

Straight lines

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

March 4, 2015

When I was young, faith often seemed to be about straight lines. Right/wrong. Do/don't. Pure/impure. In/out. Faith/doubt. Virtue/sin. Blessed/cursed. Victorious/suffering. Innocent/guilty. Saved/damned. The lines were clean and true, and not to be trifled with. To suggest that the lines might not be so straight was itself evidence that you were on the wrong side of the line. To live and think rightly in the world involved accepting and preserving a lot of straight lines.

I remember not thinking too highly of straight lines. This was partly because I often found crooked lines more personally convenient. But it was also because even as a younger person I had the strong sense that the straight lines just didn't *work*. Life always seemed considerably less clean and simple than the sellers of straight lines would have me believe. I observed faith that I once considered unshakeable begin to wobble and fracture. I saw relationships that seemed sturdy and admirable fall apart. I saw people suffer—despite the earnest prayers of the faithful. I saw churches that claimed to follow Jesus yet looked little like him. I saw good coming out of what I once assumed could only be bad and bad coming out of what I once assumed could only be good.

And I didn't just see, of course. I also experienced. Through every season of life that I have walked through, the straight lines have proved inadequate to the task of interpreting and explaining my own experience and the experiences of those around me. *Pray to God for healing . . .* but sometimes the healing doesn't come, at least not in the way you hoped for. *Train up a child in the way he should go . . .* but kids are not widgets on an assembly line, and sometimes no matter what you do or try, parenting is just brutally hard—for your kids and for you—and things don't turn out the way you assumed they would. *God will show you the path . . .* but sometimes trying to figure out your vocation just feels like groping around in a fog. *Jesus is the answer . . .* Yes, but what *kind* of answer? And what about when the church has asked and answered the wrong questions? What about when Jesus is used as a weapon by human hands and hearts and minds that are all too greedy for power and

security and status? The list could go on and on, but the common theme remains. The formulas don't work. The lines aren't that straight.

Perhaps it's worth evaluating our love of straight lines. Lines are about demarcating abstract boundaries. Life and faith are about *people* and *stories* and stories *behind* stories. And people and stories tend to wind their way to their destinations in meandering, sometimes frustrating ways. Lines are about keeping things separate, making sure things are in the right place. They seem to have a lot more to do with us and our perceived needs than they do with God. God has for some time now been in the process of blurring our straight lines, breaking down walls that we frantically scramble to erect. Jew/Gentile, slave/free, male/female . . . on and on it goes. On and on *God* goes.

And yet I also have a hunger for straight lines, for clarity, for structure, for clean and concise categories. I wish the lines were straighter than they are. I wish life worked more like a formula where the right inputs always and necessarily led to the right results in the equation. I wish God and God's ways were easier to figure out and live according to. I am not one of these people who claims to love living in the messy, muddled gray spaces of life. I wouldn't mind a bit of black and white, a few straight lines.

But this is not our world and this is not our God. And the thing is, our epistemic situation is pretty theologically interesting, when you stop to think about it. The mere fact that we *do* not and *cannot* know everything we would like to can serve as a sort of built-in guard against the idolatry of the self that comes so naturally to us. The inherent limitations of the human condition force us *away* from the sufficiency of our own answers and boundaries and intellectual formulas and *towards* things like trust, openness, humility, faith.

And, perhaps most importantly, toward a *relationship* in place of an intellectual abstraction as the ultimate reality with which we all must deal.

If God intended life to work like a uniformly predictable formula where the equations always came out right and the straight lines always held, then God wouldn't have had to give us much more than an assortment of data and a list of instructions. This is, to be sure, how many people think of the life of faith, but I think things are much better and more hopeful than that. Rather than the manageable data we think we want, God gives us a *story* of salvation, a *people* with whom to walk and learn and

grow and discover, a *love* to light our paths and welcome us home. In place of a collection of sterile straight lines, God gives himself to us, in the person of Christ, and invites us into a Jesus-shaped life—a life where we, too, learn what it means to give ourselves away for God and others.

And the hope, of course, that things will one day straighten out. I used to puzzle at passages like [Isaiah 40:3-5](#), which talks about making a “straight way in the desert” and how “every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” This didn’t sound like much of a vision to me. Aren’t the hilly, rugged things of life what make the landscape more interesting? What could be duller than a flat, nondescript plain with no mountains or valleys?

I was guilty of an overly literalistic reading of this passage, to be sure. But I was also guilty of failing to read in context. In a world before cars and planes and easy transport, rugged terrain was undoubtedly experienced primarily as an obstacle to hot, weary, and heavily burdened travelers. The hope of Isaiah surely was (and is) nothing less than that one day all that stands between us and our destination—which is God himself—will give way. Our paths will be smooth and straight for we will no longer be able to get in the way of the One we have always been stretching and stumbling crookedly towards.

Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)