

Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, chapters 4-6
Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way*, preface and introduction

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Before reviewing the remainder of Kallenberg's book, I want to reveal the reason I have assigned this book at the beginning of the course.

At a school like Westmont, it is easy for us to read a text like this as if 'we' are the evangelists and 'they' the unevangelized at Westmont and beyond who need our witness. Not so! We are reading Kallenberg because *all of us in this culture* lack exposure, training, catechesis, fluency, storied imagination, and embodied forms of life in the Christian tradition. I too am a candidate for remedial Christian education, because while I have been a follower of Jesus for as long as most of you have been alive, I belong to a culture that systematically ignores, pigeonholes, distorts, and misunderstands the good news. In the friendliest of contexts Christian faith is already a challenge. Our context looks friendly at first – Americans have freedom of religion, right? – yet in fact our culture makes understanding Christianity, let alone living it, enormously difficult. Do not deceive yourself: Every one of us would come away in shock after spending five minutes with Jesus of Nazareth. Please do not construct an 'us' or a 'them' for this book. Whether you are a skeptic, a friendly outsider, a new disciple, or a veteran, you are a Doreen, a Larry, an Allen, or a Kathy. And by April, whether you are a skeptic or a veteran, you will be able to be a guide for others. If this course doesn't both rock you and ground you, then either I have failed or you haven't been paying attention.

To illustrate his claims about how people acquire knowledge of Christian faith, Kallenberg appeals to several people's stories.

Doreen, tenured English professor and casual Buddhist, shows that gaining fluency in Christian faith takes time. Years, in fact! Moreover, there is no one date Doreen can point to as her decisive moment of conversion (67-71). This is because faith is as *social, associative, and implicit* as it is personal, proprietary, and explicit (71-77). That fits the gradual deepening of understanding we will see in the disciples as we read Newbigin's commentary on John.

Larry, sufferer from cancer and New Ager, shows that gaining fluency involves immersion and participation in Christian practices. Picking up the vocabulary this way allows Larry to recognize and identify what is happening to him as the mercy of his personal God (77-84). Larry is increasingly typical of a culture that is biblically and theologically illiterate. Face it, folks: our conservative Christian circles are too, dominated as they are by youth and family culture, socially conformist messages, and politicized social agendas. Without a thick Christian vocabulary, Larry and we are the blind man of John 9. Even a supernatural encounter with Jesus (which Larry apparently had as a teenager) is of no effect on its own, for we lack the equipment for knowing what to do with it. We can learn what has happened to us and who is responsible only by repeated direct exposure (John 9:13-38).

Heidi, high schooler and Congregationalist, shows that gaining fluency can happen through catechesis even if it comes before faith. True catechesis is not just about memorizing vocabulary words but learning new communal behaviors (84-88), and that demands that churches train experienced guides as Jesus trained his disciples to feed his sheep (John 21).

Allen, journalist and skeptic, shows that gaining fluency through participation can set aside issues that impede trust. Serving the poor defuses his distrust of God's goodness in a way that apologetics have not (92-94). This is because our knowledge is not so much objective and propositional ("Allen concluded that God is good because making human beings who are free to sin is better than making them unfree") as tacit and revolutionary ("imitating Jesus' care for the poor trained Allen to see God as compassionate") (94-102). Our own actions speak louder than

others' words (104). So also, time with Jesus changes the terms of debate for those he meets (John 3-4).

Kathy, observer of Jesus and participant in New Song Church's "Jesus Freakend," shows that gaining fluency involves cultivating narrative imagination. Modernity trains us to extract timeless meaning out of texts, including the Bible. (How many sermons have you endured that derive three to five principles from a list of Bible passages?) Yet premodern Christians like John Calvin looked *through* the Bible rather than just *at* it (108). Education trains us in the Christian story so that its all-encompassing narrative tells us both who God is and who we are (cf. John 4:39, 20:30-31). We need this training before anything like 'spiritual laws' makes any sense (116).

Compared to the quasi-scientific methodologies and supposedly foolproof techniques of modern evangelism, gaining fluency is hard and unpredictable. And that is the point. Grace is free, but it isn't cheap. Shirley Mullen put it well in her chapel talk: Getting a health club membership is not the same as getting in shape. As long as we keep acting as if eternal life came as a handy membership card rather than a personal and cosmic death and resurrection, we will leave our world and ourselves untransformed – *unsaved*. Kallenberg compares Christian learning to sailing rather than proofreading (as it requires judgment rather than just technique), questing rather than archery (as the target is not in sight at first), acting kindly rather than shoemaking (as it is thoroughly self-involving), and as medical practice rather than parallel parking (as it is discerning rather than formulaic) (123-126). It asks more of us, and offers everything in return.

Q: I'll save my questions for the first written assignment.

Robert Barron develops the ethical shape of taking up this challenge in *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*. He presents Christian faith "in its odd particularity" through literature, Catholic traditions, and other manifestations of faith. These prove that "Christianity is not so much a system of thought or set of convictions as a path or series of practices" (12).

If so, then modernity is a roadblock. His introduction chronicles the effects modernity has desiccated his own Catholic tradition. (The same deterioration wrecked liberal Protestantism in the twentieth century and is now in the process of destroying conservative evangelicalism.) Emphasis on individual certainty, personal emotional experience, institutional reinvention, and cultural relevance has sidelined the earning and testing of trust, personal and communal formation, tradition, and respect for Christian distinctiveness (18-24). The result is a western Christianity full of hype but rather empty of promise. Against all this Barron points us to the practices that confer sainthood. "Christianity is a captivating and intellectually satisfying game, but the point is to play it," he says. "It is a beautiful and truthful way, but the point is to walk it" (30). Consider what follows a Catholic counterpart and follow-up to Kallenberg.