

The great cloud of unreliable witnesses

By [Tripp Hudgins](#)

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One morning, with the requisite fog covering Berkeley, I turned to [Last Night's Fun](#), about Irish traditional music, for some solace and inspiration. I had a lot to do: e-mails to send, books to pack up in one office and take to another, reservations to make, recruitment kits to create, and a metric ton of introspection to accompany it all.

Once again I am plagued by missing the mark. We have a long and uncomfortable relationship.

The following reading comes from a chapter entitled ["O'Dowd's No. 9."](#) Where do the tunes come from?

*"The tune becomes a family tree. It is a conversation piece, a modus operandi, a way of renegotiating lost time. Our knowledge of the past is changed each time we hear it; our present time, imbued with yesterday, comes out with bent dimensions. Slipping in and out of nodes of time, we find our circles sometimes intersect with others."*

Carson paints this picture of our relationship with time and other people through the experience of trying to play a tune, a "traditional" tune whose origins are necessarily suspect. This, for me, is a helpful analogy for liturgy, how it's lived rather than how it's recorded. Did John Chrysostom write the Orthodox liturgy? Scholars suggest that he did not, but it is so named nonetheless. Accretions, subtractions, omissions intentional or accidental, happenstance, deliberation, feud, council, committee meeting, some old person scolding the priest ("Bless me, Father, but that's not how it goes..."), and even the seminary have had their say.

And it is no different for us Baptists. We too depend upon the loose connections of churchy sociality. Carson continues:

*"Yet there is a wider circle we can only dimly comprehend, whose congregation is uncountable, whose brains and hands have shaped the tune in ways unknowable to*

*us. We do not know how far or deep its palimpsests extend. We do not even know O'Dowd, or whether he made up the tune, or simply borrowed it and thought he made it up."*

The great cloud of witnesses is an unreliable one.

And yet, it is the most trustworthy.

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