

## Pastor Steve's Pensées

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Today's message is very different from our normal message. After three and a half years of preaching verse by verse through Romans, we ended it last week. To get through it, we had to keep grinding. Along the way, I've had thoughts about things and continue to have them. But to get through Romans, I had to put them on the back burner. Today's message is less exposition, more encouragement and exhortation.

Some years ago, I decided that I needed a list of great books to read before I die. While I have not written them down, I have had a mental list going and have been working on it. For example, my pandemic read was Jonathan Edwards's *Religious Affections*. A wonderful book and one of the hardest I've ever read. A few years ago, I took on *Pascal's Pensées*. I'm thinking not many of you have read it or even heard of it.

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician and scientist/philosopher in the 1600s. He was a real renaissance guy with an amazing mind who, other than science and math, is probably best known for *Pascal's Wager*. Have you heard of this? Pascal's Wager is, *if I live as a Christian and it turns out to be not true, then I have lived a virtuous life of meaning only to end up in the nothingness like everyone else. But if it is true, the Christian spends eternity with life and bliss and God.* Get it? There is little lost if Christianity isn't true. There is infinite gain if it is. That's Pascal's Wager and it's part of this book called *Pascal's Pensées*. It's a collection of some 1,000 or so thoughts and essays.

Today, the message is *Pastor Steve's Pensées*—thoughts and reflections on a variety of subjects. These are not in any particular order. Just things I want to share and talk with you about in this pastoral chat.

### **Pensée #1 – In a Pandemic Year, the Bethel Cream Rises to the Top**

I repeatedly heard from my parents growing up, *the cream always rises to the top*. My dad grew up dairy farming, so the milk analogy stuck with him. When freshly-drawn milk sits in the milk tank, it separates with the thicker cream rising to the top. My dad tells about his childhood going into the barn and scooping the cream off the top and guzzling it. Liquid ice cream. The best of the milk rises to the top.

*"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it"* (Proverbs 3:27). I know we are not done with all the pandemic stuff yet but we are certainly in a different place now than we were a year ago. Over this past year, I have seen so many amazing examples of people in our church stepping up to serve, to sacrifice, to give, to pray. We've had staff who have risen so high in my estimation as the stress and challenge of this year revealed amazing character and fortitude. The cream rises to the top.

There is no way I can mention everybody, but I don't want to mention nobody. I'll start with our lead elders along with Pastor Brad Lagos and Executive Director of Operations Dave Harvey. I could not have survived without their steady leadership through difficult times. Thank you to our whole staff who served the church in wonderful ways. One department to highlight—our worship and tech team led by Pastor Dustin—immediately pivoted to produce a high-quality streamed service every weekend. They also figured out outdoor services over four campuses. I have heard over and over again praise for how much the online service

blessed our people and allowed an ongoing church experience for them. Thank you worship department and tech team and everyone else.

Our small group leaders had a crash course on how to use Zoom. We had a week or two to get them up to speed, and small group ministry moved online for a season. Well done everyone including Pastor Chris Whetstone! That kind of determined ministry is more often required on the mission field, but we've had our turn.

Led by Pastor Jared Bryant, our missions and outreach teams did over 90 community initiatives with huge amounts of food and supply distribution. I received many notes from teachers in our community thanking us for the supplies and help we provided. We did some creative encouragements too. This is one of my favorite things we did at a local hospital:



Bethel Church, your financial generosity during this time was astonishing. Truth be told, as the shutdown started and nobody knew how long it would last or if we could pay our bills, our finance department was running scenarios for what happens if giving plummets. Not only did it not plummet, with a very strong December, we ended the year with the strongest giving year we have ever had. We haven't passed an offering plate in 14 months. Wow! We were able to stick to our mission. The cream rose to the top and my first Pensée is *Thank you, Bethel Church, and well done!*

## **Pensée #2 – What's Old is New, and is Desperately Needed Again**

*"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:33-36)*

*"Show hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9).*

*"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.... Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (Romans 12:13, 16).*

The hospitality of early Christianity was part of why it shook the world. Acts tells the story of the early church's radical generosity and hospitality. They refused to be the Levite who passed by people in need. They modeled the Good Samaritan whose heart felt compassion for other people—so much so that the early church gathered every day to be together, partake in the Lord's Supper, hear the apostles teach, and to enjoy being with each other.

This past year was certainly the loneliest year in recent memory. Millions of people were separated from family and loved ones, especially senior citizens. It was a year of social distancing and eyeing other people suspiciously. Whether you agree with all of that or not, that's the reality.

Coming out of this season, people are craving embodied experiences with others. In this, we have a huge opportunity to do what the church does best: gather, share ourselves with each other, and open our hearts and lives to other people.

This is certainly a neighborly opportunity but it is also a tremendous church opportunity. We have hundreds of new people who have come to Bethel Church over this past year. Many have moved to Northwest Indiana. They don't know anybody. They need recommendations for dentists and plumbers. They aren't sure about schools and signups. They don't have legacy friendships or family here. They are eager to connect. This is a huge opportunity IF Bethelonians open our hearts and homes to new relationships/friendships.

So, what do you do when you meet someone new around here? Let's walk this out. You come in, sit by someone you don't know. What happens next? Hopefully, you greet them. *Hi, who are you? New here? OK. These are your children? Wonderful.* What happens next is the critical moment between Christian pleasantries and Christian hospitality. *Well, OK. Nice to meet you—OR—*have you ever thought about what it's like for that other person? They are the newbie. They aren't going to likely initiate. This is *your* calling. Bethelonians, this is the moment. I'm urging hospitality.

*Is there anything we can do to help get you settled around here? Would you like to meet here again next week and sit by each other? Would you like to grab some coffee after the service? What are you doing for lunch? We love our small group, would you consider attending once if we invited you? Could I call you sometime and see how you are doing?* The early church didn't have phones or texts, yet they made it happen. Compared to them, we have it easy.

In a world of politeness and social niceties that generally go nowhere, a church of people engaging and taking small steps with people surprises them. *Really? You want to eat something together? Like with us? How do they feel as they walk away? I matter! This is my kind of church.* Old-fashioned hospitality.

Or how about this old-fashioned church thing, inviting people to church? In the past you might extol the church for various reasons. Now? Come enjoy people again. It's a powerful draw.

I read a book recently by Rosaria Butterfield entitled, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. I'd highly recommend it as she urges Christians to practice *radically ordinary hospitality*. To live with an open door and open table in your home. Not to entertain. Fine china and crystal glass are intimidating to people. Better is plastic or paper plates and burgers. Your normal

real self. Invite people into the normal mess of your life and home. It feels authentic. We think we have to project some fakey perfection but that counters what real Christian hospitality does. Christianity must be observed in the messiness of our normal lives for people to relate and find encouragement in the mess of their lives.

- *"Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God's gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged. They know that the gospel comes with a house key."*<sup>1</sup> (Butterfield)
- *"Radically ordinary hospitality is this: using your Christian home in a daily way that seeks to make strangers neighbors, and neighbors family of God. It brings glory to God, serves others, and lives out the gospel in word and deed."*<sup>2</sup>

There has never been a greater opportunity for Christian hospitality to welcome people into the kingdom of God. To help, we are having several outdoor services across the campuses this summer. We will be grilling afterwards and providing opportunities to linger. Eat together. Just this week, the DeWitts put in a fire pit at our home for the express purpose of gathering with people.



I have heard the cicadas are coming. It's this once-every-17-years phenomenon. The big one. Brood X. Billions of cicadas will emerge out of the soil. All of them are looking for love. It's the biggest singles gathering in history. As we hear this deafening sound for the next few weeks, let it remind you of people emerging from this past year, looking to meet and connect. Let the sounds summon you to open your heart and home. The gospel comes with a house key.

### **Pensée #3 – Are You a \_\_\_\_\_ Christian or a Christian \_\_\_\_\_?**

So much of this past year's rancor has centered on identities and narratives. Narratives try and explain why things are and who we are. Political, racial, and sexual identities are front and center in our society. What is troubling is my perception is that many Christians are choosing these secondary identities as their primary identity over who they are in Jesus Christ. To be a Christian requires that my Christian identity be my primary identity and my racial, political, and sexual identities are clearly secondary.

*"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28). Look at this verse with me. Jew or Greek. *Racial identity*. Slave nor free. *Economic identity*; you could argue *political identity*. Male and female. *Sexual or gender identity*. The Apostle Paul says these are not primary anymore. Not in the gospel. Not in the church. *For you are all one in Christ Jesus*.

You can know what your primary identity is because it's where your true belonging, significance, and passion lie. You can tease people about secondary identities. I do it all the time as a Dutch guy making Dutch jokes. I'm safe doing so because being Dutch isn't my primary identity, and people laugh about it if being Dutch isn't their primary identity either.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Kindle Edition, Location 415.

But you joke about someone's primary identity, and they are quickly offended. You don't mess with a primary identity.

There are way too many professing Christians who have as their primary identity their political or racial ideology. That was on full display this past election cycle. Were you devastated? Triumphant? Who is your Messiah actually? Where is your hope actually placed? Is even my saying this offending you? Are you kind of proving my point? Similarly, our racial identity as Christians can't be the center locus for everything either. What is the Lordship of Jesus if not the enthronement of Jesus in my life and who I am in him as my primary identity? My spiritual identity transcends my racial identity.

Make sure your noun is Christian and all the other identities are adjectives. When adjectives become nouns, you tribalize around something other than Christ alone.

Am I an American Christian or a Christian American? Am I a Christian Hoosier or a Hoosier Christian? Democrat Christian or Christian Democrat? Republican Christian or Christian Republican? Am I am Latino Christian or a Christian Latino? Christian Caucasian or Caucasian Christian? Christian African American or African American Christian? Christian Presbyterian or Presbyterian Christian? Christian Baptist or Baptist Christian? You get my point?

This year was filled with adjectives turned into nouns. Do you suppose in heaven anybody will say, *I'm a Presbyterian*? No, Presbyterians don't go to heaven. If being a Presbyterian is your primary identity, I just offended you.

Even our racial identities are secondary to who we in Christ. Revelation 4 prophesies the future gathering of redeemed humanity around the throne. Every tribe, tongue, language, and people, "*Saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'"* (Revelation 5:12)

Since the church is the emergence of heaven on earth, who we are in Jesus is our defining reality—all these other things are secondary. In society, the secondary things are the primary things because they don't have any other primary thing. They tribalize around politics and politicians and power and narratives of meaning. As a Christian, I have far more in common with a Venezuelan Christian than I do with another American, as much as we love and appreciate our country. Jesus is greater than America. Jesus is greater than China. Jesus is greater than Russia, Assyria, Babylon, Rome or any other kingdom of this world. The world can melt down and kingdoms can fall, but nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Make being a Christian your primary, your noun, and let all other identities be far, far beneath Jesus.

#### **Pensée #4 – The Pandemic Required Us to Ask, *What is a Local Church?***

This is a question still being asked. Why? For two millennia, the church has been the gathered redeemed under the gospel and eldership for the purpose of making disciples, preaching the Word, holy communion, and spiritual fellowship. For the past year we lived with this less than ideal situation, a couple months of everyone online, then this summer, most online and some in person. Today we are still one-third online. This coming summer, we will have some online, some inside, some outside. Just taking the Lord's Supper has proved challenging. I personally think God has flexibility in extraordinary times.

But as we move out of the extraordinary back toward the ordinary, models and habits have shifted. How many people currently online view gathering with other Christians as essential?

Now, I know we have some people online for health reasons or conscience reasons, but we also have people online for convenience reasons. It's nice to go to church in your PJ's. Is digital church actual church? What is a church? You see how the year has created these questions? These are all things we leaders are wrestling with.

There is no doubt that answering them biblically and aligning our church with the healthiest possible biblical answer is one of our challenges in the year ahead. Pray for God's wisdom and help.

### **Pensée #5 – Our Calling is to Serve Jesus by Serving Others**

For months now, nearly every Sunday, I have observed people coming back for their first Sunday with tears in their eyes and joy on their faces. *It's so great to be back!* You know what? Attending is great but we need everyone to move to the next step—let's get back to serving. We have so many opportunities and needs. Attending doesn't minister to people, serving ministers to people and God's vision for the church is gifted Christians using their gifts to serve one another. That's our vision too. A mobilized missional army of Jesus lovers.

Let's get back to serving, ministering, loving, and deriving from it the joy of serving the Lord with gladness. Go to [bethelweb.org/serve](http://bethelweb.org/serve) for details.



While not a pensée, I will tell you that our summer teaching series is *Bottom Lines of the Bible*. Simple. Pithy. Memorable truths that easily apply to life. First up is Micah 6:8, "*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" Please pray God blesses it, and thanks for listening to Pastor Steve's Pensées for Bethel Church. I love you.

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