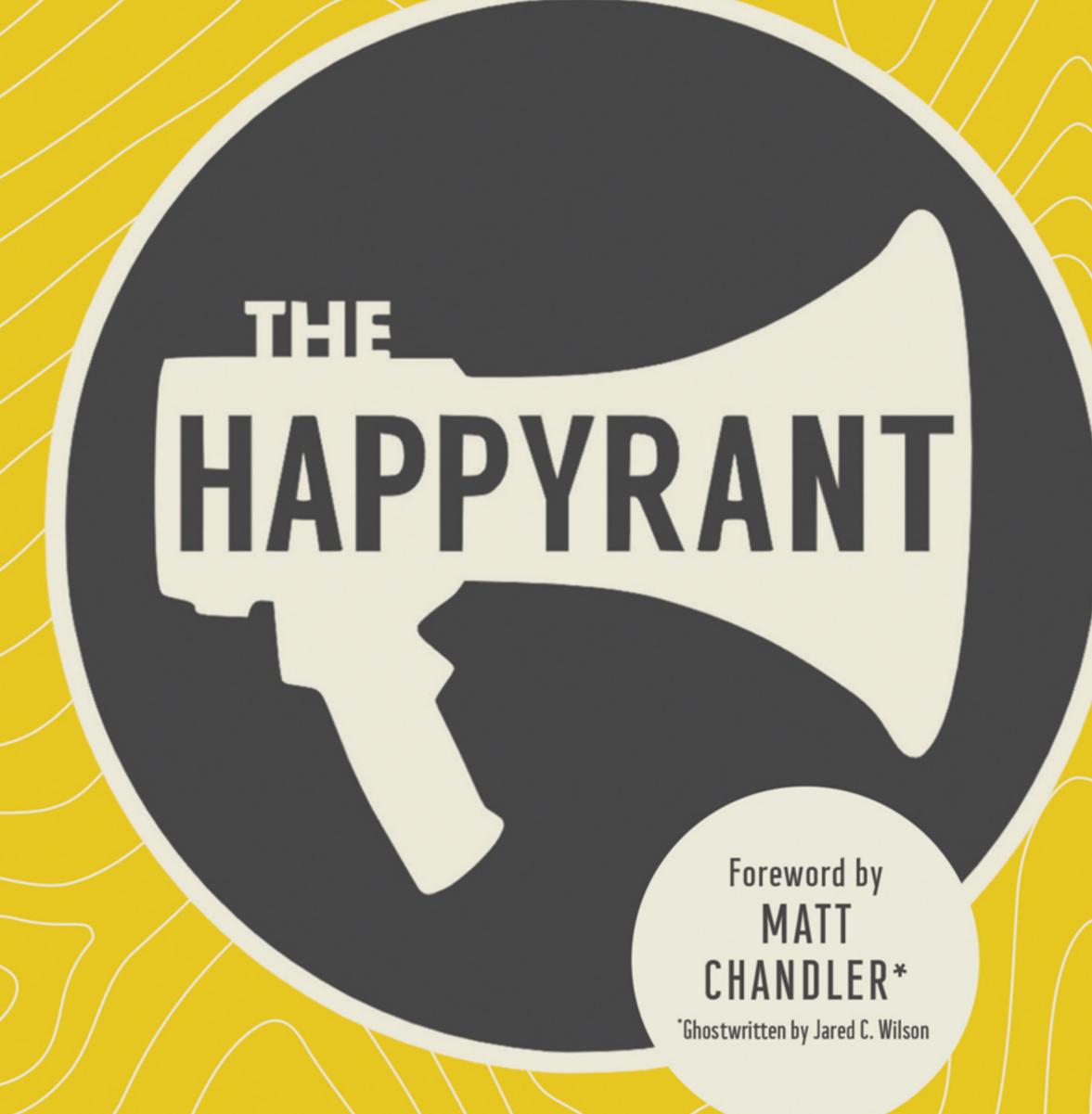
Wandering To and Fro Through Some Things That Don't Matter All That Much [and a Few That Really Do]



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Hosts of the Happy Rant Podcast



III It feels wrong somehow for me to start this chapter given that we have Conference Man right here in our midst. That said, I'm not a big conference guy, but I want to understand it more.

To me, especially in the Christian realm, it feels like an invitation to listen to a bunch of guys you probably listen to all week anyway via their sermon podcasts, except that you're paying a premium to do it while sitting at the Yum! Center in Louisville instead of through your headphones. So you're not going for the content.

You're not going for the city either in that it's always either in Louisville or Indianapolis.* EDITOR'S NOTE: The Gospel Coalition (TGC) used to be in Chicago and then Orlando, but apparently they realized those cities offered too much fun potential. No offense to those great cities, but I'm not leaving the house to go to Indianapolis in February. EDITOR'S NOTE: Ted is also

^{*} I used to live in Indianapolis and love it dearly to this day! It's an underrated Midwestern city in that it's impossible to get lost there, you have both the NFL and the NBA, and, all things considered, it has a pretty moderate winter situation.

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not leaving his house to go to Indianapolis the other 11 months of the year unless someone offers him tickets to the NFL Combine.

Conferences are church camp for grown men in that you get to hang out a whole bunch, sleep under the same roof, eat a snack that someone else provides, listen to a talk and then talk about all the ways you would have done it better, hear some music, and then go to bed. **EDITOR'S NOTE:** Women's conferences are strikingly different in that they are usually at nice hotels or resorts and feature some level of pampering. Rinse and repeat. Maybe I just don't understand extroverts who choose to do this and who *want* to run into a bunch of people at the hotel continental breakfast in the morning.

Random conference memories, ranked from worst to best:

- A Campus Crusade conference I went to in Indianapolis in the late '90s in which two bro-ish dudes reenacted a scene from *Braveheart** onstage (because of course). I am the only bro-ish dude on the planet who didn't care for *Braveheart*, and this has always frustrated me.
- An adoption conference at a San Antonio megachurch I spoke at once, which is the first time I truly understood the commodification of adoption as a "thing" and realized my book was about three years too early.
- The Moody Pastors' Conference I wrote about before where I sneaked KK into the dorm—a strangely erotic experience.
- The American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) Coach
 of the Year Football Clinics I used to go to with my dad and
 Chuck Shroyer, who was the Al Davis of Hartford City, Indiana, peewee football. We had a blast.

^{*} An hour too long and made during Mel Gibson's "I'm never editing out a scene I'm in" phase. Also, I never really bought Mel as an action hero.

The genius of conferences seems to be that it gives you a chance to travel and get away and see your friends, but under the guise of a "work thing" and, even better, a "work thing" that somebody else pays for. In this, it might be the perfect business model, which raises the question, Why are we not hosting a conference?

BP I have thoughts, many thoughts. However, since Ronnie is a professional conference attender and has earned the aforementioned moniker, I feel he should go first. It doesn't help that every one of the hundreds (literally) of conferences I have attended have been for work or as a speaker. So I have observed a lot but never as a willing participant who wanted to be at grown-up summer camp.

The conference thing happened for me later in life, to be honest. Of course, I had performed (concerts, a.k.a. music) at conferences on occasion and played at bazillions of festivals, which are the music equiv of conferences (unless you go to an actual "worship" conference, which is just a regular conference where people "talk" about music more than they play it). But my first foray into the world of conferencing was at TGC over a decade ago in Chicago. It's hard to remember what stuck out to me.

So here are seven things:

- 1. Seeing massive—and I mean massive—amounts of hanging posters of celebrity pastors promoting ESV Bibles.
- Seeing hundreds of men wearing khakis, blue suit jackets, and multicolored ties like they belonged to some society I didn't know about. Or maybe it was just Ligonier. Which is also a society I happened to know nothing about.
- **3.** Being approached by a kindhearted Canadian pastor in his early fifties ("So I guess old guys like these conferences

- too," I said to myself, now the same age as said guy) who ate lunch with me and told me all about his ministry. This was a surprising turn of events, but one that made me think that conferences could be a place to make new friends. Or just listen to pastors tell you all about their ministries, which is also a pastor's most favorite thing in the world to do.
- **4.** Attending with my wife, which was great because it only took us three days before we saw another woman, and it was Mary Kassian, a breakout speaker.
- 5. Seeing Alistair Begg walking alone through the conference corridors, looking very deep in thought, which he may well have been. Or maybe he was just trying to escape, and I'd actually bet a hefty sum on the latter now that I'm thinking about it.
- 6. Seeing also a tall, lanky dude in a yellow polo wandering around the same empty corridors (confession: I don't actually know what a corridor is) as people kept pointing and waving at him. I had no idea who it was until years later, when I realized it was Matty Chan. EDITOR'S NOTE: It's been fun to watch the fashion arc for Matty Chan over the years. He did the polo shirt as a sort of post-seminary-Baptist-frat-boy thing for a while but moved away from them for a few years. At the time of this writing, however, he's fully embraced the middle-aged-dad look with seasonal polos back in the rotation, but with cowboy boots. Which is only fitting for a former cattle magnate.
- 7. Being surprised by the scale of it all. There was a ginormous exhibit hall with miles of green-and-purple carpet, megatron jumbo screens, corporate TV crews running all over the place,

and security guards posted at every corner. I remember looking at Big M, thinking, *They're REALLY not trying to be cool here*, *are they?* And I kind of oddly respected that too.

So there they are. Seven arbitrary recollections that one might think had the potential to make me strangely ambivalent or obviously adverse to ever attending another conf again. But the thing is, I liked it as much as I loathed aspects of it. I liked being in an environment where I could observe people (read: extroverts) doing things that puzzled me on one hand but that were also tied to me on some theological level on the other. It was a new experience. It wasn't so much about the conference talks as it was about talking to people at a conference. With purple carpet. And jumbo screens. And mountains of ESV Bibles.

Baby, you've gotta love a Christian conference with larger-than-life-sized posters, screened images of pastors adorning every wall, and NBA-sized crowds and at which a third of the talks are all about the dangers of Christian celebrity. We haven't really lived until we've seen a 50-foot-tall Carl Trueman on the screen telling us not to do the very thing that we're doing.

Don't you think that part of the pathology of being a Reformed guy in a conference setting is that some small part of you has to do the performative thing where you're really enjoying it but you have to publicly eschew the fame part? Baby, that's what I respect about you...there is no ambivalence about wanting conferences and wanting to main-stage with all your heart. I feel oddly comforted by the fact that you're at least being honest about it.

Also, help me understand the business side of this whole deal. Doesn't the Christian publishing industrial complex kind of run the whole conference business? I mean, I probably owe my publishing career to the fact that *Why We're Not Emergent* was given away at T4G (or TGC) many years ago,

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at which point all the pastors in that room ran home and blogged about it.* Short of that happening, the book would have probably sold 3,000 copies and been quickly forgotten. **EDITOR'S NOTE**: An experience with which all three of our authors are intimately familiar. Kevin DeYoung (KDY) never would have gotten famous. I never would have gotten to sneak my wife past the Moody gestapo before then having furtive, [redacted, redacted, redacted] dorm room [redacted] with her. Sigh. Maybe I love conferences too.

BP Ted, if I'm reading this right, and I think I am, what you love is not conferences. It is royalty money and dorm room [redacted].

I spent almost 15 years in the Christian publishing world, which means that I was present (I hesitate to say "attended") at literally hundreds of conferences and conventions. My lanyard collection was a thing of beauty. This also means I saw far more of the exhibit floor, bookstore, and even the occasional greenroom than I did the actual conference meeting or main stage.

For me a conference was like entering a different dimension. The moment I set foot in the convention center or hotel ballroom, time ceased to exist. There was a low-grade energy pulsing through everything, enhanced by the smell of rental carpet and pipe-and-drape setups. Normal rules of human interaction ceased to exist. I made friends who I literally only ever saw at conferences, but in some cases, that meant six times a year (or three times as much as I saw my parents).

Over the years, there was almost a seasonal consistency with these conferences, knowing what to expect from whom, what to dread, and who you could guarantee would be there.

^{*} On their WordPress blogs in which the banner image across the top was a stack of books adjacent to a cup of coffee and were all cleverly named something that had to do with books and coffee.

• TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL (T4G): More accurately known as Together for Calvinism, 10,000+ pastors and seminarians gather together to listen to the same six men preach 60-minute sermons for three straight days. Then they swarm like a plague of locusts to the Zero Dollar Bookstore, where they collect huge stacks of theological resources (like Ted's aforementioned Why We're Not Emergent). In between the deluge of books and sermons, the Presbyterians (and some rogue Baptists) find local brew pubs at which they drink stouts and tip badly. The rest of the Baptists drink sweet tea at the Old Spaghetti Factory. And all of them discuss how they would have preached that text differently.

- THE GOSPEL COALITION (TGC): Together for the Gospel but chill and with breakouts (including some taught by, gasp, women). Per capita, there are fewer blazers and more beers consumed at this conference. And no free books. Attendees live for the glimpse of John Piper, Tim Keller, or Matt Chandler roaming the convention center corridors.
- THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION ANNUAL MEETING: The Republican National Convention for pastors combined with the longest church business meeting ever. Lots of hairspray (on pastors and their wives). All beers consumed are surreptitious and not expensed to churches.
- THE PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY: Like the SBC convention but with some renegade Democrats as well as much beer and many cigars, all of which are expensed to churches.
- THE BETHLEHEM CONFERENCE FOR PASTORS: Like T4G but much smaller and more relaxed. Also, it's in Minnesota in

- February, so every attendee is at least a little crazy. A surprising number of college students in attendance with that crazed, cage-stage Calvinist gleam in their eyes.
- CATALYST: Unlike all previously mentioned conferences. And, really, unlike any other conference. Catalyst is a leadership-y, influencer-driven, attractional-church-funded, beautiful-people-platforming, hipster hype machine. They have been known to offer camel rides, have bouncy houses for adults, and do hot-air balloon rides, and all that is before you enter the arena (yes, arena). Each session is kicked off by Hillsong Elevation Passion Bethel Worship in fedoras. And then a string of bestselling inspirational authors recap their books as TED Talks (though, to be fair, most of these books started as TED Talks and should have stayed that way). The best part is that each year, they bring in one token preacher, and let me tell you, John Piper in his faded tweed earnestly extolling the significance of Christ on the cross is quite...dissonant.
- **BASICS CONFERENCE**: See Bethlehem Conference for Pastors but without the college students and overflowing with various accents from the British Isles and more Gettys leading worship.
- MOODY PASTORS' CONFERENCE: See Basics Conference but dispensationalist and with all the pastors sleeping in college dorms. They may still be trying to kill the emergent church.
- THE VERGE CONFERENCE: A church-planting, urban ministry, multiethnic conference held in a supercool city: Austin. Oozed cool. Loved the TED Talk format with 25 speakers talking for eight minutes each. Attendees and exhibitors alike prioritized this conference for the BBQ.

• **EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY:** The fact that this one is called a "society" serves as a good clue as to its nature. The one conference where people are not there to hear speakers but to speak. Or rather to read. To read papers. To read papers about esoteric, incomprehensible theological topics. All while wearing

ill-fitting khaki slacks and blue blazers.

- **SUNDRY CHURCH-HOSTED CONFERENCES**: Never meet the attendance projection given to exhibitors to justify the cost. Usually one A-list speaker they blew the majority of their budget on and the rest of the speaking lineup filled out by the church staff. The host church is usually manically eager for the affirmation of exhibitors (but just as ready to ignore them if the A-lister wanders by).
- I mean, it's an era we're in, is it not? What's funny is that most of the pastor dudes I talk to now who spent half their church budgets on attending these things over the past decade all tell me they're "conferenced out." There's a very peculiar fatigue that comes with attending too many of these big events, which is why so many of us feel drawn to smaller, less flashy conferences. For me, it's become all about people and connections. Here's how some of them play out:
 - 1. That person you were on a ministry staff with back in the day who you bump into at the Crossway table in the middle of the bookstore. For some reason, you're shocked that they're there, even though...umm...*everybody* is there. The problem is, you weren't super tight with them back in the day, so it's hard to remember anything about them. "So...*Gentle and Lowly* is like

- the bomb, amirite?" is probably the easiest conversation starter you'll have.
- 2. That closer friend who's part of the denomination or network you're in, and before you've even said hi, they're asking you when you can get coffee, lunch, dinner, or all three. For the next three days.
- 3. That social media "friend" that you've never actually met but can somehow pick you out of a crowd, even when they're standing approximately two miles away at the other end of the convention center. This meeting can go either way. You can just as easily receive a vague and confused "Ohhhh…hey…" or an emotionally bonkers faux-reunion-level greeting that rivals a soldier returning home to his family after the Second World War ended.

All said, I'm here for it.

If I think we're talking about different things here: conferences themselves and fame, which is a by-product of the conferences that are (stay with me) kind of the ultimate fame-flex. And, yes, Pipe, to your question a few pages ago, it is primarily about hotel sex with my wife and book money for me. I am very human.

I think what Ron is talking about is some version of high school but for adults. Substitute "cafeteria" or "Sadie Hawkins Dance" for the energy that Ron described just above, and that's it. And, baby, we *know* you're here for it because we also know you're (literally) not here for the show roughly half the year due to your, ahem, *ambitious* conferencing schedule. Perhaps this is a function of attending tiny, weirdo Christian high schools and not really having the ultrasocial high school experience for real?

I think at a deeper level, it speaks to something that I hear a lot of pastors struggling with, which is the idea that they can't/don't have many (any?) actual friends in their communities with whom they can be real, so they have to seek that kind of kinship/relationship out at a Hampton Inn in Louisville five to six times a year. I'm being glib there, but I actually think that's a real thing and a real problem for which conferences are an imperfect-but-the-best-shot-we-have kind of solution. Thoughts?

Also there's the fame thing. I have a friend who now works at a relatively high level in the Christian leadership industry, and he indicated to me that fame is more a function of "organization" than any kind of individual insider/outsider dynamic that we usually attribute to it (fame). And he explained that main-staging at a conference—Ron's very special dream—is more just a function of being made the "face" of a particular organization. So the main stager is, in a sense, there just as an emissary of whatever organization they are being the smiling face for. Knowing this makes you feel either better or worse about the whole conference thing. Personally, it makes me feel worse. I want to feel like there's something magical or ethereal about fame—something beyond just being (literally and figuratively) platformed by a larger organization.

It's fascinating to me that y'all are approaching this topic from such different directions. Ronnie, you're all in, engaging it as a willing but observant participant. Ted, you're observing as an outsider, and a suspicious or even cynical one at that. I think I land somewhere between y'all, something more akin to working the family business. I mean, I've literally been working at conferences since I was ten and I volunteered at the fledgling Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. So I am an insider of sorts. I'm cynical. And part of me still has an insatiable draw to conferences even though I kind of hate them, kind of like the Kennedy kids must feel about politics.

Ronnie, you're absolutely right about conferences becoming more

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about the people than the platform. There were friends I would see three or four times a year at conferences where we'd grab coffee or stay up late over drinks or get dinner. That's more time than I spend with extended family in a given year. I know guys who have scheduled reunions with former coworkers at various conferences—"Wednesday night is pizza with the old staff, right?" And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention all the awesome interactions we've had with *The Happy Rant* listeners at various conferences over the years. **EDITOR'S NOTE**: This is entirely genuine. It is awesome to meet our listeners live and in the flesh at conferences. You genuinely can maintain meaningful friendships simply through conferences, and that is hands down the best thing about them. (To be fair, the people aspect can get super weird too. Without going into details, let's just say *a lot* of seminarians lack basic social skills.)

Ted, I'm not sure if I can ease your pain or not, but this might help. Your friend's observation about fame applies largely to industry conferences, where *leadership* is the thing. Being the face of a brand or institution carries more weight there. Fame is still pretty ethereal in ministry circles. I mean, *Gentle and Lowly* has sold a bajillion copies, but Dane Ortlund isn't headlining any conferences. Kevin DeYoung headlines a couple conferences, and it would be tough for most pastors to name his last three books. We all still know who Mark Driscoll and James MacDonald are, but they aren't likely to be asked back to speak at *our* conferences anytime soon (though they still get asked elsewhere). Francis Chan is a Christian household name, and nobody even knows what he is doing these days. Eugene Peterson is the pastor everybody is aspiring to be these days, but they didn't decide that until after he passed away. So Christian fame is still a nebulous, undefinable, unpredictable thing.

Let me throw y'all this question: What makes a good conference in your minds?

I've identified a core issue with conferences for me: If I go to a conference (or retreat, or trip, or whatever we're calling it), I almost always return with a new acquaintance who invariably ends up feeling really offended if I don't become their new best friend and keep in touch all the time afterward. Conference friendships are, like camp romances/friendships, unsustainable, unless both parties understand exactly what they're dealing with (which is a camp friendship). I run into this dynamic probably one or two times a year, and dealing with the inevitable cycle of unmet expectations/ fallout actually occupies a lot of my energy/mindspace.

So for me, it's just easier not to go. For me (again), a conference in which this doesn't happen—or in which I make friends but friends who sort of *innately* understand what is and isn't happening—would be a nice conference.

But nobody really addressed my pastors-not-really-having-real-friends issue from a few paragraphs ago. Is that a thing? Or is that kind of a dead topic? The reason I ask is that I think it kinda goes hand in hand with the please-be-my-new-best-friend thing that I deal with vis-à-vis conferencing. I'm just curious.

RM No, baby, pastors not really having real friends is an issue that's getting talked about quite a lot these days. To be honest, I feel like this could have been it's own chapter. But I would agree that it's probably connected to conferencing because that's the only place ministry dudes are going to find other people who want to talk about Bavinck and debate obscure Augustinian philosophies while drinking adult beverages in a posh downtown hotel pub. EDITOR'S NOTE: In a pub because the pastors being described would never lower themselves to drinking in a bar, so they call what is very obviously the hotel bar a pub so they can feel like part of the Inklings or something. The problem is that once the conference is over, most fall back into the plush leather chairs of their introverted pastoral studies and experience

the kind of isolation and loneliness that pastoring is known for, and that just got dark, didn't it?

To Pipe's question, a good conference is many things to many people. Here are a few things that make it good for me.

- Location. It's going to be a draw for me only if it's in driving range, and by driving range, I mean as close to my front door as possible. Also, large, confusing, metropolitan areas are not ideal because I want to get there, find parking, and not feel like Google Maps is reading a dissertation on the hypostatic union back to me. A smaller city with nice restaurants and neat coffee shops is really all I require.
- Bookstore. I enjoy a good bookstore, and not because I'm a huge book lover (I prefer a good album, to be honest) but because I like looking at and buying books even more than I like reading them. If that just made someone on nerd-Twitter gasp, I get it. EDITOR'S NOTE: A good bookstore benefits from the conference as well because pastors on a travel budget are like kids in candy stores with birthday money.
- Speakers. I like me some good conference speakers, but honestly, I don't go to the sessions like I used to unless I'm with my wife, and then she goes to the session while I meet with a friend. It's a good marriage, guys.
- Candy. I love it when the vendors have bowls of candy just sitting on the table, beckoning me into their marketing schemes. "I've always dreamed of going to Bavinck Seminary because you all seem to place a high value on expository preaching, and—oh, I see you have Twix bars. Don't mind if I do..." (Grabs said Twix bar and steps away nervously.)

- Diversity. I'm a devoted people watcher, and conferences are super good for that. Nothing like seeing the Spurgeon-loving, 1689-style long-beards kicking it alongside the khakis and blue sport jacket seminarians who look like they just won a PGA tournament. It's deluxe entertainment, I'm telling you.
- Pipe, I just want to point out that "diversity," in Ron's paradigm here, means having *both* kinds of white guys—beards/tats and PGA types. Do your worst.
- Ronnie, you forgot another key demographic in the "diverse" conference schema: unkempt college dudes. They inevitably carry large backpacks with multiple things clipped on with carabiners, one of which definitely includes a Nalgene bottle or Klean Kanteen. They don trucker hats and/or bandanas, and their feet are shod with Birkenstocks or Chocos.*

I think what many of these questions come down to is purpose. What is the *purpose* of conferences? The people and ministries putting them on have one set of ideas. They are putting together a stellar lineup of brilliant (by their own estimation) speakers who can collectively expound upon a theme for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of attendees. They see themselves as providing a service and learning opportunity attendees cannot get anywhere else. They may shift the very trajectory of entire churches through their efforts.

The attendees want summer camp with books, beer (even you, Baptists),

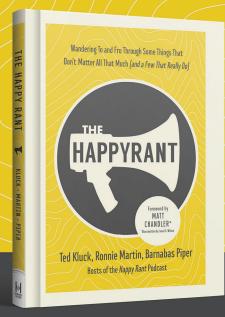
^{*} Ted here: Pipe, I just want to address your spelling of Chaco. I know this because annually, my wife orders herself a pair, indicating to me that this will be, quote, "a lifetime sandal" and "the only pair I'll ever have to buy." Note that she orders another pair annually.

and candy. The conference is an effective smoke screen so their church members (and especially accountants) can feel good about them going.

And as far as I can tell, it's generally working. Pastors need summer camp and time to hang with friends, but that doesn't sound good to their congregation. But a *conference* with prominent preachers and a Cheesecake Factory—sized menu of breakouts? That they can peddle.

And unlike a mere vacation or bro-trip to a big city, conferences foster deeper conversations and a spiritual environment. Good messages are given that offer encouragement and insight. There's a milieu of genuine meaning in it all. And about once every five or seven years, a conference message is given that becomes a catalyst (pun not intended) in a significant Christian movement.

So I guess what I'm saying is that as weird as conferences are, they're working. They're sort of like lasagna or meat loaf: If you start picking apart the ingredients, they get way less appetizing, but if you leave well enough alone and just dig in, they're not bad at all.



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