

Chapter 10 = The Incarnation of a Transformed Mind

Have you ever watched your twenty-six-year-old wife squirm in complete agony, calling out to God to take away her pain, only to have it grow worse? I have.

-Palmer
July 10, 2003 1:10 p.m.

I met Mark Palmer back in 2001. My dad sat with him at a pastor's retreat in Pennsylvania. He thought I might like to hang out with Palmer since we were both ministering in the Columbus area. I called him and we chatted for a few minutes. He told me he'd love to meet and so we scheduled a local coffee shop as our place of introduction.

The moment I saw Palmer I was a bit taken back. Any guy that stands over 6' 8" has that tendency I suppose. We ordered a drink and told our stories.

We talked about philosophy, music, our wives, and mostly about Jesus. Only the way he talked about Jesus was a little bit strange. It was as if the Jesus Palmer talked about was real. I mean of course I know Jesus is real, but the stories that Palmer shared made it seem like he'd literally spent the day before hanging out with the incarnated Son of God.

I sat there with a barrage of emotions. I felt intrigued, curious, nervous, perplexed, and mostly excited. This guy had a strange quality about him. He seemed relevant. Isn't that what we all want?

Palmer came across without any separatist tendencies. I sat back waiting for the conformist tendencies to come spilling out. Only they didn't.

I began to probe and pick at his theology searching for a crack in his worldview. Once again I couldn't find any. Philosophically we agreed on many things, but his methodology seemed so foreign to me. As he explained the way he did church, I thought I was hearing a rendition of the early church from the book of Acts. Nonetheless, after a while I was convinced that his theology was sound.

Following our time at the coffee shop he drove me around the neighborhood. He had a house church, which he referred to as a missional community. Both its name and location were definitely nontraditional. The community, called *the landing place*, took up roots in a section just north of downtown Columbus called the Short North.⁽¹⁾ Many of the buildings we passed had large murals painted on them. As we drove through the streets it was obvious that this part of town was splashed with a progressive artistic feel.

As I left that day and headed home Palmer handed me a business card. It had a little alien in a spaceship. The card read The Landing Place. I looked for his job title. Instead of it saying **Pastor** or **Church Planter**, his self-made title read: **Mark Palmer: Resident Instigator**. I liked Mark and so began our friendship.

MORE ABOUT PALMER

A few months later I called up Mark to come talk to the young adult group at my church. We wanted our wives to meet so grabbed some dinner before the gathering that night. Mark, Jennifer, Kelly and I hit it off. We shared our experiences in the ministry and talked about our college lives. We each took turns telling the story how we met, fell in love, and got married. Mark and Jennifer told us they were expecting a child in a few months.

Eventually, we headed over to the young adult gathering. Palmer had a Q and A time about ministry in the Short North. Every time I hung out with him my theology was forced out of the box and into real life. I found myself subconsciously saying inside, "That's not the way it's supposed to be done." However, when I examined the Scriptures he was consistent.

I asked Palmer to tell me a little more about the landing place and his philosophy of ministry. He gave me the facts:

The Landing Place is a community of friends and neighbors that "do life" together. The central theme of this life is a shared passion for following Jesus. We often gather in each others homes to share meals, have conversations, read Scriptures, tell stories, study the teachings of Jesus, sing songs, pray prayers, recite poetry, and practice liturgies.

Sometimes a few of us will meet in a coffeehouse or pub for spiritual and/or philosophical discussion, or to talk about a book we've currently read and found meaningful.

We also like to throw worship parties in our art studio. Our parties usually involve some or all of the following: candles, loud music, incense, quiet music, visual art, food, sitting, standing, meditation, dialogue, monologue, songs, and ancient prayers.

*There are certain things we **value** that shape who we are as a church. They are:*

***Following Jesus** (because we consider him to be not only the finest teacher that ever lived, but also the Messiah.)*

Being Creative (because we are made in the image of the Creator, and seek to make Him known through our creations.)

Sharing Life (because life is best experienced together in community.)

Making Peace (because Jesus asked us to not only love our friends, but also our enemies.)

Loving Our Neighbors (because being a good neighbor is one of the most valuable things you can do.)

The Story (because to value the lives of those who have gone before us is to make our own stories richer.)

Living Missionally (because living as a "sent" people allows people to see Jesus, and experience him for themselves.)

We are artists, students, thinkers, parents; but more than anything we're just people on a journey. We always enjoy meeting new friends who are also on the journey. Hopefully we can meet soon over a cup of coffee and a story.

Like I thought, simple, inspiring, and incarnational. I was gripped by Mark and Jennifer's commitment to faith and culture. Certainly this was a couple that didn't reject the culture they lived in. Surprisingly, they didn't conform to their culture either. They transformed it!

The culture they lived within was certainly unique. Everyone native to the Columbus area knows that the Short North certainly has the characteristic of being unique. One source describes this part of town as a stretch "containing a variety of places to eat and shop mixed in with dozens of art galleries. The Short North is also a popular nightlife destination with dozens of bars and clubs lining high street."(2)

Another source contextualized this section of the city as, "Columbus's version of New York's artsy Soho district, this historic urban neighborhood is filled with boutiques, art galleries, coffee houses, restaurants and theaters."(3) These generous words could not always be attributed to this area. In fact, less than twenty years ago it "was known for dilapidated buildings, crime, drugs, and prostitution. The name 'Short North' was used by police to describe the run down area between downtown Columbus and the Ohio State University."(4)

Anyway you slice it the Short North is a place, just like any other place in this world, that is in desperate need of Christ. The Palmers knew this and therefore committed their lives to bringing light to this corner of darkness.

The amazing thing is that they balanced their faith with the culture of the Short North in some pretty transformational ways. I loved what I saw and wanted a piece of it. I took a group of teens downtown to pitch in and give Palmer a hand. We painted, cleaned, swept, and organized something he called the Kindergarten room. That afternoon we set up shop on his front porch and cooked hot dogs for neighbors and strangers passing by. It was just a simple way we loved God and people.

Palmer sent me more stuff about some upcoming events at *the landing place*. Once again I was intrigued at the simplicity. Once again I saw a couple that was consciously living as transformists. Here were just some of their events.

The Kindergarten Room

The Kindergarten Room was an all ages music and art space that we did last year. We hosted visual artists, poetry readings, and live music. This was basically an effort to create an atmosphere where people could meet people and to allow artists a venue to express themselves in meaningful ways. It was an opportunity for people to tell their stories in ways that were important to them. We hosted local visual artists in a gallery setting; my housemate Aaron hosted a poetry reading series called The Switchboard Series, and we hosted local and national bands in the space. It was pretty great all around.

Worship Parties

The Eucharist (bread and cup) is always the focal point. Musicians write music. Worshipers write lyrics. Poets write poems. Painters paint. All these forms of worship are impromptu. It's a really nice vibe.

Labyrinth...All the cool kids are doing it. Individuals walk through a prayer path guided by a CD.

Small White Light...The Landing Place Community takes things like Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Pentecost pretty seriously. Last year for Advent we did original music and readings from our community. These all focused on the past and future comings of Jesus.

Catacomb Worship...Gathered in self created catacombs to celebrate the lives of saints that have gone before us; Bonhoeffer, Nouwen, St. Francis, etc. Our community celebrated their lives through their transformational writings. In a setting of candles we sang songs and celebrated the Eucharist.

Urban Monastic Communities...More and more of us are moving toward sharing our lives on more intimate levels. For some of us that means actually living together, sharing the same space and possessions.

Book Groups...In local coffeehouses. We do this by just sitting down and being present (that's most of what mission is). We invite others to dialogue around a

book and go on a journey with us. We've done Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community by Wendell Berry and My Confession, My Religion by Tolstoy.

Being Good Neighbors...I mean, love your neighbor as yourself, right? This might take the form of mowing their lawns, being with their kids, or having cookouts...so simple.

THE TWO BECAME ONE

Why do I write about Mark? What's so significant about him? As I cautioned in chapter two, there is a danger in reading a book about how to balance faith and culture. The danger is that we read it and fail to live it. It's an easy thing to write a book about how to balance faith and culture; it is a whole different matter to live a life that balances faith and culture. Mark and Jennifer have done such a thing.

I wanted you the reader to see the incarnation of a transformist in someone other than Jesus or Paul. I wanted you to see the practical things they do to transform culture, without becoming compromised by it.

Without incarnation then we are just theorists. Without our paradigm infused into the life of real person with a set of real issues then we're only speculating. What makes us relevant is incarnation.

Mark had no idea the real set of issues him, Jennifer, and their baby Micah were about to face. Only the Father knew the events that would befall these transformists. The two would become one.

Transformists don't just transform culture when everything is going well. They aren't exempt from intense trial and pain. They aren't fickle people who only love God when it's easy. They struggle because faith is a struggle.

As I've observed Mark's life, he's exactly this type of person. He doesn't love God with lip service or surface obedience. Rather, it's out of an intense and authentic struggle that Mark is able to transform the culture around him. Other than sharing Palmer's own heart with you, I don't know a better way to explain the significant events surrounding the summer of 2003. Below are his journal entries that record some of his darkest and brightest moments.

Date: 2003-07-04 13:14

Wanted to pass along on update on our journey. Jennifer finished her second round of chemotherapy a few weeks ago, and on Monday had the first CT Scans since beginning treatment. We received the results of those scans on

Wednesday. The scans showed that the cancer has doubled in size, and has spread further in a very aggressive way. Because of this, Jennifer will not be continuing her current form of treatment. The doctor also did not want her to continue eating any longer, because of the damage it could cause to her digestive system. So yesterday, Jennifer was admitted to the hospital to begin receiving TPN, which is nutrition that is fed through the central line in her chest. After this weekend, she will be able to receive that at home, at night, while she is sleeping. The TPN will provide her body with all of the nutrition that it needs. We now need to decide together what direction we will take concerning further treatment of the cancer.

The news we received was obviously disappointing. But Jennifer and I continually reminded each other in the days leading up to the test that no matter what the results were, it didn't change who God was, or what He wanted to do for her. God still is who He is. His will is still for Jennifer to be completely whole and healthy and disease free (that is His will for all of His children.) It doesn't change the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago provided for not only our spiritual healing, but for our physical as well. It doesn't change the fact that the Kingdom has come among us in the person of that same Jesus, although not yet in its fullness...

And so it doesn't change what our responsibility is; to lay hands on the sick, and to pray that they will be healed, and to believe that God desires that same thing very much. And do please continue to pray for Jennifer's healing, joining us in believing that her good Father desires it even more than we do.

Be encouraged. Don't lose heart. The battle is not over. Our family blesses you as you fight this battle with us. "Father in Heaven, holy is Your name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, here on earth, just as it is in Heaven."

Date: 2003-07-09 13:10

Have you ever watched your twenty-six-year-old wife squirm in complete agony, calling out to God to take away her pain, only to have it grow worse?

I have. (When will Your healing come?)

After Mark wrote this entry, two anonymous readers took a risk and replied. This is just a glimpse of the Body of Christ at work. Evidently, none of us are immune to pain.

Date: 2003-07-09 (Anonymous)

I lost my husband when he was thirty-six years old, after spending five years in the process of dying. He was a juvenile diabetic and complications had set in. I never felt so forgotten by God in my life. I was completely on my own.

He lost limbs and suffered from phantom pain; he was on peritoneal dialysis and suffered from the pain of having his gut stretched with fluid. He had neuropathy pain. He never got better. And it went on, and on, and on. These things happen, have to happen. And I don't blame God for it or demand His mercy in them. But it's just not fair. And yes, I am still angry about it.

But it is. The reality is in front of you. Don't hesitate to use whatever means you must to try to make her comfortable - it's all your can do. And pray. I always felt better.

Date: 2003-07-09 18:37 (Anonymous)

Oh honey, I am so sorry for your pain. I do not know why I keep reading your journal. I do not even know you, and yet I keep finding myself here. Maybe I can relate in one way. I have a 15-month-old daughter, and I can only imagine the pain of having to leave her. It is so amazing to me that you can keep praying and keep your faith. She must be so sad to leave her son; it totally breaks my heart. I cry almost every night thinking about the three of you. I will continue to pray for you and her healing. He is all-powerful, and can heal in His time. Take care-God Bless you all.

Date: 2003-07-10 10:42

Long night...we had to take Jennifer to the emergency room around midnight last night; we just couldn't get the pain under control with the morphine. Surprisingly, it was our first trip to emergency since Jennifer's diagnosis. Hopefully our last trip as well. Around 5AM they finally decided to check her in. She's on some pretty heavy pain medicine right now, so is feeling better.

Interesting the timing of it all. Last night, around 8 or 9, my housemate Aaron and friend Brandon spent some time praying for me. The Spirit of God was really present in a strong way, strengthening me and encouraging me. It was right on time.

Pretty tired right now. I think I'll go take a nap with my son.

Date: 2003-07-30 21:31

I thought I would post an update on Jennifer and the journey that we have been on for a few months now. We were in Cincy two weekends ago, worshipping and sharing life with friends from around the region. Jennifer had a really wonderful time; she was strong and was encouraged by all the prayers and love we received while there. When we returned on Monday, she became very tired, and then started to experience nausea on Thursday. The nausea became so severe on Sunday that I took her to the emergency room, and we spent the night in the hospital.

While there, she began to have waste drain from the tube in her stomach. Her doctor told me this indicated the stomach and the bowels had fused and that waste was passing freely into her abdomen. This was what was causing the nausea. He encouraged us to bring her home, so that she could be comfortable for her last days here on earth. While at the hospital, we also made the most difficult decision I have ever been faced with, to stop her nutrition. It was only feeding the tumors and making her more sick. So as of Saturday evening, Jennifer is no longer receiving any nutrition for her body to live.

We came home Monday evening, and have been controlling the nausea with around the clock injections of medicine. Jennifer is sometimes aware, and sometimes not. This morning we spent a few hours together in the gardens behind the house, talking of the future, the past, and how unimaginably wonderful it will be when she meets God.

I also told her that I still believed God could heal her, and renewed my promise to pray for that until the end. I would encourage you to join me in that prayer, asking God to bring His healing in a miraculous way. I know that if Jennifer had the strength to write, she would say the same thing.

She would also say to be encouraged. Do not lose heart. The Kingdom is present.

Date: 2003-08-01 11:48

Last night 64 King was filled with the laughter and conversation and tears of our spiritual community. We shared a meal, as we always do, and then began to sing songs to our God. Jennifer was not able to come down, because she was too weak. So we all gathered in the entryway, up the stairway, and down the hall that leads to our bedroom. There we continued to sing, and Jennifer joined us...

***Rejoice, lift up your voice and praise Jesus now
Hallelujah***

*Our Father in Heaven holy is Your name
Your Kingdom come, your will be done here*

When we were done, I whispered to Jennifer that what she had just experienced was but a tiny taste of Kingdom come.

She smiled.

Date: 2003-08-09 18:35

I want to again say thank you to all of you for your prayers and encouragement during this journey. They have really sustained us during this unimaginably difficult time. God is so gracious to us. The last few days have been filled with questions for me, questions of why God might be sustaining Jennifer this long. Thursday night she was able to come downstairs and worship with our community of faith. It was really amazing; she had been pretty unresponsive most of the day, but as we began to sing, she mouthed the words along with us, basking in the beauty of community and worship...

Date: 2003-08-12 09:23

Friends,

This morning at 6AM, Jennifer's spirit went to be with her Father God.

Her physical body awaits the resurrection of the dead on the day of the Lord.

We live this life to the glory of God.

We anxiously wait for the next life to begin.

All praise to Jesus of Nazareth, the Resurrected One.

The funeral was a solemn celebration. People from their community of faith testified one after the other about Jennifer and Mark's life of faith. There were courageous stories. Some were joyful. And others were wrapped with sorrow.

So what? Is Mark Palmer removed from the pain? Is it easy to raise Micah alone? Because he is a follower of Jesus, does that mean everything is Okay?

Date: 2003-08-12 22:13

It's 10PM, and I am frightened of going upstairs to bed by myself. I have gone to sleep with Jennifer every night for the last 5 plus years, and now I am quite unsure of how to do it myself.

If you are awake this evening, will you pray with me through the watches of the night?

38 people posted a message to Mark this night. That evening, although Jennifer was not physically there, Mark did not go to bed exclusively by himself.

Date: 2003-08-21 13:51

It's the little things that trigger memory, and the grief that waits patiently in the background until it is stirred...receiving junk mail addressed to Jennifer, finding pieces of her hair in random places around the house, getting in the car and hearing the CD that was playing on our last trip to the hospital over 3 weeks ago that I have yet to remove from the player, deciding to finally open the mail at 1AM and having Jennifer's death certificate be the first thing I open...with all my strength I tried to put it down; I ended up reading it word for word. Twice.

It all adds up to a longing and a loneliness the nature of which cannot be described in words.

Date: 2003-09-09 13:58

The nice cashier at Lowe's gave Micah a flower this morning "to take home to his mommy." It's stuff like that, which just comes out of nowhere and blindsides you.

THE REAL INCARNATION

Seeing Mark in these months of pain, sorrow, and rejoicing has made the incarnation all the more real. I have no answers why God took Jennifer and left Mark and his one-year old son Micah alone. None of us has a complete perspective.

Palmer has maintained his steady course of being a transformist. This is only been possible through his commitment to God and the commitment of God's people to him. The next few months and years will be a grieving process. He seems stronger in some ways, and weaker in others. Nonetheless, he is a transformist. He has balanced loving God and people with his faith and

culture. He is the incarnation of a transformed mind and I thank him for his inspiring example to me.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 18