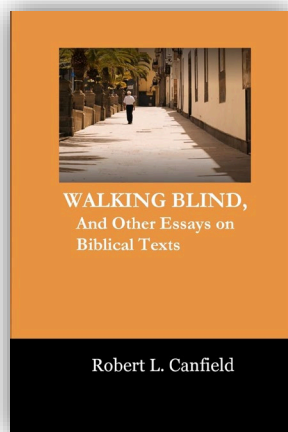


BOOK REVIEW

Walking Blind, and Other Essays on Biblical Texts

By Robert L. Canfield

Reviewed by Brooke Boyd



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Robert L. Canfield's book, *Walking Blind, and Other Essays on Biblical Texts*, is a compilation of essays that challenge the reader to consider the cultural context of the Spirit-led prophets of the Old Testament and Christ-following stories of the gospel and to see the Spirit-led responses that reformed nations and transformed the hearts of His followers. In doing so, Canfield exposes the modern church's tendency to settle for an interpretation and application of scripture that is relatively comfortable, requiring minimal sacrifice, transformation or investment. The risk, Canfield argues, is a self-reliant, culture-justifying faith leading to lukewarm churches and relationships. The encouragement from Canfield is to apply Christ's teachings to our lives wholly, recognizing Holy Scripture as wholly set apart from all other writings with a presented worldview unlike any other. In seeing

the scriptures as set apart, the reader is inspired to pursue a way of living that is set apart, continually becoming more holy through a transformed being that demonstrates the gospel in our daily encounters.

Perhaps the strongest case Canfield makes to the modern church is to focus on *becoming* the holy word. He rightly points to a modern world, full of information, but unable to engage in the act of "becoming" rather than consuming and presenting information. Holiness applied cannot be anticipated by those in the center of the modern world, it must appear wholly other to them. The present cultural context, set of circumstances, or norms we find ourselves in cannot inform us on how to respond. The word of God, active and alive in the heart of believers, must be the key to our own narrative.

Canfield makes the point, through various historical figures in the scriptures, that following the laws is never sufficient. It is the believer's walk and heart posture that the Lord seeks to transform by the power of His Spirit. Evidence of such a life, Canfield writes, is seen in Moses following the cloud, "he learned to follow and obey as God led and directed, without prior notice, with little preparation, little indication of what to expect next, armed with nothing more substantive than God's promise" (88). In another example, the commonly cited parable of the Good Samaritan is summarized. The opportunity to show evidence of a Christ-filled life is presented in the three men who had an opportunity to act on the spur of the moment. Readers of this parable can ask the reflective question, "How does one act, as it were, spontaneously, creatively, in circumstances that are unforeseen?" (41). Again, the laws are not sufficient, for they do not always give insight into the daily

¹ A revised and expanded edition of this book has been published in 2025 by Wipf and Stock, entitled, *Walking Blind: Essays on Faith*.

unforeseen circumstances that arise. Some would have applauded the men that did not respond to the man beaten on the side of the road because they remained committed to their plan of following the law. The Spirit, who is described in John 3:8 as spontaneous, spurs the human heart to act in the moment like Christ. No law could inform us of this culture. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” The modern world does not need vessels that are only full of the knowledge of God, rather it needs vessels full of the Spirit of God, ready to act on the spur of the moment, in an unforeseen space, to act in favor of all people, in order for God’s love to be tangible.

Canfield argues that “A feature of the modern world seems to be a fragility of meaningful relationships, an impermanence of social context and an uncertain sense of place in the world” (65). Without a sense of belonging, people struggle to be active agents in the world. Canfield inserts a verse from Isaiah,

And I will lead the blind in a way that they know not,
in paths that they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn darkness before them into light, the rough
places into level ground. These are the things I will
do, and I will not forsake them. Isaiah 42:16

He notes that this promise is given to a people in confusion. The criteria for receiving God’s promise here is that you must be blind. This should encourage the modern world, if they are sensitive enough to the Spirit to confess being blind, they will be guided on unknown paths. Again, it is not about using the law to be sure of a path coming up, but dependence on the Spirit to lighten the path as it is walked in faith. Canfield uses the example of the Hebrews, to whom these words were originally spoken when they were in exile. “The Hebrews, in their suffering, are an archetype of every one of us in a state of alienation and exile” (68). It was in their exile that they started to consider their actions and the person of God that they were missing. They previously assumed that their ethnicity would spare them God’s wrath and that they had outgrown God’s way. Instead, they find a God who calls them blind. In other words, God shows them that he knows who they are at their core—with all layers of their cultural context and circumstances stripped down—and he promises to not leave them. Following laws does not expose a person to a holy God. Rather, the context of loneliness and isolation heightens our

experience of being found by God. When all else has been removed, and He calls us “blind” in the context of our loneliness and isolation, no longer hiding behind a neat facade, we hear his promise to never leave us and are able to get up and become vessels of love, spurred spontaneously by the Spirit of God.

Canfield’s solution to some of his criticism of the modern church is to become vessels of love. He writes, “This generation has no excuse: Access to the text of scripture is easier now than ever before” (49). As a result, “How great the responsibility of those of us who have heard” (59). But this statement can be distinguished from claiming a generation is without excuse. Our access to the gospel has increased, as well as access to every other kind of information. The plethora of information, as well as the people who are allowed to create the information, is ever expanding. It may be more helpful to kingdom building to say that with incredible access to information, more intentional time must be dedicated to culture building, emotional intelligence, and context awareness. We can agree that the eyeglasses of information overstate a sure path intended for the faithfully blind to navigate in the moment.

The challenge is for Christians to take up the responsibility of culture building. There is no time for finding where Jesus’ ways might fit into our existing lives. Jesus lays out the life he desires for Christians to have with Him. In a world with tremendous technological advances and nations conflicted with globalization versus protecting national interests, we should consider where worldly culture hinders the gospel. A cure to this modern struggle is articulated by Canfield, “This is the Christian sense of martyrdom: letting the body, in this world, express another kind of commitment, another standard of virtue, one that participates in another kind of economy, in which value is made by giving and serving, turning our bodies into vessels of God’s love” (50). Being a vessel of God’s love is no easy task, let alone becoming a vessel of such perfection. The gutting that must take place to make room for the Spirit is severe. The scripture does not suggest that one transforms immediately to a vessel of love. It suggests that ongoing hardship and interaction with the hardships of others is what will continually rid the vessel of self and make room for the Spirit to move freely in those unforeseen, spur-of-the-moment times, when “the believer is to display in the disparate contexts of everyday life the love of God” (45). The modern world is more efficient than the church in its pursuit of wealth and health through the

use of the accessibility and quantity of information. However, the lack of spiritual formation in the modern church suggests that the accessibility of information has also overwhelmed the Christian mind leading to false comfort and inaction.

Canfield's main argument is that life presents unforeseen circumstances, moments we hardly know how to bear, including conflicts in our global policy surrounding topics that make us frightened by other image bearers. In such circumstances, the mark of the believer is not those who figured out how to follow the rules best. The mark is of those who, in the moments of unpredicted turmoil, acted in such a way that the fruit of the Spirit was poured out, and all those around were free to eat of it—that the immediate neighbor was fed in the midst of a famine by a person who was not worried about how much there was to give away, and who did not discriminate against anyone who was at the table. For this again puts aside law and leans into the movement of the Spirit, “God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (58).



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