

Rail Ventures

If you always go where you have always gone and always do what you have always done, you will always be what you are now.

Tristan Gylberd

Leave Longview, Texas, Friday, August 2 @ 10:30 AM on Amtrak's *Texas Eagle*... So began my diary entry at the start of my railroad journey to California to speak at the Third Annual Student West Coast World View Conference (August 5-10, 2002).¹ The trip started in typical Amtrak fashion.² Due to track repair, the *Texas Eagle* had been rerouted to Mineola, Texas. At 11:30 AM, I left Longview on a shuttle bus to catch that connection. I finally heard the anticipated "All Aboard!" and stepped up into a coach car of the *Texas Eagle* in Mineola at 2:00 PM. Thus began a fascinating and engaging four-day roundtrip journey to California.³

Who's Reading What?

Before this trip, I had never traveled by train even though, from childhood, trains had always fascinated me. I can vividly remember watching the sleek, hi-level orange and yellow Santa Fe passenger train streak through the rich agricultural countryside of California in the late 1950s. When the invitation came to speak at the California conference, I pondered my travel options and said to myself, "You've got the time. Why not try the train and enjoy the scenery of the southwest?"

I also thought that in those four days of round trip travel I could do lots of reading (my favorite pastime). So, when the time for departure came, I loaded about twelve books into my "carry on" baggage and crammed a few snacks and some toiletries into the little room remaining. I would never ponder the words of most of those books. Instead of me reading books on this trip, *my fellow-passengers read me.*

Schmoozing and the Amtrak Experience

The Amtrak experience is a cross between camping out (with an air conditioner) and a resort (formal dining available). There are lots of "open spaces" on a train (compared to the confined quarters of a plane). To me, it seemed that "openness in space" generated "openness in conversation" from the "get go." Waiting for the train at the Amtrak station in Longview, my wife Lila, who was seeing me off, began talking to an elderly lady, Kate⁴, from Minden, Louisiana. Lila soon found that she had taught children Kate knew from this town. Kate was traveling to Las Vegas to visit her daughter who had just given birth to her first child. I ended up watching out for Kate (since she was traveling alone) both going to and, amazingly, from the West Coast.⁵

Another obligatory part of the Amtrak experience is eating meals in the formal dining car. Eating there was a leisurely experience and seating is a required four to a table. At each meal I found myself mixed with a new group and the "schmoozing" began with simple introductions and questions like, "Where are you from?" "Where are you going?"

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Evangelistic “Code of Conduct”

At this point I want to define what I believe is the Bible’s “code of conduct” when it comes to interacting with unbelievers. Jesus illustrated how to interact in John 4. First, he asked questions. Then, he found “eye-openers” (cf. Acts 26:18). He let the people He was talking to “open the door” to eternal issues.⁶ His questions generated further questions. He let people condemn themselves with their own words. We should also note that Jesus relished life in all of its everyday fullness (from wedding parties to banquets). Christians are the only people who should truly know how to laugh wholeheartedly and celebrate life in all its richness (even in the midst of trials; cf. I Peter 1:6). Our godly and genuine exuberance for living will help draw us into an unbeliever’s confidence.⁷

We learn from Paul that our walk and speech toward “outsiders” are to be with wisdom and “seasoned with salt” respectively (Colossians 4:5-6; cf. I Peter 2:1-3:16).⁸ In contrast to this, note what a Campus ministry representative did on the grounds of Louisiana State University Shreveport in the spring of 2002. With a Bible in hand, he stood in front of the University Center and screamed to the students passing by, “The men in fraternities are drunks! The women in sororities are fornicators! People who smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol or do drugs will not enter heaven. I am calling this campus to repentance!”⁹ There is a place for “street preaching” but only as *God directs*.¹⁰ This man was not in God’s place; he was in a place of his own tomfoolous making.

I have never approached personal evangelism with an aggressive “in your face” style.¹¹ I never attempt to “insult my listener’s intelligence” by gearing a conversation to my stated ends.¹² I never move into someone’s “space” without an invitation.¹³ I rarely use Gospel tracts.¹⁴ If a conversation with an unbeliever turns to Christ, the only tract I give is my phone number.

In all our interactions, we should demonstrate common Christian courtesies like assisting the elderly and the young. As gentlemen we open doors for ladies and render any needed assistance. Sad to say, these graces are nearly extinct in today’s society.

Ambassador on Amtrak

Our English word “ambassador” is derived from Medieval Latin. It means “mission” (*ambactia*) or “servant” (*ambactus*). In New Testament Greek, the word is connected to elder (*presbeuo*) and it reflects “rank” established by maturity. The Christian is above all a servant of Christ (in the kingdom of God, he that is a servant has the highest rank); he is *available* to do Christ’s mission at Christ’s beckoning call.

My goal for this Amtrak trip was to read, relax, and enjoy the scenery. This was my mind’s plan, but I’ve learned through the years that the Lord directs one’s steps (Proverbs 16:9); i.e., I should always be ready for a “change in my plans.” From the “get go” I saw that my plans were being updated by a higher authority. It started with Kate, the grandmother and a borderline alcoholic episcopalian. She just loved to talk and throughout the trip, as I checked up on her and, at times, escorted her to the dining car, we continued our conversations. She was fascinated by my work in mathematics and science and she told me that she was going to inform her son-in-law, a professor at University of Nevada at Las

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Vegas (UNLV), of my book. My first experience in the dining car was Friday evening. The train was traveling through the undulating Texas landscape south of Ft. Worth and the sun was languidly setting in the west (it was a breathtaking sight). I found myself seated next to a family from Oklahoma traveling to California for a first time visit to San Francisco and Yosemite. Being a native Californian, I gave them some travel advice. Then, they asked me, “Where are you from?” and “Where are you going?” As I nibbled on my blackened catfish, I told them that I was speaking at a conference in California. “On what?” they queried. “Math and science,” I replied. This piqued their interest, “What specifically?” I replied, “One of my talks will be on the medieval origins of modern science.” They were non-plussed. Then they found out that I was a published author (that apparently impresses some people). The conversation now became primarily one-way. They asked questions and I answered. Some two hours later with the dining car nearly empty (and Amtrak employees shooing us out), they wanted to know how to order my book.

Why the Darkness?

At 8:00 PM the next evening, the *Sunset Limited* left El Paso, a laid-back city named after a pass formed by the Rio Grande. Surrounded by the Portillo mountains and slowly enveloped by darkness, the train intruded upon a barren strip of land that had witnessed Pat Garrett shooting Billy the Kid in 1881 and Pancho Villa’s marauders provoking the US-Mexico conflict in 1916. I escorted Kate to the dining car and we sat in front of Charles and Andrew, a black father and son from Fresno, California (near my hometown of Dinuba). Charles, at age 84, had been a star football running back for Fresno State College (my alma mater) in the 1940s. His father, a former slave, died in the late 1940s at age 108. Charles went to high school with the future United States Navy Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. He also knew Olympic decathlete and former California Congressman Bob Mathias, boxer Joe Louis, singer (“Ol’ Man River”)/actor/athlete Paul Robeson, and several Hollywood stars (including Bing Crosby). He was a walking history book.

Andrew told me that he was the director of a community minority coop in Fresno. His aim was to provide economic opportunity for the minorities of this city. This time, as I ruminated a scrumptious New York steak, I queried Andrew about the status of West Fresno (known to me as a black “slum” area in the 1960s). Andrew, who had seen me play basketball in the late 1960s (an amazing connection, isn’t it?), said that not much had changed in West Fresno. I asked, “What about the black churches in West Fresno?” Andrew replied, “I have regular contact with these churches; they are great and always have been.” I responded, “If the church is supposed to be the light of the world, and West Fresno is still in the dark, then how do you define a great church? What is wrong with this equation?” Andrew sat back in thought and his father interjected, “Are you a pastor?” Note, all this time Kate and several other passengers were intently “listening in.” The next morning, Sunday, I awoke as a blazing sunrise streamed over the Arizona desert. I opened my Bible and read the final chapters of Job. I then walked up to the observation car. Charles and Andrew were there and we continued our conversation from the previous evening (in the presence of many witnesses).

The week at the conference at the campus of Bethany College in Scotts Valley, California, was wonderful. I boarded a bus in San Jose on Monday, August 12, to take me to Stockton for a connection

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with Amtrak's San Joaquins. From there I traveled to Fresno for a few days visit with my parents. After leaving San Jose, the bus made one stop to pick up an elderly lady. I watched as she said good-bye to what looked like her granddaughter and then boarded. As the bus slowly departed, I observed that the granddaughter was crying. I spoke to the lady who was sitting across the aisle, "Is that young woman your granddaughter?" "Yes," came the reply. I continued, "Do you know she was crying after you said goodbye?" She turned away as tears welled in her own eyes. When the train left Stockton, this lady and I sat together and had a short conversation. It was short, because at the next stop (Modesto), Steve sat in front of us. Steve monopolized the conversation from there to Fresno (he loved talking about his hunting adventures in Canada, Alaska, and Africa). Here is one case where I asked a lot of questions, but the conversation stayed in Steve's ballpark. This happens sometimes.¹⁵

Making a Mathematical Connection

In the early afternoon of Friday, August 16, after a tearful goodbye to my parents, I left Fresno for Bakersfield on the *San Joaquins*. I could board the train through any one of ten cars. I made my choice, then walked the aisles to find a seat (the train was fairly full). I sat next to a young man reading a paper. I greeted him, unloaded my baggage (now packed with about twenty books, instead of the original twelve). I pulled out *The Birkenhead Drill* which I was anxious to read.¹⁶ This is the story of the 1852 foundering of the British H. M. Troopship *Birkenhead*. More than 400 men chose to drown or be eaten alive by sharks than allow one woman or child to suffer. After reading a few pages, I relaxed by eyes. Ramon, my seatmate, asked, "What is that book about?" I proceeded to explain. He wrote down the title on his notepaper. I then asked, "Where are you going?" "To Los Angeles to visit my girl friend." "Where are you from?" "Fresno." "What are you doing in Fresno?" "Going to school." "Where?" "Fresno State." "Why, that's my alma mater! What's your major?" "Mathematics." Can you believe this? Of all the railroad cars I could have chosen, I chose this car and sat next to this person! I said an internal prayer, "Okay, Lord, You are not going to let me get any respite on this trip! I hear Your beckoning call."

As the train continued to trek through the San Joaquin Valley with its flat landscape of orchards, vineyards, and alfalfa fields, I put the book away and began to pepper Ramon with questions about his studies. I finally got to a discussion of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems. Ramon said that he read a passing comment about Gödel in one article, but none of his teacher's had discussed Gödel's conclusions. Then he stopped me, "Are you a professor? You certainly know more about math than most of my professors." "No," I replied, "I am not a professor, but I'm a student of mathematics and have been for over 30 years." I then proceeded to explain to Ramon the Bible's answer to the question, "Why does mathematics work?" Ramon's eyes swooned upward in disgust. I asked, "Why are you reacting this way?" Ramon lectured me in return, "This God stuff, I don't buy it. It's too simplistic. Don't you know that the Bible is full of contradictions?" My reply, "For example?" This time Ramon's eyes swooned, not in upward disgust, but downward with the look of one who just got caught with his hands in the proverbial cookie jar. After waiting a few seconds for the silence to make impact, I queried, "You've never read the Bible, have you?" Ramon confessed, "No, but my teachers have told

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me that the Bible is unreliable.” My reply, “Are you trusting in the word of fallible man? Don’t you think you should read the Bible first-hand?”

Thus began a conversation that lasted all the way to Bakersfield (where we had to board separate buses for the final leg to Los Angeles). Ramon had a Roman Catholic background (and all of its ensuing baggage). Starting from mathematics, I ended up confronting Ramon with the nature of absolute truth¹⁷, the reality of sin, and the resolution of sin in the Cross of Christ. As the train reached Bakersfield, Ramon’s initial antagonism had relaxed into a quiet receptiveness. His last words to me, “You are the first person that has talked to me about God without trying to chop my head off while doing so.”

Do You Need Some Help?

I arrived at Union Station in Los Angeles at 6:00 PM and reconnected with Kate (returning home from her visit to Las Vegas) a few minutes later. The *Sunset Limited* was scheduled to leave in four hours. Around 9:30 PM, we prepared to board. An Amtrak employee directed Kate and I to the “blue line.” We “happened” to be standing behind a very tired (and very pregnant) young lady. Susan was carrying an infant in her arms and her three-year-old daughter was bouncing off the walls (a result of being too tired and ingesting too much sugar). We began to chat; this was Susan’s first train trip and she was traveling to see her husband in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Noticing her excessive weariness, I asked, “Do you need some help boarding the train?” She nodded in the affirmative. I found an Amtrak “Red Cap” and told him that this lady needed some assistance. He nodded and simply walked away. Within minutes, we heard the “All Aboard” call and the line began to move. I offered to help Susan, “Here, let me take your luggage.” Susan objected, “But you already are loaded with two pieces. I can do it!” I replied, “It will be okay. You take care of your children. The walk to the train will not be long.” I threw one piece of my luggage (with the twenty books) over my left shoulder and the other over my right. I grabbed Susan’s heavy piece with my right hand and we were off. The walk to the train turned out to be a long 300 yards, but the extra load felt like feathers. I helped get Susan on board, walked her to her seat, and then began to explain the “ins and outs” of Amtrak travel. I made sure she was comfortable and warm and told her that I would check on her later. She and her daughter said, “Thank you so much.” As I left Susan’s car to board my car, an elderly lady, noticing how I assisted Susan, grabbed my arm and said, “I need some help. Are you an Amtrak employee?”

The stories about my trip home could go on and on. I could recount my Sunday morning discussion with a black lady sitting across the aisle from me. We discussed the applicability of the Bible to the manifold realms of social welfare, family structure, and personal accountability (and getting hearty “Amens” from the neighboring eavesdroppers in the railroad car). Or, I could detail my charming inter cultural encounter in the dining car with a couple from Germany on vacation (they were traveling on Amtrak on Amtrak for the first time). I was even able speak to them in halting German, much to their delight.

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Arrival Home

After a one-day delay in my estimated time of arrival in Shreveport, I finally reached my wife's loving arms. I felt an internal sense of satisfaction and completeness about this trip. No, I had not read all the books I wanted to read; this was a trip for other eyes to scan me. I had selected a new mode of travel. I had not gone where I had always gone. I thought about the new people I met, the amazing coincidences I encountered, the multiplicity of opportunities for practical service ... God used every detail of this trip to further transform me into His image "from glory to glory" (II Corinthians 3:18).

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Endnotes:

¹ I've been speaking at conferences since 1985 and I rate this conference in the top three. "Hats off" to Zach Wagner and his crew for doing such a fine job.

² Unlike the "golden days" of competitive train travel from the 1930s to 1950s (when most everyone traveled by train), Amtrak (a federal subsidy) is notorious for running a little late, sometimes more than a little. This is because Amtrak trains run almost entirely on the tracks of freight railroads. I found out quickly that a train carrying freight always has priority over a train carrying people.

³ The route to California took me through Dallas, Ft. Worth, San Antonio (where I connected to the *Sunset Limited* at 4:00 AM the next day), El Paso, Deming (in New Mexico), Tucson, Maricopa (in Arizona), Yuma (in Arizona), and Palm Springs. Because the train was about 8 hours late, I (along with 40 other passengers) boarded a bus at Palm Springs and raced to catch the *Coast Starlight* before it reached Santa Barbara (we barely made it). From there, the train jaunted up the resplendent California coast and finally made it to San Jose late Sunday evening, August 4.

⁴ I am not using the passenger's real names in this essay.

⁵ When I was waiting at Union Station in Los Angeles on August 16 to catch the *Sunset Limited* to return home, I heard in the distance a shout, "James! James!" It was Kate and she was on her way home from her stay in Las Vegas. She was so happy that she called her husband to tell him that she would be taken care of coming home because "James was here."

⁶ We should see people as made in God's image and deserving respect thereby (even though that image is marred by sin). We should not look at people as potential "scalps for the kingdom." People will respond to authentic empathy, interest, and compassion.

⁷ As Abraham Lincoln once said, "It is easier to catch a fly with honey than with vinegar."

⁸ Try seasoning bread with sugar instead of salt sometime. Notice the difference in taste. Salt makes the bread tasteful. Likewise, our speech should make the Gospel flavorful.

⁹ Chris Alexander, "What the hell?" *The Almagest* 41:9 (April 18, 2002), 1, 4.

¹⁰ Peter, in Acts 2, was a street preacher but his ministry was not street preaching. God compelled him to preach in the street; Peter never planned it that way.

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¹¹ This is my personality style. I simply do not thrust myself on people. I believe that God has gifted some (especially evangelists) to be confrontational, but I firmly believe that the evangelist must allow the Holy Spirit to temper this God-given “fighting instinct” with the fruits depicted in Galatians 5:22-23. Being confrontational is no excuse for being impolite.

¹² Too many people involved in “personal evangelism” insult the listener’s intelligence in their attempt to get to a Gospel proclamation. They are willing to use any and all methods to get to the desired end.

¹³ Most church visitation programs pay no respect to their neighbors when they attempt to barge into other people’s living rooms without invitation. After visiting a church once, I received a “visitation call” on a Tuesday evening. Two people drove up my driveway while I was attempting to change the distributor in my car. They wanted to talk (i.e., go through their “canned” presentation). I “played dumb” and let them “do their thing.” You know what they should have done? They should have offered to help me fix my car! Now, if I were an unbeliever, that service would have been a real testimony to me.

¹⁴ Most Gospel tracts are geared to a listening audience that is as extinct as a dodo. I’m all for Gospel literature, but let us make sure that the literature we use presents the relevancy of the Gospel to the “hot spots” or “eye-openers” of a post-modernistic culture. Before we write any Gospel tracts, let’s “understand the times” first (I Chronicles 12:32). Eternal truths need to be proclaimed in a manner adapted to the particular needs and receptivity of the times.

¹⁵ Every conversation does not have to end with a clear Gospel presentation. By word and/or deed, we either plant seed, we water seed already planted, or we harvest seed.

¹⁶ Douglas W. Phillips, *The Birkenhead Drill* (San Antonio: The Vision Forum, 2002).

¹⁷ At one point, Ramon declared, “No one can really make a certain claim to absolute truth.” My response, “On what basis do you claim such certainty?” Ramon was careful not to make such assertive claims again.