately identified in Christianity. Part of that effort included a slim book he wrote entitled *Our Sunshine: A Christian Understanding of Life*. In the book, Dr. Bitar makes his case for a robust and practical Christian philosophy of life, informed by the classical Christian wisdom of antiquity.

Dr. Bitar wanted to offer a positive conception of what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," and how Christians might follow in the way.

In this edition of the Scattered Seeds magazine, we offer to you the preface and the concluding chapter of *Our Sunshine*. Our hope is that, someday soon, we can reproduce the entire book for your consideration and benefit.

I want to thank Dr. Bitar's wife Gail, and son Brandon (who are also guests on the current episode of our podcast), for giving us permission to reproduce the book for future generations to enjoy. I want to thank Dr. Kyle Bennett, who was also a student of Dr. Bitar, and whose closing essay offers us a sketch of what we are affectionately calling lessons learned in "the School of Bitar."

Until the book is republished, I trust this sampling will whet your appetite and encourage you to live life to the fullest.

As Dr. Bitar said, "Learn to garden and cook, dress and decorate, exercise and play, sing and dance, laugh and celebrate with passion and polish, honor and elegance, simplicity and flair. God in Christ died so that you could have a full and complete life. Do not settle for less!"

That was the life Byron Bitar lived. Even while he was battling cancer, he never doubted the goodness of God. His last lesson to me was one I shall never forget, as it reinforced what Jesus himself said in the gospel of John: I have come that you might live life abundantly.



Those Were the Days: This video image (recorded on Oct. 29, 1998) captures Dr. Byron Bitar (front left), seated across from Pastor Nate Devlin (front right), when he was a philosophy student of Dr. Bitar at Geneva College in Beaver County. Next to Byron is Ben Kendrew (back left), Nate's college roommate. Behind Nate is Mike Witterman, a fellow Geneva student.



Preface

From Our Sunshine: A Christian Understanding of Life

***My reason for going to college was unconventional:
I wanted to find out what it means to be a Christian.***

It was the 1960s. America was no longer one nation under God. War and peace, establishment and revolution, conservative morality and hippie freedom, Christianity and the religions of Asia opposed each other in a tense and, at times, frightening cultural conflict. Many Americans decided to do their duty and went off to war; others were delegated against their will to join the military fray.

A lot dropped out, many dropped acid, some dropped dead. God supposedly died. A 1966 cover of Time magazine couched the concern as a question, “Is God dead?” It is no wonder that I wondered what it means to be a Christian.



During my freshman year, I bought a book about the basics of Christianity by a well-reputed theologian, read it through, and was quite disappointed and depressed. It

said nothing more than what I had been taught in Sunday school: that humans are sinners and are condemned by God to hell, that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, that Jesus died to pay the penalty for human sin, that a human is saved from hell and restored to a positive relationship with God by accepting Jesus as Savior, and that at death, a Christian will go to heaven. It was not much more than a simple, superficial gospel tract.

“Is that it?” I thought. “That’s the basics! In

that case being a Christian does not amount to much.”

I already knew everything the book proclaimed, but I still felt an emptiness. The book made no sense of my life, my gifts and aspirations, my passion for learning, my questioning mind, my commitment to a college education, my love of weight lifting and tennis, my concern about my looks, or my love for my girlfriend. The book made no sense of my desire to be married, to have sex, to be an attorney, to make a positive contribution to my nation and its economy, and so forth. I was disheartened and discouraged. I continued my quest, however, thinking that there had to be more to Christianity.

After completing a major in economics, I began a major in philosophy. I gave up my immediate goal to attend law school and went to seminary instead. After seminary, I attended graduate school in philosophy. Every school experience helped, but I still felt deficient in fundamental wisdom and meaning.

After graduate school in philosophy, I began teaching philosophy at Geneva College. The curriculum included a course in ancient philosophy and one in medieval philosophy, areas I had not studied at graduate school.

As I read and scrutinized the works of Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, an enlightenment took place different from anything I had experienced before. Through those classical figures, I felt a deeper understanding of life dawning. Under the influence of their writings, I examined and reexamined my experiences, noticing things I never discerned before.

I was exposed to new concepts, became familiar with old, venerable distinctions, and thought through ancient arguments. I considered numerous ideas and ideals, agreed with many, rejected others, and was stumped and puzzled by some. As the process continued, I came to grasp in fair measure what I now call “classical wisdom.” My education in classical wisdom was and still is exciting. It continues to this day.

After over 20 years of teaching philosophy, I was told by a student, Ben Kendrew, and a colleague, Richard Grassel, that Nietzsche was the philosopher

of young people today. Since Ben was planning on being a youth pastor, we covenanted to study Nietzsche together, reading all of his works. His friend, Nate Devlin, joined us. As our inquiry progressed, we came to the realization that there was a need to present the meaning of being a Christian in the light of Nietzsche’s philosophy

and his critique of Christianity.

The result is this book. It presents the core of classical Christian wisdom, which contains uniquely Christian beliefs and more. Classical wisdom includes principles and insights gleaned from Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient philosophers.

This book is also a challenge to the young people of our age, Christian and non-Christian, who are being devastated and destroyed by a popular culture that promotes egoism and hedonism. It is a challenge to them to turn from death to life.

I came to grasp in fair measure what I now call “classical wisdom.”



Chapter 12

Practice of Living, Practice of Dying

From Our Sunshine: A Christian Understanding of Life

Practice of Living

Christianity is a way of living: living with exuberance, wisdom, and virtue. It is forming and fostering friendships of character. Christian living involves marrying well and raising fine children. It is cooking, gardening, dressing, and dancing with style. It is doing business with honesty and excellence. It is conscientious study, research, and experimentation.

Christianity does not get integrated with culture; it is a form of culture.¹ Where Christianity is practiced, culture is shaped. The molding of culture by Christianity originates in the person, his or her physical and moral life,

and his or her skill and performance.

Christian discipline and activity fashions friendships and family life, business environment and behavior, educational goals and means, economic institutions and habits, civic constitution and custom, religious community and philanthropy, and leisure experience and pursuit.

Practice of Dying

Christianity is the practice of living. Christianity is also the practice of dying.² A proper Christian lives with one foot in the grave. A Christian is concerned with both existence in

¹Unfortunately, many times it is a tawdry, low-grade form of culture. But it should not be. That is a central point of this book.

²This is an adaption of Plato's contention in *Phaedo*, "Philosophy is the practice of dying."

this life and in the afterlife because a Christian has faith in personal survival after death.

After death, we are accountable for how we think, feel, and behave in this life. More importantly, in the afterlife, there is direct experience of God and, for those who love God, entrance into a community of persons – human and angelic – who take virtue seriously. We carry our earthly knowledge and virtue with us into that mystical community.

That supernatural community is called the “City of God” by Augustine. There development continues: knowledge expands, character is refined, skill grows, friendship blossoms. Living virtuously in the transcendent City of God involves difficulty and challenge and requires

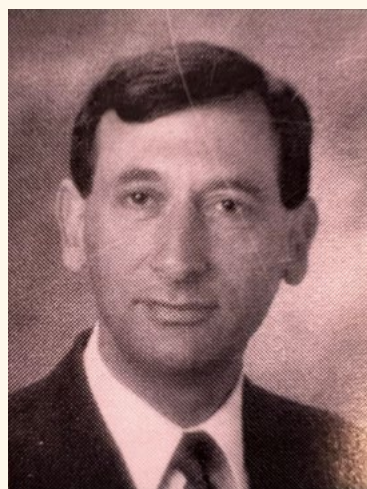
effort and exertion.

Existence after death provides hope for those who die in infancy, for those severely disabled, for those socially oppressed and deprived, and for those cut down in the prime of life. There is more to come, infinitely more.

Existence after death also directs our priorities to everlasting things. God, virtue, friendships of character – these are everlasting.

Practice dying so you can live well. Practice living so you can die well.

May God be with you in life, in death, and in life after death!



Just one year after Our Sunshine was published in 2001, Dr. Byron Bitar got news no one wants to hear: a Stage 4 cancer diagnosis. And the year after that, in 2003, he passed from this world to the next, dying from that cancer, which was a very aggressive and painful type. Nonetheless, among his final words

were: “Never doubt the goodness of God ... and keep the faith.”

Born in Seattle, Washington, in 1947, Dr. Bitar was the third of five children of Dr. Emmanuel Bitar, a pathologist, and his wife Margaret. When Byron was 4 years old, his parents attended an evangelistic crusade. Their son was saved two years later at age 6.

Dr. Bitar met his future wife Gail in the eighth grade in Everett, Washington. They were married in 1969 and had two children: daughter Kara and son Brandon.

Dr. Bitar graduated with a B.A. in philosophy from Pacific Lutheran University in Parkland, Washington, where Gail received her degree in education.

They then moved cross country to Philadelphia where he completed his M.Div. degree at Westminster Theological Seminary. He was a student there of John Frame, a Westminster professor who was raised in Beverly Heights Church.

Dr. Bitar subsequently completed his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, both in philosophy, from the University of Virginia in 1975 and 1977, respectively. He taught at Geneva College for a quarter century until his death on June 2, 2003.

Since 2004, Geneva has hosted the annual Dr. Byron I. Bitar Memorial Lecture in Philosophy. Dr. Kyle Bennett of our staff has been a past Bitar Lecturer.

What I learned in the School of Bitar

Though we have one Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, many teachers and schools can help us serve Christ's Kingdom and submit to His Way. Byron Bitar was one of my teachers, and he schooled me in how to follow Jesus. He showed me what Christian living looks like.

What was so winsome about Dr. Bitar and his teaching? It was how he wore his faith on his sleeve. The kinds of questions he asked and the peace he carried while a relentless disease ate his body. It was the joy he exuded every day in the classroom.

I wanted to be like him. I wanted to be around him. Here was a man who was fully alive. It was hard not to notice.

Over the past 20 years, Dr. Bitar's teaching has hovered over me like the Spirit over the waters.

It has informed everything I think, feel, and do: how I understand life, my vocation and how I teach and think about topics ranging from marriage, sex, parenting, friendship, fashion, food, even American football. Each were topics he thought about Christianly.

The excerpts from his book *Our Sunshine* reprinted in this edition were forged by years of training; the deliberate development of "head, heart, and hand" habits (which is the slogan we have adopted for our new Academy here). Describing these habits from the

"School of Bitar," the following points come to mind.

There is a wise way to learn.

Choose conscientiously, listen closely, and read carefully. Not everything is worth reading. Not every writer is worth engaging with. Dr. Bitar discerned which thinkers and interlocutors were worth the time of digging deeper and the effort of disagreement. Only a fool tries to convince anyone.

There is a wise way to think.

Critique ideas, but do so corporately and charitably. Thinking is very personal, but it shouldn't be done privately. Dr. Bitar thought out loud, and, in the process, showed us how to think. And he did so without throwing out the baby with the bath water. Every falsity, and every lie, has a sliver of truth.

There is a wise way to

understand Christ's work.

The Lord of Golgotha is the Logos of Genesis who laid out Life long ago. Dr. Bitar constantly stressed that creation and creatures were made wonderfully good by Christ in their vulnerability. We were not made or saved to become angels or gods.

There is a wise way to relate to

others. Find people committed to following Jesus, become friends with them, and invest in their character. Dr.

Bitar understood the importance of investing in other believers and doing life with them. It takes a Christian family, and a Christian school, and a local Christian church, to raise a Christian.

There is a wise way to see life.

Egoism and hedonism are bad; sacrifice and suffering are good. Dr. Bitar frequently flipped my world upside down: it's not about me and the pile of exhilarations I might enjoy before I die. It's about my neighbor and how they can experience life in Christ. Life is more than a bucket list.

Like Pastor Nate, I believe that the "School of Bitar" has a lot to offer the Church, the Academy, and even the Living Room of today. I pray that these excerpts from *Our Sunshine* instigate worship, inform your living, and improve your interactions. I pray that they help our church live more Christianly.

May those with eyes to see, read. And those with minds to think, reflect.

Dr. Kyle Bennett is director of the Beverly Heights Christian Preschool and principal of our Academy.

Rick Wolling's "Between Sundays" column will return to this space in April, once he finishes writing a Lenten devotional as our March edition. It will be available on or before Ash Wednesday on Feb. 22.