

## Introduction: ESCAPE FROM SUPERBIA

**“Don’t be so sure of yourself!”** Jesus spits at me across the stage. I shake off his warning and return to my self-congratulation. I am Peter—at least for this Holy Week. I’m in our church’s Easter play. Several of us have taken on the roles of Jesus’ followers, acting out key moments from the Gospels, then stepping out of the scene to reflect on that moment’s impact on our faith. I am Peter—the rock on whom Jesus builds his church. I am no-nonsense, a straight shooter. I call ’em as I see ’em, and I see that Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God. I can’t believe nobody else sees it.

The nature of stage drama is that years pass in moments. No sooner have I completed my confident soliloquy—of course he’s the Messiah; of course I’ll follow him anywhere—than I am crouched by a fire, denying that I know Jesus not once, not twice, but thrice.

Peter is among the first of Jesus’ contemporaries to give up his life and follow Jesus. He’s one of the first to voice the suspicion that this teacher, this wonder-worker, may just be the man of God they’d all been praying for. Peter’s acknowledgment that Jesus is Christ is admirable. But no sooner had he said it than he developed his own messiah complex.

“Jesus, I won’t let you suffer.” “Jesus, I’ll always stand by you.”

“Jesus, I’ll die before I betray you.” Peter dismisses the faithlessness of his friends even as he boldly asserts his own greatness. Jesus may be the Messiah, but Peter is the man.

Peter’s self-confidence is met by one of Jesus’ harshest rebukes: “Get thee behind me, Satan!” No less than Peter—the first undisputed leader of the Christian church, mind you—is accused by no less than Jesus of doing no less than the Devil’s work. A few pages later we see Peter showing himself faithless, proving that he is not the man, even as Jesus proves that he is the Messiah.

Good thing I’m not like Peter. I rehearsed these two scenes over and over again for months with the same small group of people, and I don’t mind telling you, they drove me a little crazy. I don’t know why they couldn’t handle such a simple project. Early on I was the first bass voice in the chorus with my parts committed to memory. I was the first disciple off script, with lines memorized. I was the only cast member who wasn’t giving the director back talk. That guy was lucky to have me around, I can tell you.

Hey—wait a minute ...

What I gradually came to understand and even accept during that Easter production was that I was guilty of the same sin as Peter: *superbia*—Latin for pride or, more precisely, an inordinate sense of self-regard. I actually like the word *superbia*; it’s cute. But it was counted by ancient Christians as one of seven deadly sins that destroyed the work of grace in the life of a believer. In the case of Peter (and of myself, I’m afraid), we can see why. The cocky self-assurance that compelled Peter to one-up his fellow disciples and to tell the Son of God that he needed to rethink his theology, this smug self-satisfaction that allowed

me to quietly judge my fellow performers as we acted out the good news of the gospel—both threatened to undo good work before it could even be done. If I had run that play, no one would have had any fun. If Peter had run the universe, we would have no redemption from sin, no hope of reconciliation with God.

Superbia is one of the seven deadly sins not just because it has the capacity to be calamitous, as in the case of Peter, but because it can be so common, as in the case of myself. Self-absorption is a besetting sin among all God's children, nipping at the church's heels throughout its history, and as such it must be met by the vigilance of the people of God to hold it at bay.

## **RUNAWAY PRIDE**

*Superbia* is often translated as “pride.” Pride is a heightened sense of self-satisfaction; our pride comes through our accomplishments and our associations. The things we have done or said or avoided, the people, places, and things we surround ourselves with, strike us as uncommonly impressive. A friend once heard the crowd at a Duke University basketball game yell, “Our SATs are better than your SATs!” Your team may be proud of how it handles the ball, but in the minds of those fans, odds are you're dumber than Duke.

Pride is rooted in circumstance. In fact, pride is occasionally appropriate: The first in a family to earn a college degree should be proud of the accomplishment, and if he or she isn't, the rest of the family will be. Singer James Brown shouted, “Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud,” to assert the inherent worth and the cultural accomplishments of an entire race that had been otherwise persecuted and belittled in the larger society. The apostle Paul, of all people, sanctifies a kind of pride when

he thanks God that he speaks in tongues, of all things, more than everyone in the Corinthian church.

But *superbia* is more insidious than mere pride. It's not rooted in accomplishment so much as it is preoccupied by the selfness of the self and the otherness of others. Sinners in the hands of *superbia* establish their own experience as the baseline by which all others must be judged, and anyone who fails to achieve that baseline is typecast as inferior—and not just inferior but freakishly so. It's *wrong* not to be how I am. It's senseless not to have come to the understanding that I have. It's *ridiculous* not to have accomplished what I've accomplished. I'm normal; the rest of you fall short.

*Superbia* sometimes manifests itself in the cockiness Peter displayed when he promised never to leave or forsake Jesus, but such arrogance doesn't necessarily bubble up to the surface of a *superbian* consciousness. I don't go around trumpeting my superior attitude of servanthood, for example, and I dismiss attempts by others to celebrate it. To call attention to myself, to dwell on my particular areas of giftedness, to indulge the praise of others—people who do such things are morally compromised, to my way of thinking. I will have none of it. I will be content to know that I have served where I could, and I will only privately scorn those weaker Christians who fail to serve where they could.

Oops—I did it again. *Superbia* is insidious because it infects our worldview. We find our way through our days at least in part by our sense of *superbia*. It's a preventative coping mechanism, so to speak. We don't need to be relieved of *superbia*; we need to be delivered from it.

It's odd in our day and age to think of an inordinate sense of self-regard as the most subversive sin plaguing the church. People are more likely to struggle with low self-esteem than high self-esteem, aren't they? Western culture actually recognized a crisis of self-esteem in the late

twentieth century that continues to afflict us. People actually *do* think too little of themselves. Countless children are devastated by the teasing and bullying they experience at school and the belittling and terrorizing they experience at home. Countless young women are driven to destructive behavior in attempts to perfect or punish their imperfect bodies. Countless men and women are dehumanized by new technologies that render them incompetent or, worse, nonessential. Countless spouses find that they can't measure up to the romantic ideals propagated in film and television. Surely the sin of self-esteem must be rooted in its lack rather than its abundance.

Superbia is subtle, though. The tragedies wreaked when people and impersonal forces whittle away at our self-esteem notwithstanding, superbia kicks in to help us cope. We rewrite ourselves into the drama we find ourselves in so that we, the sufferer, are the hero—whether that hero be epic or tragic. People who are intimidated by technology blame the “stupid computer” when things don't go as they hoped. Resentful spouses demonize romantic ideals as sentimental emotionalism and fantasize about less-demanding relationships. Marginalized young people revise themselves as misunderstood heroes, like Peter Parker/Spider-Man, or as avenging angels, like the Virginia Tech killer.

## ME-VILLE

Superbia is subtle, but it has powerful outcomes. Individuals, relationships, systems, and cultures all suffer its effects. Superbia is the ground of our learned being, the garbage chute we've retreated into, like Luke and Leia and Han and Chewie on the Death Star. We turn to superbia to protect ourselves from the onslaught of a difficult world, but our refuge threatens to crush us, to destroy us.

The word *superbia* sounds to me like a place—like suburbia or Albania or Utopia. I like to call that place Me-Ville—a kind of suburb to the city of God. The fifth-century bishop Augustine of Hippo articulated the concept of the city of God after the imperial city of Rome was devastated by pagan Carthage. Augustine addressed the cultural confusion that would follow any such encounter, the same sort of cultural confusion that followed on the heels of the attacks on the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center in 2001. We're a Christian nation, aren't we? We're doing God's work throughout the world, aren't we? Why, then, did this happen?

Rome was, technically I suppose by then, a Christian empire, but as Augustine was quick to point out, that's not how things work. There's the kingdom that God reigns over, and there's the kingdom that we assert in our everyday lives. They're commingled in the way that the city of Chicago and its suburbs, for example, are commingled. The suburbs thrive at least in part because of their proximity to the city, but they would never dream of allowing Chicago's mayor to tell them what to do. The suburbs fancy themselves distinct from the city, surrounding it and keeping it contained; meanwhile, in the thrust of history Chicago keeps growing and expanding and asserting its influence.

Similarly the Roman Empire owed much of its strength and longevity to the grace of God, but when it came down to giving God total reign, Rome effectively said no, thank you. It continued to fiddle around with its fantasies of autonomy; meanwhile, the city of God continued to grow—even as Rome suffered its defeat.

What happens to empires happens to us as well. We're moving happily through our lives, telling God we love him; but meanwhile our universe revolves around us, and we act accordingly, promoting our own

agenda, pronouncing judgment on people and circumstances based on how we're affected.

Inevitably our agenda doesn't go as planned; the people we've judged wind up winning while we wind up losing. Our empire of self crumbles, and we're left to wonder in the rubble: What about me?

Sometimes in those moments we come to the realization that we're living in the wrong kingdom. The kingdom of God is firmly established because it's the place where our God reigns. Me-Ville is not. Me-Ville is where superbia reigns; it's a place from which we must escape.

## **ESCAPE FROM SUPERBIA**

This book will look for escape routes. We are being called out of Me-Ville and onto a journey toward our true home in the city of God. Peter will be a guide for us because, as we will learn from the Scriptures, he's well acquainted with superbia and is also well acquainted with the path Jesus leads us on toward God's city. By God's grace, as we travel with Peter, we'll recognize our own vulnerabilities to self-absorption, and we'll hear God's Spirit speaking not to Peter but to us, whispering something very much like, "This is the way; walk in it."

The city of God is a place out in the open, with never-closing gates—quite different from the land we find ourselves locked inside. Such a different environment calls for different living—free living in place of confinement. But living free carries its own cost. We grow accustomed to controlled surroundings, rigid boundaries; removing those controls and subverting those boundaries can be an awkward process. At the same time, there are boundaries that were not constructed by us but given to us by One who knows us better. To transgress

these boundaries, even by accident, can be painful and can send us scampering back to the safe ground of our superbian prison. However safe life in Me-Ville seems, we must take again and again on faith that it is a life not ultimately worth living because it is a life that will not extend past our death.

Mapping out our escape from superbia will involve coming to terms with where we are—recognizing the way that superbia has already infected our outlook and our relationships. It will involve coming to terms with who we have become and how we have fallen short of who we could be.

Our deliverance will also involve training our eyes on God and learning to see life unfiltered by the veneer we live under in Me-Ville. Jesus takes our place not only in our suffering but also in our assessment of what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Our way out of ourselves will involve Jesus coming to us and displacing us.

Outside of Me-Ville the fog clears, and we can get a better sense of how we can live more in step with the plans God has made for us. Having positioned ourselves in right relation to Christ, we can live more humbly and, simultaneously, more fully.

In Me-Ville we tend to see other people as, at best, tools or toys or, at worst, threats to get rid of as quickly as possible. En route to the city of God, however, we can learn to relate to others in ways that don't ask too much or too little of them. We can serve, and we can accept the service of others.

We are never far from the land we are leaving. We need to train ourselves in the way of Jesus, and we need to learn how to recover our way when we stray back into the land of Me-Ville. Each chapter then will feature a section called "Escape Routes" to focus in on practical

ways, when we find ourselves slipping back into superbia, to get back on the road to the city of God.

The escape from Me-Ville is difficult and menacing because along the way we are made to feel incredibly vulnerable. At times we'll feel as though we're falling back; at times we'll feel as though we're going nowhere. But as we endure, we will discover that the city of God has been all around us all along, biding its time, silently preparing the walls of Me-Ville to come crashing down. If we are patient with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with our God, we'll discover the Promised Land right beneath our feet.



## THE HIGH COST OF LIVING IN ME-VILLE

**I got married recently.** To my niece. It was her idea; I just went along with it. She was five at the time, over at my house with her parents and her brother and her sister, and she decided it was high time she and I got hitched. And my niece is stubborn; I knew she would not take no for an answer. So I said yes.

We didn't have an officiant, of course, so the wedding could hardly be considered official. I figured if we're going to pretend, why not do it up right? So rather than wed ourselves, we re-created the most famous impulse wedding I could think of on short notice: the wedding of Britney Spears and Kevin Federline. I played the part of K-Fed; my niece, to my brother's great chagrin, played the part of Britney.

Britney—in case you happened to discover this book in a post-apocalyptic twenty-second-century church library—was a bubble-pop music sensation in the early part of the third millennium AD. Her career was at least temporarily sidetracked by a series of bad decisions including an hours-long marriage to a family friend (Jason Alexander) and an affair that would lead to marriage and two children (and a reality television series) with a man whose child by another mother hadn't been born yet (that would be K-Fed). Britney went on to redefine the

party scene as a tragicomic event, attacking a car with an umbrella, shaving her head, and leaving the scene of a car accident. Perhaps you can understand my brother's concern.

Federline (who, we were eventually led to believe, was the responsible one) was an accomplished dancer for touring bubble-pop musicians such as Britney, but his real dream was to be a media sensation. Having Britney as a wife (and a television costar) opened considerable doors to K-Fed, clearing the way for him to experiment with acting (minor roles in film and on television) and rapping (his first album, *Playing with Fire*, dropped in October 2006). By the time my niece and I reenacted the Britney/K-Fed wedding, Britney had filed for divorce, and K-Fed had become (at least for the moment) a professional wrestler. His album failed, several of his tour dates were canceled, and he was ultimately named by *Star* magazine and British television, among other media outlets, one of the ten most annoying people of 2006.

Now, my niece and I weren't invited to the Britney/K-Fed wedding, so re-creating the event took some imagination. My niece, fortunately, has been protected from such silliness in her young life, so she simply pretended to be a bride, but I took my role seriously. I put a baseball cap on my head, cocked to the side. I slung an oversized coat around my waist and elbows. I slouched. I smirked. And I asserted myself unapologetically. K-Fed, I imagined, would mark his wedding not with the traditional "I do" or "To thee I pledge my troth" but with a bold-faced boast: "I'm Kevin Federline! I'm important, yo!"

Why do I share this story? I'm trying to remember.... Oh yes. I share this story because about a month after my niece and I were married, my brother called to inform me that my niece and my other niece and probably, once he learns to talk, my nephew have adopted a new

catchphrase: “I’m important, yo!” They shout it over and over and over again, to my great amusement and my brother’s great chagrin.

When small children learn to say, “I’m important, yo!” it’s cute. It’s also significant, because they *are* important. At the birth of the world, the Bible dares to suggest, God “created human beings in his own image.” He went on to assign them great importance in the created order: “Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground” (Gen. 1:27–28 NLT). Little children are important because they are human beings, and human beings are important because they are made in the image of God and bear a responsibility, in keeping with their divine likeness, to the kingdom of God.

The danger comes when small children, or grown adults, say, “I’m important, yo!” over and over and over again. Somewhere in that repetition their sense of significance morphs into something more sinister: self-absorption. Welcome to *Me-Ville*.

## **SUPERBIA = SELF-ABSORPTION**

Imagine a young couple, leading a life of relative leisure in an idyllic garden setting. Let’s call them, say, Adam and Eve. They’re told at the beginning of their life together that they’re important, and they’re given a substantial but eminently manageable job description, complete with all the resources they’ll ever need. And then they set out to enjoy a life of abundance together. Mark Twain imagined one such day in the life of our heroine, Eve, trying to share her sense of significance with a parrot. She writes in her diary,

Polly ... is gay and happy and impudent, and talks and laughs and screeches all the time. But after all, he is something

of a disappointment, he cares so little for elevated conversation, and his range of subjects is so limited. Another defect—he repeats himself too much. This is a vulgarity. It indicates a low order of mentality, also indifferent cultivation. I would not judge him unjustly, yet in candor I am forced to say I believe he lacks spirituality. . . . Yesterday when I spoke with strong emotion, and said “How majestic is the universe, how noble the design, how spacious, how impressive, how . . .” he broke in with a hoarse shriek, followed by his odious laugh, then stormed out a string of strange words which instinct told me were not nice, and demanded a cracker.<sup>1</sup>

It’s imagined, of course, but it makes you think: How does one person, even two people, with no prior history to draw on, make sense of the different abilities of different creatures? Given their well-developed sense of their own importance, how do they measure the importance of everything else—made before them but placed under their care? For that matter, how do they make sense of one another?

Simply put, they judge everything in comparison to how they understand themselves. And they understand themselves as important. Yo.

It’s almost impossible to imagine ourselves into that setting because of the world we live in. Self-worth has run a whirlwind cycle in recent decades. The reality of God came into question philosophically in the late nineteenth century when Friedrich Nietzsche declared God dead at the hands of his creation. With God’s lights out, the theory went, the world plunged into darkness. The question took on stark dimensions in the years that followed as a world war was eclipsed by a global economic crisis and a second world war, one in which entire people groups—including God’s “chosen people,” the Jews—faced a very real possibility

of extinction. The war ended with a strong punctuation mark in the first two atomic bombs, leaving hundreds of thousands dead in two instants. Maybe God is dead, philosophers wondered; maybe he never lived in the first place, others considered. Maybe we're a meandering step on an evolutionary journey dictated by random events and mathematical possibilities. Maybe we're not that important. Whoa.

Social psychologist Jean Twenge, in her book *Generation Me*, suggests that the decades following this philosophical self-doubt nursed a self-esteem crisis that in the wake of the Vietnam era reared its ugly head:

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, a scale written specifically for children [revealed that] during the 1970s—when the nation's children shifted from the late Baby Boom to the early years of GenX—kids' self-esteem declined, probably because of societal instability. Rampant divorce, a wobbly economy, soaring crime rates, and swinging singles culture made the 1970s a difficult time to be a kid. The average child in 1979 scored lower than 81% of kids in the mid-1960s.

A strong concern for the emotional health of children in the wake of this cultural self-doubt led to a systemwide commitment to training people in self-esteem.

Research on programs to boost self-esteem first blossomed in the 1980s, and the number of psychology and education journal articles devoted to self-esteem doubled between the 1970s and 1980s. Journal articles on self-esteem increased another 52% during the 1990s, and the number of

books on self-esteem doubled over the same time. Generation Me is the first generation raised to believe that everyone should have high self-esteem.<sup>2</sup>

That doesn't mean, of course, that everybody *has* high self-esteem. Many people clearly don't. Consistently rising rates of depression suggest that countless people still think themselves unimportant, but the parallel rise in self-injury as a habit (cutting, for instance, or various eating disorders) hints at a more insidious social problem: People with poor self-image punish themselves for it.<sup>3</sup>

Society doesn't consider high self-esteem merely healthy; it considers it *noble*. If you don't see yourself as important, yo, you're seen as upsetting the natural order. You're weird. As one person—a *pastor*, mind you, who had taken upon himself responsibility for the spiritual health of hundreds of young men and women—told me about damaged people: “I'll pray for them, but I'm not going to waste my time with them.”

A side effect of the self-esteem movement has been this type of pandemic of self-importance—a general state of superbia.

## OUT OF EDEN AND INTO ME-VILLE

When an individual descends into a state of superbia, individual costs result—an unrealistic sense of the gap between self and God, an underappreciation of one's natural limitations—that lead to tragic outcomes for the individual and the wider community.

GenMe trusts no one, suggesting a culture growing ever more toward disconnection and away from close communities. Trusting no one and relying on yourself is a self-fulfilling

prophecy in an individualistic world where the prevailing sentiment is “Do unto others before they do it unto you.”<sup>4</sup>

Adam and Eve had one taboo—only one. No eating from one tree. They didn’t eat meat, not because God told them not to, but because God had given them “whatever grows out of the ground for food” (Gen. 1:30), and that was more than enough. They didn’t spend a lot of money on clothes, not because God didn’t want them to have nice things, but because our idea of clothes was absurd to their way of thinking; they were clothed in the glory of God. Only one thing they didn’t do because God told them not to do it: In a garden full of all kinds of vegetation, they could not eat from one tree—the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The serpent, we’re told in the story, was “the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made” (Gen. 3:1 NLT). Shrewdness, however, when stacked against bearing the image of God, comes up short, and we may imagine the serpent resenting the trust that God had shown *them* rather than *him*. “Why would God put two such hopelessly naive people in charge of everything?!? They’re not shrewd ... they’re morons! Why, I’d bet I could have them breaking the only rule they have to keep in a matter of minutes!”

It is embarrassing how easily Eve and Adam fell prey to the serpent’s shrewdness. A few choice words about the artificial limits God had apparently placed on two people with such unbelievable potential, and they were convinced that they were important, yo, that God was killing their buzz, holding them back, bringing them down. They were spitting out seeds before they knew it.

God came by soon after that act of revolt, and he asked them where they were, which on the face of it is a weird question—where

else could they possibly be? They were in Eden, the place God had put them in, but in a very real sense they were no longer in God's kingdom. Right there, under the shadow God cast, they were standing in Me-Ville.

We get a sense of the relational impact in Adam and Eve's reaction: Adam said, "The woman ... gave me the fruit." Eve said, "The serpent deceived me.... That's why I ate it" (Gen. 3:12–13 NLT). Jean Twenge would accuse Adam and Eve of "externalizing" their moral breach:

A popular psychological scale ... measures a fundamental belief: are you in control of what happens to you, or do other people, luck, and larger forces control your fate? People who believe they are in control are "internal" (and possess "internality"); those who don't are "external." ... The average GenMe college student in 2002 had more external control beliefs than 80% of college students in the early 1960s. External control beliefs increased about 50% between the 1960s and the 2000s.<sup>5</sup>

Adam and Eve each denied their own responsibility when confronted by God because they saw themselves as too important to be wrong, to be weak, to be vulnerable to the shrewdness of a mere serpent. The dramatic increase in self-importance over the turn of the millennium, occurring alongside a steady increase in divorce, white-collar crime, morbid obesity, and high-profile falls from grace, smacks of a similar stink. We're too important for silly rules. We can't be expected to keep promises we made after circumstances change. Give us enough time, and we'll figure out who's really to blame for the trouble we find ourselves in. Jake Blues covered all bases when he was

confronted by his ex-fiancée for skipping their wedding in the film *The Blues Brothers*:

I ran outta gas. I had a flat tire. I didn't have enough money for cab fare. My tux didn't come back from the cleaners. An old friend came in from outta town. Someone stole my car. There was an earthquake, a terrible flood, locusts. It wasn't my fault!! I swear to God!!

Imagine all the members of the entire human population of the earth desperately trying to cover their own butts—on constant lookout for a scapegoat. That's Adam and Eve, just past their moment of weakness. That's you and me and everybody else, in our moments of weakness. That's superbia, and it has an impact on the culture we inhabit.

## **WILL YOU ASCEND TO THE HEIGHTS?**

Within thirteen generations of Adam and Eve, and after a colorful history of murder, polygamy, and such vile immoral behavior that God virtually started over, the entire human race finally got down to business: "Let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous" (Gen. 11:4 NLT) Keep in mind: This was *everybody*; they already all knew each other. So becoming famous was a bit superfluous. But becoming famous is the holy grail for people steeped in superbia. Consider the sad tale of William Hung.

*American Idol*, the mother of all reality shows, is at its core a singing competition. Contestants are, theoretically, everyday people off the street who happen to have a world-class voice and a knack for singing bubble-pop. Only other people, luck, and larger forces have kept them

from already making themselves known on the contemporary music scene. Each season begins with a showcase of the people who have worked up the moxie to declare themselves publicly as idol-worthy.

Among them, in 2004, was William Hung, whose audition is now the stuff of legend. In the middle of a painful rendition of the bubble-pop song “She Bang,” Hung was interrupted by one of the show’s three judges, Simon Cowell: “You can’t sing; you can’t dance. So what do you want me to say?”

Hung’s hopes for a career in music had been shot down. “Umm,” he stammered, “I already gave my best. And I have no regrets at all.” There was no need for regret, of course, because his dream of a music career was only secondary. His primary dream—the dream of all the other people waiting for their turn in front of Simon and his fellow judges, Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul, and the dream of the whole shovel-wielding human race laying the foundation for the Tower of Babel—had already been realized by William Hung. He was now famous.

Standing there, basking awkwardly in the American limelight, Hung attempted to justify himself. “You know I’ve had no professional training.” That much was already evident, but the last moment of his televised attempt to become America’s next musical idol was not the voice of reason—“You can’t sing; you can’t dance”—but a throwaway attempt at encouragement by Paula Abdul: “William, you’re the best.” *American Idol*, the ultimate judge of what is worthy of our idolatry, sent William Hung home, saying to himself, “I’m important, yo.”

## IT’S EASY FOR ME

It’s easy for me to point out the absurdity of William Hung and Kevin Federline and Generation Me and Adam and Eve and all of Babel-onia

declaring themselves important and pursuing fame as the highest end of living. I'm not them, and more important to me, they're not here. Ultimately they likely won't even be adversely affected by my ridicule of them. Even K-Fed and Hung, my two most vulnerable victims, will likely see their fame extended by virtue of people like me rambling on incessantly about how absurd their pursuit of fame is. Meanwhile I'm doing something significant: I'm writing a book, making moral judgments about what I consider noble and praiseworthy and what I consider pathetic and laughable, and suggesting to you that these moral judgments are important enough to be put in print, paid for, and read. I may even try to get your church to bring me in to give a talk about it.

There I go again, declaring myself mayor of Me-Ville. Sorry about that. Fame is a stamp of approval on the human psyche. The television show *Dirt* defined the concept bitterly when a fledgling celebrity's private life became fodder for a scandal sheet. The celebrity complained to the editor, "I just want to be an actor." The editor responded, "No, you just want to be famous. There's a big difference." For all their complaints about the unexpected consequences of fame—the highly publicized errors in judgment, the constant press of people, and the profound lack of privacy—people still strive after it as a barometer of their self-worth. The Portico Research Group assessed the culture as guilty of "creating a culture of possibility. These young people see every aspect of life as an open opportunity for self-expression and self-fulfillment."<sup>6</sup> My greatest fear in making my writing public, quite frankly, is not that my book won't sell or my ideas will be challenged by my critics; it's that an audience will read what I write and disregard it as insignificant. Such is the anxiety of the fame-addicted:

When success is so largely a function of youth, glamour, and novelty, glory is more fleeting than ever, and those who win the attention of the public worry incessantly about losing it.<sup>7</sup>

You can get around that anxiety, however. Fame as a personal goal, utterly divorced from the pursuit of excellence, has become a noble quest in a culture that buys William Hung records. Psychology professor Terry Cooper nails our collective self-regard:

The desire to have a profound self-confidence without any self-development is sometimes obvious in American society. Self-esteem becomes a new form of entitlement. We have a *right* to feel good about ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

A. W. Tozer calls the self “so subtle ... that scarcely anyone is conscious of its presence.”<sup>9</sup> Even as we recognize that others have taken up residence in Me-Ville, we are often dangerously close to our own slide into it. In many cases we’re already there; Me-Ville functions as a meeting place of self-important people who have measured one another and found them lacking.

Superbia rears its ugly head when we are at our most vulnerable—suddenly disrupted from our default self-satisfaction. You might think of it as a staged descent:

Stage one: I congratulate myself on some random achievement or passing prominence.

Stage two: Something embarrasses, humiliates, or scandalizes me.

Stage three: I look for someone or something to blame for what I've done.

Stage four: I look for ways to reassure myself that I'm better than everybody around me.

Cooper articulates this pattern as an example of attribution theory: "We humans tend to attribute positive behaviors to ourselves and negative behaviors to external factors. We take credit for the good things that happen to us and blame the bad things on outside considerations."<sup>10</sup>

## RED-CARPET TREATMENT

In 2007 I became an elder at my church—the pinnacle of power for a devout Protestant layperson such as myself. The weekend before my ordination I attended two training sessions and managed to dump my cup of coffee at both meetings. This minor act of clumsiness was embarrassing enough, but it happened in front of the royal guard of our congregation, on the eve of my ordination, on the brand-new carpet.

In my case the coffee spill was a minor embarrassment, a moment of humiliation, or a scandal of the highest order—depending on how much you value carpet. If I hadn't been in stage one, I probably would have laughed it off and hoped nobody else would freak out. But I was in stage one, and suddenly I found myself in stage two; my self-congratulation had been interrupted by humiliation and potential scandal. So I looked for a way out.

Of course I blamed the coffee, which was ridiculously hot; and of course I blamed that stupid, flimsy, disposable cup. But blaming temporal, disposable objects wasn't going to cut it. I needed to figure out a

way to blame the carpet. More than that, I needed to blame something with flesh and blood.

*What kind of church community are we building, it came to my mind, if people need to adapt their behavior to accommodate something as inconsequential as carpet? Do people actually think that's hospitable? Someone who needs to know Jesus is going to come in here and innocently spill a little coffee or lemonade—they'll probably get bumped by one of these thoughtless oafs here—and they'll get chased out of the building.* People were thinking way too much of that carpet, I quickly deduced. It had become an idol in our church. I was surrounded by a bunch of stinking idolaters.

*Wait a minute—these stinking idolaters are the spiritual leaders of this church!* My job as a new elder suddenly got much more important: I needed to save this community from itself.

Keep in mind, nobody said a word to me when I spilled the coffee. Nor did I get all prophetic on everybody, renouncing their idolatrous ways and calling them back to a spirit of humility and mission. I laughed, got a wet paper towel, and cleaned up my mess; and we all moved on. In my head, however, I was no longer simply a mildly klutzy elder; I was the salvation of my church, I daresay the salvation of my whole community. I could almost hear some random princess in a galaxy far, far away, begging, “Help me, David Zimmerman, author of two books and the youngest elder at your church; you're my only hope.”

I was rewriting the story I found myself in so that I could play a better part. It's a helpful coping mechanism: Allies become enemies, heroes become bit players, heroines become damsels in distress, all in the service of our placing ourselves in the center—whether we're really hero quality or not.

Tozer sums it up nicely:

An inward principle of self lies at the source of human conduct, turning everything men do into evil. To save us completely Christ must reverse the bent of our nature.<sup>11</sup>

Christ reverses the bent of our nature by leading us out of Me-Ville and into the city of God. That act ennobles and humbles us all at the same time because it admits of our need—we are unable to redirect ourselves, unable to fulfill the heroic needs of the story we find ourselves in—and it brings us to a direct encounter with the Creator and Sustainer of all that is seen and unseen. The way out of Me-Ville is unavoidably through Jesus, who visits us, displaces us, delivers us, and sets us within the bounds of his city, his community.

But before Jesus can deliver us from our own private superbia, he must first visit us. In the next chapter we'll find Jesus in Me-Ville, and we'll wonder what he's doing there and why we settled there in the first place.

# • ESCAPE ROUTES •

## KNOW THYSELF

**Superbia is insidious:** We see it more clearly in others than we see it in ourselves. But it's there, rearing its ugly head perhaps more often than we think. This week, keep a journal of your interactions with other people—either direct interactions, people you talk to or sit next to on the train, or indirect interactions through television or film. Pay attention to what you find yourself thinking about them and what thoughts about yourself well up alongside them. Brian Mahan, author of *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, calls this tendency “invidious comparison”: We assess other people through the lens of ourselves, and we assess ourselves through the lens of other people. And you know, I suppose, what happens when one assesses.

Ask yourself questions such as these:

- What was my visceral reaction when I first saw this person? Was I positively or negatively inclined toward the person? Why? Was I neutral toward the person? Why might I have such a noncommittal attitude toward someone like this person?
- What points of identification did I notice with this person? In what ways are we the same or similar? Did those similarities make me feel better or worse about the person? About myself? Why?
- What points of distinction did I notice between myself and this person? Was I proud of those distinctions? Ashamed? Neutral? Why?

- If I had to assign a pecking order to myself and this person—in terms of social value or spiritual maturity or strength of character or cultural intelligence—would this person be ahead of me or behind me?
- How does my perceived status in those pecking orders affect my sense of self-worth? My feelings toward this person? My conduct toward this person?
- How hard was it to perform this exercise with people I know well? People I don't know but encounter directly? People on TV or in other media?
- Where do I see superbia in myself peeking through these encounters?

