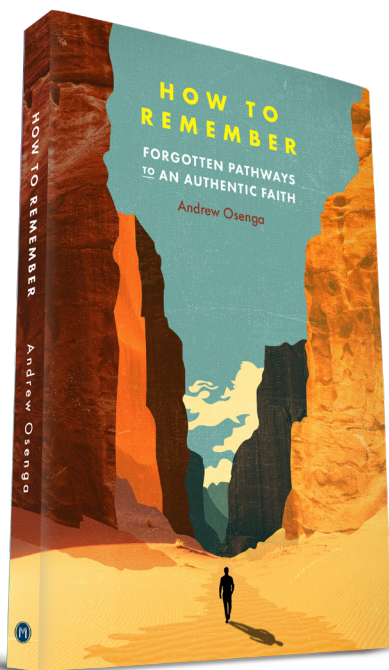




Andrew Osenga invites readers to a life of faith and wonder, reflecting on prayer, doubt, grief, confession, joy, peace, mystery, and more. Through stories, biblical reflection, and the sturdy traditions that have gone before us, Osenga offers language and tools to rebuild a communal life of faith, hope, and awe.

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The Oak Tree

ON A SUNNY MONDAY AFTERNOON one autumn, I stepped out of a meeting to find a slew of texts and phone calls from my family. One of the giant sixty-year-old oaks behind our house had suddenly splintered, sending half the tree crashing down on the fence that separated our yard from our neighbor's.

What we found in the fallen branches was surprising. A deep, dark discoloration was running through the middle of each section, both of what was on the ground and the rest of the tree still standing.

Though the oak appeared full and vibrant and healthy, it was actually deeply diseased and rotting from the inside out. We discovered the same dark rings in the other three trees in our yard, so the rot was likely spreading across our neighborhood.

What if all the big, old, trustworthy trees around us suddenly fall or need to be taken down? It will change so much of what we know and love about our street and our homes. It will be sad, but there will also be space for new trees to grow and eventually

become the big, old, trustworthy trees for the next generation of families who live here on this street.

Something about this seemed familiar.

I'm a church kid. I grew up in a Christian family who went to church *all* the time. My parents were, and still are, a part of nearly every committee, group, and project going on in the building.

So much of who I am and what I care about was formed from my childhood experiences there. That's where I learned about Jesus and caring for others, became familiar with the classic hymns, and met a bunch of people who thought those things mattered and tried to live their lives in a way that reflected that.

Now I've spent over half of my life in "Christian" work.

I signed a record deal the day I turned nineteen, dropped out of college, and went on tour with my first band, The Normals. Over the next twenty-five years I would also become a member of a fairly popular Christian band named Caedmon's Call, and a touring guitar player for many artists in Christian music, such as Andrew Peterson, Steven Curtis Chapman, and Jars of Clay. Somehow, I ended up in A&R (working directly with artists and their songs) at two of the biggest record companies in Christian music, working with a large number of the artists and songwriters in that industry and discovering and developing some who have become quite successful.

As a songwriter myself, I've released many albums, played hundreds of my own concerts, and had my songs recorded by many well-known artists; I've also sung at worship services around the world.

I say all that only to tell you of the experiences that have led to this book. I won't include any more name-droppy paragraphs like the last two in the rest of these pages, I promise. The point is, I've seen many different types of churches, leaders, and communities

and have been deeply impacted by the many amazing ways God is working.

But I've also seen a lot of fallen branches. People who have left the church, sometimes quietly, sometimes angrily. More often than we might realize, what has looked so vibrant and alive from the outside has a sickness running through it.

Leaders get caught in scandals, pastors are exposed as narcissists, politics takes priority over the gospel, churches' desires to grow leave the people in the seats feeling like numbers rather than individuals. Behind it all is a uniquely Western drive to make everything bigger and faster and more efficient, sometimes hiding a landscape of pollution and inequity in its shadow.

I don't think we are aware of how much the world around us has shaped our assumptions of value, economy, and cause and effect. Just as some babies are born with blue eyes and some with brown, I believe many of us are capitalist children, born with eyes that see the world as status to achieve, products to sell, or products to consume.

This is not our fault, yet part of the process of maturity is recognizing this natural bias and working to reorganize our lives along priorities of our own choosing.

If American consumerism has shaped how we see the world, then, obviously, it will have shaped the American church as well.

Some of the more positive ways this worldview has impacted the church has allowed its message to spread around the planet, in ways and forms never before seen, at a scale previously unimaginable. Of course, to achieve that reach, what gets communicated must be simplified to its lowest common denominator, taking much of its nuance, beauty, and contemplation—things that would be dear and familiar to Christians before us—and leaving it behind.

The ways of Jesus, a disciple must eventually learn, involve quite a lot of nuance, beauty, and contemplation.

I fear that, in order to grow faster, we have cut ourselves off from our roots, and now we are surprised that our plants are withering.

This is how we find ourselves with an American church full of failing leaders, shrinking numbers, and little knowledge about its own history.

Are we surprised, then, when more and more branches start falling from the trees?

2.

The Gift Shop

COULD IT BE THAT PEOPLE coming to church in search of God, healing, and community are instead finding celebrity pastors and the worship band's latest single—so they're turning around and heading back out?

When the Jesus who told us to love our neighbor and turn the other cheek is now being used as a bumper sticker to “take our country back for God,” are we surprised that people in grief and pain aren't finding the peace and freedom they are seeking?

But the good news, and it is so good, is that Jesus is not even a little bit done with the church, nor is He even a little bit scared of any of these things that keep some of us up all night.

You and I have been invited into a friendship with God in a holy and mysterious way, beyond our own power. He who began it will be faithful to complete it.

I have a lot of friends who have left the church over the years. Some of them still stay away, but a few have started to come back. They miss the community, the sense of collective purpose. They

miss feeling close to God and serving those around them. They have kids now and they want their kids to learn about Jesus and have shared experiences with other young believers.

So, I'm not surprised every time I see another friend show up at our small Anglican church, where the service may seem, on the surface, kind of rote and there's not a screen in sight. Or I hear they're joining up with a house church in their neighborhood or going back to the small and established AME church down by the park.

They don't want the celebrity pastor. They don't want fog machines and light shows. They want people to know their names and to notice when they're not there. They want to belong and be known.

Isn't that what we all want? To be seen, to be known and, ultimately, to be loved?

(And please know that I've got nothing at all against a giant church with eight services and a telecast pastor. I have seen how God uses them, ministering both to their congregations and in their communities. Yet it's so hard for individuals to be seen or known in a large place like that. So easy to feel lost in the crowd. That's an uphill battle for everyone involved, as thoughtful and well-meaning as I know many of those pastors and churches to be.)

At its furthest extreme, these churches can feel like one more "product" to be sold. One of the great challenges of the contemporary church is that, at times, we're handed our faith-to-go like we're rushing by a drive-thru, rather than hunting, gathering, prepping, cooking, and finally feasting on the fruits of our labors. We eat it so fast that we don't savor it, nor do we really understand where it's come from.

As capitalism has commodified the Christian experience, it has also unwittingly filtered out the parts that were too challenging, too boring, or too controversial to pass along as product. But the

challenging parts and the not-exciting parts and the controversial parts are, well . . .

. . . those are a huge part of Christianity.

Following Jesus has been, since the very beginning, a counter-cultural way of living. It was never meant to sit on a bookstore shelf. It is a revolution in the wake of a resurrection.

It's like we've spent years in a gift shop for the Grand Canyon. We've been wearing the T-shirts, learning the history, and setting up imaginary worlds with the figurines . . . until suddenly something catches our eye. We realize that there's a little light poking through a shuttered-up window. As we tear down the blinds, we are startled to realize that we've been next to the Canyon itself the whole time.

This might be thrilling and it might even be a bit scary. You might make a mess in your haste to get out of the gift shop. (For your mother or your pastor watching from afar, it might be scary as well.)

But when you know the Grand Canyon is out there, you're not going to stay inside.

For thousands of years, Christians have been driven by a spiritual hunger to explore the beauty and the wildness and the never-ending richness of God. And the bottom line is that we're the same as those who came before us. Searching like explorers, we have to keep looking deeper, finding the hidden and humble paths to the divine presence we feel beyond our senses. Thankfully, many of these earlier explorers, our spiritual ancestors, have left us a rich legacy of what they've found.

Just as we have new trees taking root in our yard, we are seeing new signs of life in the church in America. More and more, contemporary Christians are looking to find things about the church they can trust. They are putting down roots in well-seasoned soil

and finding there the legacy of overlooked songs, prayers, and practices to guide them into a sacred and intimate life with Jesus.



What follows are a series of short essays on some of what I've learned about these forgotten songs, prayers, and practices of believers who have gone before us. Our culture has raced past these older guideposts in its haste to grow and stay relevant, because we've forgotten that relevance is not about being trendy and modern. To be relevant is simply to be trustworthy to those who need you.

There is infinitely more to discover about each of these ideas, to be very clear. If what I'm discussing is new to you, know that this is simply to serve as an introduction. If the topic is familiar, I hope I can offer a new way to look at it.

It's my hope and prayer that some of the practices and ideas you find in this book (none of which are my invention, nor my discovery) can help guide you into a richer, deeper, and more satisfying life with the Jesus who loves you so much more than you can possibly imagine.

ENOUGH

What we sing matters.
The words we speak matter.
The way we live matters.

We are giving ourselves a vocabulary.
We are teaching the language of the Christian life,
to ourselves, to our children, and to the world around us.

It's a life that gives us enough . . .

enough to bear suffering and doubt.
enough to taste and celebrate joy.
enough to rest in plenty or in need,
to walk together or alone.

for we know we are never alone.

It's a life that might have enemies,
and that is willing to love them,
because we are held and formed,
at all times,
in all ways,
by Jesus.

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