

# CONVERSATIO MORUM

[www.pfi.org](http://www.pfi.org)

*Thoughts for a Monday Morning*

---

17 November 2008

## CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE\*

*Ronald W. Nikkel*

There was a time when I did a lot of climbing in the great Rocky Mountains of Western Canada and the United States. It was an exhilarating period in my life when I would ascend narrow mountain trails and scale granite cliffs to reach the “roof of the world” -- or at least of North America. Each arduous ascent, often accompanied by risk and fear, was inevitably rewarded by a deeply satisfying sense of accomplishment and the breath-taking splendour of a view from the top.

I vividly remember the first occasion I made an ascent to cross the Continental Divide, the high ridge of mountains that defines the boundary between the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta. As I gazed west I saw the vast peaks of the Coastal Mountains in British Columbia, as I gazed east I saw the rolling foothills in Alberta and marvelled at being able to straddle the narrow ridge with a foot firmly planted in each province. I also recall a very difficult climb up Triple Divide Peak in Glacier National Park (Montana, USA). Triple Divide Peak uniquely defines the North American watershed as a dividing point between waters flowing to the Pacific Ocean in the west, the Atlantic Ocean in the east, and the Arctic Ocean in the North. As I drank from a cold glacial pond I marvelled at the possibility of its waters flowing in different directions.

The Continental Divide is also known as the Great Divide and forms the world’s longest continuous ridge of mountains, running from Cape Prince of Wales in northern Alaska along the Rocky Mountains of North America and continues south along the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountain ridge of Mexico and Central America. One of the most difficult and spectacular hiking trails is the Continental Divide Trail that runs from Mexico to Canada.

When I think of the imposing grandeur of the Great Divide and its impact, I cannot help but ponder the existence of another kind of divide. As awe inspiring as the geography of the Great Divide is -- the geography of division and divisiveness between humans is anything but great. It is the horrific spectacle of humanity separated by the great divide of ideology, religion, economics, sex, race, power, politics, and the innumerable differentiations and judgments by which we separate the “sheep” from the “goats” -- our kind from the other kind. Inevitably, I come face to face with the tragedy of this great divide in the prisons of the world, which hold disproportionate multitudes of the poor and disadvantaged, racial minorities and underclass, mentally and socially powerless people. I find myself standing with one foot in prison and another foot in freedom, wondering why are there not more rich and famous and well connected and “establishment” people in prison? Are they by nature or nurture morally superior?

But it is not the great divide between prison and freedom that concerns me most. It is the great divide comprised of the many peaks by which we Christians define and separate the waters of our humanity. We even differentiate ourselves from “lesser” Christians along the great divides of liberal or conservative politics; pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian affinities; pro-or-anti-Obama dispositions; just-war or anti-war

persuasions; etc.

The spiritual crisis of our day is our un-Christ-like proclivity to critique and castigate, and control others on the basis of our politics and points of view. To be a follower of Jesus is to surrender every personal perspective and preference by which we define and divide ourselves from others to the embrace of his love – across the great divide – the cross on the mount where Jesus sacrificed every human prerogative to attract and embrace sinners like you and me. To me, the cross of Jesus stands as the amazing centre point of the human story, crossing every great divide, God reaching across every imaginable human division to embrace every person who ever existed or will exist to exhibit and express His love.

I am all too aware of the delineations and definitions I use to decide who is worthy of being my brother or sister. How dare I, or any of us who know the unsurpassable love of God, subtract or add anything that would deter or distract others from knowing it. If we desire to think and act as Jesus did, we must stop raising the great divide of personal partisanship, politics, preferences, and perspectives alongside the cross of Christ. It is only the cross of Jesus Christ -- plus nothing -- that will bridge the chasm, chaos, and conflict of our human and all too often our blasphemous divisiveness in the cause of faith.

*That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (St. John 17:21-23)*

---

**CONVERSATIO MORUM** is brought to you weekly by Prison Fellowship International

Ron Nikkel is the President of Prison Fellowship International

To [comment](#) on or [subscribe](#) to Conversatio Morum, e-mail [conversatiomorum@pfi.org](mailto:conversatiomorum@pfi.org)

© 2008 by Prison Fellowship International  
All rights reserved  
Reprints permitted with acknowledgement



\*Adapted From a *Conversatio Morum* published 11 September 2006