

AARON NIEQUIST

# THE ETERNAL CURRENT

How a Practice-Based Faith  
Can Save Us from Drowning

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AARON NIEQUIST

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How a Practice-Based Faith  
Can Save Us from Drowning



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## THE ETERNAL CURRENT

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Hardcover ISBN 978-0-7352-9116-4

eBook ISBN 978-0-7352-9117-1

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr; cover photograph by Eric Niequist, New Branch Films

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

2018—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Shauna and the boys. You three are  
the center of the center of the center.  
Let's swim together forever.

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# Introduction

## *The Eternal Current*

A mighty River flows throughout history toward the healing and restoration of all things. If you have read the Bible, you know how the story ends: love conquers death, a new heaven and earth are established, and the God of love and justice finally puts all things to rights. Our Creator is carrying every corner of creation into a beautiful future.

Jesus Christ referred to this River as the kingdom of God, a realm where the things that God wants to happen happen “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Jesus explained it as “good news to the poor . . . freedom for the prisoners . . . recovery of sight for the blind,” freedom for the oppressed, and God’s favor on earth (Luke 4:18–19). Or as Dr. Martin Luther King

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Jr. taught, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”<sup>1</sup>

You and I have been invited to swim with this Eternal Current for the sake of the world. Jesus didn’t merely invite us to believe about the River. He didn’t say, “Here is the truth. Believe me.” He declared, “I am the truth. Follow me.” Beliefs are important, but they’re not nearly enough. The invitation is to wade into the River and swim.

This really is good news. Swimming with Christ is the *way* to embrace the *truth* of the abundant *life* that Jesus taught about. And the Eternal Current will carry us into the joy of getting swept up in God’s work of redeeming and restoring all things.

Yet so many of us miss the invitation. We concentrate on perfecting our beliefs but never step into the water. Or we decide to swim but get stuck in the comfort and safety of the shallows.

Friend, I missed this invitation for years. I believed Christian ideas, prayed Christian prayers, and attended Christian events, but I never learned to swim with Christ in the River of God. Though I had been a Christian since a child, I missed out on the passion, meaning, peace, and power of eternal life. I traded the richness of swimming in the River for the dry riverbank of religion. Honestly, I still wash up onto these rocks from time to time.

But Christ keeps inviting me (and you) back into the Eter-

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nal Current. Over and over, through the mundane and the dramatic details of our lives, in deeply religious and wildly profane moments alike, through heartbreak and delight and confusion and epiphany, Christ continues to gently reach out to us.

Few sections of Scripture capture this better than Eugene Peterson's poetic articulation of Matthew 11:28–30 (MSG). Jesus called out,

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Jesus Christ invites us to join God in the River of grace for the sake of the world. It's the flow of real rest, true freedom, and recovering our lives as well as the life of the world. It is pure gift, but it is not passive. And it doesn't happen primarily between our ears.

Notice all the action words in Jesus's invitation: *come, get away, walk, work, watch, learn, keep company, live*. The invitation is participation. God is already working in every corner of the earth and in every molecule of our lives. As we follow Christ, we get to participate in that eternally flowing good work

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through practices that allow God's Spirit to do what only God can do. Grace alone makes the River flow, but we need to wade into the water. Grace alone makes the vine grow, but we need to build the trellis. Grace alone makes the wind blow, but spiritual practices help us humbly open the window, day by day, moment by moment. The invitation is participation.

While this invitation requires the complete laying down of our lives as a bold and humble living sacrifice, we don't have to do it alone. In fact, we can't do it alone. Answering Jesus's invitation involves a community of swimmers.

Thankfully, you and I are part of a diverse global community that spans thousands of years. The untold numbers of women and men who have been swimming in the River have developed invaluable swimming wisdom. One of the greatest gifts of being a Christian is learning from those who swim differently than we do.

I grew up in a Christian system that assumed our version of the tradition possessed all the truth. All others had none of the truth. We guarded what we had and defended our beliefs and decided we couldn't learn from anyone outside our inner circle. But I have found that while my original tradition is committed to and hungry for the truth, it comprises only a thin slice of a much bigger and more fully Christian story. Much of this book will explore what we can learn from Jesus followers who are outside our inner circles.

In addition to learning from others, we have the eternal

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Christ swimming with us. We are never alone. Christ keeps calling out, “Come to *me*. . . . Work with *me*. . . . Keep company with *me*. . . .” (Matthew 11:28–29, MSG, emphasis added). The Teacher of life does not stand aloof from our search but rather invites us to swim *with him*. The River is a place not of self-actualization but of relationship. We can’t fix ourselves to please God, but we can join Christ and get swept up in God’s good pleasure to heal the world and us. The invitation is participation.

Will you say yes? Will you move beyond correct belief about the River and jump into the Current with Christ to learn to swim? There are no teachers, traditions, or resources that can help you as long as you choose to remain on the shore.

You and I don’t need more ideas or complex philosophies. We need to put the ideas we have already learned into practice. We need to get into the River. Let us wade in with Christ, learn to swim with God’s Eternal Current in each moment, and be transformed for the sake of our lives and the sake of the world.

This is a practice-based faith. And we’re all invited.



## Losing My Religion and Finding the Kingdom

On an otherwise-normal Sunday morning in 2002, as I prepared to lead worship at my church, it dawned on me that I didn't believe the words of most of the songs we'd be singing. In fact, even though I was a full-time employee of a large evangelical church in the Chicago suburbs, I was pretty sure I didn't believe in Christianity anymore. Somewhere along the line, between being saved in elementary school and joining the staff at a church, my faith had stopped working. Like a car with a seized engine or an air conditioner that blows only warm air, my life as a Christian had run its course. An observer might see all the right pieces there, but something was uncomfortably absent.

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For years I thought Christianity was fundamentally about three things: believing the correct things about God, saying a magic prayer to obtain eternal security, and not doing any of the fun things your friends are doing. It felt like growing up in a small pond that was perfectly safe for beginning swimmers. But once you grew a bit, you began stubbing your toes in the shallows and dreaming about oceans.

I was raised in the Plymouth Brethren faith tradition, a “conservative, low church, nonconformist, evangelical Christian movement whose history can be traced to Dublin, Ireland, in the late 1820s.”<sup>1</sup> I experienced it, like any tradition, as a beautiful and messy mixed bag of gifts and disappointments that shaped me deeply. But my overarching reflection is that our church failed to recognize that we were connected to the River of God’s kingdom. Instead, we thought we were the one true pond.

This pond was a beautiful place to begin a faith journey. But as I became aware of the larger church and larger world, I started bumping into other realities and versions of the story that didn’t fit neatly into our still waters. I was exposed to different ways that Christians throughout history approached Scripture. I encountered a more Charismatic understanding of the Holy Spirit. I discovered that God was not an American—and not even a Republican. I learned that faith and science were not opposites. I got to know Catholics and was scandalized to discover that they, too, were Christians.

This was an exciting yet destabilizing season. I was thrown

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off balance because my early Christian training convinced me that anything outside our small pond of Plymouth Brethren beliefs and traditions was wrong. We were the center, and everything else was judged as off center. Instead of teaching us to be curious, they taught us to critique. Instead of teaching us to learn from other people of faith, they taught us to protect ourselves from being led astray. Instead of helping us discern and sift the wheat from the chaff, they trained us to defend ourselves against *anything* that fell outside our circle.

I wish my early tradition would have seen my search and said, “Yes! Keep exploring! Go! We’ve given you a foundation. Now let it sweep you into the bigger River. Keep growing and learning and building.” Instead, church leaders inadvertently communicated, *Nope. We are right; they are wrong. We are inside and have all the rightness; they are outside with none of the rightness. Stay with us or fall away from the faith.*

So for the first twenty-five years of my life, I stayed in the small pond. I wanted to be a good Christian. I loved the people in this faith community, and they loved me. But eventually, from the inside out, my faith began to crumble. And I found myself at the crossroads that so many other people have stood at: Should I double down on a faith that no longer works or abandon the whole thing?

Maybe you have asked this question. Maybe you’re asking it right now. Your pond may feel very different from mine, but the ache for more is universal. No matter how good and whole

your experience has been, the River is deeper. The Current is stronger. And you were made to get swept up into the fullness of its flowing goodness. Could this be your moment?

Increasingly in the polarized time we find ourselves, it can feel as if we have only two choices: give in or give up. We can turn off our hearts to stay where we are, or we can break our hearts by walking away from faith entirely. Friends, these are terrible choices. And thankfully, they are not the only options. But I know firsthand the claustrophobic pain of not being able to identify a third way.

So there I was in my midtwenties on a Sunday morning. I was standing backstage at my church, filled with dread as I prepared to put on a fake Christian smile and rock the house once again. Let me state the obvious: it's pretty awkward to urge people to join you in singing songs you no longer believe.

This season of losing faith was dark. I didn't feel angry as much as sad—and profoundly lost. Very quickly I slipped into a numb sort of despair.

Most often, the despair came out sideways. My disillusionment with faith spread to a disillusionment with just about everything and everyone else. Rather than grappling with the terror of feeling the ground disintegrating beneath my feet, I mostly just poked holes in everything else. Everyone was stupid. Everyone was fake. Everything was a lie. This was essentially a matter of self-protection. If I could remain focused on how everyone was wrong, I wouldn't have to wrestle with the terrify-

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ing reality of my own wrongness. But in quiet moments, the unwelcome whispers of the faith I had lost sneaked through my cynic's armor, and in those undefended moments, I felt truly defenseless.

The Christian story was the wallpaper on nearly every room of my memory—framing every day of my life. I didn't know how to move forward constructively without it.

I'm not the only person who has felt that *giving in* or *giving up* were his or her only options. I needed to find a third way, and I have a hunch that if you're with me this far, you're looking for a third way as well. Jesus called it the narrow road that leads to life (see Matthew 7:14).

You will never settle for a small version of the story, but you're not willing to give up altogether. Thank God. Or maybe you have found a third way and are looking to move more deeply into these streams. In either case, it's possible to take a new path. But it's very difficult to take the path alone.

## A NEW WAY FORWARD

Thankfully, my parents and a few close friends weren't afraid of the doubts and questions of my midtwenties. In fact, a few of them moved closer to me in my dark season. (This is not normal. Many people express their doubts, only to get kicked out of the community. I am profoundly grateful for such a loving family and for safe, patient, and wise friends.)

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A friend named Chris—a musician in my band who would go on to become a brilliant theologian—gave me a life-altering book. Possibly without realizing it, he was saying, *You’ve been trapped in one small pond for a long time, and you’re drowning. But there’s a bigger and better River out there! Here’s an invitation into an entirely new way of being.* Chris handed me a copy of *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard.

I remember the morning I read chapter 2, “Gospels of Sin Management.” I was sitting on a fake-wood floor, leaning against a fake-leather couch, when God used Willard’s writing to open my eyes to a reality that I had never before heard: the kingdom of God. I learned that Jesus was inviting us not primarily into correct beliefs, eternal destinations, or behavior modification but rather to participate in a living, eternally present reality. Through Christ, we get to join the redemption and restoration of all things. God has not given up on the world. Instead, God invites every one of us—in the way of Jesus and through the power of the Spirit—into the divine conspiracy of overcoming evil with good.

Although I had been a Christian most of my life, this was the first time I had heard teaching on the subject that Jesus devoted most of *his* teaching to. Jesus’s primary message in the Gospels is the kingdom of God, but for some reason my tradition had avoided the topic entirely. How could we have missed Jesus’s core message?

At first I felt regret and frustration, but these quickly melted

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into gratitude for the possibility of a new way forward. This is such good news!

As my heart pounded and my vision blurred with tears, I sat on the floor where I had been reading and prayed over and over, “God, if this is what you are up to in the world, I’m in. If this is who you are and what you care about, I’m in. God, if you can use someone like me, in all my doubt and brokenness, I’m in.”

And like a good evangelical, I was born again . . . again.

## LEARNING TO SWIM

The first few months after being awakened to God’s kingdom were full of passion, gratitude, and almost-nuclear energy. Like discovering a treasure buried in my backyard, I had found what was missing, and I threw my whole self into trying to live it out. But while the conversion exuberance carried me for a while, I began to notice that my old tools were no longer fit for this new journey. The skills I relied on to swim in the still pond didn’t help me in the raging River. The old wineskins were never meant to hold new wine.

I had finally been drawn into the great Eternal Current that has been flowing throughout history, and I wholeheartedly said yes to Christ’s invitation to get into the water. But I didn’t know how to swim. I didn’t know what to do on Sundays or in my life. My mind had been converted, and my heart was burning with devotion, but I didn’t know how to live into it.

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So I began exploring.

The years following my spiritual awakening were both glorious and tumultuous, exciting and disillusioning, heart expanding and heartbreaking. The search led me more deeply into myself, and it nudged me outward into corners of the Christian faith that previously would have felt dangerously off limits. My heart had been seized by the mighty River of grace that is good news to all people, and I was going to either learn how to swim with Christ or drown trying.

## WORSHIP BEYOND SINGING

This search led my wife, Shauna, and me to Michigan, where we joined with a young pastor named Rob Bell at his church, Mars Hill Bible Church. Our years at Mars Hill were some of the most exciting and stretching of my whole life. It was a greenhouse for artistic experimentation, theological exploration, and discovering what the kingdom of God could look like in an actual time and place. We read books that blew our minds, heard sermons that ignited our hearts, and walked closely with a small group of Jesus followers who will forever frame the way we think about community.

As a worship leader, I tried to align the Mars Hill community with the bigger story, but I quickly discovered that my normal approach was woefully inadequate. Four rock songs and a hymn fell far short of the depth and width of the king-

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dom vision that animated us. It was like trying to paint Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* masterpiece using only two colors. And so we began to experiment with different forms, practices, and ways to worship. Fortunately, my ministry partner, Troy Hatfield, had been on this journey for many years. He had a huge influence on all that we learned and discovered.

In the same way that God expanded our corporate worship forms to embrace the bigger story, God did the same thing in my soul. Four rock songs and a hymn no longer cut it on Sundays, and my personal spiritual practice began to fall short as well. It was in this season that I heard about contemplative Christianity, and I practiced centering prayer for the first time. I learned about the Jewish roots of our faith and began to see the Scriptures in a new and more vibrant light. Rob Bell's teaching also exposed me to the deep connection between spiritual health and emotional health, and we explored practices that helped us become not just better Christians but, I hoped, better humans.

As my internal world was being reshaped and reformed, I learned that God was inviting me outward into the bigger world that God was reshaping and reforming. I didn't always live it out well, but this season was the first time I saw contemplation and activism come together in one community. The deeper we went inside ourselves, the more we felt propelled into the messiness of the world. We didn't have to choose between being exhausted activists and being isolated contemplatives.

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Instead, we caught a vision for swimming with Christ in a life of contemplative activism. I will always be grateful for Rob and the Mars Hill family.

In these formative years, both as individuals and as part of a church community, Shauna and I discovered that God's Eternal Current is deeper and grander and more beautifully powerful than we knew. This understanding brought us face to face with our inability to swim well in it. Four songs and a hymn in worship could get our feet wet, but we had to move beyond singing if we were to enter the flow and swim. My personal practice of reading the Bible and journaling was a helpful foundation, but it could take me only so far. Thankfully, God's grace drenched us as we stumbled and splashed around with new (old) practices and worship forms. I couldn't wait to see what was around the corner.

## A NEW LITURGY

In January 2009, after months of conversation and just shy of a billion job interviews, I accepted a worship leader job back at Willow Creek Community Church. The pastoral team was breathing new life into the weekend services, and they invited me to join the adventure.

Shauna and I had felt it was time to leave Mars Hill, so here we were back in the Chicago suburbs. I jumped into my new role at Willow Creek like an excited kid with a new backpack

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and school shoes, ready to keep building on the themes we'd explored at Mars Hill. I came to meetings with idea after idea about "swimming in the River" and "moving beyond singing" and how to keep pushing and stretching and experimenting and widening the bounds of worship. I was like an overcaffeinated soapbox preacher, relentlessly pushing the church toward an exciting and risky future.

The only thing I didn't do, unfortunately, was listen. I rarely stopped to ask, *What does the team think?* or *How do we build on the beautiful foundation of what has already been laid?* or *Is it possible that I have as much to learn as I have to teach?* Instead, I put my head down and pushed and pushed and pushed.

This was a very difficult season, and I created a lot of the heartache—for both everyone around me and myself. I believed so deeply in what a church could be and how we could empower the church to swim with Christ for the sake of the world, but I wasn't mature enough to bring meaningful change.

After a particularly frustrating day of work, I went for a run on the trail that ran through the woods behind my house. The goal was to pray and seek peace, but instead, I became more stressed, more angry, and more tangled up in fear. I had once again fallen into the prayer of rehearsing my anxieties rather than releasing them to God. So I opened iTunes on my phone to find spiritual help. The intent was good, but I found that all the worship music was happy, triumphant, and (in that moment) offensively irrelevant to the reality of my life.

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I thought, *I don't need a pep rally. I need to be pastored.*

This burning need sparked an idea. Over the next six months, a few artist friends and I began dreaming, experimenting, and finally producing a series of twenty-five-minute audio recordings called *A New Liturgy*. Through songs, readings, Scripture, and guided prayers, we sought to help people create holy space wherever they find themselves.

The River of God is always flowing—every day and not just on Sundays, in every place and not just in church buildings—and we really can learn to swim in each moment. Our cars can become rolling sanctuaries. Our living rooms can become tabernacles. Thanks to God's gracious presence, simple tools, liturgies, and practices can open us up to what God has been doing all along.

In the midst of this difficult and beautiful season of inner turmoil, exciting realizations, and God's gracious healing, while working on *A New Liturgy*, I stumbled into a conversation with Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of our church and who is also my father-in-law. As we discussed the new passions growing in me and how I hoped to bring them more fully into Willow Creek, he said, "Aaron, just so you know, we're never going to do the kinds of liturgies and spiritual practices you want to do in our weekend services. That is not what our services are for."

As he paused, my inner monologue sprinted through the entire cycle of surprise, despair, anger, gratitude, and delight.

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He named reality with gracious but shocking clarity, and I was reeling a bit. Then he continued in an unexpected direction: “But you’re onto something important.”

Record scratch. Wait . . . huh? That wasn’t what I expected him to say. It got more surprising.

Aaron, would you consider pulling together a team to create a space at Willow for people to explore these spiritual practices? We know that we can do more to help Christ-centered people go deep, and I think this could be a huge gift to our community.

This conversation changed the trajectory of my life. Rather than trying to force a square peg into a round hole every Sunday morning, the church was empowering a team and me to create a holy community of unapologetic squares.

I jumped in with both feet. I prayed more than I had ever prayed before. I contacted every like-minded person who was willing to help me learn and discern the right questions. I met with anyone who would teach and inspire the new team I was building. I read every book on spiritual formation and practice-based faith I could get my hands on. I had countless coffee conversations with people who felt the same ache and might want to join the adventure.

Along the way, influenced by experts and fellow journeyers alike and through the grace and wisdom of God’s Spirit,

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we sketched out a proposal for a practice-based, discipleship-focused, neo-liturgical, ecumenical, Eucharistic gathering to take place Sunday nights at Willow Creek. The church leadership approved eighteen months of funding to launch the experiment. We called it the Practice: Learning the Unforced Rhythms of Grace.



Have you ever felt stuck in the shallows and unable to find a new way? Have you ever longed for depths that terrified you yet felt utterly necessary? Have you ever believed your faith was dying, only to find that the death you'd been avoiding was the one possible path to new life?

You're not alone, and you're not crazy. No two journeys are alike, but I share my story in the hope that it will resonate with and encourage you. As we walk together through these pages, may God reawaken the deep longing that always has scratched around in your soul. The Eternal Current is flowing in you right now. By God's grace, it has always been flowing. Let's keep swimming together.

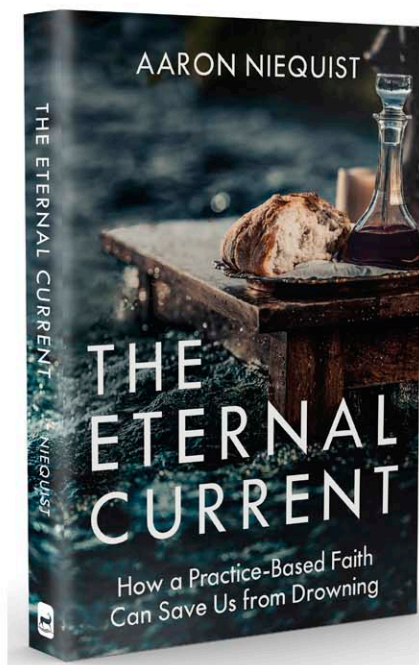
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