

Churchianity

vs

Christianity

How the Church Cancels Christianity

Greg Hildenbrand



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Greg Hildenbrand

Foreword

“The Bible is a human product: it tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God sees things.”

Marcus J. Borg¹

Churchianity vs Christianity is a collection of individual reflections, each published weekly as a *Life Note* between January 2021 and May 2022, under the umbrella of the book’s title. Each chapter contains several reflections considering a topic related to the overarching category. As such, the book can be read by skipping around as easily as reading sequentially from front to back. The stand-alone nature of each section, however, does result in considerable repetition of certain themes and ideas, hopefully not to the detriment of the overall reading experience.

All biblical quotes come from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, published by *HarperOne*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

I am honored to have you consider my thoughts as I wrestle with my relationship with God and the world around me. I welcome your feedback if and as you choose to join the conversation at: ghildenbrand@sunflower.com or through my website: www.ContemplatingGrace.com.

¹https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/22721.Marcus_J_Borg, accessed June 2, 2022.

Greg Hildenbrand

The Divine Communion

(A reimagining of the Lord's Prayer)

Divine Love,
Relentless weaver of creation's fabric and
Liberating presence permeating all being:
Working through us, you call forth
The awe-inspiring consummation of all things,
In this world and beyond.
Provide for the needs of this day
As you heal the frayed strands
Binding betrayer and betrayed.
Awaken our better angels, and
Inspire a higher, all-inclusive good.
Enflamed by you, and in union with one another,
All things are possible, and
Nothing can abort the new tomorrow
Born of today's labor.
May it be so.

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Introduction

I first heard the term *churchianity* from contemplative author and teacher Fr. Richard Rohr during an episode of the podcast, *Another Name For Everything*.² He used it in the context of a discussion about ways in which the church has seemingly strayed from its Christ-following roots. The term provides a not-so-subtle accusation that perhaps the *Christian Church* has become more focused on the *church*, meaning the institution, than on the *Christ* from whom it adopts its title. This book is an exploration into a subject I hope readers will find thought-provoking.

I suspect much of what I say will strike some as overly critical of the church and its leaders and members. And that may not be an entirely inaccurate assessment. I do want to begin by saying that I am a long-time, active member and worship leader of a church, so I value the institution of the church and consider myself an insider. I fully acknowledge that whenever I point a finger of accusation at another there are three fingers pointing accusingly and justifiably back at me. As I name hypocrisy in others, I claim it for myself, too.

Here are a few introductory disclaimers:

² *Another Name For Everything*, podcast of the Center for Action and Contemplation. Fall 2020.

*My reflections are directed at the institution of the church *in general* and not at a specific church, denomination, or other religious fellowship.

*While my reflections about the church are meant to be general in nature, that does not mean that any specific church, including my own, cannot be characterized by the criticism, at least to a degree.

*These reflections are not directed at *specific* church leaders or members, but they often will be directed at a generalized stereotype of leaders or members in order to illustrate a larger point.

*While my reflections about church leadership and membership are not intended to refer to specific individuals, that does not mean that specific leaders and members, myself included, are not characterized by those traits, at least to a degree.

I have mulled over the substance of this book for several years. I confess to having significant concerns about my worthiness to assess an institution like the Church. And yet, the one I profess to follow, Jesus the Christ, reserved his strongest criticisms for the leaders of the church of his day, specifically for the scribes and the Pharisees. He called them *hypocrites* and *blind guides*. He accused them of leading people *away* from God and God's kingdom under the guise of leading them *toward* God and God's kingdom. The gospel of Matthew records a long series of *woes* that Jesus pronounced upon the religious leaders of his

day.³ It does not appear that he waged his criticisms for the purpose of tearing down the Jewish faith, of which he was a devout follower, but that he sought to redirect the teaching and application of the faith to better minister to the sincere followers of it as well as to those of other belief systems. It is in this spirit of possible *redirection* and self-assessment that I offer these reflections – not to tear down the church but to ask questions and to reflect upon common assumptions so as to better assess where and whether its work can be realigned in ways that help us become better followers of our namesake.

In his classic book *Mere Christianity*,⁴ author C.S. Lewis wrote: "...the Church exists for nothing else but to draw (humankind) into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time." To the extent that Lewis is correct, then I question how many, if any, churches today are doing their *job* of transforming their members into "little Christs." There are many paths to becoming "little Christs," but where is the evidence that churches today are focusing their energy and resources toward that end? I believe the church, in general, has lost sight of its primary purpose, albeit often with the best of intentions. If we are going to rightfully claim the title of *Christian* or the name *Christianity* then I believe helping members become more like Jesus the Christ must be the heart of and motivation for everything we do. If, instead, we place the *church* at the heart of everything we do, then we

³ Matthew 23:13-36.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1952.

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are practicing *Churchianity*, which may produce occasional acts of mercy but risks developing followers of the church instead of followers of the Christ. Unfortunately, the two are not the same.

Greg Hildenbrand
June 2022

Chapter 1

Churchianity vs Christianity

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.

Matthew 23:13

In the Introduction to this book I draw a distinction between *Churchianity*, which focuses on the church, and *Christianity*, which focuses on making disciples or followers of Christ. One challenge for churches today is that to coordinate the worship, work, and other activities of even a modest sized group of people, some sort of organizational or institutional structure is required. Among the foundational questions I will raise in the following pages are these: What is the end goal of our religious structures? What should be the purpose of a church? How effectively or efficiently do any of our churches accomplish their purposes? Finances aside, which I will consider separately, are our religious structures focused on making followers of Christ or are they focused on perpetuating the church's existence? Of course, there are probably few, if any, churches that fall completely on either side of that question. I think the relevant question for our personal reflection is

this: Where is my church on the continuum between self-perpetuation and full-on discipleship to the least and lost? To what extent do the administrative functions of our churches support attracting new members into the church *and* leading those members toward faithful discipleship?

If the sole purpose of the church is to make “little Christs,” as C.S. Lewis claims, then the central question has to do with how much of the church’s structure, resources, and energy is dedicated to developing followers of Jesus and how much is dedicated to maintaining the organization. I am not trying to imply that structure and administrative systems are unimportant. Rather, I am raising questions about end results. A crude analogy is that being a member of a church does not make one a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes one a car. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, apparently read the Sermon on the Mount⁵ (Matthew 5-7) regularly and is attributed with saying, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”⁶ If non-Christians, like Gandhi, who appreciate the teachings of Jesus observe such a wide gulf between the teachings and what manifests among its professed followers, is that a failure of the church or a failure of its members? Likely, it is a failure of both.

Author and theologian Dallas Willard writes, “For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to

⁵ Matthew 5-7.

⁶<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/22155-i-like-your-christ-i-do-not-like-your-christians>, accessed January 19, 2021.

be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship.”⁷ And that is the challenge of the modern church. How do we obey the great commission of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations”⁸ and still accommodate a membership that is neck-deep in 21st Century life? Willard continues, “So far as the visible Christian institutions are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional.”⁹ Should faithful discipleship be optional for those calling themselves Christians? I think it depends on how we define the terms *faithful*, *disciple*, and *Christian*. It also depends on the purpose of the church.

Most churches today face steep declines in membership and active involvement. The average age of members is rising and the seats vacated by dying members are not being back-filled. Among the common criticisms of the church are that it is increasingly irrelevant, out of touch, overly judgmental, and hypocritical. I propose that increasing numbers of people today recognize Churchianity when they see it and are not interested in identifying with or supporting it. They are not willing to carve time and resources out of their otherwise full lives to participate in an institution they perceive to be only a façade for what wearing the title of Christian is supposed to mean.

On the other hand, if a church were to *require* its members to commit to active discipleship – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Harper-Collins, 1988.

⁸ Matthew 28:19.

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Harper-Collins, 1988.

homeless, reaching out to and including the marginalized, working for social justice, ministering to the isolated and lonely – would that church attract and retain sufficient numbers of members to sustain its work? Would such a church be able to fund an administrative structure capable of supporting and coordinating the social justice work of its members? Sadly, such a church would almost certainly struggle to survive. And yet, that may be exactly what our churches are intended to accomplish.

Budgets and Buildings

After I finished graduate school I spent a year in an administrative fellowship. One of the perpetual assignments for fellows was to coordinate the annual United Way campaign for the organization. The local United Way chapter at that time (1990) claimed that over 90% of all donations received went directly to services for people in need. In other words, the United Way assured donors it would use less than 10% of what it received on their own administrative functions (salaries, facilities, etc.), and they would only distribute money to local organizations that met their administrative costs from other sources. In that way the United Way funds would directly fund the services those organizations provided to people in need. Most charities today spend at least 40% of their funding on administrative costs with some spending 80% or more. One must wonder if their focus is on the people they intend to serve or the organization collecting the funding. As a related side-note, fundraising for charities and other non-profits has become a large and profitable business.

It is said that if we want to see where a person's heart is we should look at their checkbook. A revealing exercise is to determine how we spend the financial resources we have. Certainly, some must go to basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing, but what happens with the remaining funds, if any, after basic needs are met? Of course, we all define *basic needs* differently. A modest studio apartment might suffice as shelter for one person where another would feel they need stand-alone housing in a desirable neighborhood. The key question has to do with how much of what we have do we keep for ourselves for desires above and beyond our needs, and how much do we pass along to those with the barest of needs not being met. While there are no clear guidelines for resolving the dilemma, I do believe we are expected to prayerfully wrestle with it, *especially* if we consider ourselves Christian.

We can and should ask the same question of our churches – where would our church's checkbook show its heart to be? How much of what we donate to a church goes toward supporting the church's administrative structure as opposed to how much is going to fund services to those in desperate need outside of the church? Certainly paying a fair wage to those needed to coordinate the church's work is important, as is the maintenance of a facility from which its members can do ministry.

I daresay that most churches have large facilities that sit mostly empty for the largest part of every week. Some churches share facilities with other organizations like schools and theaters. My church attempted to use some of its empty space as an emergency shelter for persons sleeping outside in the

winter of 2019, a seemingly very Christian thing to do. Unfortunately, the effort ran afoul of City Codes, raised concerns from the church's insurer, and met strong objections from some of its members. Granted, the space was not designed to be a shelter, but it was space, it was warm, and it was out of the elements. The sad truth is that a building considered ideal for Sunday morning worship is not necessarily very adaptable for the remaining 98% of each week, or for meeting the needs of marginalized non-members in the community. Should we ask if our standards for an acceptable worship environment could be altered in ways that would allow our facilities to be used to meet more of the needs of our neighbors? It is a hard question, but it is an important one as we consider whether we are practicing Churchianity or whether we are serious about Christianity. Remember, Jesus never told us to *worship* him. Jesus told us to *follow* him – to do what he did, to treat others how he treated them. Granted, he did spend time in the Temple of his day, but he carried out most of his ministry outside of the Temple. His worship of God did not suffer for being away from the Temple or synagogues. He went where the suffering was and never demanded that the suffering come to him.

Could the historical and institutional structures of the church be holding us back from transforming our members and providing ways for them to act as Jesus to a hurting world? Are we unintentionally “locking people out of the kingdom of heaven,”¹⁰ as Jesus accused the religious leaders of his

¹⁰ Matthew 23:13.

day of doing? It may be that many churches are struggling because more and more people are seeking organizations that follow the lead of Jesus, regardless of whether they are overtly religious organizations. When our church's checkbooks primarily fund and our facilities primarily host Sunday morning worship, we may be practicing Churchianity more than Christianity.

Interpretive Certainty

Finances aside, one trait that differentiates Christian churches from each other, both within and outside of specific denominations, is the degree of *certainty* with which they present the nature of God, the teachings of the Bible, and our relationship with and to both. My own denomination, the United Methodist Church, allows a great deal of interpretational leeway among its churches, so much so that one can experience one United Methodist church as very conservative and another as very progressive, often located within blocks of each other.

Perhaps the most obvious clue for attendees in identifying a church's level of certainty is the degree to which they interpret scripture *literally*. Some churches present the Bible as if it provides a set of clear-cut *rules* to follow while others view it as a record of various authors wrestling with how best to understand our relationship to God in the context of their specific life circumstances. One hint in determining where a church is on the spectrum between Churchianity and Christianity, is in determining whether a church's interpretations and doctrines benefit the church or whether their

interpretations move people closer to the life of Jesus. For example, do the teachings make people more reliant on the church as their intermediary between themselves and Christ, or do its teachings and actions lead its members closer to becoming “little Christs” even apart from the church. One can argue that the former types of churches may indeed be locking “people out of the kingdom of heaven.”

Churches that claim to interpret scripture literally believe that God *dictated* the Bible to human authors, thus making the text *inerrant*, meaning it is completely true as written and without nuance, allegory, or inconsistency. This brand of theology drives many people away from *all* churches, the Bible, and Jesus because they feel such believers are hypocritical, judgmental, and out of touch with reality, and they assume the majority of all Christians and Christian churches are that way too. Biblical interpretation is one of the primary ways that some people judge a church and its members along the spectrum of Churchianity to Christianity.

While I doubt that any church follows the Bible literally in every circumstance, including those who claim to do so, I am also not aware of any church that *never* utilizes a literal interpretation of parts of the Bible. So there is a wide spectrum of biblical application that churches fall within. One danger of understanding the Bible too literally is in presenting it in ways that will not stretch to reach sincere seekers in their specific need or where they are in their personal spiritual formation. The Bible loses much of its beauty and relevance when we ignore its nuanced inferences and applications, not to mention its metaphorical, archetypal references. On the other

hand, a danger of dismissing all literal interpretation of the Bible is in believing there is no underlying truth or meaning supporting our lives. Instead of seeking to have God shape our lives in God's image, we shape God according to our preferences and fleeting desires, ending up with an unstable, unreliable faith life. Any church that always offers firm answers about God, life, and the relationship between God and life almost certainly falls on the literal side of the spectrum and is likely to only reach a small, exclusive slice of humanity.

Another way of naming the spectrum of certainty is in how much churches portend to *know* contrasted against how much they concede *not knowing*. In one of his *Daily Meditations*, Richard Rohr wrote, “The Bible, *in its entirety*, finds a fine balance between knowing and not-knowing...What I've called ‘Churchianity’ typically needs to speak with absolutes and certainties. It thinks it has the right and the obligation to make total truth-claims and feels very insecure when it cannot.”¹¹ While I am mostly comfortable with both knowing and not-knowing, I also understand that the chaotic nature of many people's lives demands some sense of order, clarity, and certainty before any church teaching can be useful to them. Indeed, our need for *knowing* and our comfort level with *not knowing* will undoubtedly shift over time. Granted, there is a degree of *perceived* self-control over our life circumstances when we feel certain about them. Sometimes we need to *contract* into certainty so we can gain our footing in difficult times. At other times we need to *expand* into

¹¹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, January 31, 2021.

uncertainty so we can grow into whatever is next in our lives.

Christians must find an acceptable balance between knowing and not-knowing, certainty and uncertainty. When God becomes too familiar and predictable, however, we are almost certainly practicing a form of Churchianity.

Corporate Christianity

In 1954, black author and theologian Howard Thurman wrote, “Whatever may be the delimiting character of the historical development of the church, the simple fact remains that at the present moment in our society, as an institution, the church is divisive and discriminating, even within its fellowship.”¹² A decade later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a speech at Western Michigan University pronounced, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.”¹³ Six decades later these statements arguably remain as true as when they were given. The church as an institution may be as or more divisive than any other institution in our society. Not only are most churches segregated by race, but many seek to divide its followers from non-followers by defining what it means to be Christian along narrow and *un-Jesus-like* lines.

One reason our churches are so segregated and divided is the constitutional protection on freedom of religious expression. No governing body

¹² Howard Thurman, *Essential Writings*. Orbis Books, 2006. P. 77.

¹³<http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/andygill/files/2018/01/edwin-andrade-153753-Sunday-most-segregated-hour-week-andy-gill-patheos.jpg>, accessed February 7, 2021.

may restrict religious practices, at least within certain limits. Although I agree that the government should not be in the business of regulating religious expression, I believe that too many religious organizations use that freedom to institutionalize bigotry, exclusion, and even hatred in the name of Christianity. In the words of teacher and author Richard Rohr, “Most people who do evil have fully explained it to themselves as good...Injustice, for example, always profits *somebody*.¹⁴ Who profits from religious bigotry? I suggest it is a privileged few of our religious leaders who convince unsuspecting and trusting members that their distorted view of the kingdom of God is God-serving rather than self-serving.

One glaring example of religious bigotry is found in the Christian music industry. A handful of like-minded, profit-oriented organizations control most of the major Christian radio stations, recording labels, music producers, and publishing companies. They seek out and support artists who write and perform songs that meet certain restrictive theological criteria consistent with what appears to sell the best and who maintain a pristine public image (as defined by those organizations). The quickest route out of an otherwise successful career in Christian music is to be caught having an affair, getting a divorce, showing too much skin in public, or other “sins” that many people throughout the world have committed and are almost certainly common with the less-public faces in the industry. While I agree that there are behaviors and

¹⁴ Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With Evil?*, CAC Publishing, 2019, pp. 22-23.

song lyrics we do not need to promote or celebrate, Jesus never ostracized people for their sin or human weaknesses.

The result is that we often hear the same messages, songs, and artists for years on end. Even when new songs enter the market they present the same types of limited theology and melodies. While that is not bigotry *per se*, it does give a severely limited view and experience of Christianity. It excludes much of the wonderful diversity of God's creation and mischaracterizes the wide variety of God's frail and flawed children. Worse yet, we find it hard to discover where we fit with that sort of limited presentation of the diversity of our faith. Only in our most uninformed and shallow assessments of our own nature do we worship as fervently or appear as holy as those who have become the face of the industry, which is to say it looks like any other commercial venture, but in religious garb. There is a sort of pious *air-brushing* going on throughout the industry. Does this portrayal welcome and include the least and the lost, the broken and marginalized, or the sinners among us? Such *undesirables* are the very people Jesus sought and ministered to. Somehow, I doubt that Jesus would waste much time in today's churches (or listening to Christian radio).

Lest I be overly critical, let me affirm that all churches probably provide some worthwhile services, if only in providing opportunities for worship. But worship alone does not make Christians. Providing opportunities for fellowship with others is important, but those fellowships tend to be with like-minded people in similar life circumstances. Jesus modeled a diverse and inclusive fellowship with people unlike

himself. Many churches actively host or support efforts to feed the hungry, affirm the outcast, shelter the homeless, and heal the sick, all of which are certainly Jesus-like activities.

To become *Christians*, however, *we* must be changed. One of Jesus's early and oft-repeated commands was to "Repent,"¹⁵ which means to turn around or change. Is the church actively leading me to change both my inner and outer being? Is it opening my mind and heart to explore the ineffable nature of God? Is it encouraging or insisting that I stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others who are not like me? If not, then the church is likely practicing and encouraging something less than Christianity.

¹⁵ Mark 1:15, for example.

Chapter 2

The Hijacking of Christianity

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others...But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret... Matthew 6:5-6

My biggest heartache with the spread of Churchianity has to do with its hijacking of the foundational and universal teachings of Christianity, rendering them shunned by and thus unhelpful to many sincere spiritual seekers. By this I refer to the church's propensity to use the Bible, the life of Jesus, prayer, and our relationship with the Divine in ways that wound and exclude people. This has turned many away from any sort of interest in the Bible, the life of Jesus, prayer, or a relationship with God. Churches have so indelibly wedded themselves to these spiritual cornerstones that non-churched folks cannot bring themselves to explore their relevance outside of the churches they reject. That is the sense by which I say the church has hijacked these elements, even though they are fundamental to living a fulfilled life, with or without the church.

I do not believe churches hijack vital elements of Christianity intentionally or with malice. Rather, I

believe they do so out of a well-intentioned but ultimately self-serving need for validation of their own insecure and limited understanding of the Bible, the life of Jesus, prayer, and relationship with the Divine. Our need for certainty and our need to be seen as right handicaps our efforts to describe or explain these elements of the Holy because the essential nature of these elements defies our efforts to contain or explain them in words. Words are metaphors that describe limited aspects of things but they are never the thing itself. In the words of a song I wrote several years ago: *God is not a question to be answered.*¹⁶ We cannot provide answers to questions we cannot comprehend.

I believe our dilemma traces back several hundred years to the so-called *Enlightenment*, which was a century or so where humanity began its ever-growing obsession with all things intellect. French philosopher Rene Descartes set the tone for the period with his famous statement, “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁷ The common understanding became, “My life has meaning *because I think.*” In other words, the purpose of our existence centered around our ability to reason and explain. While I do not discount the value of thinking, it does seem we have moved the intellect into a precarious position of exclusive prominence it does not deserve. It is interesting that the birth of Protestantism in the West occurred during this same period in protest against some of the non-intellectual doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The invention of the printing press,

¹⁶ Greg Hildenbrand, *Enter the Mystery*, sound recording, 2014.
www.ContemplatingGrace.com

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito,_ergo_sum

which made sacred texts like the Bible widely available, combined with access to education that taught large swaths of people to read, converged during this period to contribute to the growing infatuation with words and all things intellectual that continues unabated today.

One byproduct of the rise of Protestantism was the birth of *intellectual Christianity*, which I believe was a significant precursor to today's *Churchianity*. While the Roman Catholic church certainly had and has plenty of intellectual elements, Protestants attempted to reimagine many of these *intellectual* aspects while disavowing many of the *experiential* elements of Catholicism and other spiritual traditions. To oversimplify, what resulted was a movement toward the *thought* of Christianity and away from the *experience* of Christianity. Protestants taught *about* God instead of leading members to an *experience of* God. Many protestants see the Bible as the literal, spoken word of God – meaning God dictated it and human authors simply wrote it down. Catholics believed God spoke through the Pope. When Protestants declared the Bible as *inerrant*, Catholics pronounced the Pope as *inerrant*, and a lot of intellectual and *Churchianity-like* silliness followed. Many Protestants believe the preaching and hearing of the biblical message, as interpreted and presented by their preachers, is the most important element of worship. Unfortunately, what is preached is usually an individually-interpreted intellectualization of the Bible message, not unlike my writing of this book. While that can certainly be helpful, it can also distract seekers from what should be the primary focus of Christianity – patterning our lives after Jesus, or living the Gospel *experientially*.

Christianity is as much about what we cannot know intellectually – what must remain unknown – as what we can know. The intellect is always focused on what we can *know*. We can know that God is love and God is present, although the specifics of that love and presence elude us. We can also know that God is mysterious and rebuffs our attempts to define, limit, or become overly familiar with or intellectual about the Divine nature. When we can describe something we feel we know it. Describing is an intellectual exercise and has little to do with truth or understanding. To truly know something we must know it beyond the space between our ears – we must *feel* it; we must *know* it to be true with every fiber of our being, even and especially when we cannot put our understanding into words. The deeper our knowing, the less likely we are to be able to describe it, and the less likely we are to even want to try. Deep knowledge is known beyond description. This is exactly why Jesus's life is so important to us as an embodied, non-intellectualized example of how God acts in the flesh.

Intellectualizing Christ

Thinking *about* Christianity requires significantly less from us than *embodying* Christianity. It is a whole lot easier to think about something than to become it. The sacrifice is minimal, often no more than an hour or so on a Sunday morning. I remember as a child how difficult it was to sit still on the hard pews and listen to the sermon, scripture, and prayers, not to mention the expectation to act interested and engaged. It is even hard as an adult. That the

expectation of faithful church membership for many of us is to sit quietly and listen is a sign that our religion has become something alien to the rest of life, which is to say it has become unnatural and non-participative.

We are obsessed with thinking about things and, indeed, our intellectual understanding of something has become the gold standard for knowing it. We have lost sight of the other centers of intelligence that make up who we are and are critical to developing understanding, primarily the heart and body centers. Our *heart* center senses and expresses through feelings, emotions, passions, and relational intelligence. The *body* center senses and expresses through movement, muscle memory, and intuition. Our five senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste – feed information into our various centers of intelligence and each center processes the information in its own unique way. The intellectual center is not only the slowest of the three to process and respond, but it is also capable of processing only a fraction of the amount of information coming to it than the other centers. This can be witnessed by how quickly our foot hits the brake before our brain realizes that another car has pulled in front of us. Such a reaction does not come from our thinking mind. Not only is it our slowest center of intelligence, but our intellect is also the least capable of processing events as a whole. Rather, it *samples* events, taking in and processing its environment in bits and pieces.

Our intellect is always a step behind the other centers. Most significantly, *the intellect does not experience directly*. The intellect *describes* what just happened and so it always lags behind reality. The heart and body

centers *experience* what is happening now. The intellect *analyzes* and *judges* what has happened, while the body and heart *engage* with what is happening. The intellect cannot be centered in the present moment, only the heart and body can do that. Thus, intellectual Christianity is incapable of perceiving God in the moment, which is unfortunate since the present moment is the only place we can have an encounter with God. And this is the core dilemma of much of Churchianity. It thrives in an intellectual environment because non-intellectually converted people threaten and often abandon the institution of the church. Churchianity sets the expectation that intellectual understanding is somehow tied to salvation. We witness this with Jesus in his criticisms of the religious leaders and misguided practices of his day. It got him killed.

The significance of the move toward intellectualizing Christianity, then, is that our relationship with God has become more of something we think about and describe than about something we allow to sink in and remake us from the inside out. Our propensity toward teaching and understanding the Bible literally is a manifestation of attempting to be reborn in our heads without changing our hearts or bodies.

What are some non-intellectual worship elements that speak directly to the heart and body but have been removed or minimized by many Christian, particularly Protestant churches today? They include the use of incense; extended periods of silence; dance and other bodily movements; the incorporation of art, poetry, and drama into worship and worship settings; chanting; meditative walking; and many more. Music

is a key element in most worship services and speaks to the heart and body, but many churches discourage those who try to move with the music. In my church experiences, anyone who would dare stand and move as the Spirit moves in the music would be frowned upon (behind their backs of course). That is not the case in many black churches or Indigenous Peoples' sacred ceremonies. There the music flows freely from the musicians to and through the bodies of the worshippers. It is bodily worship and defies intellectual explanation or understanding. It is an *experience*, not a description. Our heart and body centers have no time for or patience with descriptions. They are focused on the *now*; our intellect focuses on the *then*.

In each of the four Gospels, as well as in the Old Testament, some variation of this command is written: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* It is an oft-repeated caution against worshipping only with our minds.

Hijacking the Bible

One way the institutional church has hijacked the Bible is through its emphasis on select passages that reinforce its dogmatic idiosyncrasies instead of the overall message conveyed throughout the Bible, which is one of inclusion, love, and forgiveness. Despite its many stories of violence, murder, adultery, rape, slavery, and every sort of evil humankind has waged upon itself, the Bible's overriding message consistently replays the Israelites' movement from oppression in Egypt to freedom in the Promised

Land. Slavery to freedom; misery to joy; woundedness to wholeness; crucifixion to resurrection. There is no sugar-coating the hardships of the journey, but there is also no denying the liberating grace woven into its fabric.

To illustrate how some churches hijack the Bible, making it aversive to many spiritual seekers, I will reflect on homosexuality, which is one of the most divisive issues among people within, between, and outside of churches. This, for an issue only tangentially addressed in a handful of places in the Bible. Tellingly, homosexuality is *not* an issue that Jesus addressed. I say *tellingly* to hint that perhaps Jesus did not address it because he did not consider it an issue. Instead, he addressed issues like healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and including the outcasts (which almost certainly included members of the LGBTQ+ community of his day).

A sample of the Old Testament passages used to condemn homosexuality include this from Leviticus 20:13: *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination...* Likewise, the few verses in the New Testament used to establish a prohibition against homosexuality include 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: *Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites...none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.* Interestingly, the term *homosexuality* is not used in the Bible. This is likely because there were no socially acceptable same-sex relationships until recently in human history. Same-sex relationships, which were certainly present, had to remain hidden.

A church in the town where I grew up focused its entire public ministry on the issue of

homosexuality, preaching its incompatibility with what they believed was God's will. Even many less-homophobically-obsessed churches hold that a person must renounce their practice of homosexuality before they can gain full membership into the church. All of this from organizations who proclaim themselves followers of Jesus, who was mum on the subject. It is intriguing how many churches develop a laser-like focus on homosexuality while largely overlooking the multitude of other common "sins" that are much more of a focus in scripture. The double-standard is breath-taking.

I believe there are many reasons for a church's choice to condemn homosexuality while issuing a pass on other sexual behaviors condemned in scripture. One reason could be that some church leaders (and biblical authors and interpreters) find homosexual behavior threatening out of fear of their own, subconscious homosexual leanings. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, had a lot to say on that subject. The apparent biblical prohibitions of the practice certainly motivate some churches, but I feel they need to answer for why they single out homosexuality for special exclusions and not divorce, adultery, or lustful thoughts (not that I believe *any* of these should be cause for exclusion from church participation either). The propensity towards condemning the sexual orientation of a minority while overlooking behaviors common to large swaths of the majority is, I believe, a product of Churchianity. Most churches can survive by excluding a few, but not by excluding majorities.

It appears to me that most of the biblical texts that are used to condemn homosexuality were written

to condemn forms of sexual depravity where sex was used as a show of power over another, as opposed to a loving, uniting expression between two people in a committed relationship. For example, the soldiers in Sodom publicly raped conquered foreign soldiers as an act of humiliation before they killed them. It is where the term *sodomy* originated. Clearly, this is not what God intended from the sacred gift of sex, any more than is sex with children. Acts of love cannot be forced upon another and when they are, sexual expression in any form becomes an abomination.

Because some churches adopt anti-homosexual doctrine, many seekers assume *all* churches adopt such beliefs, and so all churches are rejected. Because those seekers know the basis upon which some churches reject homosexuality comes from the Bible, they also reject the Bible. Whether the issue is homosexuality, ethnic privilege, or other divisive issues, some churches hijack the Bible by interpreting and presenting it for their own purposes, thus making it an undesirable and inaccessible tool for non-churched spiritual seekers.

Hijacking Prayer

I am passionate about church hijackings because whenever the church (meaning *a* church, denomination, or any organization presenting itself as a gathering of God's people) does or declares something that excludes a person or group of people *and* holds itself out as a purveyor of God's gifts of the Bible, prayer, or other tools of spiritual practice, they make those tools of worship less accessible and acceptable to non-churched spiritual seekers. In other

words, spiritual seekers who reject the church because of its exclusive and often irrational stances often *also* reject the Bible, prayer, and other tools of worship *by association*. This is tragic because the Bible, prayer, and other spiritual practices do not *belong* to the church. Rather, they belong to seekers after God, and the absence of such tools makes one's search more challenging. This is not so much a problem of the church *per se*, but of church leaders who often limit the desirability of relevant tools of spiritual insight by using them publicly in limited, self-serving, or other biased ways.

Inappropriate uses of prayer are particularly vexing to me. While communal prayer can be useful and important, personal prayer, as in a *one-to-one-being-in-the-presence-of-God* is indispensable. I would argue that for a person who is diligently seeking a relationship with the Divine, the value of learning and practicing personal prayer cannot be overstated, yet few churches teach it. Jesus said as much in his *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7). He condemned those who publicly prayed *so that they may be seen by others*. He repeatedly called the church leaders of his day *hypocrites* and encouraged his followers not to pray as they prayed. It is too easy for church members to sit back and allow their preachers to handle prayer for them. While this is not completely depraved, it does not move people closer to becoming followers of Christ because it does not lead them into a relationship with the Divine. Rather, we need to be taught to pray by going “into (our) room and (shutting) the door and (praying) to (God) who is in

secret,”¹⁸ as Jesus instructed. Once we establish a personal connection, the communal prayers offered in worship will be a complement to our personal prayer life instead of the entirety of our prayer life.

Praying for others is an interesting form of prayer with at least two manifestations. We often tell those who are in a difficult phase of life that we will pray for them, meaning we will ask God to bless, heal, bring peace, or provide whatever we feel they need. The other variation of praying for others is praying *in place of* another. A number of years ago my wife had a serious and potentially fatal medical condition. Our children were young and I was staring at the possibility of becoming a widower and a single parent. My schedule was so full and I was so preoccupied that I found it impossible to settle my mind and body sufficiently to effectively enter a time of personal prayer, even though I needed it desperately. It was during this time I realized that when people said they were praying for me, there was a sense that they were praying *for* me and *instead of* me. In other words, at least some of the benefits of personal prayer were flowing to me even though I was incapable of entering personal prayer myself.

When churches appear to treat prayer as their exclusive domain, or misuse it for self-promotion, those who reject *Churchianity* will also reject prayer. When spiritual seekers reject the loud prayers spoken with pride and certainty by church leaders for the masses, they are standing *with* Jesus in their rejection. Unfortunately, disregarding prayer because one disregards church is the proverbial *throwing the baby out*

¹⁸ Matthew 6:5-6.

with the bathwater. Prayer is a necessary part of our spiritual search; church can be helpful but is not required.

Hijacking Jesus

Jesus was *not* a Christian; Jesus was a Jew. The Christian church, as we know it today, evolved after the time of Jesus and over many generations. In the same way, the Buddha was not a Buddhist, Abraham was not a Jew, nor was Mohammed a Muslim. The organized systems of thought and practice that were inspired by some of history's greatest religious and philosophical teachers are often confused with their namesake, but they are not the same. Becoming a member of a church does not make one a Christian – a follower of the Christ – any more than going to a Buddhist temple makes one a Buddhist – a follower of the Buddha – or going to a Mosque makes one a Muslim – a follower of Mohammed.

Jesus's early followers referred to their movement as *The Way*. Interestingly, Jesus never asked that an organized religion be created in his name. Rather, he asked that we make disciples, or followers of him and his approach to life *regardless of our religious beliefs*. Likewise, he never asked to be worshipped, probably knowing that worshipping someone is a whole lot easier and less impactful than following them. The creation of the church might have been one way early followers felt they could make disciples. As with most organizations, however, the organization took on a life of its own and drifted increasingly farther away from the life of Jesus. Thus, *Churchianity* was born.

That Jesus was a wise and great teacher is not disputed by Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or others. That Jesus was God's *only* son is where churchianity departs from other organized religions. Yet, I would argue that was not a point of importance to Jesus. He referred to himself as the *Son of Man*, which among its various meanings includes an enlightened, evolved, or mature human being. It was others who referred to him as the *Son of God*, implying equality with God. He did, however, claim *oneness* with God, even as he prayed we would become one with him and with God.¹⁹

In addition to hijacking the Bible and prayer, the church has also hijacked Jesus by making him, his earthly mission, and his teachings into something non-churched folks are reluctant to take seriously. It is common for non-churched and non-categorized persons to explore the teachings of the Buddha, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, and others, but they often resist the life and teachings of Jesus because of the judgmental baggage the church has attached to his name.

Despite the typical narrative, we can make disciples of people *without* converting them to today's version of Christianity. We must first, however, allow Jesus's teachings to stand on their own without the church. We must remember we were directed to make *disciples of Jesus*, not disciples of the church.

¹⁹ See John 17.

Chapter 3

Spiritual, not Religious

Buddhist meditation...seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas... Thomas Merton²⁰

One of the underlying components that differentiates Churchianity from Christianity is the distinction between religion and spirituality. My sense is that the divergence has only recently, say over the last few decades, become as stark as it is today. An increasingly common response to questions about one's religious beliefs is this: "I am spiritual, but not religious." Typically, this means that one believes in God or a Higher Power but shies away from participation in organized religion. Right or wrong, the term *religion* has come to be associated exclusively with churches. Today, regardless of denomination, worship practices, doctrinal beliefs, teaching, fellowship, or outreach, if it is associated with church, increasingly falls under the category of religion.

Spirituality, on the other hand, has much broader and less well-defined or organized

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, The Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc., 1968, p. 38.

implications. Spirituality, in general, focuses on experiences that are largely beyond reason and logic. A spiritual experience may or may not make logical sense because it harkens to parts of us other than the intellect, be it emotional, instinctual, or another subconscious part of our being. Spiritual practices may range from something as secular as breathing exercises to yoga to various rituals and incantations that are not church sanctioned or sponsored. Particularly in the rise of Protestantism, many of the traditional practices of the Roman Catholic church were shunned. The statues, paintings, and other icons used for focused prayer and wordless reflection were considered idols. The veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was considered goddess worship. The use of incense was suspected as a nod to paganism. Chanting inspired associations with the occult and witchcraft. Poetry, non-biblical art, dance, and other artistic expressions were excommunicated to somewhere outside of the church. Protestantism, essentially from its beginning, focused on teaching *about* God instead of trying to lead people to an experience *of* God.

Many common spiritual practices today come from those formerly common religious practices, often under different names. Silent prayer, a staple of the spiritually contemplative life, is often referred to as meditation. The intent of both silent prayer and meditation is to silence our internal chatter, even though each has numerous variations. Meditation, however, is a more acceptable term to the religion-averse crowd than is prayer. The use of incense and fragrant oils, liturgical dance and reverential movement, rhythmic chanting, extended periods of silence, and many other *experiential* forms of worship

have been largely removed from the world of religion and relegated to the realms of spirituality.

Religion, particularly in Protestant churches, began minimizing most things that did not appeal to the intellect, while attempting to rationalize what it could not reject. Sermons, instead of being short homilies that were a relatively minor part of the larger Mass, became the primary focus of worship, often consuming half or more of the service time. Charismatic preachers – those who hold audiences captive with their speaking prowess – woo large audiences with extra-biblical, intellectualized commentary on their limited topics of choice, often black-and-white descriptions of the “correct” way to interpret select Bible passages. Of course, their topic of choice typically includes the sinfulness of mankind, the threat of condemnation to hell for eternity, and the salvation only available through the church, especially *their* church. Never mind that these topics are, arguably, of minor significance in the Bible as a whole. The experience of a mysterious, unfathomable, loving, and inclusive God becomes lost in their concrete descriptions of an angry, violent, vengeful God – descriptions designed more to fill pews with fearful parishioners than to discern the loving acceptance of God.

In some cases, explanations and explorations about God are necessary and helpful. Some events in life, however, either defy an intellectual explanation or are unacceptably cheapened by one. As we experience those types of indescribable events, religion often struggles with its inability to offer an appropriate response.

Literally Metaphorical

Just about everything that is not church related and that acknowledges or seeks a Higher Power or otherwise attempts to awaken something intangible within ourselves falls into the realm of *spirituality*. Spirituality may include activities that seek to put us in touch with God or with something within ourselves that feels purer and is more transcendent than our egoic selves, which tend to be obsessed with materialism and other earthly matters that deteriorate over time. Today's religion focuses more on *explaining* God. In that sense, what we seek in both religion and spirituality is something eternal, something immortal. Spirituality and religion both propose to point us to a higher state of consciousness and awareness than we believe ourselves to be at today. In the Western world, interest in spiritualism is on the rise while participation in religious organizations is on the decline. For some, myself included, both religion and spirituality hold value.

Interestingly, the religious organizations that appear to be thriving are the ones that lean towards the evangelical, fundamental, literal end of the spectrum. That end of the religious world proclaims a higher level of intellectual certainty in its teachings, such as believing the words of the Bible to be literally true, as if dictated by God, as opposed to the words of the Bible pointing to truth in an allegorical or metaphorical manner. I often wonder if the attraction to a seemingly stable, fundamentalistic theology is related to the insecurity and instability so many people experience in the world today. The allegorical and metaphorical ways of seeking truth are more

common in the realms of spirituality, where there is a greater acceptance of uncertainty and unknowing. Many formerly active church goers have since turned away from religion – some to spiritualism, but others have rejected everything religious or spiritual as irrelevant and either meaningless or beyond their ability to attain. Many who once sought solace and personal growth from church now find themselves spiritually adrift.

People shun the church for many reasons. The moment I was old enough that my mother could no longer force me to go to church, I stopped, at least for a couple of decades. I saw church-goers as hypocrites, acting one way on Sunday mornings and in completely different ways the rest of the week. Now that I have become a hypocrite myself, I see things differently and with more grace. I, like everyone else, am simply trying to be a better version of myself today than I was yesterday. Some days go better than others. The church is far from perfect, but it does form an imperfect community that provides an opportunity for the weaknesses of one to be compensated for by the strengths of another. This, I believe, is a critical piece to understanding *salvation* – that we were never intended to be perfect or complete as single, independent persons, but that we find perfection and completion in community with other imperfect people. Unfortunately, few churches understand or organize around this principle. Too many are focused on individual sins and individual salvation.

Among the reasons some people avoid the church today are atrocities such as sexual and emotional abuse by church leaders, the condemnation

of swaths of humanity under the guise of God's will, the self-proclaimed position of being the chosen children of God, and the teachings of theologies that do not mesh with real-life experiences. Some denominations focus on certain portions of church doctrine while others emphasize other portions. It can be confusing to understand what the church stands for when individual churches promote or condemn different things.

Among the reasons some people shun spirituality are its reluctance to provide clear-cut rules for living, its blurred lines with the perceived evils of the occult and witchcraft, its counter-cultural shunning of materialism, and the fact that much of it seems more consistent with Eastern than Western philosophies and cultures. For those with a strong intellectual bent, much of spirituality can seem otherworldly because it does not necessarily appeal to reason. It is experiential instead of logical.

Regardless of their reasons, increasing numbers of people seek spiritual growth outside of the church. Reintegrating the broader views and practices of spirituality with religion may help to reignite the church as a relevant and meaningful community for greater numbers of people.

Limiting the Faithful

What I am calling *Churchianity* in these pages refers to the practices of the Christian church that have become more about the perpetuation of the church itself, as well as promoting the limited and limiting beliefs of its leaders, than about the faithful following of the teachings of its namesake, Jesus of

Nazareth. Again, as I have mentioned, Jesus never told us to *worship* him; Jesus directed us to *follow* him – to live as he lived and to treat others as he treated others. Following is a much higher and more difficult standard than worshipping because it requires far more from us. How so many churches have developed doctrines and practices that stray so far from the will of God as displayed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth is nearly beyond comprehension. My sense is that much church doctrine has developed along the lines of what allows the church to contain and retain its members within certain behavioral boundaries that may or may not be consistent with the life of Jesus as told in the Gospels. Unfortunately, being contained within the limited boundaries of a church or other belief system can prevent us from experiencing God in a wider, more expansive context. We settle for the mundane and known instead of reaching for the spectacular and unknown. Worse yet, we completely miss the spectacular and unknown that resides within the mundane and known of our everyday lives.

Granted, that so many people reject the teachings of Jesus, prayer, God, and the Bible because they reject the church is as much a sign of laziness on the part of the rejecting people as it is a nod to wrongdoing by the church. One does not have to read far into the teachings of Jesus to know he addressed life outside of religious life as much or more than life within it. As such, most of Jesus's teachings stand alone, with or without the church. When a person gives the church the authority to claim the life of Jesus, prayer, God, and the teachings of the Bible as its own exclusive property, that person has

relinquished profound resources that could otherwise help them in breaking out of the old molds they may be stuck within. Following Jesus on a path toward spiritual growth and wholeness requires sacrificing sameness and stagnation.

Because churchianity seeks to tie our spiritual growth and development to the church, the teachings that are the foundation upon which the church is built get thrown out with the outdated structure built upon that foundation. Because the church has largely hijacked the teaching of Jesus, prayer, God, and the Bible, those vital teachings typically fall into the realm of religion and out of the realm of spirituality, to the degradation of both. Is it the responsibility of the church to adapt to the needs of the people, or the responsibility of the distanced people to adapt to the needs of the church? Jesus chose to meet people where they were instead of forcing them to come to him or to the Temple on his terms.

Spiritual? Yes. Religious? Maybe.

Various studies suggest that roughly a quarter of all Americans do not identify with a religious tradition, Christian or otherwise. The numbers are even more striking when considering young adults. A 2012 study found that “about 75% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious.’”²¹ This rapidly expanding group of people, young and old, are also called the *Nones*, meaning when asked for a religious affiliation

²¹ <https://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/25/opinion/la-oe-clayton-emergingchurch-20120325>, accessed June 26, 2021.

they answer, “None.” Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mainline churches had lost a third to a half of their members when compared with 1960.

It remains to be seen what churches will look like as the pandemic eases. It seems unlikely that people will return in unprecedented numbers. The question is how many will return at all. If a church neither retained nor established its relevance during the pandemic, why would anyone expect it to gain relevance post-pandemic, at least not without significant changes? Church members from older generations, when church membership was the norm, are dying off and not being replaced by younger generations, at least not in comparable numbers. This *falling away from the church* is, in my opinion, not a rejection of spirituality, nor does it reflect a lack of belief in God. Rather, it reflects disillusionment with the current presentation of spirituality and the corporate worship of God as embodied by the church. The current trends are a rejection of Churchianity, not necessarily Christianity.

Benedictine sister Joan Chittister distinguishes between spirituality and religion by describing the Christian religion as “the organized institutional expression of the following of Jesus.”²² She says, “Spirituality, on the other hand, is the personal expression of that following of Jesus.”²³ In other words, both a spiritual community and personal practice are required to progress along our spiritual quest. “We could go to church every week for every year of our entire lives and never develop our own

²² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-is-prayer-a-conversation_603667, accessed June 27, 2021.

²³ Ibid.

spirituality. We could jump through every religious hoop and, at the end of the day, still not have any real spiritual consciousness.”²⁴ I believe Sister Joan nails the issue behind declining church participation in this statement – that even many people who attend church regularly are failing to experience growth in spiritual consciousness. Where are they to learn their responsibility to develop their personal expression of Jesus if not from the church? She concludes, “Religion is meant to lead us to a spiritual life...but religion doesn’t necessarily lead us to spirituality. We have to do that for ourselves.”²⁵ Her point is as insightful as it is brilliant. Religion alone, meaning church, cannot of itself make us spiritual. Personal spiritual practices cannot do it either, however, because we also need the “organized institutional expression” and supportive community of the church to arrive at something beyond our own personal and narcissistic understandings of what it means to be a child of God. Both a communal and a personal expression of Christianity are necessary.

That the church has fallen short in its task of being the institutional expression of following Jesus is apparent. In addition, it is not leading people to the personal spiritual transformation they seek or need. The church is not offering a transformation worthy of putting up with the imperfections and frustrations that accompany the institutional expression of anything. No wonder increasing numbers of people classify themselves among the *nones*. The quandary is that if the church is not taking the lead on either

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

front, where are people to turn for spiritual development? Should the church relinquish its role in spiritual development, holding tight to its old traditions and restrictive practices, or should it confess that this is an area where it has fallen short and adapt accordingly?

In my opinion, the church should embrace the arenas of spirituality that are filling needs and hungers the church has vacated. Primary among those needs are religious and spiritual practices that appeal to the non-intellectual parts of our beings. For me, that begins with shorter sermons and more music; fewer creeds and more evocative poetry; shorter spoken prayers and more silence; integrating interpretive dance, incense, and other non-verbal worship elements. Why not offer yoga classes, instruction in silent and other forms of personal and community prayer, embrace mindfulness, model presence, and focus hard on the needs of the community – especially those needs with no reasonable expectation for a pay back in increased membership numbers or collections? Caring for immigrants, feeding the hungry (including spiritual hunger), tending to suffering – this is the stuff of Christianity, if the life and teachings of Jesus are to be followed.

Rebalancing Religion and Spirituality

As we ponder why increasing numbers of people consider themselves spiritual but not religious, one might conclude that something in the arenas of spirituality and religion has gone out of balance. Whenever something goes out of balance, some sort

of corrective action must occur, either with conscious intention or as a seemingly random series of involuntary corrections. This sort of forced rebalancing seems to be occurring in spirituality and religion today. The church finds itself out of step with the realities of daily life and tries to increase its grip on a seemingly more stable past, when church membership was the norm for most folks, and resorting to forms of churchianity under the guise of Christianity. One manifestation of the church's attempts to hold onto its unbalanced past is seen in its increasingly partisan political involvement.

The Christian church first got into bed with the government in the 4th Century when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine. This began a long-standing and uneasy relationship between the church and State that continues today. The church agrees, often indirectly, to operate within the laws of the land, as established and enforced by the government, and the government allows the church to do whatever it does, as long as the church does not upset the status quo too significantly. Many Christians in Constantine's time felt it was wrong, as in *un-Christ-like*, to get in bed with the oppressive and violent Roman government, just as many Christians today believe it is wrong to portray the United States as a Christian nation. Numerous religious sects rejected this marriage of the church and State in Constantine's day, either moving outside the bounds of the Empire or laying low within it. These groups included the Desert Fathers and Mothers, as well as the Celtic and Coptic Christians. Today, perhaps, people are simply deserting the church.

In a past generation, the Reverend Billy Graham became the first Christian leader to make regular public appearances with American presidents, beginning in the 1950s with President Eisenhower. It started as a public affirmation of and religious blessing for our national leaders. It allowed the government to show its tolerance for and support of the free expression of religion in the country. It quickly devolved into a public relations stunt with church leaders trying to ride the coat-tails of politicians for personal gain and politicians attempting to gain votes by appearing with well-connected church leaders. The underlying and not-so-subtle reality was and is a compromising of loyalties and priorities. The Christian church, as the institutional embodiment of following Christ, owes its first loyalty to God, as manifested in the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. The government owes its first loyalty to the people it governs, Christian and non-Christian alike. Conflict between the two institutions is inevitable since they serve different masters, at least in theory. That conflict is often side-stepped by overlooking and/or justifying the questionable actions of the other, which allows both church and government to continue with their comfortable status quo, often at the cost of both personal and institutional integrity. In the process, the church has abdicated one of its primary roles as the social conscience of the nation. *Christian nationalism* should be an oxymoron since the Bible clearly portrays God as a supporter of people, not governments. And yet, some churches hold the American flag in a reverence equal to or above their reverence for God. Others

have pronounced the United States as the new promised land, home of the true children of God.

My understanding of the life of Jesus leads me to believe Christians should hold caring for the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the lost, and the outcasts of society as their primary focus. Social justice holds the key to the kingdom of heaven, not wealth and prosperity, and certainly not military might. Not surprisingly, social justice is a major fault line between the church and the government. If politicians who consider themselves Christian committed to addressing and solving these most basic of issues of human need first, there might be a justification for labeling America a Christian nation. Author and recovering evangelical pastor Brian McLaren writes, “What if (Jesus) didn’t come to start a new religion – but rather came to start a political, social, religious, artistic, economic, intellectual, and spiritual revolution that would give birth to a new world?”²⁶ Jesus intended to inspire a revolution that would bring a new world that keeps its focus on first things first – people over nations, basic needs over rampant materiality, inclusion over exclusion. Such a revolution must stretch beyond the church walls and necessarily includes political activism. The church, however, cannot remain a silent partner or a complicit supporter of government-sanctioned injustice or oppression and still call itself Christian.

²⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything*, Thomas Nelson, 2006, pp. 3-4.

Preparing a Way

The term *spirituality* is derived from the concept of Spirit, generally meaning *not physical*. In broad terms, spirituality seeks to integrate the part of us that is spirit with the part of us that is physical. Interestingly, religion seeks to do the same thing. The word *religion* has the same root as the word *ligament*, so the shared meaning implies a binding together or joining. In our bodies, ligaments join one bone to another. In religion, the joining is the spirit with the physical. Of course there is no actual separation between what is spirit and what is physical except as is perceived by our own limited perception. So the rejoining is an act of conscious awareness – aligning our awareness with reality – more than an actual structural change.

The early passages of each of the four Gospels tell the story of John the Baptist, a prophetic religious figure who immediately preceded Jesus. He claimed his ministry as one of preparing the way for Jesus. John gained his title as “the Baptist” because he baptized people in the Jordan River as a symbol of washing their old selves away so a new being could emerge, a new birth, a rejoining of their origins with their current reality. John pronounced that while he baptized with water, the one coming after him – Jesus – would baptize with the Holy Spirit and *fire*. There is a connection between the Spirit and fire that is referenced throughout scripture. This fire, however, is not a physically consuming fire, but a purifying fire that does not destroy the physical creation. Rather, it purifies the body, reuniting the physical with its spiritual roots. We see this type of fire illustrated with

Moses at the burning bush.²⁷ The connection between spirit and fire is described again when the Spirit overcomes the disciples after Jesus's death as tongues of fire.²⁸ It is one thing to be rejoined with water and another entirely to be rejoined with fire. The latter is of an exponentially higher level of intensity than the former.

In one of his online *Daily Meditations*, Father Richard Rohr discussed the difference between knowledge that is cold and knowledge that is hot. He writes, "The spiritual truth is this: there is a difference between knowledge 'on ice' and knowledge 'on fire.' For many Christians, their belief is often just knowledge 'on ice,' not experiential, first-hand knowledge, which is knowledge 'on fire.'"²⁹ Rohr continues, "...there is a difference between intellectual belief and real trust. There is a difference between *talking* about transformation...and stepping out in confidence to live a loving life."³⁰ This difference has become the dividing line between religion and spirituality, even as both profess to lead us to the same unifying types of growth. Religion has come to focus on the intellectual, *talking about* aspect of our life with God. Spirituality, on the other hand, focuses more on leading people to a *direct experience* of and with the Living God.

It would be overly simplistic to say that religion teaches cold knowledge and spirituality teaches hot knowledge, but I believe there is an element of truth there. To use the analogy of falling in

²⁷ Exodus 3:2-6.

²⁸ Acts 2:1-4.

²⁹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditation*, July 7, 2021, www.cac.org.

³⁰ Ibid.

love: we can read books *about* love, we can observe people in love, we can write books and poetry *about* love, yet never have the actual, all-consuming, often-messy experience of being *in* love. The intellectual, or cold knowledge of love, even in abundance, is many levels of intensity less than the hot knowledge, which is the actual experience of being in love. If our experience of God is primarily intellectual – listening to sermons and reading and discussing the Bible and commentaries – I suggest our knowledge is cold. Unfortunately, this is the primary type of knowledge offered by many, if not most churches today.

An art teacher once told me that the color red brings everything else to life in a painting. Red brings the *heat* and *passion*; it puts *spirit* into otherwise inanimate colors. There is a haunting passage in the book of Revelation where an angel of God is assessing the churches in Asia Minor. To the church in Laodicea the angel says, “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot...So, because you are lukewarm...I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”³¹ To continue the analogy, cold knowledge may be preferable to lukewarm, but hot knowledge – the knowledge from actual experience – is where the *life* abides. And this, I fear, is where Churchianity falls short. Cold knowledge is safer and asks little of us. Churches may offer solid knowledge through teaching, but unless it is also sprinkled with a spicey, enticing, and experiential slice of life, the knowledge is disconnected from its roots and so it quickly withers and dies.

³¹ Revelation 3:14-16.

Chapter 4

Degrees of Separation

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Matthew 5:38-39

If being a Christian means being a follower of Jesus, it seems that Christians should be taking their most basic instructions from Jesus and Jesus's life, at least as much as is possible. This is a challenging charge since Jesus is no longer physically present. True, we have the biblical record. Even the four Gospels, however, which are the primary record of what Jesus said and did, were written by people who lived a generation or more after Jesus's death. It is unlikely any of the Gospels were written by authors who actually heard what he said or directly witnessed what he did. Rather, they are compilations of oral histories passed down to those who were later followers. As such, even the Gospels are removed from Jesus by at least a degree, and possibly several degrees, of separation.

I used to think that *red-letter Bibles* were a little odd. They are Bibles that have everything recorded as something Jesus said printed in red. It makes the words of Jesus (as remembered, understood, recorded, and interpreted) stand out. Although I do not use a red-letter Bible, I understand the efficacy of one. If we want to follow Jesus, why wouldn't we want his words to stand out from everything else in

the Bible? If Jesus is our foundational source of guidance then everything else is context or commentary. Not that context and commentary are unimportant, but they are always one or more degrees separated from the source, meaning they are someone else's experience or interpretation.

I believe one of the primary drivers of Christianity toward Churchianity has been the extent to which we are distracted away from what is primary and toward that which is secondary. We find ourselves increasingly drawn away from the teachings and life of Jesus by many degrees of separation – enough so that others may have difficulty seeing the life of Jesus reflected in the lives of the churches and members who bear his title. And let's be honest, trying to live as Jesus lived and pattern our lives after his is *hard!* It is much more comfortable to live with a few of degrees of separation from him.

Degrees of separation are important considerations because they mean the actual words and/or events we use for guidance are not only separated by time and space, but the sacred texts, like the Bible, have gone through one or more iterations of interpretation and bias. Today, we are dependent on the accuracy of the memories of the biblical authors, their degree of understanding of what was passed along to them, and their ability to effectively communicate what they received. These degrees of separation are magnified by the various translations between the primary languages in use at the time until today, from the Aramaic that Jesus likely spoke, to Greek, to Latin, to English. Each *degree of separation* modifies and biases the actual events or words of the source, at least to an extent. None of which is to

imply that the Bible and other sacred texts are not worthy of our study. But it is important to understand how what we are reading came about, especially if we are tempted to apply the texts literally, to interpret them as factual, or to use them to judge others.

Interestingly, Jesus took liberties with his interpretation of scripture and did not uphold everything that was written in scripture, at least not as it was written. Rather, he reinterpreted scriptural presentations of God and God's will, modifying what was written in the texts, often significantly, for his followers. One example of this occurs in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-48, where he takes passages from scripture (not all of which remain in today's version of the Old Testament) and refashions them. Jesus would say, "You have heard it said that..." and he would quote the instructions given in an ancient text. This would be followed by, "...but I say..." and he would then contradict or rewrite the text. In the example at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus had quoted from Exodus 21:24, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Then he responded, "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." The Old Testament law was one of violence in return for violence. Jesus's refashioning was non-violence in response to violence, a starkly clear contradiction of the law. Keeping this in mind, we must be careful with our applications of the biblical record beyond and including Jesus's words and actions. Many people are willing to provide such clarity and guidance, but I think we must always weigh their certainty against our understanding of Jesus's life and teachings.

Operators Are Standing By...

In a land long ago and far away when my siblings and cousins gathered at my grandparents' house, we could watch whatever we wanted on television under two conditions: (1) it was showing on one of the three available channels, and (2) it did not conflict with the Evening News, the Lawrence Welk Show, or a Billy Graham revival. Although by today's standards our options were severely limited, the inability to watch something when Billy Graham was on TV was particularly galling to me. My memory is of a tall man with wavy hair and a strong southern accent who stood before enormous crowds preaching *fire and brimstone* sermons with certainty and resolve to sinners in need of salvation. He always had a *dead-cat Bible* (a leather-bound Bible that fell over his palm like a ... well, you get the picture) in one hand as he gestured accusingly with the other.

As it turns out, and much to my chagrin, my central message in these chapters is not that far from Billy Graham's central message: we *must* develop a personal relationship with Christ, and just being a church member is not sufficient. I do, however, believe my circuitous path leading to that conclusion differs from Reverend Graham's path. Even so, I was taken aback recently when watching one of his old sermons by how much I agree with his conclusion regardless of his reasoning in getting there. He said, "Religion without a personal encounter with Christ will not save the soul. It won't bring the peace that

your soul longs for.”³² Personally, I do not believe our souls need saving; rather, our conscious self needs to awaken to its already existing and eternal union with the Divine. To so awaken, however, we need to awaken to our personal connection to the Christ.

With respect to the current topic of *degrees of separation*, I think Rev. Graham’s insistence on developing a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” is spot on. We simply must find ways to awaken ourselves to the source. Unlike Dr. Graham, however, I disagree that reciting a particular prayer, as he insisted, will get us there. Even such a prayer for salvation, like the Bible, preachers, and churches, is one or more degrees separated from Christ. The thought that reciting a standardized prayer will make us followers of Jesus is about as nonsensical to me as thinking that reciting a short poem to another will, in and of itself, establish a relationship with them. It may, however, be a good first step for some. Of course, Billy Graham, through his organization (now operating under the face of his son, Franklin) is more than happy to guide followers through the ins and outs of developing such a relationship, at least as they understand it.

I am not challenging Billy Graham’s position as one of the most popular and powerful evangelists of recent history, nor do I wish to criticize or convert his followers. I am thankful on behalf of any who found their way closer to God through his message. There are others, however, that found his message, his platform, and his methods to be off-putting,

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-Fe0K1bjd0>, accessed March 29, 2021.

myself included (especially when there was something better on TV).

My issue, when it comes to spiritual development, is the distance from the source. It is too easy to confuse following a person who preaches in the name of Christ with Christ, particularly when that person is charismatic. To induce fear that eternal damnation awaits those who believe differently is a patently *un-Jesus-like* thing to do. There is no evidence that Jesus ever made a big deal about his ministry. In fact, he often told those he healed *not* to tell anyone about it. While he drew large crowds, he did not seek them out. Rather, they sought him. They needed what he offered – healing, hope, love, acceptance – and many traveled great distances to receive it. No self-promotion or 800 number with operators standing by was required. There is no evidence Jesus's voice or preaching methods were charismatic. His charisma came from the impact imparted on the lives he touched.

Whether it is Billy Graham or another of the charismatic televangelists promising salvation via a prayer and a modest donation, developing a true, life-changing relationship with the Christ is a healthy choice regardless of whether we consider ourselves church-folks or even Christian. The challenge is how best to develop that relationship.

6 Degrees of Separation

The theory of the *Six Degrees of Separation*³³ proposes that we can connect with anyone in the

³³ <https://exploringyourmind.com/the-six-degrees-of->

world through someone we know or through someone we know who knows someone else who knows someone else who knows someone else who knows someone we want to meet. It assumes that we all know at least 100 people as friends, family, or otherwise. The first degree of separation comes in exploring the 100 people known to each of our 100 personal connections and, assuming all the connections are unique, we would have the opportunity to meet any of 10,000 different people at one degree of separation, meaning with one person we already know who could introduce us to any of those 10,000 people. If one expands that reasoning out to six degrees of separation, or five people between us and the person we want to meet, our circle of possible acquaintances grows to 1,000,000,000,000 people, which is roughly 150 times the number of people alive on the planet today.

The six degrees of separation theory demonstrates how interconnected we are to everyone else. My interest in bringing this theory into this chapter is in using it to help illustrate our degrees of separation from the source of the Christian faith, Jesus the Christ. While the six degrees of separation theory is directed at those presently alive, what about those from the past, like Jesus for instance? As long as there is an accessible record of what they did or said, I think the theory can reasonably be applied to the past, too. Specifically, what are the fewest degrees of separation we can manage before we connect with Jesus or another wise, spiritual teacher, at least as directly as possible?

The path to Jesus is not as clear-cut as it may at first seem. If one believes that Jesus's words and life are accurately portrayed in the Bible, then one could say that by reading the Bible accounts of Jesus, there is only one degree of separation between the reader and Jesus – that degree of separation being the Bible itself. If one believes that Jesus's words were recorded as accurately as possible by direct witnesses to Jesus's teachings and life, then there are two degrees of separation – the first being the witnesses and the second being the Bible in which the witnesses recorded their testimony. If, as I suggested earlier, the Gospel accounts were not written by direct followers of Jesus but by followers of his followers, another layer of separation is added. Add to that the various layers of translations, knowing that each translation removes us another degree from the source, along with how the various languages evolve and we have additional degrees of separation. None of which is to say that the Bible is not a useful document for learning about the teachings and the life of Jesus. It is the best written record we have, but I believe it is important to understand what it is – a worthy instrument for learning of the life and teachings of the source of our faith, but not, in and of itself, the only thing that stands between us and a direct connection to Jesus. Once we know and accept its limitations, I believe we can move forward with the Bible as a worthy tool for spiritual formation.

The Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) accounts of Jesus's life and teachings are likely closest to the source of all the biblical books, but churches generously draw from numerous other biblical references for their teaching and doctrine. The letters

of the apostle Paul, who never met Jesus (at least not physically), are widely used by churches even though Paul's letters add yet another degree of separation. I will briefly discuss Paul in the next section and in more detail in a later chapter. The foundation upon which many churches today are built, particularly those practicing churchianity, consists of the teachings of Paul. There is even a title for those basing their works on his teachings: *Paulists*. Many churches use Paul's teachings to *fill the societal and moral gaps* that Jesus seemingly failed to address. I, however, suspect this *filling of the gaps* has been a significant contributor to the evolution of Churchianity from Christianity.

Saul to Paul

Saul, soon to be known as Paul, struck terror in the hearts of the early Christians. He was a fiercely loyal Jew, a zealot, and a relentless and often violent persecutor of members of *The Way*, who were the first followers of Jesus. The story of his conversion to a follower of Jesus is recorded in the ninth chapter of Acts. One day on his way to Damascus he was blinded by a bright light, accompanied by the disembodied voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" For three days he could not see and did not eat or drink as his companions shepherded him into the city. In Damascus, a disciple named Ananias helped Saul regain his sight and baptized him. Saul/Paul, a devout Jew, became a passionate worker in the formation of what would become the Christian church. He remains a mighty force in the

Christian church, having written many of the books, as letters to churches, of the New Testament.

Some of his writings are brilliant and poetic; some seem infuriatingly judgmental and exclusive. Part of the challenge in applying Paul's letters today is in understanding that they were written to specific communities of people in specific locations dealing with specific problems at specific points in time. To generalize such targeted teachings can easily become like forcing a round peg into a square hole, particularly for those seeking quick certainty in the difficult-to-quantify realm of spirituality. Paul's letters today are several degrees separated by time, space, context, and translation from even Paul himself. If we are seeking to know Christ through Paul's letters, we are separated even farther. Which is not to say seeking Christ through Paul's writings is a fruitless endeavor. Unfortunately, in my opinion, too many churches seek to develop followers of Paul, as they understand Paul, instead of followers of the one Paul attempted to follow: Jesus the Christ. Paul, like the rest of us, was a flawed, biased, and fallible human being whose zealotry sometimes isolated the very people Jesus sought to bring into his family of followers.

I have already mentioned that some churches use certain passages from Paul's letters to *fill in gaps* on issues that there is no record of Jesus addressing. Perhaps the most controversial of such issues is homosexuality, which Paul condemns in a couple of his letters. Of course, what is translated as homosexuality in his letters I suspect more likely referred to same-sex rape and male prostitution as opposed to a committed and loving relationship between two people of the same sex. Such

relationships could not have been safely pursued in his day. When a church takes something written in Paul's letters and uses it to isolate others, they are applying a Christian teaching in a distinctly non-Christian manner. Jesus never excluded people because of their actions, social status, or lifestyle. The challenge is to read Paul in the context of Jesus's ministry. Indeed, applying Christian teachings in non-Christ-like ways is at the heart of Churchianity.

Many Christians find Paul's letters appealing because he wrote with authority, confidence, and commitment. He wrote like a zealot, clearly articulating his positions, even though he surely understood that attempts to reduce spiritual truths to words could both attract and mislead many people. Paul wrote as if God were speaking through him. Instead, I believe God *inspired* Paul, as God did with the other biblical authors, but as Paul committed that inspiration to words, the result was a product of Paul's nature, historical and cultural contexts, and Paul's limited understanding of the uncontainable spiritual wisdom imparted to him.

As enlightening as Paul's letters can be, when read in their appropriate context, Paul's conversion can be equally informative. In his zealotry for the Jewish faith, Saul was *blind* to Jesus's God-like nature. Because the Jewish and Roman leaders saw Jesus as a threat, Paul also considered Jesus a threat and willingly sought and persecuted Jesus's followers. At least, that is, until Jesus struck him blind to get his attention and open his eyes to a new way of seeing. Saul had an encounter with the crucified and resurrected Jesus that completely changed his life and his life's purpose, even though he never met Jesus

physically. This is good news for us because just as Jesus changed Saul via direct, albeit non-physical contact with Saul, so Jesus can transform us via direct, non-physical contact. In this way we too can hope to build a relationship without the degrees of separation present with the Bible, sermons, and other commentaries.

Dictated or Inspired?

Biblical scholars debate whether the second letter of Paul to Timothy (2 Timothy) was actually written by Paul or to a follower named Timothy. That discussion is beyond my knowledge and interest. What *does* interest me is the description of the nature of the origin of scripture given in 2 Timothy 3:16, that “all scripture is *inspired* by God.” This passage is commonly quoted, and in my opinion often misunderstood, to establish the authority and reliability of scripture. I am not aware of any biblical translation, however, that renders the word *inspired* as *dictated*, which is a critical distinction to me. If scripture had been dictated by God then we would have good reason to interpret it literally. In other words, if God dictated the Bible and the authors simply wrote down what they were told, then the words written in scripture would be the actual words of God (ignoring the various translations between languages), and reading those words would be equivalent to hearing God say them directly to us. In addition, we would have strong justification for literal interpretations of certain passages by using literal interpretations of other passages. In other words, the Bible would be internally consistent.

Instead, this passage says God *inspired* scripture, which sends me down a different and less certain but more interesting path of exploration. I believe my experience with and understanding of inspiration is relevant to the interpretation of scripture. There are two distinct but related meanings for inspiration. The first has to do with breathing – specifically, the *in-breath*. The second is an emotional or intellectual response to something we experience. It is a *reaction*, like the writing of a poem inspired by a beautiful sunset. Such reactions are not limited by time, space, or reality, as we can be inspired by memories of long-past events, by something happening in the present, or by something we imagine may or may not happen in the future. The two meanings merge in the Hebrew word *ruach*, which is translated as air, breath, wind, and Spirit. In the creation story of Genesis 1, God's *ruach* (breath or Spirit) swept over the face of the formless earth and initiated the on-going process of creation. In other words, creation is an inspired response to the life-giving Spirit of God breathing over and into an otherwise formless substance. While the creation is a response to the inspiration, it is *not* the inspiration itself. Rather, the inspired response is shaped by the receiving media, i.e., the material or person who receives the inspiration. As such, the creation is birthed from the inspiration but is shaped by the nature of the recipient. Importantly, there is always a degree of separation between the creator and created, between the inspiration and the product of the inspiration.

As an example, I find sunrises particularly inspiring and have written numerous songs about them. Here is an example:

*When the sun peeks over the east horizon
And the darkness slowly flees,
And a new day dawns, and the old is gone,
It feels like home to me.*

This lyrical response to an inspiring sunrise is only diminished by attempting to understand it literally. The sun doesn't *peek* over the horizon, nor does the darkness *flee*, nor can a sunrise be home. The song attempts to metaphorically recreate the emotions I feel with a beautiful sunrise in hopes of leading others to a similar memory or experience. The song is inspired by my experience of a part of God's creation (a sunrise), but the creation (the song) is a product of *my* life experience --- my beliefs, biases, understandings, and writing abilities. In a similar way, the biblical authors used poetic and metaphorical language consistent with their abilities and understandings to create something from the inspiration they received from their encounters with God in their lives. Interpreting scripture as *factual* is a recent development in religious thought. Historically, scripture was considered fodder for meditation, debate, and struggle, as well as being a provider of new insights for the changing landscapes of human lives.

When we believe the Bible was *dictated* by God, as opposed to being *inspired*, we dig ourselves into a deep pit within which we cannot deny *anything* the Bible says without simultaneously denying God. When God inspires us to something, even though the inspiration may be pure, once that inspiration is

processed by our limited human abilities, what comes out is determined by our human biases, tendencies, and limited understandings, whether we are preaching, writing, or just thinking. When the Bible is taken literally there is no grace for the authors' imperfect human understanding of events or God's nature. Always taking the Bible literally leads people to accept countless horrible acts, then and now, as apparently being condoned by God – murdering babies (Hosea 13), enslaving people (Exodus 21), and other heinous acts committed by those in power against innocent people.

To minimize the degrees of separation between ourselves and the source, understanding how sacred writings come about must be factored into how we apply them.

A Gospel of the Intellect

The issue is not that most of our sources of Christian information are bad or purposefully misleading, but that they are separated from the Christ by one or more degrees of separation. The most they can offer is context or commentary, which is not necessarily an unhelpful thing, but *they are not the source itself*. They are products of divinely-inspired but biased human beings, limited in their perspective and understanding. While they may be able to point us in helpful directions, they cannot unite us to the Christ.

Membership in a church cannot do it, either, nor will weekly worship attendance, at least not in and of itself. The teaching, community, and fellowship offered by many churches can help point us in the direction of Christ, and the enrichment of and

support for our lives through being a part of a healthy, loving community cannot be understated. But churches cannot bring us to Christ by prayer, baptism, confirmation, or confession in spite of some claims to the contrary. The reason has to do with the intellectual focus of most church worship services, teachings, and other activities. It is understandable that churches would attend to the intellect since that is also the revered focus of our society. We cannot, however, *think, read, hear, or speak* our way to Christ.

Frequently throughout the Gospels Jesus mentions that we have eyes and ears but cannot see or hear. It is not because of defects in our physical sight or hearing but because the life and teachings Jesus wants us to see and hear cannot be fully received by our intellectual faculties. We must first learn to see and hear from the less-obvious centers of intelligence in our heart and body. We must learn that our true essence is deeper than our thoughts, infinitely deeper in fact. As long as churches focus on feeding our minds and shaping our thoughts, no matter how stellar the teaching, we will not develop the eyes and ears needed to hear and follow Jesus. There are simply too many degrees of separation to overcome. We will remain spiritually blind and deaf. Jesus does not present a problem to be solved or a question to be answered. Jesus offers a way of living that is the key to the kingdom of heaven – not as a place we may or may not enter when we die, but as a state of consciousness we enter here and now. Many churches portray themselves as *afterlife insurance*, meaning that our ticket into heaven when we die is reserved through our faithful attendance and support of the church. It is a nice thought and it requires a

much smaller sacrifice on our part, but it is not biblical, and it is not the path Jesus modeled for us. Churches, in general, let us off the hook too easily, by which I mean they allow us to continue our earthly, materially-focused lives without challenging how far those lives are from the life Jesus invites us into. The degrees of separation between the two are astronomical.

To minimize the degrees of separation between ourselves and the Christ we must adopt more effective ways of connecting with the Christ. Such methods are not new, having been practiced by faithful followers for millennia. They are techniques for opening our eyes to what we are currently blind to, and opening our ears to hear that to which we are currently deaf. Few churches utilize such methods except for prayer and music. Other less-common but helpful elements include extended periods of silent prayer, chanting, interpretive dance, sacred reading, meditation, contemplative study, and other exercises that force us out of our heads and into our hearts and bodies. They build bridges to the soul, which is where we awaken to our oneness with the Christ with no degrees of separation except our own inability to open ourselves completely to it.

Until we develop the eyes to see and ears to hear that which Jesus speaks, we will remain many degrees separated from the source of Christianity, no matter how faithful we are to a particular church, Bible readings, or other religious activities.

Chapter 5

Jesus and the Christ

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

The title of the first chapter of the book *The Universal Christ* by contemplative author Richard Rohr is *Christ Is Not Jesus's Last Name*.³⁴ Thanks to centuries of the unintentionally misleading renaming of Jesus of Nazareth as *Jesus Christ*, including by common Bible translations, it is understandable that we have lost the distinction between Jesus and the Christ. Jesus of Nazareth was a man, the son of Joseph and Mary, who most likely adopted his father's trade as a builder until he was baptized by John the Baptist and awoke to his oneness with the divine and began his ministry. During the baptism he heard a voice from heaven naming him as God's beloved child and took his place as a teacher, healer, and mentor. He awoke to his position in relation to God in a way few of us have or likely will. The titles of *Christ*, which is Greek, and *Messiah*, which is Hebrew, both mean *anointed* or chosen. He consciously understood himself as *loved and chosen* by God and spent the rest of his earthly days trying to awaken others to the same realization – not

³⁴ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*. Convergent Books, 2019, p. 11.

that he was the *only* child or Christ of God, as is commonly believed, but that *all* of creation is the Christ (chosen and beloved) of God. We simply do not know or believe such a revered status could apply to us, nor are we willing to accept the responsibility to others that comes by living into such knowledge. The Christ is everything of the earth which has been infused by the Spirit of God – which is *everything*.

To make better sense of this challenging distinction I begin with the *Word* of God. This *Word* causes as much or more confusion than the title of *Christ*. Many people refer to the Bible as the Word of God, as in, “I spend time in the Word every morning,” meaning they read the Bible every morning. The underlying assumption for many is that the Bible contains the actual, inerrant, and spoken words of God. It is far more accurate to say that various expressions of the Word of God are *contained* in the words of the Bible. God’s *living* Word cannot be contained in or reduced to human words. We can, however, receive glimpses of the images, experiences, and emotions through which God inspired the biblical authors to write what they wrote. As such we can experience expressions of the Word of God by entering into those images, experiences, and emotions through reflective reading of the Bible and other sacred texts. The belief that the Bible is *the* Word of God is not wrong, *per se*, but it is misleading and understated. If we believe the Bible is the *only* Word of God, as in the *perfect, complete, and inerrant* Word of God, then we are neither appreciating the magnitude of the Word of God, nor are we honoring the nature of the sacred writings of the Bible.

In a similar way, some see Jesus as *the Word* of God, an idea seemingly supported in the first chapter of John, as in, “The Word became flesh and lived among us.”³⁵ When we believe Jesus is *the Word* of God, as in the *only* Word of God, we are misrepresenting Jesus of Nazareth and vastly underrepresenting the magnitude of the Word of God. Rather, both the Bible and Jesus are expressions of the Word of God. When the Bible says, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” it refers to God’s creating power dwelling also in *our flesh as us*.

The origins of the imagery of the *Word* of God come from the opening verses of the book of Genesis where creation is described as occurring in this way: “And God *said* ...” This is how the author chose to describe what otherwise could not be accurately captured in words. In this case, the author likens God’s creating action to God speaking. The linguistic connection is that when we speak, we create waves of energy that others receive as sound. The author of Genesis described waves of energy that shaped the earth into everything we experience as creation, using the image of the source of that energy as *God speaking*. In that way, the Word of God refers to a powerful, creating energy and not to a person or set of writings, which are singular expressions of that speaking.

The *Christ*, which refers to the anointed or chosen of God, is the product of God’s creative energy. God *chose* to create us, and we believe God *loves* what God creates. Unfortunately, humans mostly fail to understand or accept their chosenness or their

³⁵ John 1:14.

belovedness. Jesus, unlike us, awoke to the knowledge of his oneness with and his chosenness by God and committed to living his life accordingly. By that conscious knowledge he was saved from the sin of separation we all suffer from. Through his life and teaching we are saved from that sin by realizing we, too, are God's anointed, God's chosen, God's children.

One Body, Many Members

While the life and teachings of Jesus have touched many souls over many generations throughout the world, the Christ is an infinitely broader, more inclusive, and universal expression of God. The Christ stands above, beyond, and within all of creation, preceding and transcending even the Christian religion and humankind itself. Buddhist author and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote, “Enlightenment is when the wave realizes it is the ocean.”³⁶ This sort of enlightenment is what I believe occurred with Jesus at his baptism by John the Baptist – he consciously realized his oneness with God, not in an exclusive way, but in a way that *all of creation* is one with God. All of creation, including non-Christians, is anointed, chosen, and loved by God, making it an integral part of the Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, being a part of creation, understood himself to be the Christ in the same way that the wave understands itself to be the ocean. They are expressions of something much

³⁶https://www.reddit.com/r/QuotesPorn/comments/7ltkbw/enlightenment_is_when_the_wave_realizes_it_is_the/. Accessed May 10, 2021.

larger, but they are one within the larger entity, being made of the same stuff. The wave is not the ocean, but the ocean abides within the wave. The wave and ocean are One. Jesus is not God, but God abides in him. Jesus and God are One.

Concurrent with Jesus's realization of himself within the Christ of God was his realization that we, too, are within the Christ of God, as is everything and everyone else in creation. Where Jesus was able to perceive his direct connection with and to God, most of the rest of us have blinders that keep us from perceiving, believing, or trusting that connection. We are blinded by our biases, our limited understandings, our poor self-image, and other ego-related hang-ups that prevent us from taking our place beside and with Jesus as the beloved of God. We fail to allow God to express through us in order to touch and heal ourselves and others. When Jesus healed and cast out demons and restored sight he was removing the blinders of those in his day so others could see their oneness with God, too. We are not the separate, isolated beings we believe ourselves to be. Rather, we are interconnected waves in the ocean that is the Christ. We arise from God, and we fall back into God. This, then, is our salvation – that we recognize ourselves *not* as beings separated from God and each other, but as intimate pieces in the body of Christ, loved and chosen exactly as we are within that greater body. That Oneness is our security. By that we are saved, but we cannot know it in a conscious way until we awaken to it.

Whenever a person comes to this type of conscious realization of their Oneness with God – their Oneness with all that is – they are said to have

attained *Christ Consciousness*. This is a term and a state of being that is not exclusive to, nor even commonly familiar to Christians or Christianity. It is much better known, understood, and taught in Eastern philosophical practices like Buddhism. It is a state of being we seek and work towards as we attempt to grow into the type of person we know we were created to become. It is the state Jesus became consciously aware of at his baptism. To attain Christ Consciousness is to live into our fully human *and* fully divine state of being. It is to understand that God's Spirit clothed itself in earthly elements and became *us*. Jesus referred to persons attaining this state as the *Son of Man*, meaning a fully-realized, fully-matured human being, not simply in a physical sense but in a physical *and* spiritual sense. That is what makes us fully human – the conscious awareness of our earthly structure infused with and animated by the Spirit of God.

Jesus referred to himself as a *Son of Man* while others referred to him as the *Son of God*. To the unenlightened among us, Jesus appears infinitely above and apart from us. We neither understand nor accept his invitation to realize our worth and belovedness in God. Because we cannot see ourselves in Jesus, we attribute a divine status to him that we will not claim for ourselves – thus, calling him the *Son of God*, or the product of something unattainable to us. In that way we perpetuate the myth that we are separate from and not One with him.

The Virgin Shall Conceive and Bear a Son

If Jesus attempted to lead us to the realization that we can and should follow him by becoming like

him, what then are we to make of the amazing stories surrounding his unusual birth or the unfathomable miracles and healings he is credited with performing? Surely those demonstrate that Jesus, though in human form, is *not* made of the same stuff as us. After all, he was proclaimed the *Messiah*, the *Savior*, the *Anointed of God*. It seems heretical or at least arrogant to think we might also claim a divine birthright.

The unusual birth narratives of Jesus, complete with a virgin birth, impregnation by the Spirit, angels and shepherds announcing and attending the birth, Eastern kings bearing royal gifts, and no room at the Inn are only told in the books of Matthew and Luke, with a different telling in each. It is interesting that those sorts of narratives, while unusual today, were commonly attributed, retrospectively, to political and military leaders at the time to imply that they were created superior to the commoners at their birth. Such stories were not factual but mythological. Such people were portrayed to not be us – except that they were. We see remnants of that sort of showmanship today in royal families where special positions and privileges are bestowed by circumstances of birth, as if God is somehow more present in one bloodline than another.

While I concede that the virgin birth and its various accompaniments would be possible for an all-powerful God to pull off, I will also point out that God does not appear to normally operate in that manner, at least not literally. Such occurrences are inconsistent with what most of us experience in our everyday encounters with God. I would also note that just because something is not factual does not make it untrue. Facts are limited truths at best, limited to

specific spaces, times, cultures, social norms, and beliefs. Truth, however, is an evolving process that requires our on-going participation and attention. Truth is an ever-evolving journey, not a destination. So the truths in the Bible and other sacred texts are not found in the written words but in the living and dynamic impact of those words on us throughout our lives.

Surely the recorded stories of the birth, life, work, and death of Jesus illustrate the perils of interpreting the Bible literally. Either we *must* accept fantastical stories with no contemporary counterparts, or we must deny God as an active force in our lives and deny Jesus as our roadmap. I believe this false choice drives many away from Christianity. It is not that Christian foundations are not sound and meaningful but that its practice is often impractical and irrational. What if the unusual stories of Jesus's birth hint at truths that are not unusual at all? What if *all* births have similar stories? What if the biblical authors used poetic language and descriptions to demonstrate that *all life* is impregnated by the Spirit? That *all births* require a challenging and inconvenient journey through the pregnancy and labor by the mother? What if hosts of angels sing and rejoice at *every birth*, including ours? What if the birth narrative for Jesus of Nazareth is less about his specific birth and more about an allegorical illumination of the miraculous, divine, and celebratory nature of all births, including our own?

When we force the Bible's poetic and allegorical illustrations of events like the birth of Jesus into factual accounts, we force seekers to choose between descriptions that do not fit with the rest of

reality as we experience it. Churchianity, at least where it insists on literal understandings of the Bible, forces those types of disagreeable understandings and leaves no room at the Inn for those who refuse to make them. So we hunker down outside of the Inn in whatever accommodations are available. No wonder so many churches are struggling.

Jesus's was a humble, earthly birth with vast implications that drew divine attention. We simply fail to accept that ours are, too. When we focus only on the telling of his physical healings, we forget that healing has social and emotional components, too, which all of us can provide. It is not simply a matter of recognizing and claiming our divine nature, however. That is a first step, but it must be followed by taking our position beside Jesus in serving the needs of others. *That* is the responsibility we are reluctant to accept. *That* requires more than writing a check or attending worship. The needs are all around us. We are asked to do what we can, even and especially when the needs are greater than our resources. Our responsibility is to be a Christ-presence in and to our world in whatever ways we can, just as Jesus was in his.

To Choose or Not to Choose

Teacher and author Richard Rohr, in his illuminating book *The Universal Christ*, sums up the nature of the created world in this way: “Everything visible, without exception, is the outpouring of God. What else could it be?”³⁷ He goes on to explain that

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

the term the *Christ* represents the template, or *Logos*, by which all things came and come into being. As such, the Christ (or template) existed long before Jesus's appearance on the earth, and the Christ (or template) remains long after Jesus's crucifixion. Every aspect of creation arises from this template. Rohr explains that Christ is the “means by which God’s presence has enchanted all matter throughout history.”³⁸ Taken together, Jesus and the Christ illustrate something foundational about God’s nature: God is personal, in Jesus, *and* God is universal, in Christ. Rohr continues, “Christ is a good and simple metaphor for absolute wholeness, complete incarnation, and the integrity of creation … Frankly, *Jesus came to show us how to be human much more than how to be spiritual.*”³⁹ It is not enough to recognize and name Jesus as the Christ of God. We, too, must claim the Christ template for ourselves and act accordingly if we wish to become the fully human being God created us to be – the being modeled for us in Jesus.

From our perspective, at least, humans are the only part of creation that wrestles with who they are. Dogs, mountains, stars, flowers, and everything else in the created universe unapologetically act in ways consistent with their created natures. Only we raise questions and doubts. Only we strive mightily to portray ourselves as something we are not. This false identity leads us to become less human, not more. The planets do not complain about the orbit in which they were placed nor their distance from the sun. Personally, I believe we were uniquely designed to

³⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

question our place, purpose, and destiny. Pursuing such questions draws us toward greater fullness as human beings. It is the disconnect between who we are (the Christ template) and who we think we should be (social expectations, including those from the church) that is the root of much evil.

Some say our *free will* separates us from the rest of creation. But does it? If we observe closely we see that the vast majority of what we do and say is a reaction, usually unconscious, to something said or done to us. We seldom act so much as react. Psychologists estimate that as much as 90% of our actions are subconsciously motivated, meaning we have no idea why we do most of what we do. I believe it was author Harold Kushner who identified the space between a stimulus, or something done to us, and our response. For most of us, most of the time, that space is essentially non-existent. And yet, that space is our only opportunity to exert our God-given free will – to consciously *choose* how to respond. Otherwise, we simply react, like the apparently less-conscious parts of creation, often to our own detriment and that of others. And that space, when we choose to consciously deploy it, may be what separates us from the rest of creation. It is in that space where we can choose to act with reverence, presence, and intention, consistent with our divine template, instead of with instinctive impulsivity.

Part of our confusion about who we are lies in the disconnect between who we believe ourselves to be *at our essence* (our divine template) and who we appear to be from our actions or reactions. One Christ-like thing that separated Jesus from others was his ability to consciously choose his actions, to

respond to hate, threats, and exclusion with love, acceptance, and justice. Jesus mastered his space. We will become more human when we learn to consciously master our space, too. As we awaken to our Christ-nature, our lives become more than personal and individualistic – they become universal. Our actions are no longer driven by a self-protective, narcissistic ego but are driven by what serves the inclusive whole. We heal instead of wounding. We include instead of excluding. We love instead of turning a blind eye. As our actions more closely align with who we were created to be, we become Christ for our world. When we awaken to our oneness with the Christ, we see and love the Christ within others. We cannot help but serve others because our love demands it; and by serving the needs of others, our own needs are surreptitiously met because we are all One in Christ.

Sin is Separation

One of the confusing terms bandied about in discussions of the Christ is *incarnation*. The word literally means embodied in flesh. In our human context, incarnation refers to the Spirit of God embodied in our physical being. In many religious circles we hear that Jesus is the *incarnate Word of God*. That phrase is drawn from the Gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh (incarnated) and lived among us.”⁴⁰ The phrasing is confusing because it implies that something from outside comes to live inside of us. I think it is more accurate to acknowledge that *that*

⁴⁰ John 1:14.

something has existed within us from the beginning. We simply have not awoken to its presence even though it is as essential to our physical existence as are blood and breath.

To better appreciate the depth of the incarnation it is helpful to understand that it has both personal *and* universal expressions. God incarnates as individual expressions, as was the case with Jesus of Nazareth and as is the case with the individual life we claim as our own. These are personal expressions of the divine. God is also, however, incarnate within all of creation as the Christ, which is God's universal expression. It is that universal expression, equally incarnate within us, that connects us with everything and everyone else. God's incarnation is both personal and universal, as are we. Unfortunately, we focus on and obsess over our individual expression to the near exclusion of the universal context within which it is inextricably wedded.

The Christ is the Savior even though Jesus of Nazareth provided a path for us to realize we have been saved from our sin. To understand this, at least for me, it is helpful to remember that sin is whatever separates us from God and others. It is in awakening to the Christ-presence within saves us from the sin of separation – the belief that we are independent, *individual lives set apart from the rest of creation*. When we believe we are autonomous beings we assume little or no responsibility for the well-being of anything else in creation. Certainly, we may be charitable toward others on occasion, but we do not accept our equality and interconnectedness with everything else in creation that *requires* us to love and care for others *exactly* as we love and care for ourselves. Our life is

intimately connected to *that*, whatever *that* is! When we focus on the individual nature of our incarnation we become selfish and narcissistic, which leads to loneliness, anxiety, guilt, and shame because we feel we must carry the burden of our suffering by ourselves. When we act as if we are pitted against any part of the world, we ignore the universal expression of the incarnation within ourselves. We are saved by the knowledge and experience that we are not alone -- ever. We are never singly responsible for the bad (or good) things that happen to ourselves or others. Nor are we singly responsible for righting the wrongs. We are, however, collectively responsible.

What the knowledge of the universal nature of the incarnation saves us from is isolation. Indeed, salvation *is* the annihilation of our sense of isolation. Salvation comes in our felt understanding that we are not alone. The Christ in us calls us to be saviors, too, saving others from the everyday hells of their existence – loneliness, anxiety, guilt, and shame. Saviors include and embrace others. Jesus demonstrated that we are not alone and that the suffering of others is our suffering, too, which is why his was a life of service to others. When we act in ways that are inconsistent with our Oneness with God and with each other we cause and experience suffering. It is not because we are bad people. It is because we do not understand the fundamental nature of the incarnation that binds our fates with that of everything else. When anything suffers, everything suffers.

One common way we isolate ourselves and others is by moving the elderly, disabled, and those otherwise different than or inconvenient to ourselves to places outside of our circles of belonging in order

to preserve the restrictive status quo of our narrowly-defined communities. Personal inconvenience and discomfort become justification for forced separation. This recent development in human history makes families and other communities insecure and unstable because anyone can be ostracized at any time for circumstances that have nothing to do with the Christ within them. This practice is sinful because it creates separation. Better that we expand our community boundaries to accommodate and welcome the needs of anyone wishing or needing to be a part, at least to the greatest extent possible.

Naming Jesus as *Christ* is not wrong because Jesus manifested both the personal and universal aspects of God. We cannot claim the title of *Christian* for ourselves, however, until we commit to living our lives in ways that express both the personal and universal incarnations of God within us, too.

Chapter 6

The Church and The Christ

“In the first century in Palestine, Christianity was a community of believers. Then Christianity moved to Greece and became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome and became an institution. Then it moved to Europe and became a culture. And then it moved to America and became a business.” Priscilla Shirer⁴¹

Evangelist and author Priscilla Shirer summarizes the evolution of Christianity well in this chapter’s epigraph. The Christian church has morphed from its original formation as a community of committed believers to its current form, 2000 years later, as a business. In between it was a philosophy, an institution, and a culture. But the original shape of Christianity, the face that formed from those having direct fellowship with Jesus of Nazareth, was a community of people on fire for a new way of living and of understanding life. While many expressions of Christianity today retain vestiges of an earlier community, philosophy, institution, and culture, overall we have fallen far and hard from our roots.

Of course there are benefits that accrue from operating as a business, including benefits that may allow us to form more faithful communities of

⁴¹ Evangelist Priscilla Shirer, as quoted in www.UntilAllHaveHeard1.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/when-christianity-became-a-business/, accessed November 18, 2021.

followers, particularly in terms of efficiently serving the needy. Even those efforts, however, prove as shallow and transitory as a quarterly profit and loss statement when they lack a foundational grounding in community. When the original vision for Christianity gets buried under the survivalistic business practices we see from many churches, what we are left with is a far cry from the Christianity which was a gathering of followers of Jesus. What we have instead is *Churchianity*, a gathering of followers of a church removed from its moorings.

Relegating to and relying on the Church as the guide and intermediary for believers has a long history. Not until the last few hundred years have the faithful had direct access to the Bible and other sacred texts from which to learn and grow. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century allowed for the wide distribution of books, and until those texts were translated into more accessible languages, and until the masses learned to read, sacred texts were inaccessible to most folks. So the Church became the keeper of the written history of religion. Except for oral histories passed between generations, and except for those few contemplative practitioners who shared their direct experiences of encounters with the Holy, the sole source for religious teaching was the Church. Many of us behave as if that were still the case today.

The beginnings of our need for a go-between to communicate with God goes back at least to Moses, where Moses was the chosen mediator between God and the Hebrew people. Moses communed with God on the mountain, but the people saw only smoke and fire and heard only thunder. Moses communicated the messages of God to the people. The tradition

continued with the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem where its innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, was believed to house God. Only the Chief Priest, and only on rare occasions, was allowed to enter the presence of God in that sacred place. It was the Chief Priest who then communicated the messages of God to the people. This inner sanctum was separated from the other priests and the people by a thick curtain. The Gospel of Matthew records that the moment Jesus died on the cross, the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom.⁴² That passage symbolizes the opening of God's presence to everyone, with or without mediation from a priest or anyone else.

To the extent that Jesus opened direct access to God for us, the Christian Church has largely downplayed that possibility. The Roman Catholic Church established a hierarchy such that the Pope was the mediator with God, and the cardinals, bishops, and priests were the mediators between the Pope and the people. Protestant churches organized themselves with similar hierarchies that implied, sometimes explicitly, that the Word of God, the will of God, and the correct interpretation of scripture is passed to the people through the preacher.

This history laid the foundation for churches to become the mediator for our communications with God. Perhaps it is not surprising that most churches do a poor job of teaching their congregations to become competent and comfortable with direct communication with God. The fault does not fall so much on the churches or preachers as on the people

⁴² Matthew 27:50-51.

who are quick to allow their churches to assume roles and work that was never intended to belong solely to the church. The church, as a community of believers, can focus and multiply the individual works of its members but it cannot replace them. Easy as it is to rely on churches for God matters, drawing near to the church instead of to God misses the point and leaves us spiritually adrift.

The Church and the Christ

Assuming the church to be synonymous with God has led to a deceptively limited perception and portrayal of God, both for church and non-church people. When our pastors remind us of the importance of supporting the “work of God,” it is automatically assumed to mean giving money to the church. Granted, the Old Testament sets the expectation of giving the first tenth of one’s income/possessions to support the Temple and its workers, and I am not suggesting that members should stop supporting their churches. My wife and I certainly do. But is supporting the work of God the same as supporting the work of the church? Are my financial and other obligations to the work of God fulfilled with my pledge to my church? It is only when we assume the church and God are synonymous that such assumptions make sense. The work of God, however, is infinitely larger, infinitely more accepting, infinitely more generous, and infinitely more inclusive than the work of the church.

The church is a limited entity; God is not. When Moses asked God for God’s name so he could share it with the people, God gave an ambiguous non-

answer that is often translated *I am*.⁴³ Our typical human response is “I am *what*?” We limit our understanding of whatever we name, however, and God would not allow it. Names define what something is and is not. We can answer our question of “I am *what*” with any definite answer and be correct about God. We cannot, however, be *entirely* correct because whatever we put after “I am” will capture only a portion of the ways God expresses. Just because God is whatever we fill in the blank with does not, however, mean that whatever we fill in the blank with is God. It is a single manifestation of God – one of an infinite number of manifestations that are still manifesting, or *spoken into being*, in the creation terminology of Genesis and John.

And this is our dilemma when it comes to understanding the relationship between God and the church, as well as between Jesus and the Christ. The church is one manifestation of God. It is a small and limited expression of an *impossible-to-limit-or-define* God. Likewise, Jesus of Nazareth was one manifestation of God’s eternally creating blueprint, which is the Christ. While we can say Jesus of Nazareth was (or became) the Christ and be correct, we cannot be entirely correct because the Christ is much larger than one person who was raised in Nazareth 2000 years ago.

The *Christ* is a universal reality that spans all of time, all created beings, and all religions. It is not, as most believe, exclusive to Christianity, at least not as Christianity is practiced. Jesus realized his anointing, his oneness with the Christ, at his baptism when a voice from heaven said, “You are my (Child), the

⁴³ Exodus 3:13-14.

Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”⁴⁴ Voices from heaven (and family) say the same at our baptisms. The Christ is the creating and created *Word* of God described in John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through (the Word), and without (the Word) not one thing came into being”⁴⁵

We, like Jesus, recognize our chosenness – our place in the Christ of God – as we awaken to the oneness of our material *and* spiritual nature. We are of the earth *and* of God. We are quick to grant Jesus his divinity and deny his humanness, and we are equally quick to deny our divinity and emphasize our humanness. The life of Jesus of Nazareth shows what it looks like to have a fully united physical and spiritual nature. The apostle Paul recognized the Christ-nature in Jesus, almost exclusively referring to him as Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus. Paul did not know Jesus of Nazareth, nor is that who he wrote about. Paul knew and taught about the Christ as resurrected from the person of Jesus.

The Christ in the Trinity

The belief that fuels much of *churchianity* leads us to consider the Christ as something exclusive to those who consider themselves Christian. It is not. The confusion is understandable because the distinction is difficult to clarify in words. Jesus of Nazareth became *one* with the Christ as he awoke to

⁴⁴ Mark 1:9-11.

⁴⁵ John 1:1-3b.

and aligned himself with his oneness with the Christ. As he did so, the person known as Jesus of Nazareth was transformed. Even so, the oneness of Jesus of Nazareth with the Christ did not make the Christ the same as Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, the person of Jesus of Nazareth willingly set his ego-identity aside to allow the person of the Christ to emerge through him. If and as we awaken to and align ourselves with the Christ, our personal ego-selves do not disappear but are matured and transformed into something universal and eternal. We do not necessarily *lose* our individual expression, although we do lose the petty, ego-driven parts of ourselves that insist we are other or better than anyone or anything else. We give up that in us which keeps us from being the whole and holy persons we know ourselves to be, which is the Christ within. As we grow closer to our Christ-like potential, we willingly allow that which is un-Christ-like to transform because it is no longer of interest or use to us. Even so, it is not so much a giving up as a maturing into and a revealing of what has been present all along.

I liken this to my experience of becoming a parent. I gave up a lot of things and experiences that were important to my pre-fatherhood life. But as I aligned myself with my role as *Dad* I did not consider what I gave up as sacrificial. Fatherhood brought new interests that made my old interests fall into far lesser significance. Those parts of my self did not disappear, but they matured and were redirected into something more consistent with the person I was becoming.

In the traditional and misleadingly masculine language of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), the Christ is the *Son*. In more inclusive and descriptive

trinitarian language we can name these three persons or manifestations of God as Creator, Created, and Relationship. God (the Father/Creator) creates physical manifestations of God (the Son or Child or Created) by entering into matter. The relationship between the Father/Creator and Child/Created manifests a third expression of God called the Holy Spirit/Relationship. It is the interaction between the Creator and what is Created that shapes the third manifestation, which is the Relationship. We see this manifested all around us in the relationship between a parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student. These relationships are unique to the specific people involved, as if having a life of their own, but cannot be said to be exclusive to one or the other. They are a *third something* that is a unique product of a unique relationship. If we change one of the persons or add another person, the relationship and the *spirit* of the relationship changes accordingly.

The Creator (God/Father) is the energy that impregnates the material of the earth and creates life as we know it (Child or Creation). That life is always a product of Spirit of God penetrating and animating physical matter. This, then, is the Christ – the eternally chosen *child* resulting from the uniting of the energy of the Creator with the matter of the earth. It is the essence of everything we recognize as creation today, everything created in the past, and everything yet to be created. This Christ is universal, transcending time, space, religion, culture, gender, and every other humanly-created category.

Despite claiming the Christ title, Christianity has no greater claim on the Christ reality than do any of the other world religions. They are each their own

unique expression of the same reality, manifesting in their particular culture, space, and time. Because most Christians consider themselves followers of Jesus of Nazareth, we might better be called *Jesuits*. Interestingly, the word *catholic*, which was the name given the initial large-scale manifestation of the Christian church, means *universal*. It was never intended to be exclusive to a particular set of beliefs or practices, certainly not by Jesus. Rather, it was intended to serve as a spiritual umbrella under which all belief systems and believers could co-exist in respect, honor, mutual care, and peace.

Individualizing Christianity

The end of what is known as the *Prologue* to the Gospel of John says, “No one has ever seen God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”⁴⁶ The verse is often mistakenly read and understood by substituting “Jesus” in place of “Son.” This gives the common misunderstanding of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s *only* Son. Indeed, this is what many, if not most Christian churches teach. It makes the Son exclusive to Christianity, it implies that the Christian church is the only way to God, and it sets the Son, or the Christ, far apart from us normal folk. This interpretation is not only inaccurate but also misleading. The gospel of John refers much more to the universal and *eternal Christ* as manifested in Jesus of Nazareth than the other gospels, which focus more on stories of the individual life of Jesus of Nazareth. Both are important, but the focus on the Christ in John, as

⁴⁶ John 1:18.

well as in Paul's letters, once we develop eyes to see it, helps take our understanding to a deeper, more universal level, which is at the same time more intimate and personal. The passage is not about the individual named Jesus of Nazareth, but about the Christ and the *Son of Man*, which refers to the fully developed human that Jesus became. The Son does not refer to a single manifestation of God, but to *all* manifestations of God, including us. *That* is who is close to God's heart and who makes God known. And *that* is the universal Christ, which is not a religion but a state of being we are invited to awaken to. It is already present in us and has been from the beginning.

Churchianity, primarily in the past few centuries, has taken passages of scripture that are intended to express universal and eternal concepts and attempted to apply them to individuals in a specific place and time. Doing so feeds the delusion that sin and salvation are personal issues that we are individually responsible for. This *individualizing* of the Christian faith causes us to feel inadequate, unworthy, and fraudulent because we cannot individually live up to the expectations that were intended to be achieved as part of a community.

Because we consider ourselves individuals, separate from everyone and everything else, it is more natural for us to understand scripture as individual instructions than it is to understand it as universal concepts none of us can fully understand or embody alone. Jesus taught in parables so his teachings could be applied in many ways by many different people from many different cultures. In that sense his teachings are universal, particularly when compared to the Old Testament laws that were very specific to a

particular time and culture. Some of the writings of Paul are also too specific to his time and culture to be applied literally to our world today. Certainly, they were not intended to be applied individually. Much of what is most easily applicable from either Testament of the Bible today are the stories, like the parables of Jesus. No one assumes a story to be factual or literally “true.” Rather, the purpose of a story is to present something that is widely insightful and relatable across time and cultural divides. Jesus is a historical reality, but the Christ is the universally relevant story. Had Jesus not awoken to his Christ-nature, he likely would have been no more than an asterisk in Middle-Eastern, 1st Century history, if that.

Chapter 7

Paulianity

Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all members of God's family who are with me... Galatians 1:1-2a

The apostle Paul either wrote or inspired over half of the books in the New Testament. An important and influential figure in Christianity, Paul was a *zealot*, passionate about his faith and his beliefs, sometimes violently so. As is true of most zealots, Paul was divisive in his time and remains divisive today. Arguably arrogant and overly assured, Paul laid much of the foundation for what has grown into today's Christian, particularly Protestant church. Some people *love* Paul and see him as unquestionably chosen to preach and spread God's word. Others are offended by Paul because of his judgmental certainty. Throughout my life I have cautiously held Paul under suspicion, as I do all zealots. Having said that, I believe Paul wrote some of the most beautiful and insightful spiritual literature penned by anyone. Having said *that*, I further believe Paul penned some of the most divisive, misleading, and misapplied Christian literature since the time of Jesus.

My frustration with Paul today is really not with Paul at all. He was who he was. I do not expect Paul and I would have been close friends, but I do not

consider that as a negative indictment on either of us. My annoyance is with the churches and church leaders who seemingly believe Paul's teachings are synonymous with and sometimes superior to the life and teachings of Jesus. Certainly, Paul commented on a broader spectrum of the human experience than is documented of Jesus in the gospels. Paul's teachings were often less cryptic than those of Jesus and so are often easier to understand and apply. Of course, our understanding of anything applies only to a limited context. We must always be careful when generalizing our understandings of a text written in one context to other contexts, which is, in my opinion, the root of much of what I consider to be the misapplication of Paul's teachings. Paul lived in a specific space and time in human history, and his letters were written to very specific groups of people with very specific issues.

At the outset, let me state my annoyance with the way Paul's teachings are sometimes used in Christianity: *Paul's teachings should not be used as our primary source of what is and is not Christian. Paul's teachings can appropriately be used to help clarify and illuminate the life and teachings of the primary source of the Christian life, which is the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ.* In other words, the life of Jesus is primary; Paul's commentary is secondary. When we hold Paul as primary we fall prey to what some label as *Paulianity*, a mistake I suspect even Paul would be appalled (*ap-PAUL-ed*) by. Practitioners of *Paulianity* tend to use some of the clear distinctions Paul drew in his writings to establish church doctrine that sometimes ignores the love underlying the message clearly demonstrated in the life Jesus lived. Indeed, love, inclusion, and acceptance are foundational to the life and teaching of Jesus. When

love is removed from or subjugated by church doctrine we find ourselves in the same boat as the Pharisees of Jesus's day – holding to the *letter* of the Old Testament (in their case) law and ignoring the *spirit* of the law. It was what drew Jesus's harshest criticism because it implied that following God's will was more about following rules and less about loving one's neighbor. Of course, Paul *was* a Pharisee prior to his conversion experience so we should not be surprised that some of his writings reflect a great deal of inflexibility.

Before I launch into what some may interpret as an unfair and uninformed attack on Paul as a person, an apostle, a teacher, and an author, I will restate my beliefs about biblical origins. The writings of the Bible, including Paul's, are told through very human eyes complete with *the unique biases and beliefs each mortal author possesses*. The words and phrasings, though divinely inspired, are very human and thus, *not* a perfect reflection of the original inspiration or the experience.

It is through my own flawed and biased lens that I share my (inspired) thoughts about the teachings of Paul.

The Journey from Saul to Paul

It is important to note that Paul's New Testament letters were written beginning around 50 CE, where the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written around and after 70 CE, with the gospel of John written sometime after that, perhaps around 90 CE. The writers of the gospels, while probably not the early disciples for whom they were named, would

almost certainly have been aware of and influenced by Paul's writings. As such, we cannot look at Paul's letters and the gospel texts as two separate strains of Christian writing, although there were certainly theological and practical differences in thought and application, then as now. The writings often have a different focus, with the gospels relating stories about Jesus's life and teachings and Paul's serving more as commentary on what the life and teachings of Jesus mean when applied to communities of believers.

Paul's writings encourage *intellectual thought* about Christianity. Jesus's life and teachings invite us into a lived *experience* of the Christian life. Let me affirm that *both are important!* My belief, however, and my purpose in writing about *Paulianity* is that too many contemporary Christians are focused too narrowly on *thinking about* the life of Christ and too little on rearranging their lived experience to *embody* the life of Christ. It is the difference between thinking and being. When we lean too far towards one, we fall out of balance. Certainly, in my own unbalanced spiritual life, I tend toward the intellectual life, which I find to be easier and more comfortable. My personal challenge is to establish a better balance with experiential spirituality.

Prior to his conversion, Saul (as Paul was named at the time) was a persecutor of Christians. He was a Roman citizen and a violent Jewish zealot who saw the Christian sects forming throughout the land as heretical threats to good Jewish society, but also as intolerable insurrectionists. Saul approved of the killing of early Christian leaders.⁴⁷ The book of Acts

⁴⁷ See Acts 8:1.

tells us that "...Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."⁴⁸ As a Pharisee, Paul believed the Old Testament law should be followed to the letter. Even though Jesus was also a Jew, his focus was less on the letter of the law and more on the spirit of the law. Following the letter of the law could encourage all sorts of unloving, violent, and non-inclusive actions if not mediated by the spirit of the law. Jesus often restated the Old Testament law to better reflect the love of God.⁴⁹ Saul persecuted early followers of Jesus because they were encouraging people away from the strict Jewish traditions upheld by the Pharisees as if they were heretical renegades deserving punishment.

God found a way to turn this man with an inflexible and violent past from arguably the worst persecutor of early Christians into arguably the most fervent promoter of Christianity. If nothing else, the life of Saul/Paul should give everyone hope that God can use our unique, sometimes annoying and detrimental passions in unfathomable ways as tools for good.

A Man of Privilege

The apostle Paul placed himself at the sharp edge of many opposing forces in his day. He was a devout Jew, but he was also a Roman citizen, and the Romans occupied and were distrusted by the Jews. Within the Jewish faith, Jesus's life created a strong

⁴⁸ Acts 8:3.

⁴⁹ See Matthew 5:21+48, for example.

division – those who believed Jesus was the Messiah (who became the early Christians) and those who did not. Among those who eventually broke from traditional Judaism were those who felt the message of Jesus was primarily for those who came to faith in Jesus as Jews. Paul, while working with the Jewish Christians, felt called to also bring the Gentiles (non-Jews) into the gospel feast. This included groups who were despised by most Jews, including the Samaritans, other foreigners, and especially the Romans. In many ways, Paul built bridges between disparate groups. Arguably, he also deepened some divisions. The interpretation and application of his writings often creates a significant fault line between churchianity and Christianity today.

We can perhaps better understand the controversial underpinnings of Paul's writings by examining the influence of *privilege*. Paul was a man of privilege among the Jews and early Christians because he was a Roman citizen. As such, he was entitled to protections and benefits not afforded to non-citizens, which included most of the Jewish people. Many white folks today, myself included, are beginning to understand and acknowledge how our privilege lifts us up while holding others down. Most of our laws and social systems were created by white folks for the benefit of white folks, even though we see increasing numbers of white folks being left behind by those systems today. These systems of privilege and prejudice are so deeply ingrained into the social fabric as to be nearly invisible, at least to those benefiting from them. It is nearly impossible for a person of privilege, like Paul, not to ruffle the feathers of those without privilege. On the other hand, it is nearly

impossible for the privileging social systems to be changed in more just and equitable ways without the willing participation of those in control of those systems – the privileged. It is true today, just as it was true in Paul’s day. Speaking from a position of privilege affords one the opportunity to speak with authority.

Personally, I do not believe Paul was as arrogant or certain as many of his writings lead some to believe. One can find passages in his writings that express profound humility⁵⁰ and an understanding that he was struggling with becoming the person he felt called to become every bit as much as the rest of us. The difference, in my opinion, is that his position of privilege and his inherent tendency toward zealotry make his writings sound more certain and authoritative than perhaps even he believed them to be. He was working out his own understandings on paper, which many of us do. What I write today I would almost certainly write differently a few months or years hence. I suspect Paul might do the same.

In my opinion, zealots tend to cover their own personal insecurities and uncertainties under a veil of loud boldness and confidence. None of which is to say we should dismiss Paul’s writings as unworthy of study simply because he was a privileged zealot. Rather, those of us who might dismiss Paul because of the seemingly judgmental certainty with which he wrote may benefit from patience with his human frailties to open ourselves to the inspired insights he conveys.

⁵⁰ See Romans 7:14-15 and 7:24, for example.

The problem, in my opinion, with Paulianity is that it too often emphasizes the sometimes unfairly judgmental language of Paul out of the context within which it was written. It is sometimes used to condemn and isolate others, building one group of people up while holding others down, which is a manifestation of privilege. Some of Paul's language lends itself to use for behavioral control and moral certainty, which are primary tools of churchianity. Unfortunately, the personal behaviors and morals of Paulianity-types of sycophants is often as bad or worse than those they are supposedly attempting to convert. A point of emphasis for Paul is that we *all* sin (miss the mark) and fall short of the glory of God: "*Wretched man that I am.*" We cannot pull someone out of a pit when we are at or below their level. We can, however, work together to help each other up. In Paul's overarching imagery, we are all parts of *one body* and can only be lifted *together*.

Paul's Conclusions

The "books" of Paul in the New Testament are letters written to individual and regional churches, letters to individuals, letters responding to specific questions, letters of prayerful support, and letters addressing various issues within the body of believers. The letters to the churches are basically sermons. Parts of these letters encourage the congregations for their holy works and faithful persistence. Other parts chide followers about certain types of actions Paul believed to be in need of correction. Paul, in typical Paul form, does not mince words. In fact, in my opinion, Paul goes into so much detail that his overarching points

easily get lost in the nuanced rhetoric he feels obligated to provide. He writes in strong, direct, authoritative language, even emphasizing how he speaks on the authority of Jesus Christ, and when certain parts of his writings are removed from their overarching context they can be and are used to wound and divide.

Here are some of Paul's most common conclusions about the gospel that are often ignored by those seeking to make an accusatory point by taking parts of his writings out of context (never mind my taking these out of context to make a point here):

- **We are justified (saved) by our faith, not by our works.*⁵¹
- **All the commandments (the law) are summed up in ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.*⁵²
- **Do not judge others.*⁵³
- **We are individual parts of a single body.*⁵⁴
- **Be humble.*⁵⁵

These “conclusions” are completely consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus, yet one can easily quote Paul as saying the exact opposite. Paul, like us, was a complicated human being.

An interesting example can be found in parts of Paul's confusing discourse on marriage in the 7th chapter of 1 Corinthians. Paul's conclusion, that it is not sinful either to marry or to remain single, gets lost in his nuanced reasoning, going back and forth

⁵¹ Romans 3:28.

⁵² Romans 13:9.

⁵³ Romans 14:13.

⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:13.

⁵⁵ Philippians 2:3.

between the advantages to and blessings of marriage and the advantages to and blessings of remaining unmarried. His overarching point, apparently, is that remaining unmarried (as Paul was) frees up more time and energy that can be given to the Lord (assuming one's free time and energy actually goes there). He notes that being married brings "distress" in this life (as if being single does not). My point is that one can accurately quote Paul in support of marriage *and* in support of not marrying. One can also, however, accurately quote Paul to imply that being married is inconsistent with the will of God, which is not Paul's message at all. Rather, Paul extensively defends his belief that *his* marital situation is what is best for *his* situation, which I do not doubt. His intentions are good even when his verbosity overshadows his clarity.

Paul, as is true of all zealots, is passionately defensive about his own choices and beliefs. If he were not on the fringes of typical human behavior and belief he would not be a zealot. There is an annoying obsession with sin in Paul's writings that is not nearly so prevalent in Jesus's teachings. He uses all manner of "I" statements that make him sound self-obsessed when perhaps he is only confessing his own human frailties to help us feel better about ours. His letters go into tortured detail about issues that have less relevance for many of us today, like circumcision, the role of women in church, the laws laid out in the Old Testament, and the role of women in marriage. What were almost certainly hot-button issues in his day can make his writings sound seriously out-of-touch and bigoted today. Regardless and unfortunately, some of his writings from 2000 years ago are used still today to

oppress women, defend slavery, and condemn committed LGBTQ+ relationships.

When we use Paul's rhetoric without consideration of the world in which he wrote, without considering his innate tendencies, and without following it to his conclusions of nonjudgmentally loving others and humbly living by faith, we fall into the trap of *Paulianity*, and what was originally intended to help people live freer and more united lives becomes fuel for spreading oppression and division. Although I should not feel the need to apologize for Paul's sometimes annoying mannerisms, I do feel the need to put them in a context that allows seekers after gospel wisdom and application to not completely tune him out. After all, some writings of Paul are among the most beautiful, insightful, and helpful of all Christian writings.

Paul and Peter

As is recorded in the book of Acts, Peter served as the *de facto* leader of the early followers of Jesus after the crucifixion. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus designates Peter as the *rock*, or foundation upon which he would build his church, meaning to continue his work. Within the elaborate St. Peter's Basilica, which is inside the walls of the Vatican (the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church), which is also inside the old city walls of Rome, there are portraits of every Pope of the Catholic church. The first portrait is a rendering of Peter, who was named (posthumously) as the first Pope of the Church. St. Peter's Basilica holds what are believed to be the

remains of Peter, along with the remains of numerous other Popes.

St. Paul's Basilica, which is somewhat more modest, is built upon the rumored burial place of Paul. It is not only outside the walls of the Vatican, but also outside the city walls of Rome. This is interesting since (1) Paul was a Roman citizen, and (2) Church doctrine relies much more on the teachings of Paul than on any recorded teachings of Peter. Once Christianity was designated as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century, the Roman Catholic Church prospered, and a mutually enabling link was created between the Church and the State. That marriage also helped to finance the construction of beautiful, ornate churches and cathedrals to replace the homes, tents, and other humbler places of worship that had served for gatherings of the faithful since Jesus's time. While helping to end the persecution of Christians, the marriage of Church and State also compromised the Church's role as a prophetic watchdog and critic of the State. This sanctioning by the State catapulted certain Christian sects, those agreeing to cooperate with the Roman government, into a position where they could more easily grow and prosper.

Early Christianity sprouted many separate and disparate applications of the life and teachings of Jesus stemming from the disciples who went out into the world after his resurrection to spread the gospel, only two of whom were Peter and Paul. It also inspired many religious writings, only some of which are included in today's Bible. It is interesting that the Roman Catholic church named Peter as its initial leader, but the Protestant church, formed some 1600

years later, in reaction to and protest against certain Catholic Church practices and doctrines, seemed more attuned to the intellectually-focused teachings of Paul. Other veins of Christianity remain today that trace their origins to other early disciples of Jesus, including the Coptic Church (founded by Mark), the Celtic Church (founded by Joseph of Arimathea), and others who refused participation in the marriage of Christianity to the Roman Empire. All Christian churches retain one common thread despite their differing doctrines and practices: they claim Jesus's life and teachings as the foundation of their existence. It amazes me how differently even the early disciples – those who personally knew Jesus – apparently applied his teachings to the various cultures they evangelized. It is also interesting that the religion naming Peter as its founder, Roman Catholicism, and the counter movement against that religion, Protestantism, have grown in vastly larger numbers than the other early Christian sects. No doubt, the association with the Roman Empire had a significant impact on their growth that has long outlived the Empire.

It is also interesting that a large and vocal portion of the Protestant church today has seemingly and passionately aligned itself with parts of the conservative wing of the United States political system. This group uses scripture, including many of Paul's writings, to infer that certain political posturing is consistent with God's will, even commanded by God. Never mind that other passionate, educated Christians disagree fervently with their interpretation of scripture. Also, never mind that while the various sides line up in opposition to each other, immigrants languish at the border, the numbers of domestic

homeless people climb, and food insecurity remains a chronic issue in the richest country in the history of the world, all of which were issues of prime and unarguable importance to our namesake.

The thought that God's will would be focused against any of God's children or against any part of God's creation requires gross misunderstandings and dangerous assumptions, even though both have occurred regularly throughout history. Paul's writings provide much fodder for this type of misguided application, probably because they were written by a man of privilege with a bold and authoritative-sounding writing style. Regardless, even Paul's writings must be taken out of their over-arching and concluding context to be used in such destructive ways.

Like Falling in Love

For all that I find bothersome about the writings of Paul, I confess that many of his writings are truly inspiring and enlightening. I also confess that the way Paul came to Christ, to enlightenment, or to whatever else we want to call the process of awakening to the intimate presence of God with us, is *exactly* the way we come to Christ, which is to say *indirectly*, at least in a physical sense. The first disciples knew Jesus personally, walked with Jesus, sailed with Jesus, shared meals with Jesus, and were intimately in Jesus's physical presence. Paul was not. Nor are we. Paul came to Jesus by an intense experience of Jesus coming to him. He was not looking for or expecting it. Our experience may or may not be so intense or so immediate. Our experience may be a more subtle

calling over an extended time, but one way or another we are called to repent (turn around), to a *rebirth*, to a restart of our lives in the knowledge of our Oneness with God. Whether we accept the invitation is our choice. Such a rebirth, however, changes *everything*, even as it changes *nothing*. It changes our perception of the life around us, even though it changes nothing in the life around us. What it changes is how we see our place in the world, bringing with it a desire to do what we can to improve the conditions around us. This call to action is not an obligation so much as a grateful response to the realization that we live in a loving, interwoven universe where our lives are inseparably intertwined with all other lives. We realize that if the world is to be better it is up to us to make it so. Once we so commit, other powers from heaven and earth align beside us to help. It may be our work to do, but it is not our work to do alone.

20th Century theologian Bernard Lonergan is quoted as saying, “Religion should be more like falling in love than proving anything.”⁵⁶ Paul seems desperately to want to prove the truth of the gospel using reason and logic. He argues with passion and agonizing persistence. And then Paul, almost as if by accident, gives us a gift. He expresses a truth so deep in such simple, straight-forward language that we are halted, breathless in our tracks. Such is his “love chapter” in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. Such are his identification of the “fruits” of the spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) found in Galatians 5:22.

⁵⁶ Bernard Lonergan, as quoted by James Finley on the podcast *Turning to the Mystics*, November 8, 2021 (www.cac.org).

Such is his brilliant metaphor of our interrelatedness as individual parts of a single body, found throughout his writings. It is as if Paul tries desperately to prove the truth of the gospel when, in a moment of clarity, a beautiful gospel truth emerges in spite of his words. It is like falling in love – unexpected, intense, and all-consuming. We are connected to a deep truth residing in our higher self, well beyond our thoughts and actions, and a potential within waiting to arise. By confessing his own dire shortcomings, Paul claims his divine heritage. In the process he creates a safe place for us to acknowledge our shortcomings, even as we also claim our divine heritage. We know what love is, we know how we should treat others, we know God is always with us, even though our actions do not always reflect that knowledge. Deep down, we know *who* we are and *whose* we are.

When we fall in love our world *expands*. We are vastly more accepting of the shortcomings of others and disappointments in life because we have entered an experience that transcends our petty frustrations. When we focus on trivial details our world shrinks and we find ourselves unable to give or receive much of anything. Such can be true of reading the letters of Paul, at least for me. I must rise above the seemingly petty frustrations he spells out in such excruciating detail to arrive at the *pearls of great price* interspersed throughout his writings.

And this is my frustration with Paulianity – that some Christians prefer to *contract* into the petty details of Paul's teachings without *expanding* from them into his enlightening, freeing, and loving conclusions. One can make the gospel sound bigoted, exclusive, and small by doing so. In that sense, Paulianity does a

Greg Hildenbrand

great disservice to Paul and to Christianity, even as it turns away those hungering for the spiritual guidance it was intended to provide.

Chapter 8

Reconciliation vs Retribution

We need to bury once and for all those fear-and-punishment scenarios that got programmed into so many of us during our childhood. There is no monster out there; only love waiting to set us free. Cynthia Bourgeault⁵⁷

Many believe the institutional church today is faltering because too many people know too little about Christianity to recognize the church as the body of Christ. I propose that, perhaps, too many people know *too much* about Christ and a Christian life to recognize the church, in its current state, as Christ's body. They may not know Christianity with the intellectual knowledge by which the church proports to proclaim it, but they sense in their hearts that Jesus would be overturning tables and chasing money-changers out of our churches again today. They know Churchianity when they see it, and they want no part of it.

One of the many doctrines that drives people away from churches is the paradox of proclaiming a God of unconditional love and forgiveness, and in the same breath teaching about a God that threatens those who disobey with eternal damnation and torture. Many like to describe this as *tough love*, saying

⁵⁷ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, Shambhala Publications, 2008, p. 107.

God must not only threaten punishment but also actually punish those who disobey to bring them under God's will. Then and only then can God provide the unconditional love we so desire. It is interesting and most telling that the obedience God apparently demands – the *will* of God – is usually consistent with what is most profitable to those proclaiming it. This is how some church leaders shape and teach God in their own image, often with extensive scriptural backing for their position. This shows not only the depravity of some church leaders but also how easily scripture can be manipulated for self-serving purposes. The methods of scriptural justification used in these cases are the same types that are used in biblical justifications for slavery and the subjugation of women. Such teaching creates an irreconcilable conflict between the concept of a loving God and the distinctly unloving and misleading teachings of some churches.

One church in my community has a large display on one of our main streets where they put pithy sayings each week. One week it proclaimed, "What if you're not good enough to get into heaven?" I was embarrassed, not only because a church body might be teaching such hurtful nonsense, but that they would put it on public display for everyone to judge all churches by. As an active church member myself, I take offense at the arrogant, ignorant, and self-righteous attitudes behind a willingness to make such a statement. While I hope it was said with tongue-in-cheek, I suspect that that specific church believes they have the recipe for keeping people out of hell. In my own arrogant and self-righteous way, I seriously doubt that they do.

In general, we have difficulty believing God loves us enough to accept us where we are and as we are. We believe there is a threshold beyond which God withdraws love and acceptance from us, but that threshold, which is not definitively spelled out in scripture, is often somewhere below our current score on whatever *unworthiness scale* we choose to utilize. We set the thresholds according to whatever allows us salvation, but more importantly, we set the thresholds so that those we believe deserve punishment will receive what they have coming to them. The key words in that last statement are *we* and *believe* – *we* want certain others to suffer as we *believe* they should. Never mind that our definition of who is deserving of punishment is an irreconcilably biased opinion based solely on our own judgement, tinged with our own largely subconscious sense of unworthiness.

We tend to forgive ourselves when we cut someone off in traffic because at least we did not kill anyone. In that sense, we are not *as bad* as a murderer. We notoriously compare our sins with those of others, forgetting that Jesus never ranked sins as better or worse. Sin is what separates us from God and from each other, and Jesus always sought to restore that which had been separated. His was a ministry of reconciliation, not of retribution. His was a ministry of unification, not of division. If following Jesus does not make us humble and inclusive of others, we are following a different Jesus than the one portrayed in scripture.

Some self-proclaimed Christians, like the sign-keeper at the aforementioned church, seem to read the Bible as more of a rule-book than a love story. If the rules given in the Bible were our requirements for

salvation, *no one* would qualify. Indeed, the question of whether we have earned God's love is the wrong question. The more relevant question is this: Who convinced us that God does *not* love us? The Bible is full of accounts of people who committed atrocities in ways similar to and far worse than we have. Yet, God relentlessly pursues them, forever seeking reconciliation and not retribution.

To Be (perfect) or Not To Be (perfect)

In order to feel better about ourselves and our own perceived shortcomings, we often build ourselves up by tearing others down. "If only she (or he) were more like me," we think; or "If only I were more like him (or her)." We do this automatically and subconsciously for the most part, but we do it nonetheless. This is the inevitable result of two universal misunderstandings: (1) that I am to be perfect in and of myself, and (2) that others are to be perfect in and of themselves. These misunderstandings are obviously the same misunderstanding and they grow out of the even greater misunderstanding that we are individual beings, separate and apart from all other beings. In other words, we mistakenly believe we can and should be proficient and self-sufficient in all or even most things. We fail to realize that our expectations of ourselves and others, as well as the expectations of others of ourselves and others, are simply out of touch with the reality of our created and interconnected nature. Of course the idea that we are even capable of understanding what constitutes perfection is, in itself, a serious error in judgment.

Whatever perfection is, it is not attained by individuals; it can only be attained by communities.

The result of our misguided perception is a need to assign blame. Our default position is the belief that we (or others) are somehow inadequate or deficient in some (or many) ways. We (or they) are too old, too out-of-shape, too dumb, or too unskilled to be what is needed at any given moment. In Christian belief systems, our imagined deficiencies incorrectly tend to be labeled as *sin*. We easily forget that sin is separation. It is the false belief that we are individual, *separate* beings that is the original and overarching sin. It is a sin we all commit because it is a natural outgrowth of our existence as thinking, self-obsessed human beings. By the time we enter school, most of us have completely bought into the illusion that we are independent. This sin does not make us bad; it makes us human. It also makes us blind to our interconnectedness.

When we label the sin of perceived separateness in ourselves and others and its consequent suffering as bad or evil, the natural conclusion is that there must be punishment. Someone must be at fault, and they must pay the price for their indiscretion. This misunderstanding is what has led us to teach and believe that Jesus came to die for our sins, which is true, but not in the way most people believe. The sin Jesus came to address was the sin of separation and not for any behavioral sins we confuse with imperfection. Retribution, making someone suffer for the suffering of others, seems like a biblical response to sin because the biblical authors mistakenly identified the misfortunes of their people as apparent punishments meted out by

God. Certainly the Jews of Jesus's day believed they had to spill blood – first of humans, then of animals – to appease God and to earn God's forgiveness. What we miss in these interpretations of past events is the understanding that we reap what we sow. What we usually interpret as punishment is simply the result of past actions, in the same way that no wheat is harvested from wheat seeds that are never planted.

The majority of what most of us do that is considered sinful is not necessarily bad – it is *human!* Yes, we act in selfish and self-centered ways. The consequences of our selfish behaviors are what teach us, eventually, to focus less on ourselves and attend more to the needs of others. We are blind to our intimate interconnections with everyone and everything around us not because we are bad and deserving of punishment but because we are human. Most of us are fighting a difficult battle with the consequences of our narcissistic tendencies, particularly those of us who attempt to follow the example of Jesus. What we need is patient understanding and encouragement, not condemnation and punishment. We need reconciliation, not retribution.

Some have come to label our God of love as a God of retribution not because there is any evidence that that is God's nature, but because of their own feelings of inadequacy. They hope that by undergoing some sort of sacrificial punishment – or imagining a Savior to do it for them – that God will welcome them into their concept of heaven when they die. This is a gross misunderstanding of God, the life of Jesus, the nature of heaven, and of the nature of our lives on earth.

Heresy or Heir-esy

The term “heresy” is used with derogatory connotations by evangelicals & their apologists, yet all it means is belief contrary to orthodoxy. The religious elite of western Christianity have rarely been on the right side of history, so finding myself out of alignment with what they have determined to be “truth” is more an encouragement than a warning sign. Never take something as truth simply because the larger institution has said it to be so. Stay heretical, my friends.

*@desconstruct_everything*⁵⁸

The militant-like manner in which some churches, church leaders, and members today defend their doctrines and specific interpretations of biblical texts is a hallmark of *churchianity*. Any challenge to what they hold as sacred and true is met with strong resistance and condemnation. Being strong in our faith is one thing; being closed-minded against what might expand and clarify our understanding about God and our world is quite another. The first enlivens our Christian faith and helps us live a more Christ-like life; the second makes us legalistic bigots. When the particulars of our understanding of God and scripture begin to crumble, as they inevitably will, we must either allow expanded possibilities and understandings to flow into our consciousness or we must stubbornly hold to our old beliefs, twisting them beyond all logic in order to hold them together. Earthly understandings, like everything else of the earth, are temporary and specific to a limited time and space.

⁵⁸ @deconstruct_everything, Instagram post on August 4, 2021.

God and God's kingdom may be eternal, but our physical and mental experience and understanding of them is not.

One area where churchianity often seeks to hold together that which was never intended to be held together has to do with arguments over the internal consistency of the Bible. Many believe that the Bible, as the *Word* of God, must be inerrant and non-contradictory or it cannot be God's Word. A considerable amount of mental gymnastics and argumentative blindness are required to make the inerrancy case, at least in my opinion. Regardless, many attempt to make the case, and many others accept and defend it as truth. Any challenge to biblical inerrancy or inconsistency is met with accusations of being unchristian, heretical, or some other charge of unworthiness or lack of seriousness in one's spiritual seeking. These types of judging, labeling, and threats of hell are implied forms of retribution against those who dare to challenge tightly held doctrine. The need for such retributive responses comes from the threat of toppling the unstable platform propping up beliefs that cannot stand the tests of reason. Some fear that if what they believed in the past turns out not to be "true," then their faith's foundations will collapse with it. They confuse temporal understandings with truths we are constantly called to grow into. They confuse words of truth with truths that cannot be contained in words, words intended only to point to truth with truth itself.

It is interesting to me that Jews have argued about the meaning and application of scripture for thousands of years, not as a way of dividing or condemning one another of a lack of faithfulness, but

as a way to better understand and explore scripture and its application. It is in the Jewish DNA to debate scripture in a process called *midrash*, and the debates continue unabated today. Why some Christians believe they have uncovered the “true and eternal” answers to long-running scriptural debates in their short life-times is beyond me. Debates about scripture should not bring retribution but should be experienced as mind-expanding, learning opportunities. No one is required to change their mind, only to open it so they can hear new possibilities and better understand and accept viewpoints different from their own. That is how we can bring reconciliation to interpretive differences in scripture – that we can argue and debate without dividing, accusing, and punishing. Perhaps we could set a reconciling example for our politicians in the process.

When we accept that the same creating, unifying force – God, for Christians – inspired sacred writings and actors through various ages and cultures to record their individual experiences and understandings in what has been retained as scripture, then we can read the Bible and other sacred texts in their appropriate context. That appropriate context includes different people with different views living in different space-and-time realities writing about God’s existence in and influence on their world. The *truth*, to the severely limited extent we are able to glimpse it, can only be approached through the consciousness-expanding processes of open-minded reconciliation.

Unfortunately, we spread the message of a retributive God by attributing to God *our* tendencies toward retribution. It is one of the many ways we

portray the image of God as a reflection of our image, instead of seeking to remake ourselves into the image of God. Making God in our own image is the true heresy.

Grace: Near or Far?

Grace is what we call what is left over after the scouring of the self, the dying to the self...Grace comes to us in the flesh, through the spaces and forms and contents of our human life...Grace is so mixed up in the stuff of human life that it cannot be easily glimpsed at first. Ann Belford Ulanov⁵⁹

The assigning of a retributive human tendency to God is one way of creating God in *our* image and is a form of idolatry. The God we so create is an illusion. This same human tendency to assign blame and punishment gives rise to the current understanding of sin as the “bad” things we sometimes do. I have suggested that the biblical authors sometimes portrayed God as vengeful because of their own human need to assign blame and punishment. Some churches present the *judgement* of God as if it were something to fear, as if we are inherently bad people under the thumb of an angry, impatient God who will serve as our judge, jury, and sentencing marshal. Fortunately (as the story goes), we have Jesus Christ as our defense attorney to convince God we really are not *that* bad and would God, just this once, look the other way and let us off

⁵⁹ Ann Belford Ulanov, *What Do We Think People are Doing When They Pray?* Anglican Theological Review, October 1978, pp. 392-393.

the hook. When God agrees, we breathe a sigh of relief and call it grace.

But what if God is not our accuser? What if it is our own human need to assign blame and punishment for failure to meet our own human expectations that is acting as judge, jury, and sentencing marshal? In that case, the grace from God is ever-present even though we cannot see it. It is our human need to create drama around our receipt of that grace that causes all the, well, drama. It is not so much that we *deserve* or *earn* God's grace, but that it is only our mistaken perceptions that raise questions about whether grace is there for us. In spite of mountains of evidence to the contrary, we believe we only receive what we think we have earned. We forget that we see and understand only in human, earthly terms. God is not so limited, and so for reasons beyond our ability to understand, God does not punish as we often believe God should.

The original sin, and all sins arising from it, is a sin of separation. Whenever we sincerely seek God or go to God in prayer or reflection, we bridge that separation and are reunited. Not that, from God's perspective, we were ever separated. Grace is intimately woven into the fabric of our relationship with all of life, regardless of whether we accept, name, or acknowledge it. Make no mistake, grace may not save us from the natural consequences of our actions, nor will it prevent unpleasant things from happening to us. Rather, grace assures us of second chances and blessed days ahead. Reconciliation is already occurring – in fact, there was never a time reconciliation was absent except as an illusory creation in our own mind. Grace assures us that *all* things work together for

good. We forget because we cannot see or understand the intricate inner workings of all things piecing themselves together. We mistake our temporary pain and suffering for permanent conditions instead of understanding them as the necessary, prerequisite stages that lead to something greater. The apostle Paul called them labor pains. In our impatience, we seek retribution wherever we cannot see the slow, steady movement of reconciliation.

It is interesting to read accounts of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Many such accounts describe an experience of *judgement* in which one's life is reviewed with not only everything the person did, but how what they did affected others. Most accounts describe this experience not as accusatory, unpleasant, or guilt-inducing, as would be consistent with retribution, but as a gentle learning experience that opened their eyes to their interconnectedness with others, as is consistent with reconciliation. The experience made them more loving and accepting of themselves and others when they returned from their near-death experience.

In this section's epigraph I quote Ann Ulanov, a professor of psychiatry and religion: "Grace is so mixed up in the stuff of human life that it cannot be easily glimpsed at first." Grace is so close and so integrated into our everyday experiences that we miss it. We look over our shoulder for the retributive punishment we fear we deserve and miss the reconciling path God has graciously prepared for us.

Chapter 9

Questions and Answers

Of course you don't understand it. If you understood it, it wouldn't be what you're looking for. It would just be one more thing you understand. James Finley⁶⁰

"You insist on explaining everything as if the whole world were composed of things that can be explained...Has it ever occurred to you that only a few things in this world can be explained your way?" Don Juan Matus⁶¹

One of the significant points of distinction between Christianity and churchianity has to do with the degree to which one believes we can be certain about spiritual matters. I once heard a sermon with the title: *God is not a question to be answered.* The statement had more than a hint of truth for me. The search for God is not a goal to be accomplished but an invitation into a never-ending exploration. In addition, there is an important distinction between intellectual knowing and experiential knowing. These types of knowing illustrate the difference between describing something and actually living it; the difference between reading a love story and actually falling in love. Deep knowledge of God is not possible

⁶⁰ James Finley, *Turning to the Mystics* Podcast, July 12, 2021.
www.cac.org.

⁶¹ Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality: Conversations with Don Juan*, Washington Square Press, 1971, p. 126.

in the realm of the intellect, only deep knowledge *about* God. When we learn something by living it, there is no end to the learning. Our intellectual descriptions limit our knowledge to within certain risk-controlled, well-defined, and safe boundaries. Our lived experiences, however, send us on unpredictable adventures filled with ups and downs, gains and losses, happy and sad feelings, all contained in moments of clarity interspersed with moments of perplexity. Lived experiences open one's mind to new learning and change, not because one necessarily seeks new learning and change, but because one cannot help oneself from taking the path that leads there. Some say, and I believe, God draws us there. We follow not because it is easy or comfortable but because we cannot *not* go.

I believe one of the reasons some of the more fundamentalist churches are experiencing less of a loss of membership these days is that they are preaching answers instead of pondering questions. Many people, more so than in the past I think, expect answers and solutions to difficult issues. And they want them quickly so they can get on with their busy lives. In generations past, perhaps, people did not expect to find clear answers about who God is and how God interacts in their lives. Or the questions were asked rhetorically with no definitive answers expected. They understood, perhaps better than we, that life's richest questions cannot be answered as if they were a math problem.

Some churches and church leaders who are quick and certain with answers to confounding biblical and spiritual questions appear to be thriving, even amidst the pandemic that has crippled many of

the traditional denominations who were struggling even before COVID became a household term. It is unacceptable to many folks that some questions have no answers, at least no answers that can be contained in words. And yet, unanswered questions keep us seeking. It is an unfortunate expectation in our modern, Western society that answers be readily available and easily accessible. The fact is that our intellectual constructs have no solid basis in reality. In that sense they are illusions – visions of a future state, perhaps, but illusions in the present moment.

One problem with being too firm in our certainty about God is that God's story is still being written – by and through us and all other created beings. As such, some sentences end with a perpetual comma instead of a period, even as some stories are eternally open-ended. When the books deemed worthy of inclusion in the Bible were selected 1700 years ago, there was an assumed period placed at the end, as if God's Word began and ended in those writings. In an ever-evolving world with a God still at work, who are we to claim final knowledge or certainty about anything? And yet, some churches do. And apparently some people crave such certainty, at least until it proves inadequate under the weight of their life experiences.

Author and retired psychotherapist James Finley, in the epigraph to this chapter, points out that we do not understand that of which we seek. Once we understand something we cease seeking it. We close the book on that issue and move on with our lives. And that is exactly the problem with any *theology of certainty*, that once we feel we have the answers we seek we simply move on to something else. Once we

think we know the right prayer to pray or gain certainty about how much money to give we stop seeking deeper, evolving answers. A good rule of thumb is that when the answers we receive do not raise an entirely new set of questions we have almost certainly received an inadequate answer or one that will prove only temporarily adequate. Spiritual insights are best held lightly, with an openness to allowing our understanding to evolve.

Too many of us try to end our days with a period. Perhaps we should learn to settle for ending our days with a comma or, at worst, a semicolon. The story is never finished.

Is God Love?

Our desire for clear-cut answers to deep and difficult questions, and our belief that such answers can be expressed in concise, unambiguous language combine to make many of us fall for charlatans and to accept answers that fall far short of the truths we seek. To illustrate the point, consider a common answer given to questions about the nature of God: *God is love*, and the more personal extension of that answer: *God loves and cares for me*. While I do not disagree with either answer, at least on a certain level, my answer would be “It depends...” when asked if I believe that God is love or that God loves and cares for me. The answer cannot be so easily or quickly concluded, at least not in words.

The difficulty arises because of the many definitions, manifestations, and understandings of what is and is not *love*, let alone what is and is not *God*. If by saying that God is love we mean that God will

never allow unpleasant things to happen to us, then anyone with a modicum of life experience will conclude that God most certainly is *not* love. If that person continues to believe that God is love *and* that God will never allow bad things to happen to believers, then to reconcile the conflict between their belief and the reality they must construct an alternate reality. A common form of such reconciliation is to assume we are sinful creatures and that bad things happen to us because of our sin. In other words, God punishes us for our sin by allowing bad things to happen to us. We confuse *bad things* with laws of cause and effect. The qualifier for this alternative reality is this: *God will not allow bad things to happen to me if I do not sin.* Never mind that *bad things* often happen with no discernable reason.

This alternate reality must be further modified when bad things happen to innocent victims – childhood cancer, sober victims of drunken drivers, a lung cancer diagnosis for one who has never smoked. Where is the sin in cases like these? Some say bad things happen to good people because of the sins of their predecessors, which has some scriptural backing, but is unhelpful and takes us even deeper into the rabbit hole of the sin conundrum. These are the sorts of *explanations* we get when we seek quick, concise, and easy answers. It is not that we should automatically reject these types of answers as much as they should not stop our search for deeper, more complete explanations.

When we proclaim *God is love* in answer to questions about God's nature, we must look deeper than our daily circumstances to see how that can be true. There is daily evidence that God does not love

us in a way that prevents unpleasant and unfortunate things from happening to us. Teacher and author James Finley responds to this sort of proclamation by pointing out that God does not *protect* us from anything; God does, however, *sustain* us in all things. In other words, God's love is not about preventing suffering but manifests itself as and after suffering occurs. There is also daily evidence that *bad things* often lead to *good things* over time. Understanding how God loves us is a process that unfolds in time, and that understanding does not come in words but in our experience of that faithful, sustaining love that gradually births a new future in spite of today's difficulties. We easily mistake the labor pains of our daily experiences for permanent destinations instead of recognizing them as temporary and necessary parts of the birthing process.

Another confounding issue with most quick and easy answers is the assumption that life begins at earthly birth and ends with earthly death. If spirituality is about anything, it is about acknowledging that life is infinitely more than the limited time we consciously inhabit our earthly bodies. Just as preparations for a nice dinner begin hours and days before the meal, and just as planning for intricate construction projects begins years before ground is broken, so our lives are filled with overlapping cycles of planning, construction, and utilization. Some cycles take hours, some years, and some cycles almost certainly require many lifetimes. Our lives are spent in various stages of transition.

Is *God is love* a good answer to questions about the nature of God? The answer depends on the

timeline we allow for God's love to unfold. It also depends on what we consider *bad*.

Enduring Suffering

Another commonly-given platitude about the nature of God, particularly in the face of suffering, is this: *God never gives us more than we can handle*. It may sound holy and true, and it might be on some level, but try to convince a parent whose child is undergoing chemotherapy, or a person whose partner has advanced dementia, or a person in withdrawal from drug addiction. Saying such a thing in the midst of deep suffering is not only unhelpful but also can be hurtful and implies that things will get easier soon and return to normal, a guarantee none of us can realistically make.

The first fallacy is the implication that God *gives* us the hard things in our lives. Yes, life is hard sometimes. *Very* hard. *Impossibly* hard. Is life hard because God is making it so? I do not believe so. Perhaps the reason life is hard sometimes is simply that life is hard sometimes. Not everything has or needs an explanation. To imply that God causes hardships for a reason, even if it were true, is more likely to turn the suffering person away from God than it is to comfort them. This is doubly hurtful because turning away from God or wondering if God is punishing them adds even more stress to an already stressful situation.

The second fallacy is believing we can always *handle* whatever life throws at us. At any given moment, life's circumstances can overwhelm the resources at hand. Just as hurricanes overwhelm

levees and lightening overwhelms power grids and traffic overwhelms highways, so can we be overwhelmed – mentally, emotionally, and physically. It is not so much that we *handle* suffering as we *endure* it. Handling something implies a sense of control, and control is generally absent from suffering. When life is hard it does not call for being *handled* as much as being persevered. Our most loving response to such suffering is often accompanying and supporting the sufferer and not pretending we can remove a source of suffering we cannot remove. How can we best hunker down and get through this?

The truth is that our ability to *handle* whatever life throws at us can only be speculated about in retrospect, if at all. Like Moses in the cleft of the mountain,⁶² we can only see God once God has passed by. Yes, we made it through *that*, whatever hellish experience that may have been. We did not, however, feel we were handling anything at the time. We were enduring. We were holding on for dear life. Things were being done to us that were unbearable and out of our control, but what choice was there other to endure it? After the fact, we may be able to see how God's hand was at work throughout the ordeal – and we may not. Only by faith do we believe God is at work, even in our suffering.

It is only in hindsight, if at all, that we may see that pathways to new life were being created in our suffering. Even so, many people have a very human tendency to feel the need to share words of “wisdom”

⁶² ...and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. Exodus 33:21-22.

with the one suffering. I was 14 when my dad died suddenly. I was the oldest of four children. Well-meaning church folks shared their wisdom with me: “I guess you’re the man of the house now”; and “God must’ve really needed your dad in heaven”; and of course, “God never gives us more than we can handle.” I didn’t know what to do with any of that. I still don’t. These were good people who were searching for words of comfort and healing in the face of an unspeakable tragedy that was beyond words. In their defense, they didn’t know what else to do. They were pained by their helplessness, too. In retrospect, I probably didn’t need for them to say anything, except perhaps *I am sorry this has happened to you*. We needed friends and family to stand with us so we would not suffer alone. Thankfully, many did. We also needed people to roll up their sleeves and help fill some of the gaps left by an absent father with a young family. Thankfully, many did.

In cases of suffering, answers seldom come in words. They come in the actions inspired by witnesses to the suffering who believe suffering need not be endured alone. They come in community. They come from God working through persons willing to stand in solidarity with the suffering.

Answering vs Responding

One way to handle a troubling issue is to reframe it as a problem. Once an issue has been stated as a problem it better lends itself to being solved so folks can move on to something else. That often works well in business. It even works for some interpersonal issues, at least to a degree. Some issues,

like some questions, have neither answers nor solutions, however. For example, your child comes to you and says, "My heart hurts." An attentive parent will attempt to discern if this is a problem in need of a quick response, such as a cardiac issue that needs prompt medical attention, or a less well-defined dilemma requiring attention of a different sort. The *heart* refers to much more than the blood-pumping organ in the middle of our chest. It is also the center of our feeling and emotional intelligence, as well as our spiritual connection with others. If we treat our child's hurt heart as a question to be answered when the source of the pain is emotional, we may send them away with the assurance everything will soon be okay but also feeling they haven't been heard or had their pain acknowledged. We feel we have *solved* a problem when in fact we have simply avoided addressing a dilemma that might have been better addressed with open-ended, loving compassion and companionship that assures the child whatever they are going through need not be suffered alone. If the child's heart stops hurting it will be because the pain has been repressed and not because the pain was acknowledged and honored.

When facing a challenge we must first determine if it is a question needing an answer or a dilemma needing reflection. The first is closed-ended. The latter must remain open, and we do well to attain a level of comfort with unresolvable challenges, particularly as we age. The deeper we enter spiritual dimensions the more abundant those mysterious and unanswerable challenges become. One of the more difficult lessons in relationships, at least for me, is remembering that when a partner presents a concern,

they may or may not be looking for a solution. Here's a lesson that required many uncomfortable years for me to learn: If they are looking for a solution, they will ask. More often than not, at least in my experience, they are seeking companionship in their dilemma – a listening ear, an understanding heart, an attentive mind...and a closed mouth. Such dilemmas are not something to be answered so we can move on to whatever is next, but something to be acknowledged, respected, and heard.

And this is our dilemma with *churchianity*, where so much of God's nature is treated as a question we can answer or a problem we can solve by saying the right prayer or memorizing the right scripture. An example is saying we can save ourselves from Hell by proclaiming Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It may be implied biblically, and it may answer a question, but it is wholly inadequate for building a Christian life. God is not seeking cookie-cutter Christians ready with quick and easy answers to life's dilemmas. God is seeking life-long companions and followers, those who will stand with those who are suffering, come alongside the oppressed, those who are capable of *companionsing* even when there are no easy, apparent, or quick solutions. Building a relationship with God is similar, in some ways, to building human relationships in that we must be prepared to *respond* in appropriate ways and not simply provide pithy answers in order to move on to something more interesting to us. Learning to be comfortable with dilemmas without clear or quick answers is an important lesson in responding appropriately. When we try to force answers onto paradoxical situations we miss the mark, which is one

definition of sin. Sometimes it is better to accept, sit with, and acknowledge the unresolved tension, focusing our efforts on accompanying the suffering instead of trivializing or ignoring it because we cannot eliminate it.

When we dig beneath the surface of our materially-focused, Western lives, we find a whole lot of issues buried under our comfort-seeking, tension-avoiding ways. Just because we can reduce many dilemmas to problems or questions does not mean we should. In reality, as with a child with a hurt heart, we may simply push the dilemma into subconscious arenas where it will resurface, often in a more difficult form and often hurting more hearts in the process.

Obviously, some dilemmas require a quick and appropriate response. When someone tells us they're hungry we should feed them and not begin an internal debate about whether the person is suffering from a physical or a spiritual hunger or question what they will do with the food or money we give them. Again, sometimes an appropriate response is quick and easy. Other times, however, an appropriate response is a life-long process.

Chapter 10

Good and Bad

*You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, You'd better not
shout I'm telling you why,
Santa Claus is coming to town.⁶³*

Many of us developed an image of God based more on Santa Claus than on anything biblical. That image, born in childhood and perpetuated by many churches, persists long beyond our belief in the jolly, bearded gift-giver. God is often envisioned as the eternal, heavenly version of the mortal, earthly Santa Claus. God makes a list and checks it twice, so God can find out who's been naughty and nice. For the naughty kids, Santa brings coal, if anything at all. Nice kids get toys. Likewise, God sentences naughty people to hell for eternity. Nice people get to spend their forever in heaven. For Santa Claus, “crying” and “shouting” put one in the “naughty” category (never mind the impact of that on our mental health as we grow). For God, the standards for *naughtiness* and *goodness* are less clear. In fact, they vary from church to church and from believer to believer. There is, arguably, no greater source of biblical debate than over what behaviors clear us for entry into heaven as opposed to what earns us a one-way, non-cancelable

⁶³ “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” Christmas song by J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie, 1934.

ticket to hell. There is little argument, however, that these images of Santa Claus and God make some children better behaved, at least as Christmas approaches, and some adults more religious as they age.

My daughter was always suspicious of Santa Claus. She refused to sit on his lap, and she questioned the existence and reality of the Santa-mystique from a very early age. As a parent, for me at least, it was an annual dilemma as to how much I should encourage the Santa Claus aspect of Christmas. I chose to not to directly answer her questions about whether he was real, opting to give vague generalizations and trying to change the subject. I did not want to lie to her, but I also did not want to rob the season of any of its magic. As it turns out, the season is magical even without the Santa Claus myth.

I remember older relatives asking me as Christmas approached, “Have you been a good boy this year?” It was a terrifying question. While I felt I had been *mostly* good, and while I knew I *tried* to be good, I knew I was not *always* good. I just hoped no one else, especially Santa Claus or (gulp) God, noticed. I was especially thankful no one could know the bad thoughts that perpetually plagued me. I would have collected enough coal over the years to heat a city had that been the case. And the same question is out there today, although in a different context. “Have I been good enough to go to heaven when I die?” The question may not be asked as directly as my relatives asked in the context of Santa Claus, but it still hangs over us like a shroud that gets heavier with each passing year.

The question raised by the question is this, “How good is good enough?” For me at least, Santa Claus always brought me toys for Christmas regardless of the bad things I had done and thought throughout the year. I guess I must not have been *that* bad. Does God weigh good and bad in a similar manner, the weight of one cancelling out the weight of the other? If so, I may be good enough. If not...

With Santa Claus, the punishment for bad behavior, as the story goes, only lasted a year (of course a year for a child *is* an eternity). With God, the punishment is rumored to be forever. What I couldn’t see as a child but *should* be able to understand as an adult is this: *It is impossible to be good all of the time!* Even the apostle Paul understood this: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”⁶⁴

We are, individually, a mix of good and bad. All of us. All of the time. That is an undeniable fact, whether we label it as the sinful nature of humankind or our selfish, narcissistic tendencies. I suspect our issue is not one of sin so much as a misunderstanding and judgment of what is good or bad. Our expectations are high, due at least in part to the Santa Claus stories of our childhood and our subsequent projected beliefs about the nature of God. Those beliefs are completely out of line with the Jesus of the Bible – God made flesh who came to reveal God’s true nature. Love. Forgiveness. Grace. Healing. Acceptance. Inclusion. Understanding. Not even Santa Claus could be so lavishly generous.

⁶⁴ Romans 7:15.

Goodness and Perfection

I suspect it is true that we limit our understanding of the true nature of what is good by condemning certain things as bad when they are simply necessary stages for good to fully develop. Much of what we label as bad can more accurately be considered as incomplete or immature. Goodness, like life, is a process and a journey, never a static or permanent state of existence. It manifests and changes over time. Given time, attention, and an appropriate vision for maturity, most of what we consider bad will lead to something better, even something good. We equate goodness with perfection even though perfection is a poorly understood and constantly moving target. Our limited understanding of perfection is usually based on the unrealistic expectations of others, and it has no permanence. Our concepts of perfection are largely shaped by social media, airbrushed photographs, and movie scripts. Some of us consider living a life that is above criticism as perfection. Not only is living a life that is above criticism impossible, but it also requires us to ignore the soul-voice in our hearts that encourages us to rock any boat in need of rocking for the sake of goodness, which necessarily will draw criticism from those who cannot visualize a path to goodness.

Criticism is often a necessary prod to steer us toward the good. My 9th Grade English teacher, Mr. McKinney, was a stickler for grammatical perfection. There was a quiz every day and one's grade was either an A or an F, nothing in between. We completed our work perfectly and got an A, or we made an error, no matter how minor, and got an F. My semester with

Mr. McKinney began with two weeks of straight F's. I had never gotten anything below a B in my life, but I was clearly flunking his class. I mustered the courage to visit Mr. McKinney one morning before school. He was a gruff, intimidating man in class, but he was pleasant and welcoming that morning. He patiently went through each of my failed assignments until I could do them correctly. And then he changed each of my F's to A's and suddenly I had an A in 9th Grade English. Perfection! But there was a lot of bad and a lot of suffering leading to that perfection. And there was a lot of work involved in retaining that measure of perfection.

When I was a child, as is the case with all children, I did a lot of *bad* things. I did not share as I should have. I took toys away from others. I picked on my younger siblings. I cried when I did not get my way. I was not a bad person, however. I was a *child* and incapable of behaviors expected of adults, even though that is the standard some children are held to. In that sense it would have been more accurate to say I was immature, although from a child development standpoint, I was perfectly normal. Only when viewed through adult eyes and held to adult standards could I be considered bad or even immature. We make a similar mistake with many of our judgements of good and bad – we label something as bad when it is often something good in the making.

When something unfortunate happens to someone we are quick with unhelpful platitudes like, "Everything happens for a reason," as if there were some God-ordained plan requiring our misery. While I do not believe that God wills unpleasant things to happen to us, God does work *with* us to help

unpleasant things grow and evolve into something better and sometimes into something very good. I believe that from God's view, everything is sacred and useful, even though some things have yet to blossom into their sacred fullness. Our misguided attempts to eliminate everything bad from our lives is not only a fruitless endeavor, but it may also stunt the growth of much good that is trying to manifest.

Whenever we expect goodness, completion, and perfection from anything or anyone we set ourselves up for disappointment. Not everything works out the way we think it should (nor should it). Not everyone acts the way we think they should (nor should they). The central issues are not the things and people who fall short of our expectations. The problem is our belief that we always know what is good, complete, and perfect. Clearly, we do not. We can, however, watch in awe as God works in God's way, through us and others, and in God's time to bring about the perfect consummation of *all* things. Paul said as much in his letter to the Romans: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."⁶⁵

Systems of Evil

One of the defining differences between churchianity and Christianity has to do with how concretely good and bad are defined. Some churches and religious leaders are quick to point fingers and condemn those who do not live by the standards they

⁶⁵ Romans 8:28.

preach (often including themselves). Many of those standards are only tangentially related to anything Jesus said or did, if at all. Certainly any teaching that ostracizes or excludes others as unworthy of God's love and care is not based on the message or life of Jesus. Rather, the purpose of those types of standards is more about controlling the behavior of others and making them believe their salvation depends on the teaching of the church or their religious leader. That is exactly the sort of control sought by the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's day and that drew his harshest criticisms. They were misleading people in the name of God. It wasn't that they were bad people *per se*, but they were deceiving others by focusing the attention of their followers on the wrong things.

It is not that bad and evil do not exist. Certainly they do. But bad does not always mean an intentionally insensitive act, nor is bad always synonymous with evil. Everyone does bad things on occasion in the sense that we do things that end up being uncaring or hurtful towards others, often just thoughtlessly. Evil, on the other hand, is a manifestation of a social system – a group of people who have codified certain behaviors over time, usually generations, that benefit one group of people at the expense of others. When a husband leaves the toilet seat up, that may be considered inconsiderate behavior, but is not evil. When a society has laws with built-in prejudices and favoritisms that provide privileged benefits to a few while making life harder for others, that society has systems of evil in place, many of which are difficult to identify and disentangle because they are woven so tightly into the fabric of the society.

I am aware of churches that require couples who have been living together to stand before the congregation and confess their *sin* of living together without being married prior to the church allowing them to be married in that church. It seems a perplexing disincentive to require a couple to humiliate themselves prior to being allowed to comply with the church's definition of God's *will*, i.e., getting married before living together. Contrast this with Jesus's treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery⁶⁶ or the woman at the well.⁶⁷ There was no condemnation, only love and acceptance in order to move forward. As an aside, it is interesting that the men involved in these two stories of sex outside of marriage are not mentioned nor, presumably, condemned for their part, likely the dominant and instigating part, in the undesirable behavior. No doubt, the patriarchal society of Jesus's day let men off the hook for activities it condemned in women, which is yet another example of a systemic injustice and systemic evil.

In his *Sermon on the Plain*⁶⁸ Jesus illustrates the circular nature of our life experiences, rotating from good to bad and bad to good. He says, "Blessed are you who weep (bad), for you will laugh (good)." A few verses later he says, "Woe to you who are laughing now (good), for you will...weep (bad)." Some people understand these words to mean we will pay for our happiness with suffering, so the best way to avoid suffering is to avoid happiness. I believe this is a perversion of the teaching. Rather, Jesus is stating

⁶⁶ John 8:1-11.

⁶⁷ John 4:1-42.

⁶⁸ Luke 6:14-49.

what should be obvious: as long as we label some things as good and others as bad, we will continue waffling between the two, just as the moon waffles through its phases between new and full. Perhaps we are better off accepting whatever is happening to us now as the phase our life is in now without labeling it in positive or negative terms. One obvious exception is when we find ourselves in unacceptably abusive situations that warrant our exit or other drastic action. The unfortunate outcome of trying to avoid much of what we label as bad is that by so doing, we often short-circuit the natural movement of God in our lives. Just because something is unpleasant for a time does not make it inherently bad or evil. When we condemn certain behaviors or occurrences as bad we often bring more of those bad behaviors or occurrences into our lives because we are working against the way God created the world to develop. None of which is to say we should not commit ourselves to working for a better and more just world. We may, however, need to go through some difficult times and experiences in order to arrive at a better and more just world.

Discerning bad things that need love and mercy from bad things that need condemnation and elimination is a life-long and imperfect process. I suggest erring on the side of love and mercy, however.

The Sacred and Profane

*There are not sacred and profane things, places, and moments.
There are only sacred and desecrated things, places, and*

moments – and it is we alone who desecrate them by our lack of insight and reverence. Fr. Richard Rohr⁶⁹

In early adulthood I worked as a landscape designer. I focused on trying to recommend plants and planting schemes where the natural growth pattern of the plants would co-exist in a complementary way with their surroundings without a lot of trimming. I tried to create what *I* considered a sacred symbiosis between plants and structures. One of my pet peeves, then as now, was when others would use hedge clippers to (in my opinion) *desecrate* plants by forcing them into globes, squares, or other unnatural shapes that made them fit the particular space they were given to grow. Of course for some, plants trimmed neatly into various and convenient shapes makes the desecrated *sacred*. Which type of landscape is sacred and which has been desecrated? I confess it is a matter of opinion, but if only plants could talk... Regardless, we tend to judge one as good (sacred) and the other as bad (desecrated).

Contemplative author Richard Rohr teaches that nothing is profane, in and of itself. Everything is sacred. It is *we* who desecrate the sacred, often with seemingly good intentions. But even our desecrations do not have the final word for people, places, things, and moments. Anything that has been desecrated can regain its sacredness because everything remains sacred *at its core* regardless of what has happened to it on the outside. All of us show the scars of our desecrations, as Jesus did on his resurrected body, but our inner sacredness, our true nature, cannot be

⁶⁹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, October 4, 2021. www.cac.org.

defiled. When we are abused, physically or emotionally, the marks and memories of that abuse do not disappear. Abuse does not, however, define who we are. It is something that happened to us in an imperfect and often unfair, dangerous world. Once others look beneath our weathered appearance, they will still see the undefiled image of God from which we were created.

When some churches and church leaders attempt to draw clear distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, or sacred and desecrated, they usually fail to share that the story is not finished. We cannot know how any of our stories end because even though books and movies have beginnings and endings, we do not. Our stories began long before we were born on earth and will continue long past our days on earth. Churchianity often truncates our stories as if God has placed a period where God only placed a comma. Yes, our life may be a hot mess today, but who is to judge the work that God may be doing with and through our messy life? Just because we are a work in progress does not make us bad or evil. We may become desecrated to a greater or lesser extent on our way to manifesting our sacredness. That – making the desecrated sacred – is arguably God's greatest work on earth.

In order to help restore the sacredness of something that has been desecrated we must first open a place for it within ourselves. Too much of churchianity attempts to deny or reject what has been desecrated, which is like trying to live one's life in perennial daylight by rejecting nighttime – nighttime just keeps returning. Life is and always will be a mix of light and dark, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant,

sacred and desecrated. When we try to live in only one half of reality we live permanently unbalanced. Better to enlarge our acceptance to include *all* things and circumstances, recognizing they are all of God. Darkness is dark and fearful only because we cannot see what is there. We can, however, expose what is dark in our lives to the light. Once exposed to even the dimmest light, what is hidden in darkness becomes known and is usually far less troublesome. Jesus remade desecrated lives whole and holy again by accepting them into his reality and providing the loving attention needed to allow the image of God to become visible again. If we are to be followers of Jesus, we are to do the same.

For whatever reason, good and bad things happen all around us, all of the time. Some people die from certain conditions that others survive. It is not given to us to know why. What we *can* know is that life does and always will produce what we consider opposing results and confusing circumstances. *And* we can know that God and those we love will go through cycles of unpleasantness with us, just as they do with cycles of good. Ultimately, however, good and bad are One.

Chapter 11

Anthropomorphosis

But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living.

Job 28:12-13

When we anthropomorphize something, we attribute human qualities to it and judge it based on human values, experiences, and understandings. Anthropomorphizing is a natural human trait, and there is nothing wrong with it *per se*. Where it leads us astray is when we are not conscious of doing it or when we convince ourselves it is an accurate representation of another part of creation. In fact, as I write this I catch myself anthropomorphizing nearly every analogy I attempt to draw. When we confuse our own anthropomorphizing with ultimate Truth, however, we believe and act as if we were God – all-knowing and exclusive holders of Truth, instead of humbly acknowledging our rightful place as one *part* of the body of God. There are roughly 8.7 million known and unique species of life on earth today. The human race makes up 1/8,700,000th of them, and any one of us individually makes up about 1/7,800,000,000th of those. We tend to see ourselves as the pinnacle of evolution because we believe we are in control of the planet, but we can only believe that by anthropomorphizing creation – seeing the entirety

of creation through our biased human lens. When we say that climate change threatens the survival of the planet we are anthropomorphizing, and we are incorrect. The survival of a habitable environment *for human beings* is at risk, but other parts of creation will adapt and carry on, exactly as it was created to do.

It is common for my anthropomorphizing self to see a wilted plant and exclaim, “That plant is screaming for water!” Obviously, the plant is not literally *screaming*, which is a human and not a plant trait. It is, however, a typical human way of pointing out that a plant might need water. Rather, plants naturally wilt when they are dry to preserve moisture. It is how they were created. Is the plant in the sort of pain that would cause a human to scream? Probably not. If the plant is suffering, it is suffering in a way unique to its created nature that we cannot understand by anthropomorphizing its current state. Yes, we should probably water the plant if we can, but is it necessary or helpful to attribute human-like feelings to the plant? I suggest it is not only not necessary, but it can also limit our ability to understand, respect, and appreciate the unique nature of the plant. Plants, too, are created in the image of God, as is every other part of creation, including viruses, mosquitos, rocks, and the most annoying people we know. When we treat everything else in creation as though it experiences life as we experience life, we limit our understanding of and appreciation for the unfathomable diversity of the created world.

Likewise, when we anthropomorphize God, we mold a caricature of God from *our* image. Our most common portrayals of the nature of God are based largely on Zeus, the mythical ancient Greek

God of thunder. Zeus was easily angered and retributive. Our most common *picture* of God is taken from Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel of an old, bearded, white man. Granted, the Bible refers to God mostly (although not exclusively) in the masculine gender since most societies in biblical times, as today, were patriarchal systems. That God is represented to look like a human is the anthropomorphosis of a deity figure. That God was painted as a white male reflects the reigning racial supremacy of the time.

If, when we think of God, we picture an old, white man who is wise (in human ways) but aloof, distant, and retributive (also in human ways), we have anthropomorphized God. Too many of us expect our relationship with God to be a version of our relationship with one or both parents, typically with our father. And those images stay with us and solidify over the course of our lives unless and until they are significantly and consistently challenged, which most churches fail to do. Not only do they not challenge our imbedded images of God, but they perpetuate those images by referring to God in the masculine gender and by portraying God as a retributive task-master who will condemn us to eternal misery for disobedience. That god does not exist outside the realm of human imagination. That god is a creation of the anthropomorphosis of the God of creation. That god is created in *our* image and reflects our seldom-merciful human concepts of justice and judgment..

And this is a mark of churchianity – that the god we are taught to worship is an anthropomorphized god created in man's image that loves and blesses only those who abide within the

church's exclusive, man-made fictional narrative. Unfortunately, that god only recognizes and acknowledges a small portion of the Christ of God. That god, thankfully, is not an accurate representation of God.

Divine Injustice

Jesus provided numerous examples of the nature of God that make no sense to our typical human ways of understanding. We tend either to ignore or rationalize the inconsistencies, or we twist the teachings into something other than what was given. One of my favorite examples is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.⁷⁰ Jesus uses the parable to illustrate a distinctly non-human characteristic of the kingdom of heaven. A landowner hires laborers to work in his vineyard. Some workers begin early in the morning and work all day. Other workers are brought in at various times throughout the day and work until the end of the workday, including some who work only the last hour. At the end of the day, the landowner pays all the workers the same amount, one day's wage, regardless of whether they worked all day, half the day, or a single hour. God, represented by the landowner, clearly does not abide by the human value of equal pay for equal work.

When we read and understand this parable through our human values, we wonder, "How is that fair, that the landowner would pay the person who worked very little the same as the person who worked all day doing the exact same work? Isn't that

⁷⁰ Matthew 20:1-11.

discrimination? Worker abuse? Does it create a hostile work environment?” My point in drawing attention to this parable is that God’s application of fairness is vastly different than ours, and when we attempt to anthropomorphize God’s actions under the rules of human understanding we are often going to be confused and believe God to be unjust. The lesson from the parable, at least one understanding, is that there is only one reward for going to work in God’s vineyard. That reward is the kingdom of heaven, which means being in the vineyard. There are no gradations – higher or lower values – of the reward. It does not matter whether we enter the field at the beginning or end of our earthly days, the reward is the same. Certainly, the time in our life that we enter the field will impact our earthly experience, but the “payment” is the same. We will never arrive at that sort of understanding of the teaching, however, by anthropomorphizing God’s sense of fairness.

The parable strikes at the heart of our sense of justice. Near the end of the telling, the landowner says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”⁷¹ Indeed, must God abide by our human sense of justice? God’s generosity may make us envious when we anthropomorphize God because it is of a different nature and so much more lavish than that of most humans. Once we have a taste of God’s presence – the vineyard of God – while we may wish to share it with others, our human nature wants others to suffer in similar ways to how we believe we suffered in order to “earn” it. It seems only fair since

⁷¹ Matthew 20:15.

we (believe we) had to work for it. That sort of very human thinking leads to all sorts of often hurtful misunderstandings about the nature of God.

A large part of our misunderstanding of God's nature has to do with perspective. As humans we tend to divide our lives into separate and distinct pieces, like days, months, or years. The pieces may be related to the beginning and end of a project or process. Certainly the life-piece weighing most heavily on our minds goes from our birth to our physical death. What we miss by dividing our lives into pieces is the continuity and interconnectedness of the various pieces. Splitting into pieces is the anthropomorphosis of life, and that reality only exists in movies, novels, and the imaginary space between our ears. Not only are our individual lives an interwoven collective of what we perceive as pieces, but our lives run continuous with and are connected to all other lives, human and non-human, past, present, and future.

When we look at the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from a more integrated perspective, we begin to understand that whether we enter the vineyard at age 8 or 80 matters very little in the larger scheme of life. Our life is more than our days on earth, let alone a single day. The reward is entering the vineyard – being present with the Divine – and that reward is all there is. That reward is all that matters.

The Ignored Gospel

The anthropomorphosis of what it means to follow Jesus and honor Christ has led to millennia of misunderstandings, persecutions, and narcissistic

actions, all under the guise of following the “will of God.” When we understand and interpret a benevolent God in human terms, we create a God that always acts in what we believe to be the best human interests. Unfortunately, we seldom consider what is best for humanity as a whole, for creation as a whole, or for the evolution of that creation through time. Instead, we interpret the nature of God in scripture according to what we believe is best for us and those like us. We take a narrow, exclusive, and self-serving view of what is good and pick and choose scripture to support it. This manifestation of churchianity is what has become the modern-day church, at least the caricature of the modern-day church, and masses of people are leaving or shunning it as they see through its faux-universalist facade. We cannot understand what is best for us without first understanding what is best for everyone and everything on the planet. And we cannot understand what is best for *us* by defining *us* as “me and those who look and think like me.”

Jesus paints a descriptive picture of the kingdom of God in his Sermon on the Mount.⁷² Meekness, non-violence, humility, service to others, inclusion of outcasts, feeding the hungry, healing the sick – these are the human traits of one acting in the will of God. They are not, however, traits we naturally elevate and strive to emulate as human beings. For example, there is nothing in Jesus’s teachings that encourages the accumulation of wealth beyond meeting the needs of the day. (I acknowledge my place among the hypocrites who call themselves

⁷² Matthew, chapters 5-7.

Christian while ignoring the teachings that threaten our comfortable lifestyles.) The foundation of the gospel, reflected in every non-human part of creation, is trusting that God will provide for our needs. Whenever we hoard beyond today's needs we either make something unavailable to someone else who needs it, or we take beyond what the earth can sustainably provide. Let's face it, there is no bank account large enough, no insurance policy comprehensive enough, and no house strong enough to withstand every tragedy that can happen in life on earth. We strive mightily to secure our lives, but it is a fruitless endeavor because we have anthropomorphized what it means to be secure. Alas, there is no security in our *stuff*.

True security is described in the parts of the gospel we usually ignore or twist into something they are not. In Luke, Jesus tells us it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom,⁷³ which sounds exciting and lavish. But then Jesus describes the path to the kingdom: "Sell your possessions and give (to the needy)." The command is repeated elsewhere in the gospels, as in Matthew 19:21: "...go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven..." Suddenly, the kingdom of heaven does not sound so exciting and lavish – it sounds frightening and foolish. Surely Jesus must have meant something or someone else. Afterall, he was from another time and place. And yet, according to the Bible, this was how Jesus lived and how he instructed his disciples to live. He tells them in Mark 6:8: "...take nothing for (your) journey

⁷³ Luke 12:32.

except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money...” Did Jesus seriously expect us to live that way today?

My sense of meaning regarding these teachings has to do with the puzzling-to-human-understanding nature of the way God provides for our needs. God does not give so I can hoard beyond my need. When God gives in excess it is so I can pass along whatever is beyond my need to someone else who is in need. God’s gifts are not meant to stick; God’s gifts are meant to flow. And they cannot flow, passing from one person to another, if they are not freely received and freely given. God’s provision is like a river, providing water and sustenance to all who come to its shore. In our fear that the river may dry up one day, we build dams, restricting or preventing the flow for those downstream. When we restrict God’s provision we find ourselves surrounded by masses of homeless, hungry, sick, and isolated souls in need of mercy – the result of anthropomorphizing God’s generous provision and not trusting God to provide in the future.

Spiritual Blindness

Anthropomorphizing the nature and workings of God is a cause of much confusion about God and life. When anything “bad” happens, as it inevitably does, we either reject God as unloving, unjust, or uncaring, or we believe we have done something to make God angry and so are being punished. This is exactly the way we would feel about another human being who we believe acted in an unloving and uncaring way towards us, which is textbook anthropomorphosis. When God appears to behave

differently than we believe God should behave, we either seek alternative explanations or we cease to associate with or believe in God.

In the ninth chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus encounters a man who had been blind since birth. His disciples, anthropomorphizing the cause of the man's blindness based on Jewish teachings and traditions, believed the blindness was caused by either the sins (the "bad" things) of the man (never mind that he'd been blind since birth), or the sins (the "bad" things) of his parents. Jesus made clear that sin was not the issue. Jesus stated that the man was blind so the works of God could be revealed through his blindness. This explanation is troublesome for a couple of reasons. First, for devout Jews, Jesus contradicted traditional Jewish beliefs about such matters. Second, for non-believers, Jesus painted a picture of a God willing to punish one person to make a point for others.

In the gospel story, Jesus healed the man's blindness, which in our anthropomorphized and literal reading of the story we understand to mean he restored the man's physical sight. And perhaps he did. But what if the man's blindness was not physical? What if he was blind to the good news of God's loving presence within him or to the nearness of the kingdom of heaven? What if Jesus's healing was a spiritual healing that opened the eyes Jesus refers to when he says, "You have eyes but do not see?"⁷⁴ Would that sort of healing be any less miraculous? A few verses later, Jesus says, "I came into this world...so that those who do not see may see, and

⁷⁴ See, for example, Mark 8:18.

those who do see may become blind?”⁷⁵ Surely Jesus is referring to something more than physical sight. Surely Jesus is trying to expand our understanding beyond our typical, anthropomorphized view of God and reality.

When we anthropomorphize sight, or any of our other senses or human capabilities, we limit our understanding of them to something physical. We miss that seeing is much more than perceiving the colors and contrasts before our eyes. And hearing is more than perceiving the limited range of vibratory inputs our physical ears can receive. And feeling goes well beyond our physical sense of touch. Each of our physical senses has a corresponding spiritual mode of sensual reception that can reveal aspects of our world to which we are otherwise blind and deaf.

Our modern-day sciences reveal how much of life our physical senses miss. And science reveals the enormity of what even it cannot begin to perceive or understand. Back to the gospel story, we can either believe God created the man blind at birth so Jesus could reveal God’s power by restoring the man’s sight. Or we can imagine that blindness sometimes happens for reasons we do not understand, and Jesus restored the man’s sight to show what is possible when our eyes are opened to possibilities beyond our physical limitations. I believe the latter explanation is no less miraculous and far more consistent with what we can and do experience in our earthly days. There is an infinite world of possibilities for us to experience residing just outside the reach of our physical senses.

⁷⁵ John 9:39.

Greg Hildenbrand

Anthropomorphizing the nature of God only reinforces our blindness to God's kingdom.

Chapter 12

God as Being

*I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I believe
that prayer changes us and we change things.
Mother Teresa⁷⁶*

Perhaps the most egregious outcome of anthropomorphizing God is in our imagining of God as a human being. Our patriarchal societies since biblical times have portrayed God as a man and referred to God with masculine pronouns, but the counter-movements that portray God as a woman are, in my opinion, equally misleading. Portraying God as a gender-neutral being – an *it* or *they* – is not only misleading but also feels cold and impersonal. The core issue with human portrayals of God, aside from their inaccuracy, comes in our expectation that our relationship with and to God can be likened to that of another person – a highly enlightened and powerful person perhaps, but a person none-the-less. I find it difficult to understand God within the limits of personhood because God, at least in our anthropomorphized understanding, should not disappoint, abandon, or let down. People consistently do. Other, perhaps more helpful images of God are to

⁷⁶ <https://www.catholicdigest.com/amp/from-the-magazine/quiet-moment/st-teresa-of-kolkata-i-used-to-believe-that-prayer/>, accessed January 26, 2022.

understand God as a variety of physical expressions, as relationship, and/or as energy.

God as Expression

The supposed *personhood* of God is expressed in the concept of the Trinity, where our one God is described as three *persons* – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In reality, these *persons* can just as descriptively, and perhaps more accurately, be named as expressions, relationships, or energies of God. As expressions, God the Father represents the divine Creator, who is beyond everything in the created universe since whoever creates is, by definition, assumed to be greater than their creation. God the Father expresses as *God beyond or above us*.

God the Son expresses as the creation. God the Son is the Christ. God the Son and the Christ are infinitely broader expressions than was Jesus of Nazareth, even though Jesus of Nazareth achieved or awakened to oneness with God and as God's Christ. The Christ as God's creation, of which we are an intimate and vital part, expresses as *God with or beside us*.

God the Holy Spirit is the breath of God that permeates, animates, and flows through all of creation, including heaven and earth. The Spirit is like the connective tissue in our bodies, linking every part with essential nutrients, holding the body together as a single functioning unit. God the Holy Spirit expresses as *God within or inside us*.

We recognize that we experience the same God as beyond, beside, and within us, depending on the situation or need of the moment. It is the same

God expressing in different ways, not unlike how I express as father, husband, brother, friend, co-worker, and the many other roles I assume depending on the life circumstance occurring at the time. Even so, given the limitations of my being, I cannot be beyond or within another. I can, however, be beside them.

God as Relationship

We can also describe God as *relationship*. This is one way the imagery of the Trinity can be helpful. A father cannot attain fatherhood without a child, like a son or daughter. A child, like a son or daughter, cannot be a child without a parent, like a father or mother. The titles of Father and Son (or Parent and Child) require a relationship with another. And in the relationship between parent and child a *third something* develops that is unique to that relationship. That third something is the spirit or connective tissue of the relationship. God as Trinity can be visualized as the three expressions of God giving themselves fully to one another in a sort of *circle dance*,⁷⁷ where there is a continual self-emptying and refilling, giving and receiving, of one into the other.

God as Energy

God can also be described as an *energy* that influences. This view is hinted at by Mother Teresa in her quote in the epigraph to this chapter. She is talking about prayer, which is a manifestation of our

⁷⁷ This image of the circle dance of the Trinity is developed well by Fr. Richard Rohr in *The Divine Dance*, Whitaker House, 2016.

relationship with God. She says that relationship does not change *things* but it changes *us* so that *we* change things. This is reminiscent of 16th Century mystic Teresa of Avila's concept that we are God's hands on earth. In this sense, if God is a person, then God is a person who hands the work over to us! When we imagine God as an energy, however, we can visualize how God works *through* us to accomplish God's work on earth.

The point for our purposes here is that attributing personhood to God, as if God were a human being, is inaccurate at best and certainly misleading. The question growing out of that point is this: *Who or what is God?* Certainly, God is not a *human* being, but can God be considered a *being* at all?

Praising God

If we cannot accurately liken God to a human being, what sort of being *is* God? Is God a being at all? With questions like these that cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, I find it best to answer, "Yes!" and "No!" In other words, it depends. It depends on what we mean by a *being*. And this is where our attempts to put something ethereal into words fails us because words limit whatever we're attempting to describe. God, by definition, is limitless. So how can we explore the God of the universe with words or thoughts? I suggest we can only explore the God of the universe with words or thoughts inaccurately and imperfectly, regardless of whether we are a biblical author or a 21st Century seeker. Given the limitations of language, however, it is natural to

attempt to do so and is not a bad thing if we understand we are limiting the limitless and our answers will always fall short of the reality. Which is exactly why we need to also seek understanding in ways that are not dependent on our words or thoughts. We cannot gain a fuller understanding of God without experiences *of* God being added to what is written or spoken *about* God. One of the most accessible ways to experience God is by increasing our awareness of God's presence as we go about our normal, daily activities.

Many of the Psalms, as well as countless other verses in scripture, encourage us to *praise* God. The suggestion, most often expressed as a mandate, has always troubled me because I think most of us do not understand *praise*. When I picture people praising God I often think of people with their arms raised, rhythmically moving to theologically empty (at least in many cases) *praise music*, and acting in ways they do not act outside of church. While I will not deny that is a legitimate way for some to express praise, I think there are subtle and effective ways to praise that fit into any situation we find ourselves in. At its core, *praise is attention*. We praise another when we are aware of them, consciously present with them, and in communion and community with them. As we become aware of God's constant presence with us, the regular, mundane daily tasks of our lives become acts of praise. We praise not because God is an attention-seeking narcissist, but as a reminder to ourselves that God *is* always with us. I, at least, need that reminder on an hour-by-hour basis.

Can we praise a non-being? I believe we do it all the time. We praise good ideas, reliable

relationships, and the positive energy and expressions emanating from others. The point, of course, is that God does not need to be a *being* for us to praise God. Perhaps the biggest temptation to perceiving God as a being is that it is easy for us to imagine God in that way. We can imagine a being who consolidates all the positive qualities of everyone we know and call that God. Good looking? Check. Physically fit? Check. Intelligent? Check. Emotionally mature? Check. Spiritually healthy? Obviously. If God, however, checks all the boxes for what we consider a perfect being, where does that leave those of us who fall short in one or more of the categories? Are we still a creation of the image of *that* God? It seems to me that this expectation of *perfection* is at the root of our feelings of unworthiness. Who are we to judge what is perfect or beautiful? Who are we to judge what constitutes good looks, physical fitness, intelligence, or emotional or spiritual maturity? We can only judge such traits through our severely limited human point of view and in the context of our time and culture. In Luke 17, Jesus warns the religious elite of his day that the kingdom of God will not come in ways we can observe. Our human senses and understandings will not reveal it to us.

While it may be more accurate to understand God as a non-being, it is also difficult to imagine ourselves in relationship with and to a non-being. If God is always with us, but God is not a being, then where and how is God with us? For me it is helpful to think of God *as* being but not *a* being. In the same way that waves are unique expressions of and held within the ocean, no particular wave or wave-like

entity *is* the ocean. We are held within and are unique expressions of the non-being, being of God.

God as Love

While I find it problematic to picture God as a being, particularly as a *human* being, I find imagining God as a form of attracting, influencing energy and/or relationship to be helpful. I also find it practical in the sense that God's presence is not typically physical, at least not as we are used to experiencing the presence of beings. Churchianity misses the mark when it portrays God as a being, as it so often does, because that description quickly falls apart when we attempt to apply it critically to our daily lives. When we understand God as a non-physical influencer, we cease expecting God to act like a friend or a pet, and we accept the reality that God acts in an infinite variety of ways, many of which are beyond our ability to understand. God's influence is usually subtle and easily missed if we are not paying attention to or looking for it.

There is another common portrayal of God, although not necessarily helpful in terms of developing a concrete image of God, and that is the depiction of God as *Love*. Love is an attractive energy that shapes the relationship between two or more people or entities. It is a *spirit* that is unique to the relationship and the entities involved. Love is an attractive force focused on a common interest or purpose and expresses in countless ways, even in our limited earthly existence. I find the image of God as love to be helpful since love, too, is subtle and easily

missed unless we pay attention to, nurture, and become present with it.

Love is not a being but an energy that manifests in the relationship with or to another being. Love is a type of power, like electricity, that can be used for good or evil, as in the giving or withholding of care. Love is embodied by beings even though there is no physical presence of love identifiable within a being.. Love intensifies the bond between two or more beings in a way similar to how yeast intensifies the relationship between flour and water. Jesus frequently used the image of leaven in bread as an analogy to God's influencing power upon matter and relationships.

The author of 1 John writes extensively of God as love. Consistent with what we believe about God, love expresses in a variety of ways. One can make a case that the attractive forces that hold the planets in their orbits is a manifestation of love. Romantic, brotherly, and parental love are types of love most of us are at least somewhat familiar with. These types of love typically benefit everyone in the relationship, although perhaps in different ways and to different degrees. There is also love that expresses as service to others. That is the type of love Jesus modeled for us. It is a sacrificial love where one gives up one's life or a significant portion of something valuable – often time, money, or possessions – in order to serve others. Sacrificial love has no particular expectation of being reciprocated.

One clarifying benefit of seeing God as love is that it requires us to love others in order to experience and better understand God's nature. To the extent that we hold back in loving others, to the same extent

do we miss God with us. It is not that God is fickle or demanding or withholds anything from us, but if God's nature is love, unless we are practicing love – particularly sacrificial love – we simply cannot experience God. It is like leaving yeast in its package instead of mixing it with flour and water. One can make bread without yeast, but eating unleavened bread is a tasteless, shallow, and disappointing experience by comparison. It is as if when we act in loving ways toward another, particularly when that other cannot pay us back or does not know us as the source of the kind act, a doorway is opened through which God can enter. And God, as love, graces both the giver and receiver of the loving act.

According to the author of 1 John, we do not simply abide in God's love by acting in loving ways, we abide *in* God!⁷⁸ When we love what God loves, which is everything and everyone, God's love flows through us to others. No wonder there is such an emphasis on love in scripture, particularly in love expressed as caring for others. Every being and every part of creation is a beloved offspring of God. When we care for God's creation, even a small part of it, God's love flows to and through us. We are the door through which God cares for and loves creation. When we willingly and regularly serve as that door, we take our place in the mutuality of the Divine Flow of Divine Love.

God as the Ground of Being

⁷⁸ 1 John 4:16.

Another imperfect analogy for God's nature, one I find intriguing if not difficult to wrap my brain around, is God as the *ground of being*. In other words, God is the foundation, substance, or energy from which all being emerges and exists. Imagining God as the ground of being is more easily grasped for me through the imperfect analogy of God as the *ocean*. Within the ocean there are countless varieties of fish, plants, and microbes with countless unique features between and within each unique species. They all exist within the ocean and are products of it; they are completely dependent upon the ocean for their existence; they live their entire earthly lives within the ocean; they emerge from and die back into the ocean; yet none of them is the ocean, at least not in its entirety. Rather, they populate and are integral to what we know as the ocean. In our analogy, the ocean (God) is *present within* each unique aquatic individual and species, but no one individual or species *is* (God) the ocean.

We assume, perhaps incorrectly, that aquatic life has no more conscious awareness of its surrounding environment – the ocean – than we do of ours – the atmosphere. Is a shark conscious of the water in which it swims? Does a manta ray recognize the ocean as its source of nutrition and oxygen? Do octopi perform 8-legged praises to the ocean for its goodness and provision? For humankind there are biblical hints that the atmosphere is divine since in its original Hebrew, *air*, *wind*, and *breath* are the same word as *Spirit*, referring to the Spirit of God.

The late Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, is credited with saying, “Once the wave

realizes she is the ocean her fear dissipates.”⁷⁹ His illustration is insightful and thought-provoking. It implies that our lives can be likened to waves in the ocean – they rise and fall, appear and disappear. We, as human beings, also rise and fall, appear and disappear. Using the analogy of God as the ground of being, we rise from the ground of God at birth and fall back into the ground of God at death. While it is easy to see how inseparably the wave is connected to the ocean, it is much more challenging to understand how we are connected to God. It is easy for us to see how waves are connected with each other, but it is difficult to see how we are connected with each other. And while it is nonsensical for us to consider a wave as made of anything other than ocean, it is a leap too far for most of us to see ourselves as made entirely of God. Never mind that we are told in Genesis that humankind was created in the image and likeness of God.⁸⁰ We cannot imagine a wave existing apart from the ocean, yet we consistently believe ourselves to be separate from God and each other.

Even so, just as waves are individual expressions of the ocean, so are we individual expressions of God. Waves can only be understood in the context of the ocean, and we can only be understood in the context of God. There is nowhere outside of the ocean for a wave to escape any more than there is anywhere outside of God for us to exist. Just because we cannot understand or visualize it does not make it less of a reality.

⁷⁹ Unsourced quote attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh.

⁸⁰ Genesis 1:26.

Picturing ourselves as waves in the ocean can be an uncomfortable image since waves come and go so quickly and disappear so completely. Most of us have no desire to be annihilated at our death as waves appear to be. And yet, waves are not annihilated when they crash against the shore. Waves return to their source. They are not destroyed; they are pulled back into the ground of their being. We too, at our physical death, fall back into the source from which we arose. We fear death because we fear losing the most precious and unique features that make us who we are. We forget that those features originated in the ground of our being. What makes us unique and individual expressions of God is not lost at our death, it is simply rejoined to its source. The wave does not lose its individual expression when it returns to the ocean, it expands to become more of what it has always been. Once we better understand how we are inseparably rooted in the ground of our being we release our fears because we know that nothing can separate us from who we are. The ground of our being is our truest and most secure identity.

Chapter 13

Exclusivity

Whoever is not against us is for us. Mark 9:40

Arguably, the most egregious sin of Churchianity is in its professed exclusivity, by which I mean the portrayal of Christianity, as understood and practiced by certain churches, as the *only* path to truth, the *only* hope for salvation, and the *only* way to God. Granted, this view can be supported by a literal reading of several passages from scripture, including some attributed to Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of John. For example, John records Jesus as saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me.*”⁸¹ Similarly, “I am the gate. *Whoever enters by me will be saved...*”⁸² and “I am the resurrection and the life. *Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.*”⁸³ Of course there is also the ever-popular John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” One must admit that following Jesus sounds like an exclusive club – there is no way to salvation other than through him. Churches that hold to a literal reading of these

⁸¹ John 14:6.

⁸² John 10:9.

⁸³ John 11:25.

and other exclusive passages have a tight grip on those who agree with and appreciate the exclusiveness of their brand of Christianity. Unfortunately, these types of teachings, when taken out of the larger context of Jesus's life and teachings, completely isolate and condemn the many thoughtful seekers who refuse to believe that God's salvation excludes all Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians who follow different but equally devout paths.

Of course even Jesus was not a Christian; Jesus was a Jew, as was Paul. There is no indication they wanted to *replace* the Jewish religion with Christianity or anything new. Jesus understood how the strict Jewish adherence to rules and doctrines made it undesirable, if not impossible for many to join in their common journey to become conscious children of God. Those very rules and doctrines could become roadblocks against instead of aids to enhancing one's relationship with God. Rather, Jesus attempted to reimagine Judaism, to make it less exclusive and more inclusive and accessible. It is disappointing how we have taken what Jesus worked so hard to make inclusive and molded it into yet another exclusive belief system. Heck, among Christian churches, we cannot even agree on who to exclude, probably because Jesus never provided guidance about excluding others. Whether by race, gender identity, sexual orientation, culture, or sincerely held religious beliefs and practices, exclusion is exclusion and Jesus apparently wanted no part of it.

Among the people the Jews of Jesus's day pompously excluded were foreigners, their Roman oppressors, the Gentiles (non-Jews), tax-collectors, prostitutes, those possessed by demons, and those

with one of the skin diseases called leprosy. No doubt, it riled the Jewish devotees when Jesus told a parable that had someone from one of these excluded groups as its hero. For example, the story of the Good Samaritan,⁸⁴ the parable of the Great Dinner,⁸⁵ the cleaning of the Ten Lepers,⁸⁶ and the parable of the Pharisees and the Tax Collector.⁸⁷ It was equally galling to them to know that Jesus ate with tax-collectors,⁸⁸ gave healing attention to a foreign woman,⁸⁹ blessed children,⁹⁰ and healed the servant of a Roman Centurion.⁹¹ In the context of the passage quoted in this chapter's epigraph, Jesus's disciples question whether a non-follower who is casting out demons in Jesus's name should be told to stop. Jesus responds, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Doing good is good and right regardless of who is doing it or *under which, if any, religious banner.*

The Holy Catholic Church, the first formal iteration of the movement begun in the name of Jesus, was to be first and foremost *universal*, which is the literal meaning of the word *catholic*. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church, like its Protestant descendants, has taken what was intended to be universally inclusive and made it something far less. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's day, for whom he reserved his

⁸⁴ Luke 10:25-37.

⁸⁵ Luke 14:15-24.

⁸⁶ Luke 17:11-19.

⁸⁷ Luke 18:9-14.

⁸⁸ Luke 19:1-10.

⁸⁹ John 4:1-42.

⁹⁰ Luke 18:15-17.

⁹¹ Matthew 8:5-13.

sharpest criticisms, are alive and well today in what has become the Christian church.

The I am Statements

One of the reasons I do not believe Jesus's seemingly exclusive statements like "No one comes to the Father except through me" are as exclusive as many believe (other than them being inconsistent with the life he lived) is that he makes many of those statements in the context of the title *I am*. The *I am* statements occur most frequently in the gospel of John. When Jesus says "*I am* the way..." he is invoking the name God gave to Moses to share with the Israelites for when they asked from whom Moses had been sent.⁹² We commonly translate *I am* as the name *God*. If we substitute *God is* for *I am* in these statements, they appear very different. For example, "*God is* the way..."⁹³ or "*God is* the gate..."⁹⁴ or "*God is* the bread of life..."⁹⁵ Jesus, being a devout Jew, would have known he was invoking God's name with these statements, so our question becomes, was Jesus referring to himself *exclusively*, or was he making more general statements about God? If the latter is true then we need not believe Jesus was establishing himself as the only way to God. In my opinion, this less-exclusive interpretation is far more consistent with the life Jesus lived. If Jesus was referring to God with his *I am* statements, and if God is the God of everything and everyone, including all world religions and belief

⁹² See Exodus 3:13-14.

⁹³ John 14:6.

⁹⁴ John 10:9.

⁹⁵ John 6:35.

systems, then these statements do not refer to Jesus as the *exclusive* way to God. Rather, finding our way back to God is the primary focus and following Jesus is *one* of the ways. One destination, many paths.

Although Jesus did claim *oneness* with God, for example saying, “As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you...,”⁹⁶ Jesus also referred to God as distinct from himself, describing God as *Father*, speaking and referring to God as one would to another. Jesus spoke of his *oneness* with God in a way similar to how we might consider the oneness of a wave with the ocean – the wave is *of* the ocean, *in* the ocean, and at the same time distinct *from* the ocean. Jesus and the Father were perfectly aligned in a way that the Father’s work could be done through Jesus with little or no ego-massaging interference from the person of Jesus. Indeed, this is the challenge Jesus lays before us in his command to follow: Can we, too, set aside our egotistic, self-centered biases and expectations and simply allow God to do God’s work in and through us? Jesus offers us a part of his oneness with God in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they (*meaning us*) also be in us.”⁹⁷ This process of becoming One with God is not a physical or even a spiritual reuniting since there is no actual separation except for the thin veil of conscious awareness that is inherent to our three-dimensional existence.

We can also be confident that Jesus’s message was not one of exclusivity by the commandments he gave to love each other, particularly in his explanation

⁹⁶ John 17:21.

⁹⁷ John 17:22.

of *who* we should love. In the lead up to the story of the Good Samaritan,⁹⁸ Jesus tells a devout Jewish lawyer to love God and to love his neighbor as himself in response to a question about what one must do to inherit (or become a part of) eternal life. The lawyer then asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan, the point of which is that anyone in need is our neighbor. The parable could as easily have been titled the Good *Foreigner* or the Good *person-who-is-different-than-me*. If we love and include only those like us we gain nothing in terms of moving toward oneness with God or with others. We only solidify the oneness we already experience within our self-selected, exclusive group. Oneness does not require uniformity. Oneness does, however, require acceptance of our differences.

Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment. “...that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁹⁹ Similarly, Matthew records Jesus being asked which was the greatest commandment and after citing love for God he says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”¹⁰⁰ We will be known as followers of Jesus and claim our oneness with him by the love we show to *all* others, not by simply claiming ourselves as Christian and excluding those who do not.

⁹⁸ Luke 10:25-37.

⁹⁹ John 13:54-55.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 22:39-40.

The "Right" Way to Know

In concluding my thoughts about the exclusivity that has become an identifying characteristic of churchianity under the guise of Christianity, I wish to reflect upon why exclusivity has become so important in the first place. I believe we can trace its roots to several defining characteristics of life in the Western world, beginning with the Enlightenment in the 17th Century. This *Age of Reason* opened new intellectual vistas for humanity, while at the same time closing or subjugating more traditional ways of knowing through the heart (feeling) and body (instinct). These more traditional paths to knowledge are now often considered pagan or heretical, garnering much less respect. This is illustrated by the Protestant revolution occurring during the Enlightenment. The soaring cathedral ceilings, the haunting acoustics, the archetypal artwork, and the spacious fragrance of strong incense were replaced by more modest, less awe-inspiring houses of worship with a strong focus on teaching, preaching, and sharply focused presentations (or opinions) of right and wrong. Instead of being held safely within the wordless reverence of deeply holy spaces, we were rounded up into revival tents and altar calls proclaiming an exclusive holiness of *one* true God, *one* Word, and *one* Life. Suddenly there was only *one* correct understanding of the way to God because *that is the nature of intellectual knowing*. It is force-fed to us from our first days of school. We are given lessons with only *one* right answer, and if we do not get the answer right, we fail. Churchianity thrives in this intellectual age because if we do not get its *one* answer right, we

fail our way into eternal damnation. It is a fear-based faith.

It is not that the intellect is bad or evil. It is a gift from God. But intellectual knowing is not the only way to understanding, and what it offers is incomplete. We experience this in our educational system where the rewards are based on which lessons we can parrot back to our instructors instead of what practical skills we can develop to help us thrive in our lives outside of the educational system. We are told *what* to know instead of being taught *how* to learn. We are taught to listen instead of to explore. We are taught to *know* instead of to *wonder*. 16th Century Christian mystic John of the Cross is credited with saying we cannot *know* God; we can only *love* God. The difference between intellectual and experiential knowing is the difference between reading about the fragrance of a rose and smelling it.

Our obsession with all things intellect has led us to see life through an excruciatingly dualistic lens. In order for one thing to be right, another must be wrong. One must be bad and another good. We have been enculturated to ignore the continuum between and beyond the two extremes, which is where life actually takes place. In fact, even the extremes are not actual extremes because they are relative terms, one extreme being defined in relation to the other. A pure extreme exists only in theory, not reality. Even in politics there is no purely conservative or liberal stance because there are always additional degrees of each – an infinite number of degrees in fact. Even so, no one wants to find themselves on the “wrong” side of any issue, whether that issue is a math problem, a political dilemma, or a belief system. To be wrong is to risk

becoming a social outcast or labeled a failure. We desperately strive to find ways to be “right,” whatever the current and relative definition of “right” is at the time.

This obsessive need to be “right,” to be morally “correct,” or to always be on the “winning” team is a direct outgrowth of our obsession with the intellect and its dualistic categorization of reality. We have been enculturated to believe that if Christianity is not the one, true religion then it must be wrong. If Christianity is not exceptional among all world religions then lead us to the one that is! If being a Christian does not make me superior to non-Christians, why bother? Jesus taught a way where *all* could be winners, everyone could be included, and there was plenty of everything needful to go around.

Yes, Christians are special and chosen by God. But so are Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and non-believers. Jesus’s work was about welcoming *everyone* into the kingdom of God, not by forcing everyone into a single belief system but by throwing open the gates of the kingdom to all belief (and unbelief) systems so everyone would be and feel welcome and loved for who they are and as they are. Christianity was never intended to be an exclusive club, nor is the kingdom of God. Our work is to invite and encourage people to enter by whatever path is available and accessible to them, even when that path does not go through a church.

Chapter 14

Is the Church Canceling Christianity?

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Matthew 7:15-16a

Wikipedia defines cancel culture as “a form of ostracism in which someone is thrust out of social or professional circles.”¹⁰¹ I waited until the end of this book to apply the term *cancel culture* because it may be an overly harsh term to apply to churches and church leaders that are doing the best they know how to lead people to God, consistent with how they were taught and their own understanding and interpretation of scripture. Cancel culture implies a purposeful intent to ostracize, which I do not believe is usually the case. The term does, however, seem in some sense to apply because the practices of many churches ostracize many seekers after truth from the very texts and practices that could otherwise be most helpful to them. Throughout this book I have pointed out how too many churches are thrusting the Christ out of

¹⁰¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cancel_culture, accessed April 25, 2022.

their “Christian” circles with practices and teachings that focus more on following the church than on following the Christ. Clearly, the two – the church and the Christ – are not the same and probably never have been.

In the context of the definition of *cancel culture*, the church may be canceling Christianity from religious and spiritual legitimacy by portraying a too limited, too exclusive, and too judgmental portion of what it means to be a follower of the Christ. In that sense it is ostracizing those who sincerely seek to follow the Christ but are unable to find a Christ-centered flock to join in the church. Or, perhaps, they cannot find those who will lead them in a Christ-like manner within the confines of the church. Granted, the church is not a perfect institution, nor should we expect it to be. The church, however, could take a step back from its current practices and teachings and look hard at the impact, if any, it has on the community it serves and the needs of that community. Is it creating *little Christs*, as C.S. Lewis instructs? Is it leading people to recognize and find their place in the larger body of Christ both inside *and* outside of the church? Is the church guiding its members toward any sort of internal transformation? Is the church feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the immigrant, and housing the homeless in its community and beyond? If the answer to any of these questions is “No,” then I believe the church is producing followers of something other than followers of the Christ.

As I have pointed out in earlier reflections, the church, especially the Protestant church, has become increasingly *intellectualized* since its beginnings in the

age of the Enlightenment. To view anything in an intellectual way requires very little of us. We think deeply and mistake that for action and/or transformation. The majority of our church leaders are taught an intellectual version of Christianity in seminary, and intellectual presentations of the gospel through lengthy sermons are what have become the expectation for clergy these days. By intellectual Christianity I refer to the ability to quote, interpret, and apply Bible teachings without any serious personal, internal transformation of one's heart or being, nor any sincere personal sense of responsibility to ease the suffering of the less-fortunate folks in one's sphere of influence. Being able to quote from the Bible is not a sign of a changed heart, although it can be a step toward that end. Rather, being able to quote from the Bible is an intellectual exercise in memorization that may or may not reflect the type of changed heart Jesus clearly sought through his life and teachings. As the author of Matthew quotes of Jesus in the epigraph to this chapter, "Beware of false prophets...You will know them by their fruits." The same can be assumed of today's church – we will know them by their fruits and not by their words.

For those seeking help, support, and community on their journey toward living in harmony with the world around them, creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all peoples, and to answer the personal call to holiness the Spirit implants in each of us, the church may not always be the first or safest place to look. To the extent that the church is canceling Christianity, it is doing so in an attempt at self-preservation, trying to hold to a particular belief system that is not always relevant, effective, or even

Christian. That system of beliefs and practices helped churches thrive in ages past, but it is causing a slow death to those same churches today.

Prayer

The church, in its self-proclaimed role as the purveyor of Christianity, may be portraying what it means to be a Christian in ways that actually draw people *away* from becoming faithful followers of the Christ. I fear the church has fallen, largely unintentionally, into the trap of believing its survival is more important than faithfully following the life and teachings of Jesus. The latter course requires a strong faith that in following Jesus's lead, God will take care of its future. In Jesus's *Sermon on the Mount*¹⁰², particularly in chapter 6, Jesus instructs his followers not to worry – not to worry about what they are to wear, what they are to eat, or what they are to say – because God takes care of our needs and provides what is needed at the time it is needed. That is a type of faith I do not see many churches modeling. One of my teachers, James Finley observes that we attempt to exercise the control we think we have over the life we think we are living.

I do not wish to wage criticism without offering alternatives toward what I believe is a more Christ-like path. According to the gospel accounts of Jesus's life, he divided his waking hours into roughly three parts – prayer, teaching, and service to those in need. It seems reasonable to me that the church, as well as

¹⁰² Matthew 5-7.

those of us wishing to claim the title of *Christian*, might consider using Jesus's life as a template. There is an overriding theme in Jesus's life that is easily overlooked, even as we examine the activities of prayer, teaching, and service. That overriding theme is one of *creating space* for God to work in and through us. The gospels record many instances of Jesus going off by himself to pray. Indeed, I believe the foundation of prayer is in creating space for God to work in and through us, to touch us, and to guide our actions. A prayer that creates that sort of space is rarely found in church and rarely taught as a conscious practice even though it fueled and guided *everything* Jesus said and did. Richard Rohr writes, "...it is not primarily bad will that keeps people spiritually blind, but that *they were never taught how to see.*"¹⁰³ Too often, prayer is relegated to clergy who fill prayer times with words, petitions, and gratitudes, all with good intentions, as they were taught and as they experienced throughout their lives. I question, however, whether prayer that leaves no space for God to fill is actually prayer at all.

There are prayer practices intended to create space for God to enter – centering prayer, silent prayer, guided meditation, welcoming prayer, and chanting among others. There are non-traditional types of prayer that involve bodily movement like walking meditation, liturgical dance, or other body prayers that can stand alone or that merge body movements with spoken words or music. There are

¹⁰³ Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden*, Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, OH, 2022, p. 232.

non-intellectual readings that leave space for exploration with God like poetry or other prayerful, heart-piercing writings. Reflective music can open space for God to enter.¹⁰⁴

Community prayer in church is typically an exercise in sitting quietly while the preacher prays. It is only marginally participative, as when the congregation may be invited to recite The Lord's Prayer as a community. That sort of prayer, while important, asks little of individual worshippers and is not likely to be transformative. In his initial instruction about prayer, Jesus says, "...whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to (God) who is in secret..."¹⁰⁵ That is personal prayer, alone time with God, and that is what I believe most churches fail to teach. Personal prayer can include any number of words and requests, but should always leave plenty of time for listening and resting in the grounding presence of God. As Jesus also says, "...your (God) knows what you need before you ask..."¹⁰⁶ If we model our personal prayers after those we hear in church, we are probably talking too much.

Prayer, in its communal, participative, and personal forms, was a regularly practiced by Jesus. I believe teaching people to create space for God in prayer by exploring new methods of prayer should be

¹⁰⁴ There are downloadable instructions for many of these practices on my website, www.ContemplatingGrace.com, as well as at other spiritual resource sites.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 6:6.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 6:8.

near the top of the list of priorities for churches and would-be Christians.

Teaching

A second area of focus in Jesus's waking life was teaching. Most churches focus heavily on teaching, particularly with the sermons provided at worship services. Unfortunately, most sermons have become too long, too academic, and too directive to be of much help in one's spiritual formation and transformation. They often attempt to answer questions that are better left open-ended. In some churches, the sermon takes up half or more of the worship service. It is as if being immersed in the minister's opinions and understandings is more important or instructive than connecting to God. Long sermons, while sometimes entertaining, are neither praise nor worship. Instead of learning how to connect *with* God we receive a lecture *about* God and about how we should act as seen through the eyes of another. Preaching the gospel has become more about describing a love story than about helping congregants enter into the Divine love story. Too many purveyors of the gospel miss the mark completely. The important teaching point is not to learn *about* God but to *experience* God as a living presence in our lives, which cannot be accomplished with words.

We learn best not from words, but by the way our teachers live their lives, treat others, care for their neighbors, and whether they leave others in a better state than when they first encountered them. This is clearly modeled in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus taught with parables, not with *factual* accounts to be memorized and tested over at a later date. Jesus was not teaching mathematics. Rather, Jesus shared stories that could be entered into by his listeners, then and now. His stories had thought-provoking twists and unexpected conclusions. Jesus did not teach *what* to think or know but encouraged his listeners *into the process* of thinking and knowing. He engaged them *not* by providing facts but by providing rhetorical fodder for lifelong reflection. When the Bible, the life of Jesus, or any spiritual teaching is presented as factual or simplified into a *five-easy-steps-to-salvation* sort of lecture, the teaching has already lost much of its learning potential.

For example, when we teach the Christmas story as a factual, historical event – as if there were eyewitnesses present recording everything as it happened without bias or interpretation – we lessen the likelihood that listeners will be able to place themselves into the story and thus become a part of it. For me, the issue is not whether the events surrounding the birth of Jesus happened as described in Matthew and Luke, but the ways in which the imagery and emotion of the story shape our lives today. How can we live healthier, more service-oriented lives because of the Christmas story? Neither teachers nor preachers can answer that question for us. They can, however, create a learning environment in which we can formulate and grow into our own understandings and applications. This seems to be the way Jesus taught – not by providing facts or certainty but by stimulating a connection between the listener and the Spirit of God within.

Jesus used analogies in his teaching. He did not say “The kingdom of heaven *is*...” He said, “The kingdom of heaven *is like*...” He stretched and challenged the imaginations of his followers not with facts but with concepts, deconstructing old beliefs in order to create space for new understandings and broader visions of what it means to be part of the family of God. In our intellectual, answer-focused society, and in our on-going quest for certainty and truth (as if we are capable of comprehending God’s truth), we forget that literal understandings are the lowest forms of learning because they leave no room for growth in knowledge, application, or wisdom. Literal teachings leave no room for God to act. As we learn to connect *with* God, as opposed to learning *about* God, we enter a never-ending journey with no final destination. If we find God at the end of our journey, what we have found is neither God nor the end of our journey. God, life, love, and everything worthwhile exist within the journey. That journey is eternal life and, as *eternal* implies, does not end. Certainties and truths, however, change with the scenery. Our learning task is to embrace the amazing uncertainty and beautiful perplexity of the present moment, knowing we can never wander out of God’s reach.

Service to Others

The acts of service Jesus provided *always* left space for God to work through him to help others in need. He did not take personal credit for his acts of service, giving credit instead to the faith of the receiver and to God working through him. He was a

selfless instrument of God, pure and simple. And he called for us to follow his lead.

The fact that Jesus *created space* for God to work through him in everything he did is an important lesson for us. It means neither his intellect nor his ego controlled his actions. He did not serve others for his own glory but to work with God in reducing human suffering. In fact, he criticized those who performed religious actions in ways that glorified themselves. Acting in ways that bring glory to ourselves brings its own reward to our ego-self, but that reward is neither lasting for us nor helpful to others. Narcissistic actions done for personal attention are *selfish* acts and not *selfless* acts. They benefit us, often at the expense *of* others, under the guise of service *to* others. Acts of prayer, teaching, and service to others should be done with humility, under God's guidance and leading, and with no expectation of personal reward. To do so requires us to surrender space for God to work in and through our prayer, teaching, and service. To surrender space requires us to hold our ego in check, instead of allowing it to control our actions, and to subject our intellect to the wise counsel of the heart and Spirit.

The church cancels Christianity whenever it encourages ego-driven or individualistic actions. We are not individually responsible for sin or salvation, nor are we individually responsible for fixing problems or relieving suffering by ourselves. Rather, we are to join in common efforts with the gifts we have been given, being faithful contributors to good as opposed to expecting ourselves or others to act as lone rangers in the salvation of humanity. Even Jesus relied on the faith of others and the working of God

to accomplish his work. Too many churches treat people as individual bodies of Christ instead of individual *members* of the One body of Christ. There is a difference, and that difference is significant. Yes, we are unique and important, as are our contributions to society. We often fail to realize, however, how that is true of everyone else, too. Some churches act as though they are a body of Christ in and of themselves, as if they can create their own heavenly existence apart from anyone else. Too often, those same churches are quick to condemn outsiders to a hell entirely of that church's making. A church, like its individual members, is one *part* of the larger body of Christ.

The more we pray our own agendas and with words only, and the more we teach inflexible and intolerant church doctrine and practices, and the more we serve with a personal or organizational agenda, the less space we leave for God to influence and work in and through us. AND, in my opinion, the less *Christian* we become, at least in the sense of being faithful followers of the Christ as manifested in Jesus. And the more a church encourages and practices these types of prayer, teaching, and service to others, even in fervent sincerity, the more it strays from the path Jesus modeled. And the more Christianity is canceled by the very church that bears its name.

Most churches focus on teaching. Few focus on teaching in ways that leave space for God to work through their teaching. Fewer still teach prayer in ways that allow God to speak and act through the person praying. Churches, like most individuals, seek to help members *understand* God through their

teaching. But understanding is an intellectual exercise that will not lead us to God. God cannot be understood. God can only be experienced. We grow closer to God not by understanding but by learning to sense God's presence with us in our daily lives, making the way we live a more Christ-like example for others, and seeing God's hand in the fruits of our labors. Churches with a laser-like focus on those types of activities spread the way of Christ instead of canceling it.

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Epilogue

I (Jesus) ask not only on behalf of these (his disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (us), that they (we) may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they (us) also be in us.

John 17:20-21a

In these pages I have attempted to contrast Churchianity, which is loyalty to the church, with Christianity, which is loyalty to the Christ as manifested in Jesus of Nazareth. In reality, the two are perhaps not as mutually exclusive as I may have implied. Churchianity is a limited and diverse subset of Christianity in that it was originally inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. I also believe, however, that Churchianity has strayed from its original vision, and very far from that vision in some cases. The *Christ* is universal and inclusive of *all* of creation, human and non-human, all peoples of all cultures, belief systems, and ages. Within the Christ, everything is One. As I read the gospels and consider the life and teachings of Jesus, I find *oneness* to be the central message. He included and valued women and children in a highly patriarchal society. He sought out those cast aside by society at large, like those possessed by demons and those with leprosy. He

dined with sinners and treated foreigners as equals. He proclaimed the need for mercy and care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He made no attempt to convert those of other belief systems. No one was excluded from Jesus's circle of love and care.

When we recognize our oneness with everything and everyone, loving our neighbors comes naturally because it is an integral part of self-care. We cannot lift ourselves up in any meaningful way without lifting our neighbors up, too. The same goes for our environment. It, too, is a part of the Christ we need conscious oneness with. Of course, oneness is not really something we find or attain as much as something we awaken to – we are already One in the Christ, we just do not realize it.

And this is the central message of Christianity, that we are to awaken to and live out our oneness, our intimate interconnectedness, with everything and everyone around us. Not for the sake of a church, but for the sake of welcoming everyone into the family of God. Only then will the family – the body of Christ – be complete. Wildly diverse? Yes, but beautifully whole and unfailingly inclusive.

Has the church canceled Christianity? It is a debate worth having, but like each of us, the church is trying to find its way to God, too. We should be careful not to confuse immaturity with a final state of being. While I do not believe the church is actually capable of cancelling Christianity, Christianity may be canceling the church, particularly if the church does not recommit to leading itself and its members in ways consistent with the life and teachings of its namesake.

About the Author

Greg Hildenbrand lives south of Lawrence, Kansas with his wife, Carrie. They have two adult children, Grace and Reid. Greg is a contemplative spiritual director, author, songwriter, and a volunteer leader of blended worship at the First United Methodist Church in Lawrence. He is a 2019 sendee of the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation. He received his certificate in Spiritual Guidance from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in 2021. His weekly *Life Notes* blog, podcasts, a variety of songs, music videos, contemplative resources, and information about books and music, are available on his website: www.ContemplatingGrace.com.

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Churchianity vs Christianity