

Ecclesiastical orphans

By [R. Wayne Stacy](#)

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Preaching

guru Fred Craddock, retired from Emory's Candler School of Theology, often quips: "Anyone who can't remember any farther back than his or her own birth is an orphan." He was speaking about the postmodern penchant for individuality and concomitant lack of interest in history and context that tends to disconnect and detach us from any corporate, collective, or contextual sense of the self. We're like orphans isolated and independent, experiencing the world without family, without memory, without history, without perspective. His point is that humans require context, historical perspective, to know who they are. We are not *sui generis* creatures, isolated, insular, independent. We are contextual creatures, connected in a nexus of relationships that includes both the living and the dead. Lose the context, forget those connections, and we forget who we are, what we're about, why we're here, and where we're going.

When

I was a boy one of my favorite memories was spending the night with my Granny Stacy. She was already succumbing to the glaucoma that would eventually snuff out the wick on her world, but she turned it into a game that both entertained me and educated me about who I was. After dinner, she'd take out the photo album and have me leaf through its pages reading the names and describing the scenes in the pictures (Uncle Buster, Granddaddy Stacy, Great Granddaddy Costner, and on and on). Then she'd tell me the stories behind the pictures, and slowly, inexorably I would position myself in the nexus that was "Stacy" and learn who I was and what I was about. When in the morning my father would arrive to collect me, he'd always ask what we did, and I'd tell him that we played "Stacy," and he'd say, "I remember that game."

I had a similar experience some time ago at a little church where I was doing a Winter Bible Study. A beautiful little church set out in the country, the forefathers and foremothers of the faith, though poor farmers mostly, thought it important to place stained glass windows in the sanctuary depicting events and persons of their biblical and communal heritage. It was interesting in that the windows mixed scenes both from the ancient biblical story and from their own congregational story with the result that you were surrounded by The Story that reached back to Abraham and Moses and Jesus and forward to today. The effect on the worshiper was unmistakable: You were positioned in a nexus of relationships and values and events that began long before you arrived and would, God willing, continue long after you departed. It was impossible in such a setting to feel "orphaned" when, as the writer of Hebrews put it, you were "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

The implications for the Church are far-reaching and broadly applicable, but nowhere are they more critical than in the way contemporary Christians handle the Scriptures. The proliferation of translations and "designer Study Bibles" has made many Christians think of the Bible exclusively as "my Book." The only question contemporary Christians ever ask of the Bible is "What does it mean *to me*?" as though what it means to me is what it means.

Unlike those Christians in that little church surrounded by a corporate ecclesiastical and biblical context, contemporary Christians have no sense of the Bible as a shared Book in which we are engaged in timeless conversations with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Jesus, and Paul. We don't care what it meant to Matthew, we only care what it means to me.

There are all kinds of problems with this, not the least of which is the dilution of the doctrine of inspiration to mean nothing more than the pagan notion of the "muses." Moreover, the Bible is reduced to a religious Rorschach inkblot where the only relevant question is, "What do *you* see in that passage?" - where the reader rather than the Bible is really being read. Don't get me wrong. "What does it mean to me?" is an appropriate question, but only after one has positioned

himself/herself in the Christian nexus, the Christian Story, the Christian family album and asked the prior question, "What did *the inspired author* mean?"

To do otherwise is to be an ecclesiastical orphan.

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