

Fantastic Voyage: Surviving Charismatic Fundamentalism

By David L Rattigan

Everyone has stories to live by. To a Native American, the overarching narrative of her life might be the story of how the white man invaded her country and subjugated her people. On the flipside of that coin, the patriotic Republican's narrative is the story of a glorious nation, a tale of how heroic men championed freedom and built a country founded on God. These are stories that underpin everything we do and think; they are lenses through which we view and interpret the world.

For over ten years I was part of a particular story, and it was one that shaped my entire way of relating to the world. It was the story of fundamentalist Christianity, and it went something like this: God created the world; man was created good; Adam and Eve sinned; man was corrupted, and came under God's condemnation, specifically the judgment of eternal punishment; God sent Jesus to take the punishment for us; if we become Christians, we will go to heaven and be saved from hell. It was a story about good versus evil, God versus Satan, and the world was the battleground between the two. When you become a fundamentalist Christian, typically by being "born again," you become a part of that story. A distant and alien story about God and a group of people thousands of years ago becomes the story of how you yourself, two millennia after the cross, crossed over onto the right path and became destined for heaven.

You will join a community where the big story will be told over and over again, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the songs you sing, the sermons you hear, the conversations you have, the language you use and the rituals in which you participate. Present-day fundamentalists may well see themselves as part of a story about how society is getting worse and worse as standards decline and the ungodly have their wicked way, a story about how people have overcome by resisting this decline and how you too can overcome. Within the big story are smaller stories, whether hypothetical or attached to actual events, about how accepting this, that or the other is the beginning of the slippery slope into heresy and apostasy.

As in all good stories, there are heroes and villains. The world is divided up unambiguously into Believers and Unbelievers, the Saved and the Unsaved. The

Believers are faithful, Bible-believing, valiant defenders of eternal truth, heavenbound. Unbelievers are godless, blinded, hellbound. There are the Liberals, pretend Christians, attackers of the truth, rebellious against God, unbelievers masquerading as true believers. Everyone falls into one category or another. Fundamentalism presents a very black-and-white world. And if all this looks like a caricature of fundamentalism, perhaps that's because the fundamentalist worldview is a caricature of the world itself?

My own induction into the story was through my entrance into the heady world of charismatic Christianity. I had been brought up Christian, first in the United Church of Canada and then in the Methodist Church when our family moved to the UK. Mom's brand of Christianity had always been fairly mainstream, but things had changed noticeably when I was about ten. She had visited a well-known charismatic Anglican church in York, and returned believing herself to have become a truly born-again Christian. The accompanying implication was that her previous faith was at best inadequate, at worst no faith at all. It was the beginning of much tension with the other folks at our church, whom Mom saw as less spiritual, perhaps even non-Christian. It was an attitude I imbibed, for by now I too had been born again and was committed to an evangelical, Bible-believing faith, even at such a young age.

At the age of fourteen, I was rapidly growing dissatisfied with the Christianity my Methodist church represented. Few shared my evangelistic zeal and fundamentalist view of the Bible, and I was ripe to move on to a more "spiritual" type of Christianity. The opportunity came one day when I talked to the local Pentecostal pastor. Rather ashamed to admit I attended the Methodists, I confessed to the pastor it was a "dead church," knowing that such an epithet was guaranteed to arouse immediate sympathy, and confided that I probably ought to leave to seek better pastures. He was quick to challenge me: "Why don't you, then?" And so soon afterwards I attended my first service at the Pentecostal fellowship that was to become my church home for the rest of my teenage years. I discovered there a warmth and vibrancy in worship that I had never experienced before.

I was immediately thrust into a new realm of teachings and experience. At my new church God appeared to be taken a lot more seriously, as were Satan and his demons. I had already been introduced to the latter through the pastor's regular visits to my school, all done to warn students of the dangers of occultism and rock-and-roll. The

preaching seemed relevant – indeed, much of it I had never heard before, though it proved indispensable in guiding the course of my Christian walk. The worship was jubilant and stimulating, and the congregation seemed willing to be a part of each other’s lives seven days a week, not just on Sunday evenings.

It was during my first year there that I learned the basics of what it was to be Christian and Pentecostal. I learned to use the right terminology to talk about spiritual things, and I quickly began to filter all my experiences through the lens of my newfound charismatic worldview. It was midway through that first year when the gospel came alive to me for the first time: At the Bible camp I had been dragooned into attending, I had an intense emotional experience that left me convinced about the Lordship of Jesus, and the truth of his death and resurrection. It was a seminal point in my journey, a point when I felt clearly that God was calling me to be a full-time minister. I had other plans – to be a film director, in fact, an ambition I had cherished for years – but I needed no coercion. From that time on all I wanted to do was serve God.

I returned home “on fire,” to use the accepted charismatic term. I busied myself in all kinds of church activities and evangelistic endeavours. “Witnessing” to my classmates became a priority. For a while, science class became no more than an opportunity to open my Bible and have a study right there with my friends. They would ask questions, usually on the more complex and intriguing points of the so-called “Endtimes,” and I would answer as best I could with recourse to Scripture. It was my final year in high school, and I was determined to make the most of it, convinced it was my duty to exploit every opportunity to make maximum impact for Jesus.

1994 was a crucial year for charismatics and evangelicals worldwide. It was in that year that the “Toronto Blessing” emerged, a global revival characterized by bizarre manifestations believed to be from the Holy Spirit. I remember clearly the morning we first heard about the phenomenon. It was coming to the close of our morning service one Sunday in spring that year. The pastor drew our attention to a newspaper article he had read about a church in Loughborough, England, where at the conclusion of a Sunday meeting an unprecedented wave of supernatural activity had apparently occurred on a scale comparable to the Day of Pentecost. Congregants had been overcome with the power of the Holy Spirit, some falling prostrate to the ground, and others laughing and

crying uncontrollably. When the service eventually ended, it was some hours past its usual finishing time.

Over the next few weeks we heard more reports of the Blessing breaking out in churches across the world. Hotspots of the current revival began to spring up, churches known for their abundance of peculiar manifestations and late-night meetings, often on most nights of the week. People everywhere were advocating the revival's life-changing effects: Speakers and preachers were traveling from church to church to impart the blessing. "Ministry" teams from were sent out from revived churches to pass on the Blessing to others. Pastors and prophets from the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church where the Blessing had first erupted, were traveling worldwide to explain and spread the revival, connecting it with various prophecies and predictions, some of which were said to go back several decades. By the end of that year the Toronto Blessing – whether for or against – had become a defining issue for evangelicals. Some could not understand how anyone could reject what was so clearly a "move of God", bringing new spiritual life to dry believers; others thought the bizarre behaviours were just another manifestation of charismatic lunacy; some labeled the whole phenomenon psychological manipulation, if not outright demonic deception.

Our small church, however, was no exception to the generally warm acceptance of the Blessing among charismatics. We had visiting preachers and prophets from all over the UK and beyond, including the minister whose church we had first read about in the newspaper article. His sermon was replete with anecdotes about the strange but fruitful happenings in Loughborough, and he offered something of a primer on what we should expect when the Holy Spirit arrived. It was merely a preamble to what we were all eagerly anticipating: the outpouring of the Spirit itself. In general, the people were not disappointed. The preacher personally laid hands on most of the congregation, and they duly fell to the ground, as we had hoped. However, when he reached me, I simply did not respond as I was expected to. He pleaded earnestly with God to touch me, but when it became clear nothing was going to happen, he left me with an anecdote about a man who mined for days before he found the treasure he was looking for. In part it was an apologetic defence designed to assure me something would happen in the end, even if nothing dramatic seemed to be happening there and then. I couldn't escape the uneasy

feeling that the preacher himself was rather embarrassed, though he went to great lengths to assure me otherwise.

Nevertheless, I was soon to enter the revival full-swing. That summer we arranged a bus trip to a church in Leicester, one of the hotspots of the Blessing. We arrived a few minutes late, although a friend informed me what I had missed: The pastor had announced he would hand a Bible over to another man on the platform, and that upon receiving the Bible, the other man would fall to the ground under the power of the Spirit; it happened as he had predicted. We were there just in time for the music, which consisted of several slow, intimate choruses. Those who wanted to be blessed were asked to walk to the front of the sanctuary to receive prayer. I did not want to refuse, and I stood at the front and watched as one by one the congregation succumbed to a seemingly irresistible power. I wondered how I would explain myself when I did not succumb in the same way, but I need not have fretted. The leader's hand had barely touched my forehead when my legs felt as if they had been kicked out from under me, and there I was lying on the carpet in a state of euphoria. I finally knew what it was to be "slain in the Spirit". I swore to myself I never intended to fall, but it was as if my body had lost all strength without my consent.

The day's schedule ran from about ten in the morning till four in the afternoon. There was little speaking or preaching, but much singing and repeated "altar calls" where people were urged to come to the front to receive "ministry." I was prayed over four or five times, and each time I did "carpet time" as it became jocularly known. On one occasion the leader simply blew on my forehead with the words, "Receive it," an echo of Jesus' words in the upper room (John 20:22) – a familiar technique with healing evangelists such as Benny Hinn.

The day provided a much-needed boost to my now-waning spiritual life. My zeal and passion were restored, and I had a new experience of God which I longed to be repeated. And it certainly was, time and again over the ensuing couple of years. Any opportunity I had to receive "more" (a watchword of the movement, often repeated like a mantra over people during prayer) was welcomed. Sometimes I would fall backwards, sometimes forwards, sometimes straight down; sometimes I would have to have someone there to catch me, occasionally not; sometimes it happened as the result of receiving prayer and the laying-on of hands, sometimes before they even got to me, or

during ordinary worship. A pattern began to emerge: I would get blessed, run off on a path of spiritual euphoria, then would sooner or later begin to lose the momentum, at which point I would feel I was becoming spiritually stagnant, backsliding even. But within time I would have another experience and be set in motion again. The “dry” times were periods of guilt when I was convinced I was at fault. The refillings were occasions to thank the Lord and promise not to let the fire grow cold this time. It always did eventually, leaving me once again wallowing in feelings of guilt and inadequacy. It was a cycle of addiction.

Throughout that year our church continued to receive visits from leaders and speakers associated with the Blessing. On one occasion, a “prophet” came and delivered words of prediction to various members of the church (some of which later appeared to be stunningly accurate), before going on to dispense the Blessing. I will never forget the sight of one of the elders reeling around supposedly “drunk in the Spirit.” Clinging to a pillar to support himself, and giggling away childishly, he was watched by an amused and entertained congregation. The same prophet later tried to provoke the elder’s daughter to the same reaction, even forcibly pushing her down in an attempt to make her either stagger or drop, I am not sure which. Her stifled laughter only reflected an obvious embarrassment, which I shared. I never expressed these reservations, however, and continued to pursue more of these experiences. A large Pentecostal church in the town next to us had enthusiastically greeted the Blessing, and had become something of a hive of charismatic activity itself. They hosted a number of conferences featuring many of the prominent names in the revival, such as Marc Dupont (the Toronto church’s resident prophet at the time, who laid claim to having predicted this strange outpouring) and R.T. Kendall, one of the Blessing’s most vigorous advocates on the British side of the Atlantic. I attended as many of these conferences and seminars as I could, hungry for God, and desperate to keep the spiritual momentum alive. I yearned for what was often tellingly referred to as “a spiritual high”.

The format of most of these gatherings was predictable but exciting: A session of testimony, preaching and prophecy would be followed by ministry. Chairs would be cleared from the front of the auditorium and people would be invited to step forward to receive prayer. As the band led people in a time of worship (in popular charismatic parlance, “praise” is fast and lively, where “worship” is slow and intimate), the ministry

team would make their way around the crowd, usually two to a person, and the laying-on of hands would swiftly be followed by the person falling to the floor, “slain in the Spirit,” or being overcome with hysterical laughter, tears or a state of spiritual intoxication. Certain catchphrases became a part of the routine: “Touch her, Lord, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes,” was one such stock phrase; “More, Lord, more,” was another.

In my case, such “slayings” were becoming less frequent, and this absence of dramatic phenomena was becoming an anxiety for me. Often someone would pray for five minutes or so before subtly gesturing for another member to come and join. The clear implication, though always unspoken, was “I need help here: This one’s not budging!” When it became evident that nothing was happening, I would be entreated: “Don’t resist ... Don’t resist ... Just let it come.” This, of course, only ever had the effect of making me even more embarrassed and anxious for something to happen. Soon would come the assurances not to worry if there were no visible manifestations, but the ever-lengthening and increasingly intense petitions for the Holy Spirit to do something seemed to contradict the notion that “the manifestations aren’t what’s important.” A change of technique was often called for on the part of the person doing the praying. The *pray-er*, after a prolonged silence, would suddenly bellow out, “Touch!” (another buzzword), which would naturally tend to arouse some startled reaction! Or the hands would switch from the top of the head to the back or the side, occasionally the belly (the source of the anticipated laughter) or the forehead, which had the effect of causing one to lose one’s balance, especially if the eyes were shut. Eventually, if all else failed, I would receive the customary promise that the inner work was the really important thing, regardless of any impressive outward signs. Such a blithe assurance seemed at odds with the frantic attempts to make something significant happen, and I would return to my seat trying unconvincingly to talk myself into believing the Spirit was at work in me despite how things looked on the outside. I would try to be happy for everyone else being blessed, but it was a disappointment to be constantly on the fringes.

“Just let it flow. Don’t think about what you’re saying. Just let it come. Don’t resist. Ohhh! Soh-rah-bah-bah-kee-ray!”

His hands placed firmly on my head, the pastor chuckled joyously as he continued in his prayer-language: “Ohhh! Soh-rah-bah-bah-kee-ray!”

It was not the first time I had received this special treatment in order to receive the much-coveted “gift of tongues.” There was a lot of pressure for folk in my church to speak in tongues, and there was something defective about you if it wasn’t an ordinary part of your life. I lost count of how many of times the pastor would lay his hands on me during the evening service, babble away in his tongue – always the same “Soh-rah-bah-bah-kee-ray!” – and urge me not to resist, but simply to “let it come out.” I would lay awake on my bed at night trying earnestly to speak in tongues, but every time I was on the verge, never being able to bring myself to do it. It felt phony, and the pastor’s “Soh-rah-bah-bah-kee-ray” felt every bit as fake. I eventually did start to speak in tongues, and it was a load off my mind: I was normal now, having passed one of the main hurdles to being a properly Spirit-filled Christian.

It was at Bible College where I began to question the charismatic world I had taken for granted. Bible College was a melting pot for every brand of charismatic: There were “classical” Pentecostals for whom the gift of tongues was paramount; there were “health and wealth” proponents who followed and preached that faith in God was the route to financial prosperity; there were would-be evangelists sold out on the latest wave of blessing. By now the Blessing had ceased to be identified with Toronto, and was spawning a new kind of charismatic ecumenism in which all kinds of teachings – including the most extreme prosperity teachings – were gradually filtering their way into the mainstream charismatic movement.

That first year of Bible College was a challenging time for me, for many of the doctrines I was starting to call into serious question were rapidly increasing in popularity in the wake of Toronto. In particular, I had grave reservations about the triumphalistic nature of most charismatics’ worldview of the Christian life and the Endtimes. The notion that we were to expect an “Last Days” revival was rarely challenged, and the events of the previous few years only seemed to have confirmed the Spirit was about to launch a massive revival without precedent in history. This expectation was becoming increasingly bound up with more detailed predictions of a Christian takeover of the world. It was a combination of Dominion theology, which claimed that God’s rule on earth would come through the Church prior to Christ’s return,

and the Faith teaching that the world's wealth would be transferred into the hands of the righteous in the last days.

My second year in college was a watershed. During that year I became fatally disillusioned with charismatic Christianity, and the seeds were sown for my eventual decision to give up altogether calling myself a charismatic altogether. A fellow student had graduated the previous year, and had appointed me his successor in leading and organizing the monthly student renewal meetings. He was sold out on the new wave of the charismatic movement, having come straight to college from Kensington Temple, a London megachurch at the forefront of the current renewal. The meetings he began and organized followed the routine charismatic format: A time of worship, preaching from a guest speaker, and finally a time of "ministry." Some of the gatherings from the previous year had stuck in my memory. On one occasion a traveling evangelist from Finland, already known to both of us, came and offered the students a severe reprimand for the lack of signs and wonders in our daily lives and ministries. The thrust of his message was that Christians ought to see miracles and healings every day, and the blame was placed squarely on our shoulders if they simply weren't materializing. There followed the usual pattern of people crumpling to the floor, shouting and wailing, crying and laughing. A few students left, later confessing they had found it all an embarrassing spectacle, a scene of utter chaos.

I had a lot to live up to when I took upon myself the responsibility for coordinating the meetings. For me, a renewal meeting was precisely that – an opportunity for renewal. I had little interest in the kind of manifestations that had previously characterized the meetings. This put me at odds, however, with some other members of the leadership team. Though it was never directly stated, the implicit assumption was that we should always aim for an outpouring of the Spirit along the accustomed lines. I was burdened by the expectation placed upon me. I would, nevertheless (and to put it rather crudely), do my best to ensure the conditions were ripe for an intense outburst of emotion, a visible, tangible outbreak of signs and wonders, and all the anticipated charismatic phenomena. Regardless of claims to the contrary, I was by now convinced that much, perhaps most, of what we had seen over the past few years was indeed the result of precisely this kind of attempt on the part of leaders to generate a hyped-up atmosphere conducive to such outbreaks. I had no desire to follow

suit.

Charismatic worship was also beginning to grate against me. I was increasingly aware that many of the most popular worship songs were manufactured to create feelings for their own sake. It wasn't far removed from the kind of emotional and psychological manipulation that was the standard in charismatic worship. Worship leaders, of which I was one, knew just the right harmonies to provoke an emotional response, when to crescendo and decrescendo to create a sensational effect, and how to stir up the congregation into a euphoric state accompanied by tongues, shouting and "spontaneous" praise. Post-Toronto charismatic worship was noticeably rowdier!

The self-centred legalism of charismatic worship – the entire charismatic worldview, in fact – was beginning to wear me down. We sang, "These are the days of Elijah," but it expressed a sentiment that was part and parcel of a worldview I was beginning to reject, a story bound up in the expectation that the world was on the verge of a mighty spiritual revival. "All the weaknesses I see in me will be stripped away," we would sing, but I always knew that perhaps some of those weaknesses might never be removed. The world I was singing and talking about was far from reality. There was little room for weakness and suffering, much less honesty and acknowledgement of our humanity. Our quasi-mystical songs exhorted us to climb to higher heights and plumb deeper depths, but I was starting seriously to wonder whether I wanted to keep carrying the relentless burden always to be trying to progress towards God, to improve spiritually – to become somehow *more acceptable* to God.

The seal on my departure from the charismatic life of the college with any degree of enthusiasm was a visit from an American "prophetess." She had visited a number of churches and conferences within our denomination, and I had heard impressive testimonies about her. She was said to pick people out of the audience at random and prophesy about them on the spot, relaying many fantastic and apparently accurate details about them, and making predictions about their future ministry. When she was booked to come and host a conference for the students, she was greeted rapturously.

I was so disillusioned with college life that I did not attend her first meeting, an evening workshop designed to coach students in how to prophesy. When it was over, however, my roommate returned to the apartment feeling elated. "Prophesying is so easy, you know," he told me. "I think I could go up to anyone I didn't know on a bus and

just start prophesying to them.” Naturally, I was a little taken aback by such a bold declaration from a student who had never before made such claims. He gave me an account of how that evening’s session had gone. The prophetess announced they would be dividing into groups of, say, five persons. Four of them would surround the remaining person in a circle. The one in the middle would be prophesied over. Three of the four would speak out whatever images or pictures came into their head, no matter how strange. The last remaining person would put all the pictures together and deliver an interpretation for the person in the middle. The prophetess pre-empted the question of how the participants could be certain it was really God speaking by referring to Matthew 7:11: “Which of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ... How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” Thus, if they prayed and asked God for a prophecy, they were guaranteed whatever they received had its source in God. This way of doing “prophecy” was not a new concept to me. A few years earlier I had waited in line by a platform at Bible camp ready to take the microphone and announce to an audience of five hundred young people what I had seen when I closed my eyes (in reality the back of my eyelids, a very hazy mixture of light and shadow I decided looked like a ribcage!). Back then, I had been given exactly the same advice: No matter how silly it sounds, say it. Luckily the meeting had ended before it came to my turn.

I was incensed that my friend had been duped into taking his own imaginations for the voice of God, and that as a result of this seminar he had the confidence to want to go out immediately and dupe the rest of the unsuspecting world. I could not think of a better way of leading people into self-deception than encouraging them to elevate their own imaginations to the level of God. I decided to check out the prophetess for myself the next morning when she was scheduled to speak at chapel. She gave a few prophetic words about various countries of the world, and then proceeded to relate a series of visions and revelations she and her daughter had had on the subject of the wealth of the wicked. Just as I had heard John Avanzini, Creflo Dollar and Benny Hinn tell me a few years earlier during my passing infatuation with the health-and-wealth movement, this lady told us that the world’s wealth was ready to be passed into the hands of believers. Very soon, she predicted, all the businesses, financial institutions and governments would be dominated by Christians. Every bank manager would be a born-again believer.

The biggest companies would be owned and controlled by Christians. In other words, the world economy would be in the hands of the Church. At one time this notion was merely a “teaching” which could be refuted by a quick examination of the Scriptures being cited in its support. Now it was “Endtimes prophecy,” and God’s prophets all over the world were apparently getting the same message.

It was more than I could stomach. Mainly on the basis of her accurate “words of knowledge,” the majority of the students and faculty were swept up in enthusiasm for the prophetess. Everyone was talking about it. She was booked for further seminars and meetings, and plans were being made for her to return the following year to teach an entire module on prophecy. My time in the charismatic movement was up. Over time I had become convinced that most of the “supernatural” events I had witnessed and participated in – prophecies, being slain in the Spirit – were more the result of manipulation more than genuine spiritual power.

At the end of that final college year I moved back to my native Canada, and became associate pastor of a small-town Pentecostal church in the British Columbia interior. At this point I was a moderate evangelical in a fairly fundamentalist environment. The icing had fallen off the charismatic cake, and remaining in a charismatic world was a source of intense frustration and loneliness for me. After all, most of the congregation was living in a completely different story to mine. It was not a simple disagreement on a few minor points; the structure of my world was entirely different to theirs. I was an alien in their world.

My discomfort reached its peak when a few others and I were ministering to a young man who, though professing faith, continually battled with drugs and alcohol. The senior pastor’s wife had concluded that the answer was to meet daily in order to lay hands on the young man and pray for his deliverance from demons. The search was on for “generational spirits,” supposedly demons passed on from one generation to the next. Some of these were (unconvincingly) identified, and the appropriate prayers and commands were offered. Then it was decided the young man needed to speak in tongues, and so he was surrounded by three of us, one of whom would pray in tongues herself, and who for about ten straight minutes encouraged the obviously embarrassed young man to open his mouth and speak in tongues. He was not the only embarrassed one.

By now, however, my doubts were going beyond merely the charismatic world. My doubts were about conservative Christianity as a whole, a religion oriented around the belief that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God. I was questioning the entire story. A few years previously I had been part of a spectacular drama-*cum*-outreach called *Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames* in which I had warned spectators to accept Christ or burn in hell, but now I doubted the justice of such a God. I had condemned others for not submitting to supposedly biblical morality – and yet it was becoming clear to me that this kind of religion was a smokescreen for prejudice, intolerance and hatred. Against what Jesus had said, the fundamentalist religion I had bought into seemed always to be “shutting the kingdom of God in people’s faces.” Within the narrow confines of the charismatic world, it was those who didn’t speak in tongues or who “resisted” the Holy Spirit who were excluded, whether consciously or not. In the wider fundamentalist world the outsiders who didn’t meet the standards were the gays, the cohabiters, the drinkers, the smokers. I was rapidly becoming one of the excluded myself by moving outside the bounds of what was considered acceptable – Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, conservative.

I left that church, eventually leaving British Columbia to return to England. Although I immediately joined a non-fundamentalist Anglican church, I had not entirely left fundamentalism behind in my mind. Leaving fundamentalism is a lengthy process, and it is full of pain and frustration. The fundamentalist world was oriented around a particular story, and within that story were smaller stories – and those old stories died hard.

In Craig Thompson’s *Blankets*, the author recounts convincingly his adolescent departure from the strictures of his fundamentalist upbringing. He paraphrases Plato and writes:

[Since] childhood, humans have been prisoners ... bound at their neck and feet, facing a wall, and unable to turn their heads. Behind them is a walled path, traversed by people carrying statues of animals and humans ... and beyond that is a fire illuminating the cave. From the prisoners’ perspective, all that can be seen are the shadows of these statues projected upon the wall by the fire; sort of like a shadow puppet show, only the prisoners aren’t aware that what they see are shadows or puppets ... [They] think they’re studying reality. Now if a prisoner was released from his binds, allowed to turn about and examine his surroundings; it’d

be a shock to his entire system. In fact, he'd probably believe that what he'd previously known was the truth, and that this was a sort of heresy ... What an even greater shock it would be to bring the prisoner out of the cave and into the sunlight. The initial effect would be blinding ... The final step would be the ability to study the sky in the day ... to look directly into the light of the sun.¹

I cannot think of a better way of expressing the journey out of fundamentalism and, moreover, why it hurts so much. It comes very much down to this:

In fact, he'd probably believe that what he'd previously known was the truth, and that this was a sort of heresy.

We cannot simply trade in the old story for a new one in one quick, tidy exchange. Like the child told all his life he was useless, shaking off the nagging guilt that he is useless is a process lasting far longer than the one moment at which he realizes he was lied to by an abusive parent. The old stories are so deeply ingrained, so much a part of our version of reality for so long, that thinking in terms of those stories is a habit of mind we still have to shake off. It was our reality for so long that thinking outside its conventions is not something we can all of a sudden just decide to do. It's a process.

When you pick up the Bible and question whether such-and-such is really true, there's that story going round and round in the back of your mind. The story is called, *The Christian Who Let Doubts Creep in One Day and Began Sliding down the Slippery Slope of Heresy*. When you walk into a store, pick up a book that claims something is amiss with fundamentalism and you consider there might actually be some truth in its pages, you're haunted by the story called, *The Once-Faithful Believer Who Listened to the Devil and Lost Her Salvation*. When you start to question traditional "morality," the story of *The Christian Who Bought into the Lie of Liberalism* is a weight in the pit of your stomach. Is it any wonder the pilgrimage out of fundamentalism is full of pain and heartache and fear and hurt and shame and guilt?

Today I inhabit a different story. It is a story that often changes as new things and experiences come to light. It is a story that is not afraid to engage with those whose stories are different from mine. My world now has room for ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty without fear. I am a liberal Anglican, and after three years outside

¹ Craig Thompson, *Blankets*, (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2004), p500

fundamentalist circles, I have found the courage to be an openly and unashamedly gay man.