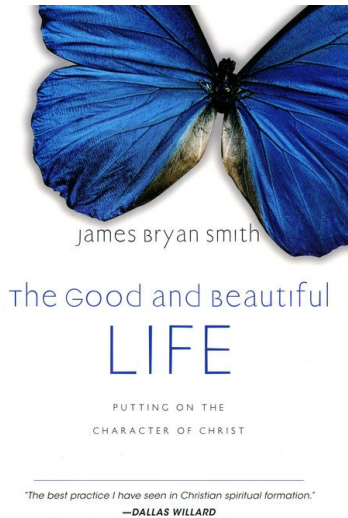


FORKS IN THE ROAD & DEAD-ENDS

GCI pastoral intern discussion starter
by Mychelle Fleming



Recommended reading:

The Good and Beautiful Life

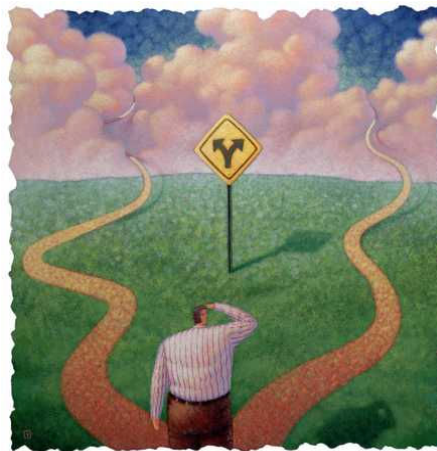
by James Bryan Smith,
pages 205-220

“Driving to feel infinite,” was a phrase my circle of friends often repeated in our early years of college. It came from Stephen Chobsky’s coming-of-age novel, *The Perks of Being a Wall Flower*, which we read the summer before our freshman year. I now see the phrase as a rather cheesy cliché that conveyed a false sense of depth as we journeyed from the safety of childhood into the adult world away from home. We were clinging to a rather naïve hope that the road had “infinite” opportunities and possibilities. We celebrated that hope listening to the music of John Mayer, Janet Jackson and, I hate to admit it, the Goo-Goo Dolls.

Last year, when the movie based on the book was released, I found myself reminiscing, though now understanding the silliness of thinking that life presents “infinite” choices. It was easy for me to feel that way growing up. My childhood was like a wide-open highway with well-lit, easy to read signs telling me where to turn and what to expect ahead. Now the road has many twists and turns, the occasional fork in the road and some dead-ends.

Now I spend considerable time weighing the pros and cons of multiple routes that seemingly would take me in opposite directions. Life on this road is often fragile. Everything can change in a moment—bringing life to a screeching halt. I have discovered that life on this road, rather than linear and simple, is messy, deep and often complex. I have learned that to successfully navigate, it is vital to have God’s direction. I have learned that his directing voice is heard most clearly when I am still.

When I hear and follow God’s direction, I find that the forks in the road of life are no longer so agonizing. I find that frequent and sometimes unexpected stops on the journey teach me that God’s will is more about *who* I am rather than *where* I am.



With God’s guidance, I now experience forks in the road of life as opportunities to pause and observe what God is doing, and as invitations to participate with him. I have come to see that what sometimes appears to be a dead-end is actually a road under construction. God, working for my good and his glory, turns forks in the road and apparent dead-ends into opportunities to get out of the car and join him in what he is doing to build his kingdom.

Not long after graduating from college, I experienced what appeared to be a dead-end on my journey. During college, I had attended a Presbyterian church where I worked as a nursery director. But once I left college, I felt called to find a new church where I could plug in. Finding that community proved to be a big challenge.

Churches in the area had groups built around life stages—college students, young families and singles. None of these seemed to fit my situation. At first, I was quite discouraged; wondering if there was a place for me in the body of Christ. As I began to share my feelings with friends, I discovered that many of them felt the same way. And so we decided to start a small group of our own, made up of our co-workers, former classmates and family.

Today our group is thriving, with a cross-section of ages, races and life-stages. We support each other and engage the community around us. What looked at first like a dead-end, was actually a road under construction!

A Biblical example of God turning an apparent dead-end into an opportunity, is the story of Mark in the book of Acts. As a young man, Mark was invited to join Paul and Barnabas' mission trip to Pamphylia. Mark joined, but left early to return home. A sharp disagreement arose between Paul and Barnabas concerning how to work with Mark—Barnabas wanted to continue to partner with Mark, but Paul wanted none of that. As a result, the two apostles went their separate ways.



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All this seemed to indicate a dead-end for Mark's journey as a missionary, and a fork in the road in Barnabas and Paul's relationship. However, scripture hints at the work that God did to redeem the situation. The relational split between Paul and Barnabas did not end their effectiveness in God's mission; both continued, though on separate roads, to spread the gospel. Mark's return home was not the end of his journey as a missionary.

Sometime later, Paul wrote from prison to Timothy, instructing him to bring Mark to him, noting that, "He is helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark apparently learned and matured (probably with Barnabas' mentoring). As a result, Mark and Paul reconciled.

One of the books my small group read together was *The Good and Beautiful Life*. In chapter 12, James Bryan Smith discusses living the Kingdom life day-by-day through abiding in Christ:

To abide means to rest and rely on Jesus, who is not outside of us, judging us, but inside us, empowering us. The more we are aware of our identity in Christ, and of his presence and power that are with us, the more naturally we will do this.

Daily reminding myself of God's sovereignty and active involvement in the smallest details of my life gives me strength to face with faith and hope the twists, turns, forks-in-the-road and apparent dead-ends. My prayer for us is that we continue to abide in Jesus and, in doing so, experience the fulfillment of what he promised his followers:

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:7-8).

Discussion starter questions:

1. Are there any areas of your life or ministry that are on "cruise control"?
2. What "dead ends" have you seen redeemed?