

Christianity Rising: The Phoenix Affirmations

From the dust jacket of *Lone Survivor*, a book by U.S. Navy SEAL, Marcus Luttrell.

On a clear night in late June 2005, four U.S. Navy SEALs left their base in northern Afghanistan for the mountainous Pakistani border. Their mission was to capture or kill a notorious al Qaeda leader known to be ensconced in a Taliban stronghold surrounded by a small but heavily armed force. Less than twenty-four hours later, only one of those Navy SEALs remained alive.

This is the story of team leader Marcus Luttrell, the sole survivor of Operation Redwing, and the desperate battle in the mountains that led ultimately, to the largest loss of life in Navy SEAL history. But it is also, more than anything the story of his teammates, who fought ferociously beside him until he was the last one left—blasted unconscious by a rocket grenade, blown over a cliff, but still armed and still breathing. Over the next four days, badly injured and presumed dead, Luttrell fought off six al Qaeda assassins who were sent to finish him, then crawled for seven miles through the mountains before he was taken in by a Pashtun tribe, who risked everything to protect him from the encircling Taliban killers.

A six-foot-five-inch Texan, Leading Petty Officer Luttrell takes, us, blow-by-blow, through the brutal training of America's warrior elite and the relentless rites of passage required by the Navy SEALs. He transports us to a monstrous battle fought on the desolate peaks of Afghanistan, where the beleaguered American team plummeted headlong a thousand feet down a mountain as they fought back through flying shale and rocks. In this rich, moving chronicle of courage, honor, and patriotism, Marcus Luttrell delivers one of the most narratives ever written about modern warfare—and a tribute to his teammates, who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.¹

To give you a taste of the young man's own voice in his narrative, here he describes his team of SEALs leaving Bahrain in a C-130 on their way to Afghanistan:

The flight crew checked we were all strapped in, and then those thunderous Boeing engines roared. Jesus, the noise was unbelievable. I might just as well have been sitting in the gear box. The whole aircraft shook and rumbled as we charged down the runway, taking off to the southwest, directly into the desert wind which gusted out of the mainland Arabian peninsula. There were no other passengers on board, just the flight crew and, in the rear, us, headed out to do God's work on behalf of the U.S. government and our commander in chief, President George W. Bush. In a sense, we were all alone. As usual.

In the rest of the book, Luttrell's account of his military training (which began in his Texas childhood) and of the events that occurred in late June-early July 2005 show

¹Marcus Luttrell, blurb on dust jacket of *Lone Survivor*, May 2006.

these young men to be remarkable, and I want to make it crystal clear that I acknowledge their heroism, determination, courage, and stamina.

What most impressed me **more**, however, was what happened when Luttrell found himself naked (literally, his pants blown off him & other clothes in tatters), wounded and alone among his enemies in the high mountains of Afghanistan. After escaping the Taliban by crawling seven miles through rugged terrain, he was exhausted and fell asleep beside a spring. He awakened some time later to find himself surrounded by Afghans with guns. He still had his automatic rifle and raised it, ready to fire, figuring he could kill several before they killed him. Something stopped him, however, and he didn't shoot. Neither did they. Eventually he realized the men were not going to kill him. Instead, these Pashtun tribesmen took him to their village, treated his wounds, fed and cared for him for several weeks, all the while being threatened by the local Taliban who kept coming to the village demanding he be turned over to them. Finally, Gulab, an elderly village leader, hiked a hundred miles over the mountains to the nearest U.S. base to tell them his village was sheltering a wounded U.S. soldier. A military helicopter was dispatched, swooped into the village, picked up Marcus Luttrell and transported him to safety.

Marcus Luttrell was flown home, given the best medical care, and awarded medals for bravery. Gulab, the "enemy" who helped him, however, might not be allowed to return to his village and he might never see his family again. His village would likely suffer retribution from the Taliban, his wife and six children killed. If they escaped the Taliban, they were still in danger of being blown up in an American bombing raid.

Do you, as I do, hear echoes of the story of the Good Samaritan in this account? To me, the most significant point in the parable about the Good Samaritan is that the

man lying wounded and naked in a ditch is helped by a *Samaritan*, not an Israelite. To those listening to Jesus tell this story, Samaritans were considered at least antagonists if not downright enemies. The point in the parable is that *actions* count for more than being a member of the right group. In the case of Marcus Luttrell, a young soldier from a nation that identifies itself as “Christian” is helped by a group of Muslims—Muslims, in fact, that he and his fellow soldiers would not hesitate to kill at the slightest indication of hostility.

In this situation, I find myself asking: who more closely follows the teachings of Jesus—the United States soldier “doing God’s work on behalf of the U.S. government and . . . George W. Bush” or a group of Muslim villagers in Afghanistan? In short, who is more “Christian”?

Indeed.

Marcus Luttrell’s story is a supreme example of a truth expressed in Affirmation #1 of *The Phoenix Affirmations*. Listen:

As Christians, we find spiritual awakening, challenge, growth, and fulfillment in Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection. While we have accepted the Path of Jesus as *our* path, we do not deny the legitimacy of other paths God may provide humanity. Where possible, we seek lively dialogue with those of other faiths for mutual benefit and fellowship.

We affirm that the Path of Jesus is found wherever love of God, neighbor, and self are practiced together. Whether or not the path bears the name of Jesus, such paths bear the identity of Christ.

We confess that we have stepped away from Christ’s Path whenever we have failed to practice love of God, neighbor, and self or have claimed Christianity is the *only* way, even as we claim it to be *our* way.²

So what are *The Phoenix Affirmations*? Has anyone here ever heard of them?

² Eric Elnes, *The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity*. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2006), page 1.

A couple of years ago, I got a phone call from First Friends Meeting in Richmond, Indiana, asking if I would be able to host some people from CrossWalk America who were coming through town. I agreed and, even though I had been in seminary for four years, this was my first encounter with something called “progressive Christianity.” CrossWalk America was a group of six people who walked 2500 miles in four months from Arizona to Washington, D.C. The purpose of their walk across the country was to call attention to the “other” voice of Christianity—the voice that has been drowned out by the likes of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and Karl Rove. When they left Phoenix, they took with them twelve affirmations which they planned to “nail to the doorway of America” (symbolically) at a rally in Washington, D.C. They walked through Ohio—did you hear about them? They reached Washington, D.C. and held their rally—did you hear about it? Dramatic and inspiring as their action was, it seemed to elicit little interest from the national media, though local newspapers and radio stations covered their progress.

So what affirmations do these people see as significant as Luther’s 95 Theses which he nailed to the door of a church in Wittenburg in 1517 and that started the Protestant Reformation of the Catholic Church? Where did the affirmations come from? What do they affirm?

Dr. Eric Elnes, who was one of the walkers, is senior pastor of Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ in Scottsdale, Arizona, and author of the original version of the affirmations and lead editor of later revisions. He tells us they emerged from “scholarly research,” “pastoral reflections,” and “many public and private conversations.” Specifically, he mentions a group in Phoenix called No Longer Silent: Clergy for Justice, which “served as the initial incubator group for the Phoenix

Affirmations” as well as “clergy and scholars” of the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey. Eventually, the affirmations attracted the attention of and generated input from “pastors, theologians, and biblical scholars from every mainline denomination” as well as “laypeople and progressive Christian leaders from around the country.”³

In the introduction to his book on the Phoenix Affirmations, Dr. Elnes describes “a fundamental shift . . . in the nature of Christianity,” occurring over the past hundred years or so, as a result of the faith’s encounter with “science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity.”⁴ This shift and the movement sparked by it are referred to as “progressive Christianity” or, among more evangelical denominations, “the emergent Church.” He says, and I know it’s true, that most people in the country don’t even know it’s happening. If you are interested, I invite you to Google “progressive Christianity” and see all that comes up.

For many years, I refused to call myself a “Christian” because among people who did call themselves Christian, I saw too much that I disagreed with—too much exclusion, too much judgment of others, too much emphasis on a punishing God, too much emphasis on the cruel death of Jesus, and too little emphasis on trying to live according to his hard teachings, like “love thy enemy.” I think of Annie LaMott’s embarrassed response after she finally decided to join a church, when a man sitting next to her on a plane noticed the cross she wore and asked if she were a Christian. She hesitated, then replied, “I’m Christian-ish.”

³ Elnes, Introduction, page xi-xii, xix.

⁴ Ibid, page xviii.

That's how I felt. Christianity is the native language of my soul. I have explored, like many of you, other spiritualities—eastern religions, Buddhism (more a philosophy than a religion), Judaism, New Age thought, and so on. Finally, though, I come back to Christianity because it's where I started. I understand the metaphors. I realized after a while that I had thrown out the baby with the bathwater. There is some really powerful, *powerful* “stuff” in the Christian teachings. Not particularly, in my mind, in Christian dogma, which is a different thing. It's almost like there are two different kinds of Christianity. There's a Christianity that expresses the teachings of Jesus the teacher, and there's Pauline Christianity which worships the teacher.

In the Phoenix Affirmations, however, I find a Christianity I can accept, that “speaks to my condition.” If you notice, these affirmations are in fundamental agreement with the beliefs of early Friends. For instance, Affirmation #1 makes a distinction between the spiritual teacher, Jesus, and the universal Spirit that infused him—sometimes referred to as the “cosmic Christ”; the early Friends called that principle the “Light of Christ” or the “Christ Within” or the “Eternal Word,” and all those other wonderful Quaker phrases. Affirmation #1 acknowledges even those who do not claim Jesus as their spiritual source may still display behavior in accordance with his teachings. George Fox in his *Journal* tells us: “Great opposition did the priests and professors⁵ make about this time against the Light of Christ Jesus, denying it to be universally given,” which, of course, Quakers insisted it was—the “Inner Light” or “Inner Christ” was within everyone. Fox and other early Friends asserted this Light Within had existed from the beginning of Creation, and even those who lived before Jesus’

⁵ those who profess to be Christians

earthly lifetime had known it. For instance, William Penn, in his *Advice* to his children wrote:

That blessed principle the Eternal Word . . . by which all things were at first made and man enlightened to salvation is Pythagoras' great light and salt of ages; Anaxagoras' divine mind; Socrates' good spirit; Timaeus' unbegotten principle and author of all light; Hieron's God in man; Plato's eternal, ineffable and perfect principle of truth; Zeno's maker and father of all; Plotinus' root of the soul . . . the divine power and reason, the infallible immortal law in the minds of men, says Philo; the law and living rule of the mind, the interior guide of the soul and everlasting foundations of virtue, says Plutarch.⁶

According to Howard Brinton in his book *Friends for 350 Years*, “No Quaker belief aroused more opposition than the doctrine that the Light of Christ has been given to all [people] everywhere, since the beginning of the human race.”⁷ This belief still meets resistance, even among Friends.

Ever since I encountered the Phoenix Affirmations and other writings about progressive Christianity, I have felt a leading to spread the word—you could even say I feel evangelical about it. This is *Good News* to me, this paradigm shift in Christianity is indeed “*Good News*,” and over the next few weeks, I will bring messages related to each of these twelve affirmations. (I will leave some copies of the Phoenix Affirmations on the table in the foyer of the meetinghouse.)

To end today, I would like to read through the twelve affirmations. See how you respond to them. See if they speak to you. See if you find them appealing or appalling; and some people do find them appalling. All the churches in my hometown of Clovis, New Mexico, for instance, found them appalling. Here are the affirmations:

⁶ Quoted in Howard Brinton's *Friends for 350 Years*. (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002), page 46.

⁷ *Ibid*, page 45.

The Phoenix Affirmations

Summary Version 3.8

The public face of Christianity in America today bears little connection to the historic faith of our ancestors. It represents even less our own faith as in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Heartened by our experience of the transforming presence of Christ's Holy Spirit In our world, we find ourselves in a time and place where we will be no longer silent. We hereby mark an end to our silence by making the following affirmations:

As people who are joyfully and unapologetically Christian, we pledge ourselves completely to the way of Love. We work to express our love, as Jesus teaches us, in three ways: by loving God, neighbor, and self. (Matt 22:34--40 II Ilk 12:28-31// Lk 10:25-28; Cf. Deut 6:5; Lev. 19:18)

Christian love of God includes:

1. Walking fully in the path of Jesus, without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity;
2. Listening for God's Word which comes through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies which we call Scripture, and attending to God's present activity in the world; [I think of Quakers' "continuing revelation"]
3. Celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God's Creation, including the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human;
4. Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural. [or silent]

Christian love of neighbor includes:

5. Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God's very image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class;
6. Standing, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice with or without the support of others;
7. Preserving religious freedom and the church's ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of church and state;
8. Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies;

Christian love of self includes:

9. Basing our lives on the faith that in Christ all things are made new and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination - for eternity;
10. Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, and recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth;
11. Caring for our bodies and insisting on taking time to enjoy the benefits of prayer, reflection, worship, and recreation in addition to work;

12. Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose; a vocation and ministry that serve to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.