

Greg Hildenbrand

Crucifying Christianity, Resurrecting the Way

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Resurrecting the Way*

By Greg Hildenbrand

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Introduction

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.¹

Crucifying Christianity, Resurrecting the Way may seem a self-denigrating topic for one who considers himself a Christian, but there are important distinctions between a Christianity that strives to *follow* the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ, and the brand of Christianity that primarily *worships* him. If we are to mature spiritually, which means growing toward conscious *Oneness* with God and all of creation, many of the common practices, beliefs, and assumptions of Christian churches need to be transcended. It is not that the Christianity practiced by most churches is intentionally evil or harmful as much as that it mislead,

¹ Pricilla Shirer, as quoted from www.UntilAllHaveHeard1.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/when-christianity-became-a-business/, accessed November 18, 2021.

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limit, and fail to foster the journey *with* Jesus along a path to Oneness with God. At some point we need to transcend whatever inhibits our spiritual growth and adopt practices that assist us in *following* him by *becoming* our unique version of what he represents, which is the Christ. The transition from *immature* spirituality, which I do *not* use to demean any more than by calling a 2-year-old immature, to more *mature* spirituality is the intended topic of this book.

In the decades following the crucifixion of Jesus, his community of followers was called *The Way*. It consisted of mostly small groups of believers meeting in peoples' homes, often in secret, because its practitioners were sometimes considered heretics and malcontents that could be put to death for insurrection. It is important to recognize that *Jesus neither started nor desired to establish a new religion*. He was a devout Jew to the end. The life and teachings of Jesus model a conscious communion with God that is applicable within *any* religious belief system, including *no* formal belief system. His was a *way of living* everyday life in better alignment with God – thus, *The Way*. His message was for *all* people, regardless of their religion. The Christianity that must eventually be crucified, that we must mature beyond, is the Christianity that has devolved into a philosophy, institution, culture, and/or business that leaves us living life out of alignment with God. While I am *not* suggesting religious institutions be destroyed, those who are serious about spiritual development will eventually find themselves searching outside of *any* specific system of organized belief in order to better discern their path.

Before proceeding I need to distinguish *The Way* of following Jesus from groups coopting the name, like *The Way International*, which was largely debunked as a cult. The

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Way of Jesus is unlikely to become a central focus of religious organizations because it defies containment in words and doctrine. It is a narrow, individualized, and paradoxical path that does not conform well to the literalizing principles most organizations eventually canonize. *The Way* of Jesus is *not* a philosophy, culture, institution, business, or a cult. It is a way of living with conscious presence and Spirit-guided awareness.

We follow Jesus by becoming what he was and is – One with God and all of creation. It is the *Way* to become a child of God (see John 1:12-13). Here are some distinctions I have found important on my journey:

- **Jesus* and the *Christ* are not synonymous;
- *The *Way* of Jesus is loving, expansive, and inclusive;
- **Heaven* and *hell* are fluctuating states of being in the here and now;
- **Metaphor* and *analogy* are better communicators of Truth than literal, historical, or factual accounts;
- *The world we experience *external* to ourselves reflects our *inner* life;
- **Black and white, light and dark, good and evil* are not distinct, opposing states but fluctuations in our perception and experience of a single essence;
- **Space* and *time* are relative to our point of view;
- *Lasting transformation requires *including* and *transcending* everything that comes before;
- *Our earthly experience is one small but inseparable part of a larger, eternal life;
- *Neither you nor I are God, but we are not *other than* God either.

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In the following pages I will explore these and other concepts in greater detail. My invitation is *not* for you to treat what I write as literal or ultimate *Truth*, which cannot be captured in words anyway. Rather, I hope some of these thoughts will serve as springboards to new and deeper understandings of your own as you read spiritual texts, worship in whatever ways are meaningful for you, and go through the mundane acts of sameness that make up your days. The goal is to experience that sameness with new eyes and ears, living life from a more unified level of conscious awareness.

Crucifixion as Transformation

As I begin reflecting on the topic of resurrecting the *Way*, I should clarify what I mean by *crucifying* Christianity. Of course, crucifixion was a brutal method of putting people to death used by the Romans in Jesus' day. But in the case of Jesus, and as a core belief in Christian tradition, crucifixion did not result in the *annihilation* of Jesus but in his *transformation* and *consummation*. In short, Jesus of Nazareth became Jesus the *Christ*. (I will share my understanding of the difference in the next chapter.) In that sense, *crucifying* Christianity is not the annihilation of the Christian church or Christian beliefs or the denial of Jesus as a child of God. Rather, crucifying Christianity is transforming what it means to be a follower of Jesus into something more universal, inclusive, and expansive than a particular religion defined by a limited set of beliefs. What is resurrected is a transformed understanding of and commitment to the life and teachings of Jesus as a *Way* of life for us to follow every moment of every day. When we treat the Christ as a divine being to be worshiped, the

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personal change required for a Christian is essentially non-existent. That brand of Christianity requires little more than an hour or two on occasional Sunday mornings.

The gospel record of the resurrected, consummated Jesus provides an interesting analogy for what a crucified Christianity might mean. Jesus was visibly present, post-crucifixion, in a body for a time, but his resurrected body was different from his earthly body in some ways and similar in others. For example, his new body was not recognizable to his closest friends until he either spoke or did something they recognized as a Jesus-like thing to do.² He could appear and disappear at will. His new body could pass through walls and locked doors. Yet, his new body also retained the scars of the nails that held him on the cross. Crucifixion resulted in a mix of what was old and familiar with what was new.

The *resurrected* Jesus was no longer bound to the geographical areas we now know as Israel, nor were his spiritual views contextualized in limiting ways by his Jewish heritage. He became more of a *universal* figure across both time and space. His direction to his disciples was to carry his message to all corners of the earth – *not* to convert anyone or start a new religion, but to share the good news³ of the *kingdom of God* as a level of conscious awareness attainable by everyone regardless of their religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or gender.

Before Christianity can serve as a life-transforming way of living, followers must adapt Jesus' journey of transformation to their own lives, not simply to become a

² Mark 15:16

³ Luke 24:13-49

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better person but to become *Christ-like* themselves. This is what it means to be a Christian: to follow Christ and become our own unique version of what Jesus modelled for ourselves, for our community, and for our world. The thought that we can become *Christ-like* is blasphemous to those who only accept the divinity of Christ and miss the divine/human unity of being Jesus leads us to become. The *Way* of Jesus is integrating *God-with-us* into our human existence as an active presence in every aspect of our lives. Jesus awoke to his *Oneness* with God, as should we.

Becoming a *Christian* is so much more than being a member of a Christian church or saying a prayer to accept Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior or being born into a family claiming Christianity as their religious heritage. These traditional understandings and practices of Christian requirements are some of what must be crucified – not annihilated but changed. Until they are transcended they will be impediments to our journey toward *Christ-likeness*.

Jesus taught a new way of life; he said, "Repent,"⁴ which means *transform*. Jesus did *not* say, "Worship me;" he said, "Follow me"⁵ and "Worship God."⁶ When asked where he abided, Jesus said, "Come and see."⁷ Jesus said, "I am the way."⁸ The way of Jesus is not a brand of worship but a way of living in Oneness with God.

Follow. Come. See. Transform. *That is the Way.*

⁴ Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15

⁵ Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:11, John 1:43

⁶ Matthew 4:10, Luke 4:8

⁷ John 1:39

⁸ John 14:6

Chapter 1

Jesus and the Christ

*Christ is God, and Jesus is the Christ's historical manifestation in time.*⁹

A common misconception perpetuated by many, if not most, Christian churches is that *Jesus* and the *Christ* are the same, as if Christ were Jesus' last name. It is an easy assumption to make because *Jesus Christ*, *Christ Jesus*, *Christ*, and *Jesus* are used interchangeably in many, if not most Christian discussions. And it is true that Jesus, in some biblical contexts (often in Paul's letters), is referred to as *Jesus Christ* or *Christ Jesus*. On careful reading, however, one notices that references pairing the title of Christ with Jesus refer primarily to his *resurrected* being. Jesus Christ, or Jesus *the* Christ, is used only three times in the four Gospels telling the pre-crucifixion life and teachings of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). In other words, when the *title* of *Christ* is included, it refers to something related

⁹ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Convergent Books, 2019, p. 19.

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to but different from the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth.

This may seem like unnecessary nit-picking, and for some it will remain a distinction without a difference. But for those genuinely seeking to follow the life and teachings of Jesus, failing to distinguish between Jesus and the Christ becomes an obstacle to more deeply understanding who Jesus was and the nature of the journey he invites us to follow.

Another set of titles often used synonymously with Jesus include *Son of God*, *Son of Man*, *God's Son*, and the *Son* (referring to the second person of the Trinity). In the gospel accounts, Jesus does not refer to himself as the *Son of God*, as some others do. Jesus presumably (although not directly) refers to himself as the *Son of Man*, which means “the human one.” Yet, even when speaking of the *Son of Man*, Jesus speaks in the non-personal *third person*, as if speaking of someone else or, more plausibly, speaking of a level of conscious awareness he has accessed that has not yet been accessed by others. For example, in Matthew 8:20, Jesus says, “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head,” instead of saying, “I have no place to lay *my* head,” which would be a first-person account.

In Jesus' day, the title *Son of God* was often claimed by kings and emperors to suggest they were divinely chosen, or *anointed Messiahs* over their earthly domains. It implied that their actions were *super-human* because of their direct connection to God. Some histories of emperors even include a virgin birth narrative, further differentiating the leader from the subjects. Tales of unique and unnatural events were told and titles bestowed in order to link a human leader with a divine source of authority.

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Leaders with no such divine heritage would have been considered *less than* or *inferior*. Jesus, however, did not seek an earthly title nor did he attempt to amass earthly power, although many, then and now, mistakenly thought he was or should. Thus, he received titles reserved for emperors. Indeed, a significant portion of his followers were expecting a warrior king to lead a rebellion to overthrow their Roman oppressors. *That* was what would have come to mind when Jesus was called *Messiah* or *Son of God* because that was the implication of the titles at the time. It is fascinating that many of the stories handed down about Jesus' birth and his titles are so similar to those of leaders of the earthly empires of his time. Few would have believed Jesus had divine status without them. Regardless, most missed the true nature of his kingship.

The word *Christ* is the English translation of *Christos*, which is the Greek translation of *Messiah*, a Hebrew word meaning *anointed* or *chosen*. The title of *Messiah* referred to a *Savior*, meaning one who was anointed by a supreme being and given divine authority and power to save the people from some unpleasantness. It was *not* the strictly religious title it is today, so a reasonable image of a *Messiah* would be a king who rallied his armies to defeat an invading force, thus *saving* the people from capture. In today's religious context, the unpleasantness most people seek salvation from is *sin*. My point is that the language used by many New Testament authors and Christian leaders today in describing and referring to Jesus as a spiritual *Messiah* is the same language used by people in biblical times to describe their leaders who held earthly power by force and oppression. That language differs significantly from the way Jesus spoke of himself.

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While I believe the title of *Christ* is appropriately applied to Jesus, I do not believe he was the *only* Christ of God, nor does it seem he believed that either. Distinguishing between Jesus and the Christ is a key to understanding how both apply to our lives.

Jesus vs the Christ

To help distinguish between Jesus and the Christ, as is done by Richard Rohr in *The Universal Christ*¹⁰, Jesus was a *specific* human being from a particular time and geographic location. The *Christ* is universal, transcending any single individual and existing outside of time and space. The Christ manifests through the *conscious* integration of the spiritual (creator) and physical (created) expressions of being into a unified, eternal, and embodied consciousness. For individuals, this is sometimes called awakening to our Oneness with God. This conscious awakening occurred with Jesus (“*the Father and I are One*”) and resulted in his extraordinary insights and abilities. And this is where his life and teachings lead us – to an awakening to and manifestation of *our* Oneness with God. As such, Jesus and the Christ exist in unity but are distinct expressions of and in God. The *Christ* is the timeless, conscious embodiment of God on and beyond earth.

The concept of *Oneness* can be perplexing. On the one hand, Oneness with God is a quality inherent to all parts of creation. On the other hand, few are consciously aware of their Oneness so their conscious thoughts and

¹⁰ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Convergent Books, 2019.

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behaviors are not aligned with God's nature, meaning they live their lives *unconsciously* and as if they were separate, independent beings. The 17th chapter of the gospel of John records Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. He thanks God for the Oneness he and God share. He asks that his disciples awaken to *their* Oneness – with Jesus and, through that Oneness, with God. And he asks for Oneness “on behalf of those who will believe (through the teachings of his disciples),”¹¹ and that final category is us. Yes, Jesus prayed for you and me 2000 years ago in that garden. He prayed that we would awaken to the same Oneness he and God share so we become conscious participants in the kingdom of God – not as God or Jesus, but as our essential selves perfectly aligned with God.

One understanding of the gospel narrative is that Jesus, the man, became *consciously aware* of his Oneness with God at his baptism, when “...the heavens were opened...and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him...and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.””¹² Some reject this interpretation because they fear it denies the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke that are traditionally understood to show Jesus that was born a vastly different type of being than us. Personally, I find assuming Jesus awoke to his divine nature later in life frees us to understand the birth narratives as allegory or metaphor instead of as literal or historical facts. In doing so, we can imagine Jesus *not* as someone inherently

¹¹ John 17:20

¹² Matthew 3:16-17

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different than we are. Rather, he was born a human baby and raised by earthly parents, just like us. He realized his universal, divine status as the *Christ* through a conscious awakening to God's presence within himself and *all* of creation, which he now invites us to join: *Emmanuel*, which means *God is with us*. It is the *resurrected* Jesus, the one *transformed* at his baptism and *consummated* in his resurrection, that we are to follow and emulate. *That* is the Jesus bearing the title of *Christ*. That, it seems to me, is the path and invitation given through the life and teachings of Jesus. And that is the transforming path *Christianity* should reveal.

Awakening to our Oneness with God and all of creation is how we become *children* of God: "*But to all who received him...he gave power to become children of God...*"¹³ Becoming a child of God is not a status we earn; it is already present, though latent, within us. *Becoming* means *consciously awakening* to our heritage as God's children so we *know* and *behave* accordingly. One path to that level of awareness is by adapting the life and teachings of Jesus to our lives. *Following* his example leads us into *Oneness* with the family of God.

In the same way that we theorize three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, Spirit) as equal but distinct manifestations of One God, so Jesus of Nazareth is one manifestation of the Christ. And just as there is no essential separation between the persons of the Trinity, so there is no essential separation between Jesus and the Christ, any more than what exists between a wave and the ocean.

¹³ John 1:11-13

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Here is an alternative conclusion about the life of Jesus that some will consider heresy: *Jesus of Nazareth was no more divine than you or me.* Make no mistake – Jesus *was* divine, but so are we. The difference between Jesus and us *regular* folks is the degree of awareness of the divine nature he consciously attained and lived out. Jesus awoke to his divinity, but most of us do not. But we can; and we do not have to wait until we die to do so. And *that* is a critical aspect of Christianity that gets buried under multiple layers of church-sponsored liturgy, dogma, and practices. Jesus realized that Oneness with God is inherent to all of creation. The danger of promoting or displaying that Oneness, also shown by Jesus, is that less-awakened others will be threatened, feel diminished, and assume *we think* we are God. A spiritually awakened person is *not* God but is an instrument through which God works. Like Jesus, they become *children of God.*

Jesus *became* the Christ, which means he was consciously aware that his physical being was not separate from the living Spirit of God. The *Christ* is physically manifested divinity. That awareness transforms a materially-focused being into one who perceives life beyond the apparent limits of the physical realm. It did in Jesus, and it will in us if and when we allow it to do so. And, like Jesus, we become a new creation, *born again* of the Spirit. Our outer appearance and mannerisms may remain similar, but our inner life and outer behaviors will be attuned to a higher, deeper, more unified state of awareness. When Jesus tells us to *repent*, this is the inner transformation to which he refers. When he invites us to *follow*, this is the path where he leads.

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Jesus: Divine and Human

Here are some practices where the church, usually with good and sincere intentions, misleads us about the *Way* of Jesus: (1) by presenting the narratives of the *virgin birth* as factual accounts that imply Jesus was inherently different than us, as was said of emperors in his day, which implies that we can *never* be like him; (2) by teaching that Jesus had to be crucified (sacrificed) to atone for our sins when he was actually killed by our ignorance (by people like us who found his teachings threatening: “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*”); and (3) that Jesus was physically resurrected into the same body he had before his crucifixion. These and similar teachings that fall well outside the known characteristics of God’s creation portray Jesus as *not* like us. His teachings, however, indicate he believed himself to be like us in every way, save for the conscious awareness of our divinity: “...*the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and...will do greater works than these...*”¹⁴

Jesus referred to himself as a Son of *Man* to emphasize his *humanness*, not his divinity. To the extent the church presents Jesus as the only divine *Son of God*, the church leads us away from maturing into the consummated offspring of *humankind* we were created to become. These limiting forms of Christianity must transform before they can lead believers onto the *Way* of Jesus where those believers are led to consciously take their place as children of God.

When we assume Jesus was divine in ways we are not, our orientation to him is like that of sheep to a

¹⁴ John 14:12

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shepherd instead of like students to their teacher. Sheep may be led by but cannot become like the shepherd because they are a different species of being. Teachers train students to become like them, even to exceed their own accomplishments. When we believe Jesus was human, the call to follow opens an evolutionary path that integrates and manifests our divine nature, bringing *heaven* to *earth*, or *spirit* to *tangible reality*. And we join him in and as the body of Christ, which is what the church is supposed to be. We find our individual consummation in the body of Christ, not as perfect individuals but as consciously aware participants in the communal perfection attained as diverse individuals united around a common purpose.

Jesus said, “*I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.*”¹⁵ He calls us to a relationship of equals, all subservient to One God. The *Way* of transformation requires seeing Jesus as a human being who matured into his divine nature, and who invites us to join him there.

Differing Roles, One Life

I got married at 33. I was 37 when our first child was born and just shy of 40 for our second. Each of these events, individually and collectively, expanded my conscious awareness exponentially. My *life* no longer centered around me; *my* life merged into a larger life – that of a family. My *I* became a *we*, and I learned to weigh my behaviors in light of their impact on a broader *life*. Becoming an integral part of a life greater than our individual existence requires varying measures of personal vulnerability and self-

¹⁵ John 15:15

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sacrifice. It changes our self-identity. It is not that the *I* of my earlier days ceased to exist, but that that *I* entered a new context, interwoven and interdependent with others. My *I* did not shrink, but the world in which it exists grew. My conscious attention and the source of my identity expanded from the *particular* (me) to the *communal* (family) as I learned my life-interests are inextricably linked to others. I became One with a reality greater than my own.

I share my experience to help illustrate the distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus *the Christ*. As far as we know, Jesus lived his pre-ministry days in and around Nazareth with his family of origin. His interests, activities, and work were almost certainly intermingled with theirs. Jesus' awakening, symbolized by his baptism, revealed his membership in a much larger, more inclusive family. He awoke to his status as a child of God and willingly devoted his little *I* to an exponentially larger *we* focused on helping others awaken to the family of God, also called the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' conscious awareness and source of identity shifted from the *particular* (he and his family) to the *communal* (the Jewish people) and ultimately to the *universal* (*all* of God's creation).

The universal awareness attained by Jesus has a name: *Christ consciousness*, which occurs when the apparent boundaries separating physical and spiritual realities fall away and their interconnected unity is revealed. This revelation is the awakening to Oneness with God. It is what some spiritual traditions call *enlightenment*. To awaken to *Christ consciousness* is to perceive both what is seen and unseen in our world as well as to understand the interrelatedness of life beyond the time and space boundaries we consider hard limits on reality. Although the

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title of the *Christ* is inclusive of time and space, its reach extends beyond both and into eternity. And although the title of the *Christ* has been co-opted by the Christian religion, the reach of *Christ consciousness* includes but transcends *all* religious belief systems. Everyone who awakens to this level of consciousness becomes One with the Divine (God) regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof. This is where Jesus the Christ consciously abides, and he invites us to join him – in the intimate awareness of our eternal Oneness with and in God, *while still physically embodied on earth*.

Greg the bachelor, Greg the husband, and Greg the father are different expressions of the same being – *me* – but in progressively larger expansions of conscious awareness and self-identity. Spiritual growth requires expanding who and what we consider as the nexus of our life. We finally understand that the only true and lasting good is that which is good for all. As our identity expands to include more beings from the greater life around us, our actions tend toward supporting what serves the interests of that larger community. Complete maturity, or consummation, is identifying ourselves with everyone and everything in creation, consciously living out our Oneness. Jesus was there, which is why he preached love for enemies, care for the outcasts and downtrodden, and loving our neighbors. It also explains why he commanded that the good news of God's reign be carried to all corners of the earth. No one was *other* to him. After attaining his universally-focused awareness, Jesus the Christ focused his attention on maturing the life-experience of *all* of humankind – Jews, gentiles, Romans, men, women, orphans, migrants – with no exclusions. His awakening had

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nothing to do with starting a new religion and everything to do with establishing the kingdom of God on earth in ways that transcended national, socio-economic, cultural, *and* religious boundaries.

We are not called to follow Jesus, the son of a tradesman in Nazareth, any more than to emulate Greg the bachelor. We are to follow *Jesus the Christ* to Oneness in the family of God. Remembering that Jesus the Christ was once only Jesus of Nazareth makes our transformative journey personal and believable.

Chapter 2

A Higher Level of Being

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

In the previous chapter I listed a number of titles often used synonymously with Jesus.¹⁶ These include *Son of God*, *Son of Man*, *God's Son*, and others. Although these terms are used exclusively today to refer to Jesus in his divine nature, in Jesus' time those same titles were claimed by secular rulers to portray themselves as divinely anointed. They tried to create the illusion of inherent difference between themselves and the masses of those ruled in order to minimize challenges to their authority, as if one of us decided we could be God and dared to think that was possible. Those in authority wanted to be considered a foundationally *higher level of being* than others could hope to become, although to them a *higher level of being* only referred to a greater amount of earthly influence and wealth. When the same titles are applied to Jesus, the implication is that

¹⁶ See *Life Notes: Jesus and the Christ*, September 12, 2024.

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we cannot hope to become like Jesus any more than we could hope to have been an emperor of old. That *unattainable-level-of-being* illusion is a misunderstanding most Christian churches continue to perpetuate today with respect to our ability to follow Jesus by becoming our version of him.

Another powerful title often applied to Jesus of Nazareth today is the *Word*, or the *Living Word*, or the *Word of God*.^{17,18} In the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus and his contemporaries, the word translated as *Word* refers specifically to God and harkens back to the initial creation story in Genesis 1 that describes God as *speaking* creation into being: “*And God said, ‘Let there be...’*” While I do not consider it entirely wrong to equate Jesus with God, especially when Jesus claimed Oneness with God (whom he referred to as *Father*¹⁹), it is misleading in a way similar to how earthly rulers claimed personal anointings by God. Jesus did *not* claim to be God or even the *Son* of God. The Oneness with the Father he claimed was not one of *sameness* but of *alignment*. In other words, Jesus attained Oneness with God by surrendering the desires of his personal ego to the universal will of God, as best as he understood and could channel it. His references to his relationship with God retain the implication of a distinction between himself and God.

It is curious how nearly all references Jesus makes to his relationship to God are in the third person, as if about someone else. When Jesus is recorded as saying, “*The*

¹⁷ See John 1:1.

¹⁸ The *Word* today is also often used synonymously (and misleadingly) with the Bible.

¹⁹ John 10:30

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Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son...” or “...*just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself...*”, instead of saying “...has given all judgement to *me...*” or “...has granted *me* also to have life...”, it sounds as if he is referring to another being. One way to reconcile this is by imagining Jesus drawing a distinction between his expression as Jesus of Nazareth, an earthly being, and as Jesus the Christ – *a higher level of being* – whom he accessed through his Oneness with God. Because he sought to lead others to a similar awakening, he couldn’t present himself as an entirely different species of being from his followers but had to show that both human and divine natures are accessible to us all. In other words, if I were playing the part of Abraham Lincoln, offstage I might say, “...*Congress empowered the President to declare war on the secessionist States,*” but onstage I would say, “...*Congress empowered me to declare war...*” Both statements refer to *me* but in different ways. The initial statement, spoken in the third person, refers to something bigger than me – the office of the President, a role I am only temporarily portraying in the latter. When Jesus refers to himself in the third person he is referring to something bigger than his human self alone.

By awakening to his Oneness with God, Jesus attained the ability to perceive and behave at *a higher level of being* than those around him – not because he was physically different than others, but because his awakening opened new realms of possibility. He *evolved* or *matured* into a *Son* (or *Child*) of Man – the consummate human. He gained access to both physical *and* spiritual understandings and abilities equally and at will. We become *children* of God by growing beyond the restrictive and illusory boundaries

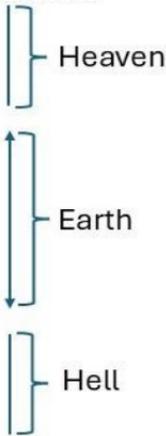
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of earthly life that we learn from parents, culture, schools, and churches. In awakening to a higher level of being, we are consciously *reborn* as a new creation, although in the same physical body. Thus, he encouraged people to *follow* instead of to *worship* him. Following Jesus is about personal transformation, peer-to-peer. Worship is reserved for God, inferior-to-superior.

Realms of Reality

The “typical” Christian view of life’s realms, illustrated below, is of three separate realms in which we might exist:

Common Christian Life View



1. *Earth*: a physical realm where we spend our days as physical beings. At our physical death we are transported to a non-physical realm for *eternity*:
2. *Heaven*: a paradise for those who lived a *good, Christian* life; OR
3. *Hell*: a punishment for those who have not lived a *good, Christian* life, those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, or those

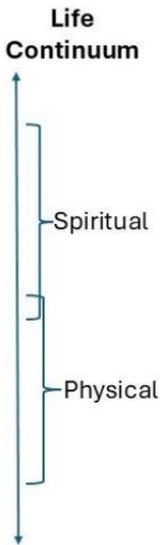
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guilty of some other variably defined *character-defect* identified by a church leader or denomination.

I will reserve my qualms about this view, except to say I find it unrealistic, unsupported by biblical, scientific, logical, or experiential evidence, and inconsistent with the God as modelled by the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ.²⁰

An Alternative Model

Here is an alternative illustration of how we might imagine life's realms as a continuum of life, meaning the nature of the environment(s) of which we can be consciously aware.



It shows an unbroken continuum between and beyond physical and spiritual experience where our attention may be directed along a broad perceptual range of expression. A *higher level of experience* does *not* refer to focusing more of one's attention on the more spiritual areas of life but to *widening the scope of one's conscious awareness* to include more of *both* physical and spiritual aspects. This is why worshipping Jesus as divine does not carry us very far in our journey toward Oneness with God. We must also *follow* Jesus in his physical expression. The cross to which he leads – our suffering – is at the lower end of

physical reality, although God's creation encompasses the

²⁰ For a broader consideration of heaven and hell, see my 2022 book, *Churchianity vs Christianity*, available at www.ContemplatingGrace.com or any major bookseller.

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entire continuum. Following Jesus leads us higher into the spiritual *and* deeper into the physical.

As one's conscious awareness travels higher on this continuum, the perceived world becomes less tangible and more ethereal. We become increasingly unable to concretely describe in words the realities we find ourselves a part of. The *certainty* commonly believed to exist in physical reality becomes hazier and more ambiguous. The higher levels of conscious awareness appear to exist in the realms of ideas and dreams when compared with those at lower levels. New possibilities, images, and ways of being emerge as one grows in spiritual awareness.

As one's awareness travels deeper into physicality, *reality* appears to solidify and become less malleable. Although change, evolution, and growth are constantly occurring everywhere along the continuum, change seemingly occurs more slowly and painfully in the deeper, physical areas. For example, mountains and oceans undergo constant change, but that change is largely imperceptible when viewed from our time-perspective. Those focused in the lower, physical realms of life *worship* what is higher because it appears to them as intangible, indefinable, and uncontrollable.

Facts and *truths* appear to change based on where one is engaged on the continuum. This is a primary reason that attempting to understand the Bible and other spiritual texts as literal and historical *fact* becomes a limiting factor in one's spiritual growth the more consciously aware one becomes. The *Truth* is always larger than the facts pointing to it.

When our eternal essence manifests as a life on earth, the focus of our awareness is drawn from the

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spiritual expressions of life into the physical. When our life on earth ends, our focus is drawn back toward the spiritual. Expressing *more* of both aspects of being is the *Way* of Jesus. Our consciousness is drawn toward Oneness with God as it aligns with greater portions of God's awareness. The physical nature of everything is just as holy as its spiritual aspect because everything is an unbroken manifestation of both – and more. This is symbolized in the Eucharist, with the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. Only our conscious perception, or lack thereof, separates physical from spiritual.

A *higher level of being* means we are more aware of more of God's nature. That allows us to more clearly reflect God's nature and for God to work through us, as Jesus did so masterfully. From our standpoint, God is a Spirit which can most effectively act in physical ways through physical beings like us. Jesus' life and teaching encourage us to draw inspiration and guidance from our connection to the spiritual realm as we manifest good works in the physical world. Others learn of God's nature most effectively from spiritually guided, physical beings. John 1:18 says God is made known through God's children, which is us in our expanding awareness and growing Oneness with God.

The *Son of Man*, or *Child of Humankind*, is the consummated human being, fully human *and* fully divine, equally fluent in both physical and spiritual expressions of life. It is the higher level of being we were created to become.

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Energy and Spirit

In exploring the spiritual-physical *Life Continuum* I presented (page 33), it is helpful to understand that spiritual and physical matters differ primarily in our perception, not in their essence. What we perceive as physical is the part we can see with our eyes, taste with our mouths, and touch with our hands, which is perception occurring lower on the continuum. Physical objects appear *tangible*, meaning we can interact with them via our physical senses. We can measure, observe, and predict their typical impact on our physical nature.

What some consider as *spirit*, broadly speaking, is everything else. Spirituality is often a *catch-all* term for what we know or suspect but cannot directly observe or explore with our physical senses. It is analogous to what scientists call *dark matter* or *dark energy* – they theorize its existence because of its impact on what is physically observable even though they cannot physically observe or measure it. The spiritual-physical continuum illustrates how there is no *essential* difference between the two – both are expressions of a single reality. How we experience an object, person, or situation is entirely dependent on where our perceptual awareness is located on the continuum.

I believe there is a direct equivalence between what we call *energy* and what we call *spirit*. In other words, the reality behind both terms is a single reality, whether in a scientific or religious sense. Both are invisible and non-measurable except by their observable influence over what we perceive as physical. We know electrical energy flows through and animates our bodies along intricate pathways of nerves. We can measure energy's impact on our bodies, and we can observe the physical nerve cells that transmit

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it. We know the physical elements required to fuel the energy our bodies require, such as nutrients and oxygen, but we cannot observe the essential nature of the energy itself.²¹ We know that when our bodily systems are no longer able to receive or process energy, through trauma or other degradation of its physical components, the bodily expression of our essence *dies*, and our conscious awareness is drawn back into the non-physical part of the life continuum.

It is interesting to compare the body's energy centers as described today with descriptions from thousands of years before technology developed the ability to concretely map our physical nervous system. The *invisible* energy centers known as *chakras* are relegated today more to spirituality than science. Yet, they correspond exactly to *visible* nerve bundles, sometimes called miniature brains, that concentrate and distribute the electrical energy driving our cardiac, respiratory, digestive, reproductive, and other major bodily processes. In other words, the chakras of old and the physical nerve bundles known to science are the same energy centers performing the same functions. The chakras, however, cannot be directly observed and so they are considered spiritual speculation instead of scientific reality. The chakras are the *spiritual* expressions of *physical* nerve bundles.

For example, the invisible heart chakra and the visible cardiac nerve bundle share a common location and function within the body – energizing our circulatory

²¹ For an in-depth consideration of the energy/spirit equivalence, see my book, *Space, Time, and Eternity*, 2024, available at www.ContemplatingGrace.com or any major bookseller.

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system. A spiritualist of old might describe the heart chakra as distributing the spirit-energy that governs the distribution of the life-force throughout the body. Today's anatomist might describe the cardiac nerve bundle as distributing the electrical energy that powers the rhythmic beating of our heart. A mystical theologian might say the Holy Spirit animates, or energizes all bodily functions, including those of the heart. All three describe the same physical and spiritual phenomenon with different vocabularies and from different but equally legitimate perspectives on the *life continuum*.

My point is that the essence of everything we consider physical is a partial expression of a much larger, non-physical reality. Everything is vaster and more complex than we perceive from its physical manifestation alone. There is a *spiritual*, or unseen essence behind everything in creation. Only from a higher level of being can this be perceived. Our bodies are not our essential self, any more than are our jobs, homes, ethnicity, or friends. Our bodies are, however, physical *expressions* or projections of our essential self or *soul*. When our physical bodies become uninhabitable, our soul sheds its dysfunctional outer shell as if it were worn-out clothing and lives on. Unencumbered by physical shackles we remember who we are at our core, our *true* self: the loving and beloved child of God we've always known ourselves to be but were afraid to trust as real.

The Brain and Consciousness

Where do our thoughts originate? Where do our memories reside? Where is the center of our conscious awareness? When we talk to ourselves, where does the

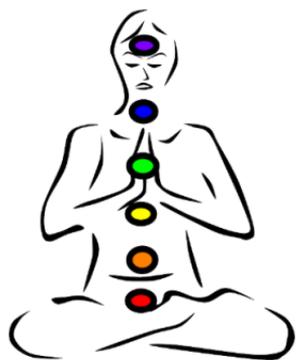
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conversation occur? Many assume all our *thinking* and *cognitive* functions somehow originate and reside within our physical brain. Yet, for all the scientific research, anatomical mapping, and microscopic analysis of the brain no one has found a single thought, image, or memory anywhere within it, let alone any physical evidence of consciousness. What has been found are millions of neural networks and chemical-producing organs (endocrine glands) that enhance or inhibit our thinking, remembering, and conscious awareness. The brain is a prime example of what I described previously – that everything physical is a partial expression of a much larger, non-physical reality. Our brains, for the miraculous creations they are, represent but one part of the physical expression of consciousness. The larger aspect of our consciousness originates from and resides in the non-physical, energetic, or spiritual realm of existence. The nexus of our thinking functions is outside of our bodies and brains, which does *not* mean that it resides *physically* outside our bodies. Rather, it is not anything we perceive as physical, but it is more like something from a different but interconnected dimension. Every impulse with a physical manifestation, however, flows through the brain, which can be understood as the *gatekeeper* for all physical actions and reactions of the body.

In the typical *chakra* model of energy distribution, sometimes called the *energy body*, there are seven chakras or non-physical energy centers. *Chakra* means *wheel of light* and is often imagined as a rotating disk. Unlike the bodily organs, the chakras do not have firm edges, so they may overlap and extend beyond the boundaries of the physical body. The lower five are aligned along the spine, and spirit-

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energy flows up and down between them. The *crown chakra* is located just above the physical head and is where spirit-energy drawn from our environment is channeled into the



third-eye chakra, located in the middle-brain area, and is associated with the pineal gland. From there, spirit-energy follows along the spine to the *throat chakra* which regulates brain/body communication. Next is the *heart chakra*, located just behind the heart, which governs circulation throughout the body.

The *solar plexus chakra* empowers digestion and is located between the sternum and the naval. The *sacral chakra* is just below the naval and energizes reproductive activities. The *root chakra* is located at the base of the spine and regulates elimination processes. Spirit-energy can enter the body from the earth through the root chakra and travel up through the other centers, just as it can enter through the crown chakra and travel down. Energy can also travel independently of the nearby chakras, as happens when heart or other energy is sent directly from one being to another.

The important point is that spirit-energy flows into and out of the body via channels that are undetectable by our physical senses even though they animate everything physical. That energy is required for all life functions. It is through these invisible channels that we are connected via our energy body to God and all of creation. It is within the energy body that our consciousness, thoughts, and memories originate, reside, and merge with the

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consciousness, thoughts, and memories of the rest of creation.

As spirit-energy enters our being it animates, via our central nervous system, physical aspects of our individual nature and manifests in our environment as observable, unique expressions of our being as words, actions, and behaviors. Like electricity, we can modify spirit-energy in ways that are positive and helpful, or we can modify it to cause harm and destruction. What we project into the physical environment is a unique expression of our current state of being and is not dependent on the nature of the spirit-energy entering our being which, also like electricity, is neutral with regard to the nature or impact of what it empowers.

It is through a general, if incomplete understanding of the invisible processes of spirit-energy transfer from chakras to nerve centers and how they relate to our physical existence that we learn to perceive from a higher level of being. That knowledge expands our awareness beyond the illusion of separateness that clouds our actions and inhibits our understanding of the inclusive interconnectedness of everything in God. Jesus was well-acquainted with this expansive knowing and said to let those with eyes see and those with ears hear. He was not referring to physical eyes and ears but to the unseen, non-physical, spiritual intelligences of insight and comprehension available through the energy body that open new vistas of possibility otherwise undetectable to our physical senses.

Our conscious awareness is usually focused on the physical expression of our being, and we learn to overlook or ignore

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the non-physical evidence that would allow us to perceive beyond the limits of our physical senses. Before we can raise the level of our being to a higher, more inclusive, more spiritual level, we must realize that we are *not* self-contained units of living protoplasm. Rather, we are spiritual beings who sometimes express in physical ways. But no expression is ever separate from the whole, nor is any expression exclusively physical or exclusively spiritual. Our mortal lives are largely products of unseen forces and energies that pull invisible strings to animate our physical natures with purpose and meaning. What we do not understand about our behavior (which is most of it) is that it is a product of an intimately present but imperceptible spiritual reality. When we do something we cannot rationalize, we say, “I don’t know why I did that,” or “I made a mistake,” or “The devil made me do it.” Or we may pretend it didn’t happen because it was not purposeful in a way we can identify, justify, or comprehend. Alternately, we sometimes have intuitive *hunches* about things or people without tangible evidence that we later find to be accurate. We call it *serendipity*, which is code for, “*Heck if I know how I knew that!*” Many psychologists believe that as much as 95% of our behavior is *unconscious*, meaning it is not consciously purposeful or intended. A universal corollary is that many physicists estimate up to 95% of the universe consists of *dark matter* or *dark energy*, meaning it cannot be directly perceived, even by the most sophisticated scientific instruments. I am reminded, once again, of the eerie similarities between energy and spirit.

Many of the ways our bodies function are governed by hormones produced in the pituitary, pineal, and other endocrine glands. This work is unconscious to us, meaning

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it, like the beating of our heart, is done without our conscious knowledge or control, which is fortunate since we lack the conscious capacity to order the appropriate functioning of our bodily systems. As we consider the enormous impacts of trace amounts of hormones and other chemicals produced in, regulated by, and distributed from tiny glands throughout our bodies, we should intuit that this is not a self-contained, isolated process. An intelligent something or someone designs and maintains these complexities, and we have no idea how or why. What scientists observe in the functioning of our endocrine system is the physical expression of processes occurring in spiritual – unknown, unseen, and unmeasurable – realms which originate from and answer to our larger being. Our physical organs transform spiritual impulses, received as energy, into bodily actions and behaviors.

We do not have good, descriptive names for this *larger being* that our physical body is a part of and is controlled by, but *energy* or *spirit body* are probably as good as any. As is *soul*. It is challenging to name something that we know is *real* but that has no physical characteristics we can see, measure, or compare. Some people question that souls are part of reality because souls are spiritual conjectures, yet these same people readily accept concepts like *dark energy* and *dark matter* as scientifically legitimate. Dark energy and matter, however, help explain so much of what is otherwise unexplainable in science – unseen forces impacting known reality in measurable ways. In the same way, the concept of the energy or spirit body helps make sense of our everyday lives – an unseen reality impacting our known reality in ways we cannot otherwise explain. Believing ourselves to be integral parts of a larger reality is

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not spiritual *mumbo-jumbo*, nor is it unbiblical. It explains a lot of what is otherwise unexplainable, but it is not taught in most churches (or schools).

Many contemplatives believe that *sin is separation*, including behaving as if our physical form is separate from our spiritual being. Not only are our spiritual and physical natures connected to each other, our natures are also inseparably connected with the natures of every other part of creations. Unfortunately, that is only readily apparent on the spiritual level of perception. Richard Rohr wrote, “(Our) sense of separation basically causes every stupid, sinful, silly thing we ever do.”²² He says our physical death solves the problem of separateness (and sin) by reuniting us with the eternal. To live today from a higher level of being, however, we must find ways to stop behaving as individuals. We are interconnected, physically and spiritually, individually and collectively, and that interconnectedness is *love* – love of self, love of neighbor, love of God.

*“We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”²³*

The image of an iceberg is often used as an analogy for phenomena where only a portion of something is visible. Actually, this is hardly rare as the nature of nearly everything and everyone is mostly invisible to us. There are two regions of invisibility for an iceberg to consider, the

²² Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, November 11, 2024.

²³ T.S. Eliot, from *Four Quartets*, 1943.

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most obvious being the part beneath the surface of the water, estimated to be as much as 80% of the iceberg. The other region, which is the larger of the two, is its *inner reality*, or what exists within its outer *skin*. There are different ways to compare the visible parts with the non-visible parts, like by volume or mass, but it seems reasonable that the hidden parts in this second context exceed 95% of the object. Experienced sailors are well-acquainted with the dangers of navigating around icebergs since the visible parts give few hints as to the width, shape, or depth of the non-visible parts. Collisions with icebergs tend not to end well for ships nor for those aboard them. In a similar way, experienced psychologists are well-acquainted with the mysteries hidden beneath one's outward appearance, the subconsciousness, which can either enlighten or sink a person into despair.

As we consider a higher level of being as an expansion of our conscious awareness, the iceberg is an apt metaphor. Most obviously is by comparing the visible parts of the iceberg – the *tip* – as our normal state of conscious awareness, and the invisible parts of the iceberg representing the unconscious. Many psychologists estimate that between 80 to 95% or more of our thoughts and behaviors emerge from the unconscious, meaning we are not consciously aware of why we do most of what we do. As such, the majority of our life-experiences occur *un*-consciously. Habitual behaviors and addictions, random or recurrent thoughts, day and night dreams, instinctive reactions – all are unconscious and arise from unknown realms beneath the visible surface. One wonders how one's life-experience could be enhanced by bringing more of our psychic capability into a more purposeful focus. This

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doesn't mean bringing more parts of our lives under our conscious control so much as intentionally *retraining* aspects of our being so we respond to situations in our lives in healthier, more intentional and unifying ways.

Using the iceberg analogy, the two unknown areas of our being include both an *external* and an *internal* expression. The hidden external expression of an iceberg is its physical portion beneath the surface of the water. The internal expression is the portion under the outer covering, or skin, of the iceberg, both above and below the surface of the water. The hidden external expression (underwater) is intimately connected to and an inseparable part of the larger *ocean*, so it is connected to an environment extending outward in all directions (underwater). The hidden internal expression refers to an inner, non-physical reality that is intimately connected to and an inseparable part of a spiritual environment existing in a dimension that includes but transcends our familiar 3-dimensional reality. Bringing this iceberg analogy back to us, it is within this other-dimensional spiritual ether – the collective spirit, energy body, or soul – where our oneness with God and all of creation becomes apparent. It is the unseen environment in which we exist. This is where the *kingdom of heaven* Jesus refers to exists as a tangible reality and not simply an abstract concept. Jesus said that kingdom is *near*, but not that it is readily accessible. It is *within* us.

As we imagine what lies under the surface of an ocean or within a spiritual realm, we conjure images of darkness, mystery, uncertainty, and the unknown. These images tend to be perceived negatively, as if bad or evil, when in reality they are only our conscious awareness butting up against its boundaries of familiarity. We often

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fear what is unfamiliar. Those boundaries, however, are what must be expanded if we are to live from a higher level of being. What is needed is curious exploration (preferably under experienced guidance), not avoidance. As we shine light on the unknown, the invisible becomes visible and vast new realms of possibility are revealed. The veil between the seen and the unseen worlds is very thin, but for those who deny the possibility of a world beyond the veil, it is impenetrable.

In the words of T.S. Eliot quoted at the beginning of this section, we arrive where we began but know the place anew. It is not that a higher level of being carries us anywhere different, at least not physically, but it allows us to experience our daily reality in deeper, richer ways – as if for the first time. Finding our way into and around these hidden internal and external expressions of being is the gateway to spiritual growth and maturity.

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Chapter 3

Baptism by Fire

I baptize you with water...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.²⁴

John the Baptist plays an interesting, if abbreviated, role in the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. Described as a *relative* of Jesus' through their mothers, John's biblical role seems to primarily be one of announcing the coming of the *Messiah* – the chosen one who was to come and save the Jewish people. John was considered a prophet so he probably said much more than is recorded in the Bible, although Luke 3 records a discourse from John about sharing one's abundance with those in need. *Repent!* and *Prepare the way!* are two of the messages that stand out from him. He claimed himself to be "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness*"²⁵ and had a number of followers, at least some of whom became followers of Jesus. He baptized people

²⁴ Matthew 3:11

²⁵ John 1:27

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in the Jordan river, including Jesus. I doubt he would be a candidate for a *Best Supporting Actor* award since he exited the scene shortly after Jesus entered it, but he was clearly significant to Jesus' ministry since his story is one of the few told in all four gospels. He readily confessed his role as secondary to that of Jesus. In words I omitted from the quote in the epigraph, John claims he is not even worthy to carry the sandals of Jesus. Regardless, he introduces important concepts in the epigraph: *baptism*, *baptism with the Holy Spirit*, and *baptism with fire*.

Baptism, usually with water, is a common Christian practice that represents the washing away of one's sins, although its symbolism as a method of cleansing or purifying one's inner and outer being is also a common practice in many other belief systems. Some see baptism as representing a death by drowning – a death to one's old life so a new life can begin. Baptism is one of the *sacraments* of the Christian church, along with marriage, the Eucharist, and others. Baptism, at least in most Protestant churches, is a sign that we belong to God. Some churches, like the United Methodist Church, baptize from infancy on to demonstrate that *everyone* belongs to God from the moment life begins. Other churches, like the Disciples of Christ in which I was raised, wait until a person is (supposedly) old enough to make their own decision. I was 12 or 13 when I was baptized and do not remember it as a conscious decision so much as something other kids my age were doing. Many baptisms are done with just a few drops of water on one's head. Others, like mine (and John the Baptist's), involve full-body immersion. I remember standing in the waist-deep baptismal pool and being asked if I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior (or

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something similar). I must've said I did because the pastor then covered my nose and mouth with a handkerchief and eased me backwards under the water before standing me back up. I remember thinking my baptism was kind of cool (and very wet), but I don't remember it being transformational.

Interestingly, most churches will not baptize a person more than once, believing that once we have received the sacrament we always have it. That contrasts with the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is offered countless times. I only mention this because I sometimes wonder how baptism would feel to me today. Perhaps it would feel more transformational with decades of life behind instead of before me. Many churches offer *remembrances* of baptism in a ritual intended to remind us that our lives were once given to God, even if we remember nothing about it.

John's baptism of Jesus was seemingly more dramatic than mine. In the telling of the baptism in the gospel of John (which was not written by or in the name of John the Baptist), John (the Baptist) says, "*I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.*"²⁶ In other accounts, "*a voice from heaven said, 'This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*"²⁷

Baptism is the event that kicks off Jesus' ministry. It seems likely to me that Jesus did not fully comprehend his divine calling until his baptism, meaning it was a transformational event for him. But what if *our* baptisms – yours, mine, everyone's – *also* had that same voice saying,

²⁶ John 1:32

²⁷ Matthew 3:17

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“This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased,” but we just don’t hear it? Or we ignore it because we don’t feel that would be possible since we are mere mortals? What if God speaks those same words of love to us through a parent or a grandparent or a mentor or a friend? What if God is trying to tell us how loved and special and chosen and divine we are through our baptisms, but it seems too good to believe? Baptism is a transformational gift – one we should accept as a sign of God’s love for us.

Entering the Depths

Lest anyone write off baptism as a trite or minimally-meaningful religious rite, there are interesting psychological and symbolic aspects to baptism by water that are worth considering. Bodies of water are common archetypes for the *unconscious*, meaning that which exists outside of our day-to-day awareness. Because something is unconscious to us does not make it less real or impactful, but its reality exists and its impacts occur in ways we are usually unable to perceive. The surface of water is a liminal boundary between our conscious awareness (above the water) and that which is unconscious to us (under the water). Because we cannot (usually) see what is under the surface of the water, it is unknown. The deeper we explore under the water or into the unconscious arena, the more mysterious and often frightening it becomes. I vividly remember fishing in a river with an uncle when I was a kid, walking in the ankle to waist-deep current with little to no idea what might be lurking beneath the surface – poisonous snakes? Electric eels? Flesh-eating piranha? Journeys into the unconscious and other *dark* places often ignite paranoia in the uninitiated.

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With that in mind, being baptized by full immersion is a physical, symbolic act of being led out of our conscious awareness (above) into the unconscious (below) and back. It represents a brief foray into the unknown. This has religious and spiritual significance since most aspects of spirituality, including God, exist in the realm of the unconscious because they cannot be seen, measured, or known by our normal ways of knowing. More than that, everything in creation exists in both conscious and unconscious realms, at least from our limited perspective. In other words, there is much more to whatever we see and experience than what we see and experience. This includes that which is physical to us, like bodies and trees, as well as that which is intangible, like thoughts, memories, and emotions. In that context, baptism is an introduction to the unknown world of the Spirit and an invitation to explore more deeply beyond the limits of our physical senses.

My point is that baptism by water can be understood and experienced at different levels of awareness, any of which can be meaningful to a person based on where they are in their spiritual development. Not only that, one's baptism – whether as an infant, adolescent, or adult – can be understood and experienced from different levels of perception decades after the actual act. While we cannot change what happened in the past, we can change how what happened in the past affects us today. Understood literally, baptism is the imitation of an odd ritual that Jesus went through. A little more deeply, baptism represents the washing away of our sins, similar to how taking a shower washes away the dirt from our skin. Since our sins are not as visibly obvious as dirt, it requires

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a little more imagination to understand baptism as washing sins away. Deeper still, baptism can be understood as an initiation into a world of mystery and wonder, a world where we must surrender our need to control outcomes and content ourselves with experiencing our life-events as they are, without pretending or needing to know the *how* or *why* of those events.

What I have shared about baptism by water to this point is how baptism has been perceived since the time of Jesus and before. Throughout his ministry, however, Jesus took traditional understandings and injected their implications with steroids. In the Sermon on the Mount²⁸, Jesus took a number of the Ten Commandments and expanded their reach exponentially. He would say, *“you have heard that it was said...”* before quoting a commandment, followed by, *“but I say to you...”* where he would increase the threshold for obedience. For example: *“You have heard it said... ‘You shall not murder’... But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable for judgment...”*²⁹ He effectively equated the murdering of another, something few of us do, with being angry at them, something all of us do. Similarly, he says, *“You have heard... you shall not commit adultery... But I say that everyone who looks at (another) with lust has already committed adultery... in (their) heart.”*³⁰ Under Jesus’ commentary on behavior, our actions matter, but our thoughts, feelings, and intentions matter just as much if not more.

²⁸ Matthew 5-7

²⁹ Matthew 5:21-22

³⁰ Matthew 5:27-28

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John the Baptist announced that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. True to his nature, and as he did with traditional interpretations of behavioral expectations, Jesus raises the implications of baptism, too.

Baptism by the Spirit

When John the Baptist was asked if he was the *Messiah* – the anointed one chosen by God to save the Jewish people – he responded that one greater than he would come as the *Messiah*. While noting that he (John) baptized others with water, the one to come would baptize with the *Holy Spirit* and with *fire*. In order to consider the implications of that prediction it is helpful to explore the ways in which the *Holy Spirit* is presented in the Bible. For starters, the Spirit is nebulous, meaning it cannot be well-defined. I don't fault the biblical authors for their lack of specificity however, because the Holy Spirit is *spirit* and, as such, does not lend itself to a precise description in words. Trying to capture the essence of the Holy Spirit in words is no easier than trying to capture the essence of God in words – it cannot be done. The Holy Spirit is named as one of the three *persons* or *faces* or *expressions* of God in the Trinity – Father (Creator), Son (Created), and Holy Ghost (Spirit).

So, what does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? Baptism is both an initiation and an invitation. It is an initiation into a world larger than what we've known or experienced, and it is an invitation to live in a way consistent with a world that extends beyond our own self-interests. Baptism with the Holy Spirit initiates us into the family of God – into the ineffable, invisible, and all-inclusive Oneness of the divine. Make no mistake, we must

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still live out and act in our normal, tangible lives, but we do so in a larger context. There is a saying in Eastern mysticism that goes: “*Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.*” Baptism with the Holy Spirit does not necessarily change *what* we do but *why* and *for whom* we do it.

The Spirit is presented in different ways in the Bible. At Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit descended from heaven *like a dove*.³¹ As his followers discussed their way forward after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Spirit came with *a sound like the rush of a violent wind*,³² giving them the ability to speak in other languages.³³ During Jesus’ final discourse with his disciples, he named the Spirit as their *Advocate* or *helper*³⁴ whom God would send to them as a *teacher* in the absence of Jesus’ physical presence. In a similar way, the apostle Paul wrote that our “*body is a temple of the Holy Spirit*,”³⁵ affirming its presence within us, or perhaps more accurately our presence within it.

In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the word *rauch* can be accurately translated as *spirit*, *breath*, or *wind*, which indicates an equivalence and interchangeability between what the words represent. Similarly, in the language of the New Testament, the Greek word *pneuma* also hints at the essential equivalence of *spirit*, *breath*, and *wind*. In a post-resurrection appearance to his disciples Jesus “*breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*”³⁶ In

³¹ John 1:32

³² Acts 2:2

³³ Acts 2:4

³⁴ John 14:26

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19

³⁶ John 20:22

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a night-time meeting with a leader of the Jews, Jesus said, “*The wind (Spirit) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*”³⁷ The initial creation story in the Bible says, “*...a wind (Spirit) from God swept over the face of the waters.*”³⁸

From these and other passages, we see the Spirit variously described as *dove-like* – a symbol of *peace* – as a *violent wind*, an *advocate*, and a *teacher*. It is hinted at being *unpredictable* and *unknowable*. It was through the Spirit acting on the physical matter of earth that God began the ongoing process of creation.³⁹ It is difficult to compile the various references of and for the Spirit into anything concrete that allows us to say, “*This is the nature of the Spirit,*” or “*That is what it means to be baptized with the Spirit.*” Which provides emphasis to the main point: *The realm of the Spirit cannot be known in our human state.* It, like God, exceeds our intellectual capacity. 16th Century Christian mystic St. John of the Cross said that God cannot be *known* but can only be *loved*, meaning God can only be *experienced*. The realm of the Spirit is the realm of the *unknown*. So perhaps we can say that baptism by Jesus – the baptism with the Holy Spirit – is an initiation and invitation into the world of *unknowing*, where our intellect plays a lesser role in understanding as our heart and intuition take on greater roles. Baptism with the Spirit invites us to let go of our neurotic needs for certainty and predictability, living by faith in the goodness of God.

³⁷ John 3:8

³⁸ Genesis 1:2

³⁹ Genesis 1:2

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Alchemical Transformation

After my children were baptized, both as infants, our extended family went out for a nice dinner. It was a celebration of a happy, traditional ritual, after which we all returned to life as usual. By contrast, after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness alone for 40 days and fasted. At the end of his extended fast, he was presented with three temptations⁴⁰ by the *devil*, each encouraging him to prioritize personal gain over the common good in the areas of *power*, *prestige*, and *possessions* – three areas in which we continue to be tempted and misled today. Jesus refuted each temptation, insisting his life’s work was for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and not for personal advancement. Unlike the baptisms of my children and me, Jesus’ baptism was an *initiation* into a completely different way of life, completely changing its trajectory. It represented the beginning of his other-focused, God-centered ministry and started the chain of events that eventually led to his death by crucifixion.

I confess, sheepishly, that baptism should probably serve as a life-changing initiation for us, too. “Oh sure,” some will say, “*he* was the son of God. His baptism and subsequent life-focus was pre-ordained from birth.” Yet, if we study his life and teachings, it is clear that becoming *Christ-like* and taking our place as *children of God* is pre-ordained for all of us. Most of us fail to prioritize our call to *Christ-likeness* because it seems an impossible, undesirable, and unpleasant way to spend our earthly days. Without a transformational baptism, we remain *self-focused* instead of being *other-focused*. The primary source

⁴⁰ Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-10

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of the difficulty is our desire for and attachment to familiar, predictable, and comfortable ways of living. Most of us easily succumb to various versions of the three earth-bound temptations Jesus resisted in the wilderness. Just about everything we've learned in life has taught us that gains in influence, titles, and wealth are doorways to success instead of revealing how they are actually chains that bind us to what has no eternal significance.

And this is what underlies the *baptism with fire* John the Baptist claimed Jesus would bring. Any transformative inclinations from baptism with water can be easily ignored because it leaves the attachments of our past intact, meaning we can easily pick up life wherever we left off. A baptism with fire is transformational, both internally and externally, in that the option to go back to life as it was is no longer present – those bridges are burned down.

To better understand *baptism with fire* it is helpful to consider the ancient science of *Alchemy*. Alchemists purified or refined precious metals by using fire to burn away the impurities within them. The art of Alchemy involved learning how much heat to apply and for how long in order to burn away the foreign substances without destroying the base metal one sought to purify.

Many today think Alchemy was *junk-science* that charlatans used to con people into thinking they could transform a relatively worthless substance, like lead, into something valuable, like gold. But what alchemists attempted was to burn away the relatively worthless substances from the valuable substances making them ever purer and more valuable. In this alchemical metaphor, we are the precious metal, and Jesus is the alchemist.

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The goal of *Alchemy* is purification. Which is also the goal of baptism with fire: to remove our impurities. The baptism Jesus offers is one where the *heat* of our life experiences – the difficulties, sufferings, and trials – *burns* away that which prevents us from attaining Oneness with God. And that which prevents us from attaining Oneness with God is almost always a personal quest for additional *power, prestige, or possessions*. Everything of the earth passes away. Oneness with God requires a focus on the invisible, spiritual ties that bind us together in this life and beyond. The very experiences that make life seem difficult – that make us feel we have been tossed into a fiery furnace – are the very things that can burn away our unhealthy attachments to that which has no eternal value. That, of course, assumes that we let go of what has been burned away instead of dedicating ourselves to rebuilding or regaining what the baptizing fire removed. Otherwise, we waste a purifyingly good flame.

Jesus was tested after his lengthy period of isolation and fasting with earthly types of temptations to assure his priorities were properly placed, and he proved they were. He had been purified sufficiently to model what *God-in-the-flesh* looks and acts like. Whether we choose to believe Jesus was born divine (One with God) or whether he matured into his divinity, our goal as Christians is the same: *Christ-likeness*.

The Transforming Fire

Baptism with water can be a powerful ritual that welcomes a person into church membership and can offer a symbolic *cleansing* of one's old self. A lot depends on how we approach and receive it. If our baptism is done as the

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routine fulfillment of something expected of us as Christians, it is less likely to be transformational. Baptism with fire, however, is an initiation that transforms the old life into something new.

16th Century mystic, St. John of the Cross, illustrates how the purifying fire of the Spirit transforms us by describing how fire transforms wood:

“The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first debumidifies it... Then it gradually turns the wood black... By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself.”⁴¹

In the purification process of baptism with fire, the necessary first steps are to remove (or burn away) everything that inhibits *union with the divine light*, meaning whatever prevents God from working freely through us. In wood, its moisture and individualistic traits are removed first. For us, the first removals have to do with *ego*, or that which we use to establish ourselves as different from or superior to others. This is usually a painful process because it feels like death to our ego. We often must be burned severely by our desire to be different or by other incidents of great suffering before our ego voluntarily lets go. Alternately, we can wait until we die, when our egoic *uniqueness* and false sense of control disappears anyway. St.

⁴¹ *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Keiran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. ICS Publications, Washington, DC, 1991, p. 416.

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John of the Cross refers to this process as a *Dark Night of the Soul*. Perhaps a more apt title would be a dark night of the *Ego*, as it is our *soul*, or that which is eternally connected to the Spirit of God, that drives and encourages this process *for our own good and spiritual growth*. Once the wood has been purged of everything contrary to fire, it is transformed into fire itself. Once we have been purged of everything contrary to God, we are transformed into a likeness of God in human form. This is the rebirthing process modelled by the baptism, wilderness purgation, and subsequent ministry of Jesus. And it is a far cry from what most of us experience from baptism with water.

It is not even the *death* of the ego that is the goal, as the ego, or healthy sense of who we are, is necessary to function competently in earthly life. It is the *demotion* of the ego to its rightful place of subservience instead of its desired place as ruler and monarch. We are uniquely created, yes, but so is everyone else. We are bestowed with individual gifts and talents, yes, but so is everyone else. We display an appearance specific to us, yes, but so does everyone else. Our differences are manifestations of the diversity of God's creation, but we remain equally valued parts in the One life of the One God. Any *glory* due is not ours but God's. All judgements of superior and inferior, good and bad, worthy and worthless are biased and egoic *human* misjudgments and must be burned away before we can take our place as beloved children in the family of God.

John of the Cross continues:

“Once transformed, the wood no longer has any activity...of its own... It possesses the properties and performs the actions of fire: It is dry and it dries; it is hot

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*and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines. It is the fire that produces all these properties in the wood.*⁴²

Consenting to being baptized with fire means we allow our various sufferings to burn away our unhealthy earthly attachments and longings – everything contrary to unity with God. Our activities are no longer solely our own but are aligned with God's. We possess and perform the actions of God on earth: We are fed and we feed; we are healed and we heal; we are loved and we love. Life-energy flows *through* us and on to others. There is no need to cling or hoard since, in God, everything is always available. God's life and ours merge, and our sole purpose becomes inviting others into that divine Oneness.

A Consuming Fire

There are a number of indirect references to *baptism* by fire throughout the Bible, but they can easily be missed if one is not looking for them. Some passages use *fire* literally; others use *fire* metaphorically to describe intense suffering or significant and uncontrollable change or transformation. For example, in Deuteronomy 4:24, God is referred to as a *consuming* fire in the NIV translation or a *devouring* fire in the NRSV translation. Many passages refer to God as *jealous* and demanding of exclusivity. In the previous section I quoted St. John of the Cross illustrating how God *burns away* everything within that stands between us and God by describing how fire transforms wood into itself. The Deuteronomy reference similarly indicates that God

⁴² *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Keiran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. ICS Publications, Washington, DC, 1991, p. 416-7.

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removes or consumes everything that separates us from Oneness with God. Although not specifically referred to as a *baptism*, the reference is to a process that transforms those who seek God into ones who become *God-like*. I suspect this occurs naturally at our physical death, although by conscious intent and surrender we can be drawn towards *God-likeness* while still on earth.

In Matthew 7:19-20, Jesus says “*Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.*” He uses the image of not bearing good fruit to refer to false prophets and others who deceive, as well as to those whose actions cause harm and division. I am certain Jesus’ references to burning *less-than-desirable* fruits by fire has contributed mightily to common (and unbiblical) views of hell as a post-death destination of intense, *fiery* misery and suffering. Given Jesus’ nature to draw everyone and everything to himself, I doubt he intended his words to be understood or applied in that way. Rather, throwing things into the fire is a method of *recycling* or allowing for the *reconstituting* of earthly elements into something more consistent with divine Oneness. Fire does not destroy so much as it transforms. The purpose of suffering (metaphorical fire) is not to destroy us but to *reconstitute* and shape us in ways closer to the image of God.

All of the twelve references to the word translated as *hell* in the New Testament, most of which are in Matthew, are to a place named *Gebenna*. It was the city dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where fires burned the discarded waste. So when Jesus says, “*...it is better to lose one*

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of your members than for your whole body to go into hell,"⁴³ he is not referring to a place of eternal damnation but to a place where that which no longer serves its intended purpose can be *reborn* into something useful.

As a child I loved visiting the city dump just outside the small town where my grandparents lived. People discarded whatever was broken or had outlived its usefulness onto piles which were set on fire, which seemed always to be burning. The fire helped transform the materials back to their most basic elements as it reduced the waste to smoke and ash so something new and useful could arise from those elements. And that is the essence of baptism with fire – that whatever has become corrupted, as occurs with everything of the earth, is made new. Nothing is lost or condemned to an eternal flame but is given the heat required to be deconstructed and reborn.

The foundational story of the Hebrew people, told, retold, and referenced throughout both testaments of the Bible, is the 40-year, transformational journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. *Forty years* refers to a lifetime, or in this case, a life-long process. There is, of course, much difficulty and anguish along the way – a metaphorical baptism and transformation by the fires of suffering to lead them out of where they were and toward where they wished to be.

Throughout the Bible the Israelites are referred to as God's *chosen* or *anointed* people. We assume that *chosenness* refers to a specific race or nation of people. But the life and teachings of Jesus indicate that God's *anointed* are not limited to one race but to everyone who consciously *chooses*

⁴³ Matthew 5:30b

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to go through the uncomfortable journey from slavery (to earthly attachments) to freedom (in the Spirit) by enduring a purifying and often difficult baptism by fire. That is the story of the Israelites; that is the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and that is *our* story when we accept Jesus' offer of baptism with fire. The *chosen* people of God does not so much refer to those whom God has chosen, which would be everyone, but to those who *choose* to follow the path to Oneness with God while still on earth. The *choosing* is done on our part, and God does the rest.

Chapter 4

The Wilderness Way

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.⁴⁴

When I was in my mid-to-late twenties I purchased 10 acres of remote, wooded land and moved a trailer onto it as my home. I had to *tame* the area enough to clear space for a driveway, the trailer, and a few other human necessities, but it remained mostly wild and mysterious. My mom and stepdad described my homestead differently, telling me once, “We like the way you appear to like it here.” And I *did* like it there. I felt a distinct *presence*, a closeness to something greater than myself that I did not feel elsewhere. Actually, *closeness* may not be the most accurate descriptor of how I often felt. *Oneness* and *belonging* describe my most grounded times; *loneliness*, *confusion*, and *fear* at other times. Countless powerful emotions and experiences were granted to me there (unaided by alcohol or drugs), and I now see that time as a significant

⁴⁴ Matthew 4:1

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experience of *transformation*, an *initiation* into and *preparation* for a new chapter in my life. It was a *wilderness* experience.

I remember experiencing a powerful Kansas thunderstorm in my trailer. It was, however, much more than rain pounding on the thin roof, lightning bolts crashing around me, and thunder rattling the walls. What I experienced was the *essence* of the storm – its wild, untamed, domineering heart. I felt its center move by, reverse course, and move again over the feeble tin can I called home as if to make certain I noticed its awareness of me. I was frightened, yes, but I was also humbled and felt spared as it passed me by. I was at the mercy of a powerful, unfamiliar force over which I had no control and could not escape, and to experience it and survive seemed like pure grace.

On the east side of the driveway of our home today is about 40 acres of similarly overgrown, forested *wilderness*. Except for the diverse species of wildlife making a home there, and except for a trail I have cleared into it and wander occasionally, the area is devoid of human visitation or habitation. I find it beautiful and intriguing. I also find it awe-inspiring and more than a little unsettling. Like all wilderness areas, it commands a certain level of respect, reverence, and uncertainty. As soon as I get too comfortable in believing I *know* such a place or that I am in *control* or that I am somehow *superior* to instead of a small part of a greater whole, the spirit of the wilderness reminds me it is not so.

The author of the book of Proverbs wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...”⁴⁵ I doubt

⁴⁵ Proverbs 1:7

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the author meant *fear* in the same sense we do today, as in being *afraid* of the Lord. Rather, this *fear* refers to an orientation of *respect* and *humility* – the experience of being a part of or a witness to something unfathomably beyond yet inclusive of our singular selves. When we believe we know something or someone well, our desire to continue learning wanes. In truth, the more we truly know about something, the less we understand because getting a sense of the vastness of anything humbles us and raises more questions than it answers. No, the *fear of the Lord* this author refers to is more like the experience of standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. It makes us feel ridiculously small yet intimately connected at the same time. We get comfortable or too casual at our own peril. Such experiences invoke a *holy reverence* in us, and the appropriate response is one of silence, awe, and speechlessness. And *that* is the essence of an experience of *wilderness*. The *knowledge* gained from this sort of *fear of the Lord* is not intellectual knowing but one of *entering into* a Divine mystery.

A dictionary definition of *wilderness* might be “a wild and uncultivated region,” using terms like *uninhabited*, *desolate*, and *barren*. Wilderness usually refers to a heavily forested or a desert area. But a *wilderness* need not be a physical location. We are equally lost when finding ourselves in an *emotional*, *social*, or a *spiritual* wilderness where everything is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and threatening to our status quo. Raising children, caring for a loved one, losing someone close to us, receiving a frightening diagnosis – all are wilderness experiences. And the wilderness experiences recorded in the Bible remind us we are not alone in our times of difficulty, suffering, and

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generally feeling out of control of our circumstances. A wilderness experience is not a destination or a final resting place but a necessary and temporary phase in our journey of spiritual growth and maturity. It was for the Israelites; it was for Jesus; and it is for us. When we recognize our involuntary challenges as such it can help give meaning and purpose to our difficulties.

Wilderness Experiences

In most biblical depictions, the *wilderness* is not a place one goes except when forced to do so. During the *40 years* the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, things got so bad they begged to return to their former lives as slaves in Egypt. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness led to severe hunger and seductive temptations by the devil when Jesus was at his weakest. The Bible describes the *wilderness* as a place of extended discomfort, alienation, and instability. And yet, the wording used to describe Jesus' time in the wilderness following his baptism is revealing. It says Jesus was *led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*. Why would the Spirit, presumably the Spirit of God, intentionally *lead* someone into the wilderness? After all, the prayer Jesus taught his disciples contains the plea, "*Lead us not into temptation...*"⁴⁶ The stark realities of real-life wilderness occurrences and experiences often seem to betray belief in a God who loves us. It did for the Israelites; it did for Jesus; it does for us.

If we believe a loving God would *intentionally* lead us into or even allow wilderness-types of suffering, there must be good reasons that elude us. I suspect the reasons

⁴⁶ Matthew 6:13

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have more to do with our insistence on comfort and our resistance to change than with any desire on God's part to watch us suffer. Consistent with all religious understandings, we easily fall prey to the seductive pull of earthly pleasures, all of which end in decay and death. And one way out of that loop, sometimes the only way, is through forced removal. Death, of course, is the ultimate *remover-in-chief*, but we can learn to enjoy the earth's pleasures without becoming attached to them *as they are today* long before we die.

Essentially all of our suffering results from our over-attachment to that which has no permanence. When we are overly attached to good health, we feel betrayed as our bodies naturally decay from age and use, as all things of the earth must do. When we are overly attached to a long-term, loving relationship, we suffer mightily when the relationship ends by the death of a partner or some other apparent betrayal. The core nature of life on earth is ongoing change and evolution, and if we do not accept the reality of constant change in everything we value, stubbornly holding to an *impossible-to-maintain* status quo, we set ourselves up for entering a wilderness experience. It is not a lack of love on God's part that leads us to suffering, but a lack of understanding and acceptance on our part of the nature of the reality in which we live. Arguably, suffering is our most effective teacher because we often refuse to change until it becomes too painful *not* to change. And the *wilderness* is one of life's most effective tools for prying our clingy hands off our comfortable status quo, allowing us to grow, change, mature, and awaken to a greater life experience.

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My first serious wilderness experience occurred with the sudden death of my father when I was 14. That event toppled everything I thought I understood about life and God, leaving me feeling alone, frightened, confused, and abandoned. I could not see how I or my mom and siblings could survive without dad. But we did. Does that mean dad was not as important a part of my life as I once thought? Of course not. Dad has been (physically) gone for decades, but he remains an inseparable part of everything I do and am. He is as much a part of my life story today as he was before he died. I could not move forward with my life at the time, however, until I released my attachment to his physical presence. The wilderness helped me do that by forcing me to live without what I thought I needed. It opened space for a greater understanding of who I am, what I need, and revealed new possible trajectories for my life.

Yes, Jesus was intentionally *led* into the wilderness by the Spirit of God, inviting him to release his attachment to and identification with being a craftsman and a citizen of Nazareth, following in his father's footsteps as most young men of that time did. In return he gained a new vision for life on earth and was able to model for us what it is to be God in human form. It doesn't mean he was a poor craftsman, only that there were other possible futures for him that served a greater swath of humanity than his previous life could do. His wilderness experience purged that which would not serve him well in a new role and prepared him for a different path. And wilderness experiences do that for us too, if we recognize them as such and allow them to transform us.

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Wilderness and the Devil

To be *intentionally* led by the Spirit into an experience of wilderness is one thing, since there must be value in going through times of chaos, suffering, and feeling out of control for reasons that make no logical sense to us at the time. To be led into that experience for the purpose of being *tempted* by the *devil*, as is recorded of what happened to Jesus, is yet another level of testing. The first experience is one we must endure; the second requires us to respond. A large part of our aversion to such experiences is our mistaken belief that anything to do with the *devil* or with *temptation* is bad and could never lead to anything good. Most of us, from our earliest days, are taught to equate the *devil* and *temptation* with evil, destruction, and something to be avoided at all costs. And with good reason. There *are* evil forces at play in the world that intend harm to us and others for unhealthy egoic or misguided purposes. We need to be protected from such evil intentions at least until we are able to discern the underlying reality of that which is tempting us.

The term *devil* is used to refer to an interesting mix of traits, including mischievous, wicked, disruptive, cruel, and clever. It's companion title, *Satan*, means a deceiver or a purveyor of lies. What the titles share in common is a dealing in *untruths* or *partial truths*. In other words, encounters with a devil or with temptation are likely to challenge the truths we hold in significant ways – either through fear, twisted logic, or deception. For example, if we believe God is love *and* that love will never cause unpleasantness, then we are forced to question those beliefs whenever we suffer. Is God angry with me? Did I do something wrong? Why would anyone intentionally

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cause this discomfort to me? We must reexamine our relationship to God and others, God's action (or lack thereof) in our lives, what is and is not love, and the very nature of suffering itself, i.e., is it always something to be avoided?

If we are not well-grounded in an open-minded and trusting faith about God and God's loving care for us, then anything of the *devil* or *temptation* will necessarily lead to suffering because we see it as *outside* of God's love for us. Alternatively, when we believe nothing occurs outside of God's purview, then we understand that the life-experiences that include suffering are limited in how much damage they can do to us and for how long before ultimately resulting in needed growth and maturation. If God is truly a loving God, then we will go through periods of suffering – wilderness experiences – *not* because God enjoys watching us squirm but because we stubbornly resist that which leads us out of a comfortable status quo that no longer serves us in order to experience life at a higher, more unified level.

Evil is initiated and perpetuated by those who project their own internal struggles out onto the world around them. They are *striking back* at those they mistakenly believe to be the cause of their pain and suffering. They need understanding and healing, not scorn, although we often need to use caution around them for our own wellbeing. They need to be taught that their wilderness experience is to be embraced and learned from, not resisted by demonizing and punishing those around them. Behaviors that blame others only serve to keep us in the wilderness. Once we are able to discern where our actions and those of others are likely to lead, we gain the ability to

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transform the evil and isolating forces at play into forces that unite and heal. Until then we are only powerless victims who react in ways that perpetuate the evil.

The invitation, then, is not to resist or resent the wilderness—whether it shows up in the form of loss, uncertainty, or the unraveling of our most cherished routines—but to enter into it with open hands and a willingness to be reshaped. It is in these liminal spaces, where the old maps no longer lead us anywhere worthwhile and the familiar markers of identity fade into the background, that we discover the raw potential for renewal. The wilderness is not merely a landscape of absence or deprivation; it is the crucible where illusions are stripped away and deeper truths are revealed. In surrendering to its wildness, we are offered the chance to uncover an identity not rooted in what we possess or accomplish or what others think of us, but in our belonging to the One who holds all things together. Such a journey may unsettle us for a time, but in the unsettling, we make room for a more genuine connection – with God, with others, and with the truest parts of ourselves. The wilderness is not the end, but the threshold of awakening, and it is there that the seeds of transformation, once dormant, begin to sprout.

As followers of Jesus the Christ, the *wilderness way* calls to us – inviting us into a world of uncertainty, change, and shifting understandings. It requires faith and trust that we are guided and protected by hands more capable than our own. When we seek Oneness with God, we will not be allowed to stand still for long or to get too comfortable. God’s creation and God’s nature are always changing in their specifics, even though they may be unchanging at

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their source. Where we get confused is in identifying with and attaching to the malleable specifics of our lives instead of anchoring ourselves to the unchanging foundation from which the specifics rise and fall. It is in God that we *live and move and have our being*,⁴⁷ and nothing can happen to us outside of that protective reality.

Ultimately, it is not the *evil* or *destructive* experiences that determine our spiritual trajectory. That trajectory is determined by the context in which we place those experiences and how we choose to respond.

Wilderness and Transformation

The wilderness way, more than anything else, is about transformation – *our* transformation as opposed to the transformation of circumstances or someone else. The only thing worse than going through a challenging period in our lives is to come out of it the same as we were before entering. I take that back. It worse is to come out of the wilderness having lost something that was important to us and spending our days bitterly trying to relive a past reality instead of embracing a new one. The saying “Never waste a good crisis,” is often attributed to Winston Churchill. We suffer because something is wrong – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. If we only endure the suffering until it abates, never attempting to place it in a larger context, we do nothing to address the cause of the suffering and it will return – often with a vengeance. What is needed is transformation, a letting go of the old and allowing the new to emerge. No matter how distasteful the new reality may have seemed earlier in our lives. We cannot

⁴⁷ Acts 17:28

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change the circumstances of our past, but we can change how those circumstances affect us today. It is not a matter of lying to ourselves about what has changed but becoming consciously aware of the possibilities our present circumstances are opening before us and trusting that *all things work together for good*.⁴⁸

Jesus did not come out of his 40 days in the wilderness unchanged. His post-wilderness life was entirely different. Although little is written about his pre-baptism days, he presumably followed in his father's profession as a craftsman, as most young men of that era and area did. Following his wilderness experience, Jesus dedicated the rest of his life to modeling what it means to be a child of God. Our path, after a wilderness experience, is *supposed* to be different and tailored to better utilize our specific gifts and circumstances. When we allow the experience to change us, we are able to display more of the image of God from which we were created.

Jesus went through another wilderness experience that is recorded in the gospels – his crucifixion and resurrection. And he did not return after his crucifixion unchanged either. It is easy to overlook the recorded incidents of his closest friends failing to recognize him, or how he could walk through locked doors or seemingly travel through time and space in ways impossible for mortal beings. He was unrecognizable until he spoke their names or acted in ways that specifically recalled something he had done or said for them before his crucifixion. His essence did not change, but his familiar expression of that essence did. And so it should be for us as we exit a

⁴⁸ Romans 8:28

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wilderness experience – that we would come out changed for the better in one or more significant ways. Otherwise, we have simply *wasted a good crisis*.

A Lenten Wilderness

As I write this, it is the first week of Lent, a season which is an invitation to transformation. An invitation to intentionally take the first step onto the wilderness way of following Jesus. One traditional rite of Lent is to give something up – to make an intentional sacrifice of something meaningful to us in order to refocus on what is or should be truly meaningful in our life. When we successfully go through the 40 days of Lent without something that was a regular part of our pre-Lent days, we open space for something new to enter. Newness accompanies transformation. If, in our post-Lent days, we simply return to the way we lived in our pre-Lent days, whatever sacrifices we made and the accompanying suffering were for naught.

The practice of *giving up* something for Lent is one way to invite a transformation in ourselves by upsetting our status quo long enough for something new to enter and take hold. The use of the number 40 in the Bible should not be understood literally, as in 40 *actual* years or 40 *actual* days. Rather, 40 means a *long time*. And that is what is required for transformation. It takes a long time for us to incorporate new ways for God's goodness and care to manifest in and from our lives. It takes time for us to cede some of the control we think we have over the life we think we are living as we consciously surrender more of our life-experience to God. Ultimately it is about weaning the ego – our false sense of being separate from others – away from

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its natural inclination towards distinguishing itself as superior to or dominant over others. Yes, we are special in unique ways, but so is everyone else. What is needed for spiritual maturation is to allow our unique expression to be woven into a larger tapestry where we no longer *stand out* as individuals but *fit in* as unique *and* important *and* inseparable parts of the universal body of Christ. Otherwise, we will remain small, isolated, and unnecessarily limited in how God can work through us. And the wilderness way may be the only path out.

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Chapter 5

A Divine Awakening

*Our awareness is everything; our waking up is everything. We need to move from the superficial or “outer self” to the true self or “inner self.”*⁴⁹

When I consider what it means to *crucify* Christianity in order to *resurrect* the Way of Jesus, it is easy and natural to think the process would change something *out there* – meaning somewhere outside of me, like in the church or the church leadership. It is easy to support change, even dramatic change, when that change applies to others. I confess to quietly but smugly celebrating when what seemed a long-overdue disruption was forced upon someone I dislike. Like many of us, I want to see the *bad* people get what they deserve. The problem is that my definition of *bad people* is subjective and personal; the reality is we *all* get what we deserve eventually, as determined by powers greater than ours. That is the law of reaping what we sow, as taught by Jesus and others, or in other cultures,

⁴⁹ Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation, Breakthrough*, 1995, pp. 1-3.

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the law of *karma*. We may create our own realities and life experiences, but the time that passes between a cause, or an action, and its effect, or reaction, usually obscures the connection between the two. In addition, our life-experiences are the product of a complex web of effects resulting from many different causes over differing timelines. As such, resurrecting of the Way of Jesus begins within: with *my* attitudes, awarenesses, and behaviors.

The Christianity that needs crucifying is *not* that of a particular church, denomination, or religious belief system. What needs crucifixion is *our interpretation and application* of what it means to be a Christian. And our interpretation and application of what it means to be a Christian is the product of a tangled web of teachings and misunderstandings from our past. Few, if any, churches focus on leading people to a more Christ-like life, perhaps because they've lost sight of what that even means. Too often, the church bureaucracy and its organizational needs becomes the primary focus of its activities.

Following Jesus can lead to life changes that can be off-putting, difficult, and counter to the non-church-related aspects of our lives. Conflicts arise as we separate church-life from real-life, pitting one against the other instead of merging them as one. Such a merger becomes easier as we remember that Jesus brought a new *way of life*, not a new religion. Jesus did not start Christianity. Rather, the Christianity of today is laden with increasingly irrelevant structures and organizations, including its buildings and bureaucracy. Church efforts to put and keep *butts in seats* undermine Jesus' model of loving and serving others, which requires a significant internal change for most of us. Too much of Christian teaching today focuses

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on controlling individual behavior and scaring congregations into submission with the threat of spending eternity in hell – none of which was taught by Jesus. He didn't tell us to go to church; he told us to feed the hungry.

The early followers of Jesus – his surviving disciples and students – attempted to continue learning from, sharing, and trying to live his teachings in small groups and house churches, calling themselves the *Way*. There was no formal organizational structure and no separate buildings. For many years after Jesus' crucifixion, followers even met in Jewish synagogues. And they were usually not considered a threat to the Jews because they were not trying to start a new religion, but to apply the teachings of Jesus to their Jewish lives. There should be no conflict between following the life and teachings of Jesus and being a Jew or a Hindu or a Buddhist or even an agnostic or atheist.

We don't need to change our religion, or even claim one, to become a follower of Jesus. The changes required are internal. To the extent we claim a religion, we will almost certainly deconstruct many of our religious beliefs anyway. What changes is our inner awareness of and approach to life. We gradually *awaken* to the presence of the Spirit of God within everyone and everything in creation. That is the *divine awakening*. Noted priest, author, and theologian, Matthew Fox, in one of his commentaries⁴⁸ about the writings of priest and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), wrote of this need to shift our awareness away from our “*outer self*” to our “*inner self*” – from the world *out there* to the world within. Priest and contemplative author, Richard Rohr, writes, “*Christianity...is not about attendance at religious services, proper*

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*group-defining rituals, or priestly performances.*⁵⁰ In order to *know* God we must *experience* God, and few churches can lead us to such an experience. Most churches teach *about* God, which is an intellectual exercise. *Experiencing* God is an exercise of the heart and a completely different type of encounter. The former leads to knowledge; the latter leads to transformation.

Sleepwaking Through Life

The typical daily conscious awareness for most of us is an amalgam of memories and regrets from the past intertwined with plans, hopes, and fears for and about the future. Our minds, for whatever reason, seem naturally to wander into the past or future and pay little attention to what is present with us right here, right now. Since we can only attend to limited amounts of information at a time, the more we dwell in the past or the future, the less we are able to focus on the present. It is as if we *sleepwalk* through our days, *daydreaming* of past experiences and future possibilities, as we miss out on our only opportunities to live in, act upon, and grow into our lives and surroundings. Contemplative author, Richard Rohr, writes, “*Most people think they are their thinking; they don’t have a clue who they are apart from their thoughts.*”⁵¹ We cannot discover more about who we actually *are* when our attention is focused on who we imagine having once been or who we imagine we might become. Realizing that everything from our past and all future possibilities already exist within our being in this

⁵⁰ Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things*, Convergent Books, 2025, p. 68.

⁵¹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, March 24, 2025.

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present moment is a key turning point in our divine awakening. Ultimately, *this* moment reveals our core identity.

To the extent we are sleepwalking through our days, we must first *wake up* in order to grow closer to God and closer to who we are at our essence (which ends up being the same growth target). Until then, we habitually and predictably react to the events of our days and nothing in our inner life changes. We find ourselves stuck in a whirlpool of sameness as the days granted to us on earth steadily pass away.

This happens in our church lives, too. We listen to the same (or similar) interpretations of the same (or similar) scriptures; we repeat the same (or similar) prayers; we recite the same creeds and statements of faith; we sing the same songs; we sit in the same seats at services near the same people. There is so much habitual sameness in our lives that we may pass hours, days, and years *in our sleep!* And some assume that is a good thing. Don't get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with the scriptures, prayers, creeds, songs, or people at worship except that they are all *out there*. Meaningful transformation can only occur within. What is needed is a new, deeper, and more focused awareness *in this moment* of the scriptures, prayers, creeds, songs, and people. If we do not hear or experience them in new ways, if we assume there is only one unchanging meaning to and interpretation of the elements of our religious beliefs, if we do not allow the life-energy around us to change us, we will never awaken to our true self or live the life intended for us.

Waking up involves a change in our inner orientation to our daily experiences. Instead of walking

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past a stone that catches our eye or hurriedly reading beyond a passage that tugs at us or ignoring an intuition about a friend – instead of treating God’s subtle attempts to capture our attention by treating unusual events as inconsequential distractions or barriers to moving through our days as we have always done, we will eventually die in our sleep.

Waking up requires breaking our habitual and unconscious movement toward sameness and intentionally exploring deeply whatever is present with us in the moment. God only speaks *in the moment*. And God’s is a *still, small* voice that is easily drowned out by a noisy world. Of course, it is easier and more comfortable to ignore God’s communications because they always urge us to behave differently. They encourage us to awaken from the drunken stupor of our habitual ways. It is far easier to cling to our status quo and pretend not to hear God calling us to repent (change). Everything in God’s creation is forever changing and evolving, discarding the old and stale, embracing the new and fresh. Change is the inherent nature of creation, and it is our nature, too, regardless of our age or status in the world.

As I write this, *spring* is emerging with a vengeance, visual evidence of transformation in my own backyard! It is my conscious choice whether I perceive these living beings as the same-old grasses, trees, bushes, and flowers leafing out again or whether I celebrate the *present moment* versions of grasses, trees, bushes, and flowers as they are reborn and remade anew as expressions of God on earth. My area of the earth is waking up and embracing the new day, and so must I.

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Problems and Mysteries

An important aspect to *waking up* is distinguishing between a *problem* and a *mystery*, which is related to perceiving whether something is *inside* or *outside* of our being. We are trained to deal with problems. When we are hungry, we eat. When we are thirsty, we drink. When we are cold, we put on a jacket. We identify the source of the problem so it can be addressed, adjusted, fixed, or otherwise disposed of, at least temporarily.

Learning what to do when face-to-face with a *mystery* is not a subject our educational systems address well, if at all. And for good reason. Problems usually have solutions, once analyzed and understood properly. The moment we try to solve a mystery, however, a whole lot of problems spin off that draw our conscious attention away from the mystery we were attempting to engage in the first place. Most mysteries, by definition, cannot be solved. Treating mysteries as problems will distract our attention away from them. Hunger, thirst, homelessness, and oppression are common problems that can be solved or at least lessened in their intensity. Life, death, love, and joy are timeless mysteries to be engaged and explored, not for answers or solutions but because the experience of engaging with them enhances our existence. If we find a mystery we can solve, it isn't a mystery – it's a problem.

Contemplative author James Finley says, “*A problem is an inquiry...which the self apprehends in an exterior way...A mystery, on the other hand, is a question which...cannot be regarded as detached from the self.*”⁵² A problem is *out there*; a

⁵² James Finley, teaching about Gabriel Marsel, *Turning to the Mystics* podcast, March 24, 2025.

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mystery is *in here*. Mysteries and problems are different conundrums requiring different approaches on our part.

One result of having a divine awakening is a shift in our focus away from attending to all but our most relevant problems in order to create space for exploring the innermost mysteries of our existence. Our problems are temporal, limited in nature, and tend to return in different clothing; life's mysteries are infinite and eternal. If we allow ourselves to become consumed with problem-solving, we will never find time to engage with mystery. Problems are seductive because as we solve them we feel useful and productive. Mysteries open onto wider and wider vistas of uncertainty. They make us feel dumb if we try to solve them the way we solve problems.

So why engage with mystery at all? For one, God is mystery. Second, our problems end with our earthly lives, but mystery endures. Finally, at some point in life, we may realize we are caught in a never-ending cycle of problem-solving that does nothing but create new problems. And that realization is the beginning of a divine awakening.

A divine awakening is a gateway into a life larger, more beautiful, and more mysterious than any we could otherwise imagine. Our educational system, at least in the West, operates as if the intellect is our most powerful resource for living a better life. But intellect is of little use with mystery. Even our churches have largely devolved into centers of intellectual learning *about* God instead of guiding us toward holistic experiences *of* God. A divine awakening reveals that our intellect is actually the most limited and limiting of our abilities to know and learn. We have powers of sight that perceive beyond the reach of our physical eyes. We have hearing capabilities outside of the

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auditory spectrum. And we have emotions and intuitions that cue us to action well before our intellect realizes anything is amiss. In recent centuries we have wrongly considered intellectual knowing as the apex of wisdom when it is actually the sleeping pill that keeps our broader senses of knowing in a deep slumber.

As we consider *crucifying* Christianity and some of our unconsciously accepted religious beliefs, we remember that Jesus' existence did not end with his crucifixion. He was resurrected. He began again. He entered a new state of being. So *crucifying Christianity* does not mean killing off the Christian church and its belief systems. It means restarting it, rebirthing it, allowing it to rise from its ashes and rebuilding from the roots of the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. And just as the risen Christ was mostly unrecognizable to his closest pre-crucifixion followers, so will the reborn church and its belief systems and practices appear foreign to many when compared to Christian churches today. The transformation, however, begins within us.

While we cannot change the external events of our past, we can change our internal responses and the ongoing impacts of those events as we turn our conscious attention away from our "outer self" and towards our "inner self." It is all part of a divine awakening.

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Chapter 6

The Kingdom of God

*...strive first for the kingdom of God and (its) righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*⁵³

The *kingdom of God* and the *kingdom of heaven* are concepts Jesus spoke of frequently. It seems Jesus essentially used the terms *God* and *heaven* in this “kingdom” context synonymously, and so will I. When Jesus was being tried by Pilate, he said, “My kingdom is not from this world”.⁵⁴ He was expressing as clearly as words can convey that our lives exist within a much larger context than most of us perceive or imagine. We usually consider our *world* as the reality we label as *outside* of ourselves – other people, trees, stars, weather, and so on. The *kingdom* Jesus refers to and invites us into includes that which is infinitely external to us but also exists infinitely *within* us.

Our being can be considered a cross-roads of sorts, where the meeting point of external and internal realms intersect. In religious/spiritual terms, *internal*, *within*, and *above* are used interchangeably, as are *external* and *below*. This

⁵³ Matthew 6:33

⁵⁴ John 18:36

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is where our imagery of *heaven* being *above* and *hell* *below* originated, although few of us believe heaven and hell to actually be places located somewhere above (in the sky) or below (underground) us. In addition, we tend (wrongly) to consider the external world as *real*, *physical*, or *material*, and the internal world as *spiritual*, *intangible*, or even *imaginary*. In the context of problems and mysteries from the previous chapter, problems are external while mysteries are internal, but both are seamlessly interconnected. When Jesus told Pilate his kingdom is not from this world, he was saying his kingdom is accessed internally and not externally. Pilate and others, being externally focused, had no idea what he was talking about. Many of us have the same problem today.

That Jesus' *kingdom* is accessed via the internal realm does not mean it is less real or impactful. In fact, it is more so because the kingdom of God is the *source* of all seemingly external, earthly kingdoms, too. There is only a distinction between internal and external because we try to understand the internal realm with our external concepts. The external realm is visibly obvious to everyone, but the existence of an internal realm seems nonsensical to many.

In truth, there is only one reality. The external world reflects the internal, and so the kingdoms of the earth are partial and imperfect reflections of the kingdom of God. Arguably, one of the most effective ways to learn about our personal inner life is to carefully examine the nature of the life unfolding external to us. If conflict seems always present in those around us, it is reflective of an inner conflict within us. If those around us seem perpetually impatient, it is a reflection of our own impatience with some part of our inner nature. The things that bother us

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most in the world we perceive as external to ourselves point directly to that which is most in need of attention and healing within us. The inner condition is perfectly reflected by the outer. When we react against an outer frustration, such as yelling at our life-partner for a perceived shortcoming, our frustration is actually an internal one we project onto someone external to ourselves. It is one way of avoiding facing our own shortcomings – by blaming others. Unfortunately, we will continue projecting our shortcomings onto others until we acknowledge, accept, and engage them.

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God he did so using parables and analogies because there is no direct language that accurately or clearly expresses inner realities – they cannot be spoken, only experienced. The kingdom of God is not a place or a thing. It is a state of being, a conscious awareness deeper and more comprehensive than our shallow, externally-focused awareness. When Jesus instructed his followers to first seek the kingdom of God, as in Matthew 6:33, he was both acknowledging that our natural inclination is to seek for what we lack or desire in the external world, and at the same time proclaiming we will not find what we seek there. To access or enter the kingdom of God requires exploring the realm of the Spirit, which is accessed within and not without. It requires sorting through those parts of ourselves we are reluctant to acknowledge, expose, or heal because those are the traits that open the gates of the kingdom of heaven for us. It is an inner journey that does not require the death of our earthly body to reveal its otherwise hidden treasures.

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The kingdom of God/heaven is all around us, all of the time. It is not so much that we cannot *see* it but that *we do not know how to find it*. Jesus provided many hints, but language and intellect only talk *around* the internal reality, acting at best like a *finger pointing at the moon*.

Kingdom Conundrums

One of the foundational teachings of today's Christianity that most needs to be crucified is the notion of *heaven* as a place we might go when our earthly life is finished. I am not suggesting that a loving and lovely existence may not await as an after-death reality, but when Jesus spoke of the *kingdom of heaven* he was referring to a *present-day, here-and-now* reality as opposed to some future possibility. To the extent we treat heaven as a distant, future destination, as most churches proclaim, to that same extent do we miss the point of the life and teachings of Jesus. Following Jesus is not *after-life* insurance, as if regular church attendance provides our ticket into a heavenly hereafter. That concept might be good for church attendance, but it is terrible theology. Rather, Jesus modeled a transformed way of living in the *here and now*, for the purpose of making *today* better for us and others. The *after-this-life* was rarely a topic of his, nor is it for the Bible as a whole. People in biblical times seemed to accept, as we cannot, that whatever awaited after this life would be a continuation of this life. Whatever it was could be experienced and trusted.⁵⁵ Realizing this helps us understand that focusing on how we can make today better for everyone is more important than

⁵⁵ See my book, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, www.ContemplatingGrace.com, 2021.

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worrying about what may or may not happen tomorrow for ourselves.

The concepts of the *kingdom of heaven* and *eternity* for Jesus and other wisdom spiritualists are not about a future in space or time but about the *now* in the *present moment*. As we learn to be fully and consciously present to the moments of our lives we realize we stand at a crossroads where past and future intersect. Those moments of conscious awareness contain within them everything that has happened and everything that will happen all in the same instant – and *that is eternity*. Eternity does not occur in sequential time as we erroneously conceive but *is* contained within the present moment. Like the *kingdom of heaven* Jesus referred to, eternity is not something we wait for but something we enter into.

Jesus frequently described the *kingdom* as being *near* and *at hand*.⁵⁶ The eternal *nearness* of the kingdom is a reality because it is not a *place* anywhere other than where we are, nor does it exist in a time other than now. Fourteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart, explains that “...the kingdom is here when we are awake enough to see it” and that “...the coming of the kingdom“ depends upon our consciousness.⁵⁷ Once our conscious awareness is properly focused, the kingdom of God becomes apparent wherever we happen to be, whenever we happen to be there. *We carry the kingdom with us* because it is anywhere and everywhere, but its sole entrance is within us.

⁵⁶ See Matthew 4:17, 10:7,12 ;28; Mark 1:15, 12:34; Luke 6:20, 9:27, 10:9, 11:20, 17:21, 21:31.

⁵⁷ Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation*, Inner Traditions Publishing, 1980, p. 142.

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Another way to consider the nearness of God's kingdom is as a body of water in which we, like a fish, exist. We move, live, and have our being *in* it whether we are aware of it or not. We cannot understand the terms *kingdom*, *heaven*, *eternity*, or even *God*, at least as Jesus used them, by considering them in the same way we consider things of the earth that we only perceive as external to or separate from us. What Jesus referred to when using such language exists in what seems a parallel universe or another dimension because it exists all around us but is completely obscured until we develop the *eyes* to see it.

We can neither draw upon nor experience the power, protection, or perfection of the kingdom of God until we become consciously aware of it. And we cannot become consciously aware of it when we believe it only to be an after-death destination, as many churches teach. In doing so, they keep us blind to both the teachings of Jesus and the nature of God, even if with the best of intentions. No teacher who has yet to experience the kingdom in this way can lead another to it.

Jesus tells us that if we seek God's kingdom *first*, all things will be given us as well. Having all things *given* to us, however, does not mean we solely possess them or can do with them whatever we want. It means we can *draw upon* all things because they are part of the same kingdom to which we are a part. As equal and inseparable parts of a single Oneness, the experience of any part becomes the experience of all other parts.

Kingdom Hints

The kingdom of heaven is a confusing concept because it sounds like a place a whole lot different than where we are

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now, yet Jesus says it is very near. I was taught that it was *paradise* and there would be no sickness, sorrow, or tears there. We would be reunited with dead loved ones, and our earthly cares and concerns would be gone forever. And while that may or may not be true, I doubt it is true in the way we imagine from this side of the grave. When we look carefully at what Jesus said about God's kingdom, it doesn't appear to remove us from earthly realities like suffering, separation, and temptation, but it does transform our experience of them. What is different in this kingdom is not *what* we experience as our external reality in this life. What changes is our internal awareness of and perspective about those experiences. We are granted a greater understanding of why some of what happens here happens, and we are better able to perceive how much we are loved, cared for, and included. In order to better grasp what Jesus is talking about when he refers to the *kingdom*, it is helpful to let go of our notions of it as a physical location in space and time, at least as we understand and experience physical locations now.

We receive strong hints that the kingdom of God is unlike any earthly kingdom by the many seemingly obscure references Jesus makes to it. For example, he says that the kingdom does not come in things that can be observed.⁵⁸ Entering the kingdom requires being born anew, but not in the way we were birthed by our mothers.⁵⁹ He claimed there were people alive in his day, and presumably ours too, that would not taste death before

⁵⁸ Luke 17:20

⁵⁹ John 3:3

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seeing the kingdom.⁶⁰ He accused the religious leaders of his day of locking people out of the kingdom because of their misleading and misguided teachings.⁶¹

An early reference by Jesus to the kingdom is this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁶² A similar teaching from the gospel of Luke is, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”⁶³ One way to understand *poor* in this context is *unencumbered by* or *free from* earth-bound attachments and worries that make us slaves to that which has no permanence, like material possessions, social status, and youthful appearance. What typically enslaves and encumbers us on earth are not usually physical chains or prison cells but are things like debt, regrets, worries, broken relationships, emotional scars, and loneliness. Being *poor* of such unnecessary baggage is freeing and necessary for entering more deeply into our moments where the kingdom may be experienced. The suffering from that sort of encumbering *wealth* is always self-inflicted, meaning that while the types of events that can lead to those reactions happen to all of us, it is our choice whether we allow them to enslave us.

In contrast to the necessity of being *poor* to enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus also comments on how difficult it is for a *rich* person to enter the kingdom. He calls out those whose earthly encumbrances dominate their conscious attention to such an extent that they cannot attend to internal, spiritual matters. He illustrates this

⁶⁰ Luke 9:27

⁶¹ Matthew 23:13

⁶² Matthew 5:3

⁶³ Luke 6:20

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difficulty by saying it is easier for a camel to go through the *eye of a needle*, a small opening in a city wall for sheep to enter and exit, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom.⁶⁴ In different gospel accounts he tells stories of a certain ruler⁶⁵ and a rich young man⁶⁶ who claimed to follow the commandments and the law to the letter as they asked what else must be done to enter the kingdom. Jesus told them to sell all their possessions (riches) and give the money to the poor, seemingly a bridge too far for both. Jesus said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁶⁷

Although possessing wealth itself is not necessarily condemned, allowing our conscious attention to be dominated by accumulating, maintaining, and over-valuing material wealth is clearly a practice that blocks our experience of Jesus’ kingdom. In truth, *our* wealth does not belong to us anyway. It belongs to God, and we, as its stewards, are responsible for its wise use in service to others and not in service to additional wealth or for our own comfort or security at the expense of others. Wealth shared with those in need is a great asset to the kingdom. Wealth hoarded is an impediment.

More Hints

One of the better-known references to the kingdom of God occurs in what we call the Lord’s Prayer: “...Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in

⁶⁴ Matthew 19:23; Luke 18:25

⁶⁵ Luke 18:18-25

⁶⁶ Matthew 19:16-22

⁶⁷ Luke 18:24

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heaven.”⁶⁸ It is as if there needs to be a reuniting of heaven and earth, and that is what brings the kingdom of God to fruition. And God wills that such reunification needs to occur. That reunification, however, occurs within our collective conscious awareness because in truth, there is not nor has there ever been a separation between heaven and earth except in our misinformed perception. The kingdom of heaven is and always has been near, but we have chosen to attend almost exclusively to the physical realm while ignoring the spiritual foundation that underlies and animates it. As such, the kingdom of God is always available when we open ourselves to it – something no one else can do for us.

Continuing Jesus’ analogies about the kingdom, he often described the kingdom as a *magnifier*, or as an energy that would *transform* ordinary things into spectacular things. For example, he compared the kingdom to a mustard seed, calling it the smallest of all seeds that grows into the largest of shrubs and provides shelter for other life forms.⁶⁹ In a similar way he compared the kingdom to yeast added to flour causing bread to leaven or expand.⁷⁰ With these examples he indicated that the addition of the kingdom’s power allows a latent potential to emerge that otherwise would not manifest.

In other analogies, he compared the kingdom to something of such tremendous value that everything else falls to insignificance. In Matthew he says the kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field and, upon discovery, causes

⁶⁸ Matthew 6:10

⁶⁹ Matthew 13:31; Luke 13:18

⁷⁰ Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20

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a person to sell everything they own to buy the field.⁷¹ In the next verse he says it is like a merchant of fine pearls who comes across a pearl of such value that he sells everything he has to purchase that single pearl.⁷² These parables reveal that an experience of the kingdom of God makes what had once been the focus of one's life fall by the wayside. It consumes our conscious attention and forces us to reevaluate what we treasure.

Jesus further says that experiencing the kingdom requires a *childlike* approach. In Matthew's recording of his words, "Truly I tell you, unless you change (transform) and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁷³ At one stop on his travels his disciples tried to keep children from approaching him. He said, "...let the little children come to me...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."⁷⁴ In Luke's account he is a little more blunt: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."⁷⁵

A final analogy I find interesting, and one that is often ignored, at least in part, is that the kingdom of heaven is like a *great dinner*.⁷⁶ It is like a lavish party with much joy and celebration. Jesus illustrates this by telling of a person who prepared a lavish dinner party and invited many to it, but all of the initially invited guests made excuses why they would not be able to attend. As a result, the person sent

⁷¹ Matthew 13:44

⁷² Matthew 13:45

⁷³ Matthew 18:3, also see Luke 18:17

⁷⁴ Matthew 19:14, also see Luke 18:16

⁷⁵ Luke 18:17

⁷⁶ Luke 14:16-24

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invitations into the streets for *the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*. Once they came he noticed there was still room at the table, so the host invited everyone in the vicinity so his house would be full. That everyone who wished to attend be invited was more important than the status of those attending.

The invitation to enter the kingdom is extended to everyone, but not everyone chooses to enter. We are given a measure of free will about these decisions. The not-so-subtle message Jesus sent with this last parable was that many of those whom one might assume would either enter God's kingdom or already be a part of it decided not to enter. He was likely referring to the religious leaders of his day – those who should have been leading others into the kingdom. He contrasted the false piety, arrogance, and entitlement of the elite with the humility of the poor and marginalized members of society. We make many choices over the course of our lives, and to make one choice means foregoing another. To enter the all-inclusive kingdom of heaven requires us to give up the seductive restrictedness of the kingdoms of earth. It is not that the kingdoms change, but our conscious experience of them shifts dramatically.

Kingdom Inferences

Because Jesus used analogies, parables, and metaphors when describing the kingdom of God we can assume it is not a specific, physical place like Yellowstone Park, which we would describe by its location, features, history, and other tangible aspects. No, the kingdom Jesus alludes to defies such descriptions because its existence is not limited to a particular location in space or time, although it does

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exist eternally in the here-and-now. Nor are its features fixed with any sort of permanence or reliable consistency. Nor is it accessible by physical roads or trails. The history of the kingdom is both non-existent and all-existing because it has always been, is now, and always will be – all at the same moment. We cannot accurately compare the kingdom of God to earthly kingdoms because it exists in a dimension that, while inclusive of earthly realms, stretches far beyond them, not in space and time but in an expanded dimension of conscious awareness. It cannot be entered with the typical consciousness by which most of us go through our days. Once our consciousness transforms, however, the kingdom opens before us. We simply have nothing earthly with which to relate. As such, Jesus drew many seemingly disparate comparisons to discourage us from locking in the details of his kingdom as if we could ever fully understand its other-worldly treasures.

If we take Jesus at his recorded word, this is some of what I think we can infer about the kingdom:

- (1) The kingdom is *near* – not like the house next door, but like a vivid memory or the closeness of an intimate relationship.
- (2) There are people alive today who have experienced and are living out of the kingdom, not as a physical location other than where they have always been, but they experience where they have always been with an expanded awareness.
- (3) The kingdom belongs to the *poor*, meaning those unencumbered by earthly attachments. Our seductive quest for additional power, possessions, and prestige stands as a barrier to the eternal rewards of the kingdom. Conscious awareness of

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our Oneness with God, which is the source of every longing, can only be found in the kingdom.

- (4) Earthly wisdom teaches that additional earthly wealth is a worthwhile goal. Kingdom wisdom reveals that earthly wealth is and always will be passing away, it never satisfies, and attachment to it distances us from the kingdom.
- (5) Accessing the kingdom allows latent potentials to manifest that often appear magical or other-worldly to those unfamiliar with the kingdom.
- (6) Seen through eyes transformed by the kingdom, what we value and prioritize shifts dramatically.
- (7) Entry into the kingdom cannot be gained, bought, or influenced by social standing, socio-economic status, church attendance, or other earth-bound advantages. While entry is available to everyone, our desire for it must override everything else.
- (8) Something about children makes it easier for them to enter the kingdom. Perhaps it is the closer proximity to their moment of birth when they were presumably still immersed in their Oneness with everything. The fact that children approach life with wonder, awe, and suspended judgement, that they do not assume they already know everything worth knowing about whatever they encounter almost certainly keeps them near the kingdom.

I believe what most inhibits a person's ability to enter and experience the kingdom is the assumption that references to the *kingdom*, *heaven*, and *eternity* point to a future existence after our physical death. Churches and church leaders are likely the worst offenders by teaching, both directly and indirectly, that the kingdom of God, the

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kingdom of heaven, or the land where Jesus is king is a mystical place in a faraway land in some distant future. And perhaps it is that, too, but that is not what Jesus' teachings describe. The life he lived and modeled was about bringing heaven to earth *now*, by serving others ceaselessly, generously, and non-violently. The prayer he taught in Matthew is clear: *Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*⁷⁷ The kingdom manifests on earth as we allow God to work through us. As long as we assume that the uniting of heaven and earth is something God or others will do without our participation, or that it will simply manifest after we die, we find ourselves perennially on the outside of the kingdom. We cannot make things on earth as they are in heaven if we are no longer in the earthly realm. That was Jesus' work 2000 years ago, and it is *our* work *today*, regardless of where we find ourselves in space or time.

⁷⁷ Matthew 6:10

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Chapter 7

Community

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*⁷⁸

In my mid-twenties, I became obsessed with trying to live a hermit-like lifestyle. I wanted to distance myself from others as much as possible because I felt their interests were too materialistic where mine were more spiritual in nature. In the verbiage of the time, *they were dragging me down*. Of course, I was delusional about my own motives and overly critical of those of others. Regardless, I eventually purchased 10 acres of remote woodland, moved a trailer onto it, and began my quest for *nirvana*. It was uniquely mine; it was beautiful; it was enlightening (in a self-revealing way); it was isolating, and it was lonely. At times it was frightening. Over the course of a few years, my heavenly paradise became a hellish prison of my own making. As it turned out, the largest barrier to my spiritual growth was *me*, not others. The experience was one of my

⁷⁸ Matthew 18:20

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most vivid lessons in the importance of *community* to spiritual growth.

Too often we act as if being a follower of Christ is an individual endeavor. We convince ourselves it is about what *I* believe. If *I* get *my* beliefs right, if *I* profess with *my* mouth whatever creeds or oaths *my* religious leaders tell *me* *I* should believe, then and only then am *I* assured a clear path into a heavenly paradise when *I* die. And many Christian churches and church leaders, particularly in the West, are more than happy to perpetuate this gospel of individualism. They assume that some persons will be *saved* and some will not, never mind the vast differences of opinion regarding what it actually means for an individual to be saved. It is as if Christianity encourages us to *look out for number 1*. Whatever it takes for *my* salvation is what *I* must do. Once upon a time I thought *my* salvation was in distancing myself from others. I was wrong.

Granted, most people are not that self-indulgent, at least not overtly, but staunch individualism still motivates many of our behaviors. Some would call it *the American Way*, which may be true, but it is not *the Way* of Christ. The life and teachings of Jesus, which should be the primary source of direction for Christian practice, are focused much more on how we treat and interact with others than on what we believe or profess as individuals. As such, many community-minded atheists live far more Christ-like lives than self-absorbed Christians. Jesus was a person of action on behalf of others, and he directed us to follow that lead.

I daresay, if we are not practicing Christianity in and with a community, regardless of whether it is a church or a *religious* community, we are probably not a serious

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follower of Christ. We might be a good person. We might be extremely devout. We might be able to recite key parts of the Bible and spend large chunks of our days in prayer and worship, but if we shun others in order to keep ourselves “holy” we miss the point of Jesus’ teachings. The religious leaders of his day, the scribes and Pharisees, received his harshest criticism for arrogantly professing holiness with their mouths but not with their behavior toward others. He called them hypocrites, and we are no better when we profess to be followers of Christ with our words but not our actions.

An ever-expanding awareness of who we welcome into our community should be cultivated. There is no record of Jesus rejecting *anyone* from fellowship in his community, including the scribes and Pharisees of whom he was so critical. Foreigners, lepers, widows, those possessed by demons, Roman soldiers, tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and outsiders of every ilk were welcomed and adopted into community with Jesus.

Jesus emphasized the importance of living with and for others in a number of his teachings. For example, “...*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*”⁷⁹ Or in what we call the Golden Rule, “...*do unto others as you would have them to you...*”⁷⁹ Or in his discourse with his disciples at dinner on the night before he was crucified, “...*the greatest among you must become...like one who serves.*”⁸⁰ True, Jesus needed his *alone time* in order to center himself and commune with God, and so do we, but his primary work was done in community with those close to him: his

⁷⁹ Matthew 7:12

⁸⁰ Luke 22:26

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disciples, his followers, and others who would continue his work after his death, which includes us today. There is a collective, expansive spirit that emerges when we are in community with others. Outside of a community we are likely to fall prey to our own egoism and self-interested natures. In community, we come to realize that being an active part of a good community is one of the best things we can do for ourselves *and* others.

Perfection in Community

The importance of being part of a supportive community cannot be overstated, whether considering spiritual growth, salvation, or simply living a good life. Communities, as I use them here, are groups of people who share something significant in common. A community may be large and diverse, like many church congregations, or small and intimate. Most of us belong to numerous communities. For all of my criticism of churches, offering a variety of ready-made, interest-based communities is a strength of many of them. For the past three-plus decades, the closest friends of my wife and me are people we met at church. They are our non-biological family. We have raised our children together, vacationed together, and buried our parents together. We have celebrated graduations, weddings, and essentially all of our important and many mundane life experiences, if not in person then by recollection. In both good and difficult times we share food, company, and companionship. Our community assures that we do not rejoice or suffer alone. The world would be a more accepting, loving place if everyone could experience the type of community with which we have been blessed.

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Unfortunately, some churches and other social groups are difficult for a new person to find a community within which to blend. Established friendships and traditions can create barriers to entry. Some churches have a strong focus on getting new folks looped into small groups to allow them a better opportunity to find community. Others leave people to find their own way, usually unsuccessfully. For those who do not find a community, church quickly becomes a lonely and uncomfortable place. That is a sad commentary when we claim the title (Christ) of one who was constantly reaching out to those with no stable or comfortable place in society.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a seemingly impossible instruction in his teaching about loving others. He says, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*⁸¹ Many of us today feel enough pressure to be perfect as it is, let alone having Jesus pile on with unrealistic, divine expectations. But I think his instruction, like so much of his teaching, is a call to community. We *cannot* be perfect as individuals, hard as some of us try or pretend to be. We can, however, approach perfection in community. I am strong in some areas and weak in others. I find some persons easy to love and others nearly impossible to willingly share the planet’s oxygen with. I know a lot about some subjects and little to nothing about others. If I enter community with one other person, such as through marriage or another committed relationship, that person will have strengths to help cover some of my weaknesses, will be able to be caring to some I cannot bring myself to love, and will have knowledge to help fill some

⁸¹ Matthew 5:48

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of my areas of ignorance. Two of us will not be perfect as individuals, but we can be closer to perfect together. If our community expands to 3 or 10 or 10,000 people with a common purpose, the shared skills, behaviors, and knowledge approaches perfection even more closely. Jesus calls us to perfection in community, as does God, resulting in more of God's creation being loved and cared for.

My church has provided a free hot breakfast every Tuesday and Friday morning for 30+ years. It requires 20 or more volunteers each day to cook, serve, and clean up. It requires people to donate money to purchase the food. It requires church members to provide the space and facilities to host the breakfast. It is an impossible task for an individual to single-handedly provide a good meal to so many hungry folks and to do so on a regular basis for so many years. It requires a community. And while individual volunteers come and go, the feeding of the poor in our community continues unabated because it does not rely on the dedication or *perfection* of any one person. Rather, the meal is a function of the community.

When Jesus encourages us to be perfect as God is perfect, he reminds us that God's perfection manifests through the lives of those willing to serve as instruments for God's work on earth. Building a perfect world, whatever that might be, or bringing heaven to earth is not up to any one person, although it does require individuals willingly serving with and for others as God's hands and heart in the various ways they are gifted to serve. A perfect world comes closer when we work together for a greater good or to meet a larger need. It is in that way we find *our* perfection, not because it makes us a perfect individual, but

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because it allows us to take our place as part of a more perfect life in community with others.

Other-Worldly Community

When we think of *community* we generally assume a group held together by a common connection in space and time. In other words, communities are often made up of people near to each other geographically (in space) and alive during the same time period. Jesus' words, "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," hint that communities, however, are not limited by boundaries of space or time. We can gather today and have one who died 2000 years ago and lived across the planet from us be in community with us. There is a mystical bond to community that transcends time.

Many churches today recognize and celebrate a *community of saints* – former church members who have passed from this life. They affirm and believe that a community of souls from times past laid and continue to support key foundations from which the church has arisen. That is another example of a community transcending time. Those with similar interests and beliefs from the past form the *traditions* that become the pillars upon which a church or other community stands. In the United Methodist denomination, four such pillars are recognized by which one can discern truth: scripture, experience, reason, and tradition, the latter of which is formed in community over time.

Considered in this way, a community is not simply a three-dimensional phenomenon but consists of *layers* of experience built upon each other stretching from the distant past, influencing today's experience, and shaping a

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yet unknown future. As such, we can legitimately be in community with Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi, Mohammed, and other admired ancestors regardless of our present location in space or time. Not only does community have layers in time, but its tentacles also span vast distances in space so we can be a part of community that includes members from distant points on earth. I experience this regularly with members of various communities of mine that live hundreds or thousands of miles away: people I haven't seen in decades, that have long-since died, or that were never in my physical presence that I feel as close to as ever through our shared community. It is the common interest that formed the community that holds its essential nature, not the proximity of its members in space and/or time. Community is not only transcendent; it is eternal.

Because it involves others, community involvement is often a movement *away from* or *emerging from* our inner being. Contemplation, silent prayer, and time in solitude and reflection are movements *toward* or deeper *into* our inner being. Considered in this way, our life experiences are like breathing – as we inhale, we draw in what is external to ourselves; as we exhale, we share what is within with the world around us. Our life experiences occur in the movement of our conscious attention from inside to outside to inside. We receive as we inhale; we give as we exhale; and both movements are complementary and necessary for life to continue.

Jesus balanced his time between being in community with others – working externally – and being alone with God. They are not separate activities so much as different foci of our conscious attention. Like the positive and negative poles required for electricity to flow,

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attention directed inward lays the groundwork for attention directed outward which then requires a regrouping or recentering movement inward. And so it goes. One pole empowers and necessitates the other. To be entirely focused inward or outward is as impossible as being a pendulum that only swings one way – or that does not swing at all. If there is no movement, there can be no life.

Some people equate an external focus with extraversion. Although there are some surface similarities, alternating the focus of our conscious attention is not a personality trait but a structural necessity for life as we know it. And if we cannot become comfortable with one end, our life experience will be perpetually out of balance. It is from our time focused inward that the gifts we project outward into our communities emerge. And our communities provide the safety and purpose within which we can turn inward to refuel and rebalance.

The boundaries of community cannot be contained by space or time. Communities, like the souls populating them, are eternal and transcendent. They may change and grow in space and time, but their essential nature – the purpose around which they form – remains. And as community boundaries are allowed to expand to include additional expressions of other essential natures, they become ever more inclusive. Jesus sought to break down the prejudicial barriers between families, sects, religions, and ethnicities in order to form a more loving, accepting, and inclusive community – up to and including the ends of the earth in both space and time. That was his vision for bringing heaven to earth.

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Chapter 8

Following Jesus to the Christ

At its core, authentic spirituality is not about beliefs. It's about behavior. Martin Thielen⁸²

Among the well-intentioned but misguided statements I am most uncomfortable hearing from “Christians” include: “*Have you accepted Christ into your heart?*” and “*Have you surrendered your life to Jesus?*” and “*Have you been born again?*” and “*Do you know where you’re going after you die?*” These types of *not-so-subtle-judgements-parading-as-concerned-questions* are bothersome to me, and always have been, not because there are not partial truths contained in them but because they are arrogant and misguided. They assume Jesus and the Christ are synonymous. They assume salvation is an individual attainment. They assume their brand of Christianity is the *only* way to God. Worse yet, those who do not adopt their version of Christianity will

⁸² Martin Thielen, [Doubter’s Parish.com](https://www.doubter.org/), *The Bottom Line About My Religion*, May 6, 2025.

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spend eternity in Hell. Those who use these types of evangelical hooks remind me of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus criticized so strongly in the gospels. He called them *hypocrites* and *blind guides* because they tried to convince others to believe the only way to God was by following their strict rules on diet, hand-washing, whom one could associate with, and the like – relatively petty concerns when compared with sharing God’s love and acceptance to the outcasts and suffering. I am certain the scribes and Pharisees were following God in the best way they knew how, just as I am certain most users of the sort of questions above are doing. In many cases, however, they are only trying to resolve their own confusion about salvation by creating doubts in others.

First of all, as I and others have written elsewhere, Jesus and the Christ are *not* synonymous. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being who lived 2000 years ago. The *Christ* is the universal state of spiritual and physical Oneness that means *anointed* or *chosen*. Jesus became the Christ as he consciously realized and lived into his Oneness with God. As such he manifested God in the flesh, *a* child of God (as opposed to the *only* child of God) and encouraged us to do the same. Jesus lived and died; the Christ is eternal. Jesus’ eternal nature resides in the Christ, as does ours. By following the example of Jesus, we too join in the body of Christ as God’s anointed as we allow our conscious wills to unite with God’s. We are already One with God— always have been, always will be – but until we consciously live into that reality we create havoc by living and behaving as if we were separate, individual entities. Our *ego-self*, the part of us that thrives on its individuality, dies with our body because, like everything of the earth, it is illusory, temporal,

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and passing. Our Oneness, however, is eternal. Once we consciously awaken to the unity that is our essence, heritage, and destiny, which is to attain what some call *Christ consciousness*, the entire focus of our life changes. We *repent*, as Jesus commanded, *not* by repeating a certain prayer or joining a particular church but by seeing with the new eyes and feeling with the new heart that awaken within us. We understand the unbreakable unity of which we are a part, interconnected with everyone and everything. Until our vision is corrected, however, we remain harsh and prejudiced critics because we cannot see beyond our own restrictive biases.

Too many of today's expressions of what it means to be a Christian do not consider the transformation of consciousness required. If we withhold compassion from those in life-situations similar to those to whom Jesus showed mercy, we have not transformed. If we do not welcome the outcast, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or heal the sick with the gifts we have available, we have not found our Oneness with God. Once the mystery of our Oneness with all of creation has been revealed, we cannot *not* welcome the outcast, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or heal the sick because to do so not only withholds mercy from the needs of the body of Christ (see Matthew 25:31-46), but it also withholds mercy from *ourselves!* Once we awaken to our divine unity, we cannot *not* ease the suffering of others because we recognize it as *our* suffering, too. It is not enough to *believe* in our Oneness with God; we must *behave* in ways consistent with that Oneness – not by forcing ourselves to behave contrary to our natural tendencies, but because our natural tendencies have realigned with God's. And that is what is missed in the

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types of evangelical challenge-questions I listed earlier. Behavior *always* trumps belief.

A blind person does not seek direction from another blind person, which is why Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees *blind guides*. They could not lead others to salvation because they had not experienced a transformation of consciousness themselves – they only tried to convince themselves and others they had. And they did so by parading their self-proclaimed piety in arrogant displays of superiority, privilege, and passive-aggressive judgement.

The Christ as the Created

To reflect upon the difference between Jesus and the Christ is like reflecting on the difference between a wave and the ocean. Jesus was a specific manifestation of the Christ in space and time, in the same way a wave is a specific manifestation of the ocean in space and time. Just as we are specific manifestations of God in space and time. The wave arises out of the larger ocean before crashing onto the shore and reintegrating into the ultimate source from which it came. Every part of the being of a wave comes from the ocean, is never separated from its origins, and returns to the unity from which it emerged. And so we say, “The wave is not the ocean, but it is not other than the ocean either.” Whatever is truly special about us as individuals is an emergence of God and finds its eternity in God.

The Christ is God in God’s unbroken unity of everything we label as either physical or spiritual. In trinitarian language, the Christ is the second *person* of the Godhead – the *Son* or *Child* or *Offspring* of God. The Christ

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is the *created* of the *Creator*. The Christ is not God, but it is not other than God either. Even though the Christ is not separate from God, we may understand it as a unique expression of God from a particular point in space and time, just as we may experience a wave as a unique expression of the ocean. So when we consider Jesus as a unique expression of the Christ we take a universal reality (the Christ) and make it specific (Jesus), but only for a particular point in space and time.

Traditional Christianity accepts Jesus as the Christ and generally accepts Jesus as God in the flesh. What traditional Christianity appears not to accept is that the person of Jesus of Nazareth was a mortal human being like you and me. He manifested the Christ on earth by consciously recognizing, accepting, and living out his Oneness with God. What traditional Christianity largely misses is that *all* of creation, including us, is inherently One with God and makes up the body of the Christ. As the *created* of God, we all live and move and have our being within that divine, all-inclusive body. But unlike Jesus, most of us reject the concept that we, too, are inseparable from the Christ. And until we consciously recognize, accept, and live out that reality, many of our behaviors will betray the divine nature from which we emerged.

It appears to be an enormous responsibility to consciously accept our place in the body of the Christ because we will largely abandon much of what was important to us when we considered ourselves as separate, disconnected individuals. The material world around us promotes individuality in most circumstances because it assumes what we experience as physical and what we experience at spiritual are two different realities. They are,

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however, the same reality, as was apparent with Jesus and as will be apparent as we awaken to and accept it.

And so the gospels tell of how differently Jesus behaved (after his baptism) and how his focus was on the needs of others and not on himself, as if he recognized that the needs of others *were* his own needs and his own responsibility. He reintegrated the unifying spiritual essence into what we otherwise perceive as solely physical. Which is exactly what we understand when we consciously live into our Oneness with everything in creation. We live and die together. We rejoice and suffer together. We are *condemned* and *saved* together. Everything about life on earth is communal – as one body – even as waves on the ocean are communal. Our essential nature is unfathomably vast and transcendent, infinite and eternal. Our specific manifestation in space and time is not.

A part of what following Jesus to the Christ involves is moving our attention from the specific – our (apparently) individual nature – to the universal – our Oneness with all that is – and bringing that unified awareness back into the specifics of our particular life environment and circumstances. Not so much solving world hunger but feeding the hungry in our midst. Not so much ending all violence in our world as assuring our actions emerge from a center of non-violent peace. Not so much punishing the sins of others as reconciling our behaviors in ways that encourage others to live lives more consistent with the unity we've found. Following Jesus, as one specific manifestation of God in the flesh, allows us to emerge in and as the universal love and acceptance of the Christ. It is why Jesus is still important as a model, and it is why we are here.

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Out of the Temples and into the Fields

I will repeat: Following Jesus to the Christ involves moving our conscious awareness from the specific – the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth – to the universal – the Christ – and carrying that expanded awareness back into the specifics of our lives. To follow Jesus to the Christ *is* to encounter the Christ because ultimately they are One. We see this throughout the gospels where people are transformed by encounters with Jesus. Their eyes open to a new way of living and relating to others. In Jesus, they catch a glimpse of their own universal, divinely-connected nature, and they simply cannot return to the ways formed under the assumption of themselves as separate, mortal individuals. Once we have seen the *Truth*, we cannot unsee it. Nor do we want to unsee it. What was once important to us pales in comparison to what is revealed before, around, and within us. Jesus told many of the folks he healed to *go and sin no more*. It wasn't a call never to behave poorly again but a call never to forget one's unbreakable connection to the Christ, to God, and to all of life around us. By so doing, we take our place, spiritually and physically, as inseparable parts of the body of the Christ of God.

In the words of Brian McLaren, “If we want to be (Jesus’) disciples, we won’t be able to simply coast along and conform to the norms of our society. We must choose a different definition of well-being, a different model of success, a new identity with a new set of values....”⁸³ In other words, and as we read in the gospels, we are

⁸³ Brian McLaren, *Daily Meditations*, www.cac.org, June 22, 2025.

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consciously transformed from a mortal, physical being to an eternal, spiritual being in a physical body. We realize the foundation from which we arise is infinitely larger and interconnected with all of creation than we could ever have imagined prior to our awakening. There is no longer *us* and *them*, only *us*. There is no more *good* and *bad*, only *good* and that which is not good yet. There is no absolute *evil*, only that which is still immature and self-aggrandizing. Everything and everyone is redeemable. We become our brothers' (and sisters') keeper, and it becomes our purpose to encourage others to find unity in diversity *with us*, to *join us* in working toward a greater and more inclusive good, and to *grow* with us toward higher levels of maturity. And that transformed perspective changes *everything*: our priorities, our values, our politics, and most importantly our behaviors. All it takes is one eye-opening encounter with the Christ.

In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, author Wendell Berry creates a seemingly simple character with a mundane life who arrives at a profound realization: "...as I have read the Gospels over the years, the belief has grown in me that Christ did not come to found an organized religion but came instead to found an unorganized one. (Jesus) seems to have come to carry religion out of the temples into the fields and sheep pastures, onto the roadsides and the banks of rivers, into the houses of sinners and publicans, into the town and the wilderness, toward the membership of all that is here."⁸⁴ One of the dire *sins* of current Christianity is in over-intellectualizing the simple (not to be confused

⁸⁴ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, Counterpoint Press, 2000, p. 321.

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with easy) message of the gospel, which is to love God and love our neighbor. When we complicate our mission with over-analysis and lavish worship spaces we deplete our energy and resources in ways that limit and distract from our ability to *act*. Jesus and the Christ call us to an *active* love, which only manifests in our behaviors. Certainly, time in silence, prayer, and meditation are vitally important to guide and fuel our behaviors, but we don't need fancy, man-made temples and sanctuaries to do so. Nature is the original sanctuary, but sitting in the corner of a closet works well, too.

The intellectualized brand of Christianity practiced today is overly reliant on buildings, creeds, lengthy sermons, and other hallmarks and practices that turn serious seekers away. That form of Christianity must be *crucified* before the *Way* of and to the Christ can emerge. Again, the crucifixion of today's Christianity does not mean its annihilation but its transformation through death and resurrection. Yes, Christianity needs to be born again. It is not that today's Christianity is evil or bad, but it is immature and has lost its *Way*. As Jayber Crow says, we must get "out of the temples and into the fields"; and as Martin Thielen writes, "authentic spirituality is not about beliefs. It's about behavior." There is simply too much worshipping of Jesus and too little following.

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Chapter 9

The Eucharist

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.*⁸⁵

In traditional Roman Catholic masses, the pinnacle of the service is the celebration of the Eucharist – sharing the body and blood of Christ. The ritual blessing of the bread and the wine is believed to transform these common earthly elements of food and drink into the actual body and blood of the Christ to be consumed by faithful parishioners as spelled out by Jesus in the cryptic passage above. The belief is that by doing so, the parishioner abides in the Christ as the Christ abides in them.

With the advent of Protestantism in the 16th Century, a product of the Age of Enlightenment, the pinnacle of worship services became the sermon – the preacher’s intellectual or philosophical sharing of their understanding of some portion of scripture or religious life. The Eucharist in Protestantism came to be called

⁸⁵ John 6:54-56

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communion, but largely without the expectation of a religious ritual causing the transformation bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. That sort of *magical hocus-pocus* does not sit well with intellectuals, so communion is reduced to a symbolic remembrance of the Last Supper between Jesus and his disciples.

Interestingly, most Protestant churches also substitute grape juice for wine, likely due to a number of ethical and legal concerns about serving alcoholic beverages in church and to people of all ages. It is interesting that wine is grape juice that has been transformed by *yeast*, one of the common analogies Jesus used to describe the kingdom of God. I believe wine was a more common drink than water in Jesus' day because the yeast purified it, making it healthier and safer to drink than the often-polluted water. In addition, wine in his day was a diluted version of what we drink today, making it less likely for someone to become intoxicated from it. I may be pursuing a distinction without a difference, but one way to view the migration from wine to grape juice is as an expression of how Protestants rejected many of the non-intellectual aspects of Roman Catholic worship. When the substance used by Jesus as an analogy for the impact of the kingdom of heaven (yeast) is removed from the wine, one is left with grape juice. No doubt, Jesus used yeast as an example of something mysterious causing a *magical* transformation in something else. By removing the transforming *magic* that yeast works on grape juice, Protestants removed an element of mystery in worship and replaced it with something more palatable to the intellectual mind, as if to make God less magical and more tangible.

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The same can be said of bread. I grew up in a church that served *unleavened* bread for communion, which was bread that yeast had either not been added to or was not given a chance to work its magic. I suspect it was a nod to the story of the Israelites taking unleavened bread with them on their hasty escape from Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land because they didn't have time to allow the bread to rise. Whatever the reason, the flat wafers I ate in church for communion were dry and tasteless. Thankfully, the church I attend now uses actual loaves of bread – rich, risen, and delicious – for communion. A much more appetizing representation for the body of Christ!

My purpose here is not to quibble about whether we should use leavened or unleavened bread or wine or grape juice when celebrating the Eucharist or offering communion. Nor is it whether the Catholic Eucharist or Protestant communion is preferable, holier, or more consistent with following the Christ. What interests me is examining the differences in the practices and the motivations behind those differences. The Roman Catholic church retains many of the mystical vestiges of its earlier days, many of which led to the protests against it and the Protestant religions. Protestantism, as a child of the Enlightenment Age, focused its worship practices more on the Bible as they interpreted it, dispensing with many practices and beliefs that did not have a literal basis in scripture. In doing so, the Protestant religions leaned heavily on intellectual practices, like interpretation of scripture, where the Roman Catholics continued to incorporate nods to the mystery and unknowability of God into their worship practices.

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Which is better? I would say *neither* and *both*. Intellectual understanding can only take us so far in our search for God, but it can be helpful. Celebrating the mystery and unknowability of God can leave us confused as to how best to defend or describe our faith, but it recognizes that the nature of God certainly cannot be understood or experienced by intellect alone.

Making Daily Practices Sacred

It seems most Christian churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, have taken what Jesus specifically intended to be a regular, everyday experience for everyone – celebrating the *Eucharist* or receiving *communion* – and made it into an elaborate religious sacrament that removes it from its mundane, everyday context. We've made sharing the body and blood of the Christ seemingly inaccessible except to members of various churches. And most of the participants completely miss the significance because it is overshadowed by the ritual. Jesus wanted for us to become consciously aware that as we eat and drink, we are not only nourishing our bodies but also acknowledging the spiritual significance of eating and drinking, too. Everything created has a spiritual core, and by remembering that we feed our soul and body as one, we draw ourselves closer, consciously, to the body of Christ of which we are a part, consciously or unconsciously. It is a necessary activity to be done daily and with conscious attention to both our physical and spiritual health.

Jesus used bread and wine because they were common elements of most meals eaten by most people of all social strata in his day. Today, we might use bread and water, or chips and soda, or cereal and milk. It doesn't

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matter because bread and wine are not the point. *Food* and *nourishment* are the point. We must be fed, both physically *and* spiritually, in order to attain and retain wholistic health. If we are faithful about giving our bodies healthy foods in reasonable amounts but fail to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of the physical food, we may nourish our body but starve our spirit. Thus, Jesus pleaded for us to *remember* – remember that the Christ is ever-present in everything we take into our bodies. A life has been given (as our food) so our life can be extended, whether the life of a plant or animal, and we should never take that exchange casually. We should also remember that one day, our bodies will be given for the nourishment of the plants and animals we consume today. There is a spiritual aspect to everything and we need to align our conscious awareness with that reality if we are to feed both body and spirit.

When we remember the Christ as the conscious reuniting of the physical and spiritual, as modeled by Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus' words that we must eat his body and drink his blood become less jarring. None of the elements making up the physical aspects of any created being is ever lost, only reconstituted. As such, we know our bodies share the same elements once making up ancient stars and all manner of plants, animals, and people from times past. It is also true of the food we eat. Every time we eat or drink anything, we consume something that has been a part of food, drink, and created life for millennia, united and reconstituted by the Spirit. Once consumed, it *abides* in us.

At his Last Supper, when Jesus took the bread and wine and shared it with his disciples, he affirmed the eternal, interconnected nature of the food and drink. The component parts of that particular bread and wine had

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been present in all of life preceding them, just as those elements would be present in all life after their own. One expression of the One Life was sacrificed for them that night, just as their lives would be sacrificed for others in time – but the spiritual essence animating the formation of the sacrificial meal is eternal. We, too, are an inseparable part of that One Life, sustained by its eternal existence.

And this is the essential message we miss in the rituals that have evolved into today's Eucharist and communion. We *must* eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in order to abide in the Christ and for the Christ to abide in us. But it is *not* only in the physical act of eating, nor is it *what* we eat; rather, *it is the conscious awareness we hold as we eat*. We cannot fully live or express the reality of our Oneness with and in the Christ until we become consciously aware of that Oneness and our place within it. The physical and spiritual natures of everything united as One in our conscious awareness – *that is the body and blood of the Christ*. If we only eat as an act of physical sustenance or as a symbolic remembrance of a Last Supper long ago, we miss the spiritual significance that calls us back to conscious union with the Christ right here and right now.

Remembering

It seems to me that the key to experiencing the Eucharist or communion as Jesus intended has less to do with ritual or food but with *remembering*. “*Do this in remembrance of me,*”⁸⁶ Jesus said as he gave his disciples bread and wine at the Last Supper. *Remembering* who Jesus was and thus, who we

⁸⁶ Luke 22:19

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are and who we are destined to become, is the essence of our salvation as Christians. And who was Jesus but the conscious embodiment of spirit in human form – son of God *and* son of Man, a product of body and spirit equally expressed, which is the *Christ*. He managed, through conscious awareness, to unite his spiritual and physical natures and become an embodiment of the Christ. We, too, are spiritual beings in human form destined, like Jesus, to take our place in and as the body of Christ. But because most of us will not let go of the illusory separation between our physical and spiritual aspects we find it easier to *worship* Jesus in his divinity than to *follow* Jesus in his humanity. Following Jesus requires a much higher degree of commitment.

When we combine one of Jesus' first teachings – *follow* – with one of his last – *remember* – we have a path laid out for enlightenment, redemption, oneness, salvation, or whatever we wish to call it. We reunite the aspects of ourselves we often repress, and we find our wholeness – our *holy*-ness – in our Oneness with everything that is. To follow Jesus does not mean to copy his life to ours. He lived in a very different time and culture. Rather, it means to live our lives in our time and culture as he lived his life in his. We adopt and adapt his way of non-violence, inclusion, care for, and love of others to our life situations. And we remember that he did not do it alone. Jesus frequently renewed and refocused his energy and Oneness through regular time alone in prayer.

But is conscious awareness *really* all that is lacking? That seems so simplistic. How impactful can something be if it has no tangible essence? Some will argue that conscious awareness is not a *real* thing because it is all *in our head*. It is

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only something we make up or imagine – like a dream or a fictional story.

In the last of the *Harry Potter* books, Harry and Professor Dumbledore (who had died some chapters earlier) found each other in a dream-like scene in a location resembling a deserted train station. Harry asked, “Tell me one last thing...Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” Dumbledore responds, “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”⁸⁷ The simple fact is that everything tangible and real *begins* and is sustained in the mind, some of which then manifests physically. Whatever we build or create starts as an idea or an inspiration, including our families and friends. Just because something has yet to become physically embodied does not make it less real. In fact, non-embodied creations retain their realness long after physically-embodied creations have crumbled into oblivion. We limit our experience of the scope of possibility by pretending that whatever cannot be seen or physically sensed is not real. It leads us to assume the work Jesus did was by some sort of mystical magic that we could never hope to perform, in spite of his claim that we would “do the works (he did) and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”⁸⁸ What is required is *belief* in him, or *conscious awareness* of who he was and what he attained. We must *remember*.

There is a sense in which *consciousness* is the connecting bridge between tangible, physical and

⁸⁷ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007, p. 723.

⁸⁸ John 14:12

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intangible, non-physical expressions of reality. It is the awareness that encompasses body and spirit in a single, unbroken continuum. Until we can freely traverse that bridge and see that the two sides differ only in how they express, we will remain *un*-whole or unholy. We will hope the priest or minister administering the Eucharist or communion has some magical power to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ that will then transform us. Once we can perceive the various sides as a single reality, we can receive the body and blood of Christ through Hostess Twinkies and chocolate milk (not recommended) if we choose. Our conscious awareness and acknowledgment of the inherent unity of body and spirit, bread and wine, life and death is indeed our pathway into the body of the Christ. That change in consciousness transforms our entire life experience.

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Chapter 10

The Word

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). What came into being through (the Word) was life, and the life was the light of all people. No one has ever seen God. It is (the Word) who has made (God) known.⁸⁹

In much of today's Christianity, the *Word*, or the *Word of God*, is assumed to refer to the Bible. It is common to hear something like, "The Bible is the spoken word of God," or "The Bible is the infallible and inerrant word of God." Even in the progressive church I attend one will sometimes hear after a scripture reading, "This is the word of God for the people of God," to which the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." The implication is that the Bible was *dictated* by God (in English, no less) and so, as we read or listen to scripture being read we hear the words God would speak to us if God were to speak to us. Certainly, there is a sense that when we read scripture and other sacred texts that God *is* speaking to us, but not in the literal sense often

⁸⁹ John 1:1,3-4,18

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assumed. Some people will even go so far as to say, “The Bible says it, so I believe it!”

But nowhere in the Bible does it claim itself to be the written or inerrant or infallible word of God. Rather, it claims its contents were *inspired* by God, which is an entirely different notion. The passage that is often quoted in this regard is 2 Timothy 3:16: “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” Most of us who believe in God are inspired by God in many different ways, as were the biblical authors, but that does not mean our words or works are God’s *actual* words or works. It means God stirred something in us that we attempt to embody in words or music or other tangible expressions. Those expressions, however, are necessarily colored by our personal experiences, biases, culture, etc., so inspired by God or not, they express the divine inspiration imperfectly at best. The other often misused word in the passage is *useful* – “(scripture) is *useful* for teaching...” not that it is *determinative*. It is a goad for thought-provoking consideration, something our Jewish brothers and sisters have understood and practiced for millennia.

Another common assumption about the *Word* of God is that it is Jesus of Nazareth. The *Word* of God, however, is the *Christ* – Spirit manifested in physical form. According to John’s gospel, the *Word* did not first appear 2000 years ago in the area of Galilee, as Jesus did, nor did it appear when the books of the Bible were canonized in the 4th Century CE. Nor did it appear when the earliest books of the Bible were written, probably around 500 BCE. No, the *Word* of God was already present for all of that and has been present since Spirit first took on material

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form as an earthly creation. True, Jesus *became* One with the Christ, but they remain different expressions of that Oneness. Using the life and teachings of Jesus as our guide leads *us* to Oneness, too – Oneness with Jesus, with each other, with the Christ, and Oneness with God. Ultimately, we are One anyway, but we are not consciously aware of it. And it is the *conscious* expression of our Oneness that the life and teachings of Jesus lead us to.

When John 1:18 says “no one has ever seen God,” it refers to the fact that we cannot see *Spirit*, at least not with our physical eyes. It is only when spirit clothes itself in flesh and becomes tangible that we can see God, or an expression of God, which is present in everything in creation – even us. When a physical part of creation utilizes the bridge of conscious awareness to reunite its physical and spiritual natures, it manifests as the *Christ*. Until that time, it appears and behaves simply as another physical creation. The apparently magical, mystical powers that Jesus possessed, according to the gospel record, were a result of his attained *enlightenment* or his conscious awareness of his Oneness with God, symbolized as occurring at his baptism. Once he understood that he was an instrument that God could work in and through, and once he accepted the responsibility that comes with such an awakening, he manifested the ability to heal and to bring others to God. And that is our mission too, if we choose to accept it – healing and bringing others to God, including the outcasts, caring for the widows, children, and immigrants, and generally bringing God’s love and acceptance wherever we find it lacking.

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Is Scripture the Word of God?

The belief that the *Word* of God is scripture is understandable since the Bible is comprised of words, and the Bible is considered by many as the primary source of Christian belief and practice. But the Bible, which may have been *inspired* by God but was written by fallible human beings like us, may not be the infallible, inerrant source some give it credit for being. In fact, the *Word* of God does not refer to the Bible but to something mysterious that cannot be contained in earthly, human *words*, even biblical words. Thus, our words and God's *Word* are very different. God's *Word* is dynamic and alive. Those of us who find the Bible inspiring and useful see this on a regular basis as we read the same teachings and stories, often finding new meanings and interpretations with each encounter. But the dynamism and aliveness of the *Word* does not come from the words on the page but from the spirit that inspired the words on the page as it moves within us. The written words are only a prompt for us to listen in new ways to what that spirit may be revealing within us.

It is also easy to believe that the *Word* of God is Jesus since the opening verses of the gospel of John seem to point to Jesus. And in a sense Jesus is exactly who the words refer to: not Jesus of Nazareth, however, but Jesus as One with the Christ of God. The difficulty with understanding the *Word* as Jesus arises when people do not make the important distinction between Jesus as a man from Nazareth and Jesus as the Christ. The former understanding leaves no place for us to enter the story as it only applies to an apparently magical being living in a time and place long ago and far away. There is no transformation for us in that narrative in that we can only

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worship that type of being. The latter – Jesus as the Christ – invites us to enter into the body of Christ *with* Jesus, in the timeless present moment. This narrative is an invitation to *follow*. We write ourselves into the eternal story through our conscious awareness that we, too, are a part of the same divine lineage as Jesus.

The concept behind the *Word* being *spoken* by God first appears in the opening chapter of the Bible where it is written that God *spoke* creation into being: “And God *said*, *Let there be...*”⁹⁰ Some believe that God literally spoke the words, “Let there be light” and light appeared. Others of us, however, believe this to be an anthropomorphized telling of the unfathomable beginnings of the universe as we know it that cannot adequately or accurately be captured in our words. We accept that how the universe began is an unknowable mystery, regardless of whether we believe it began with a *Big Bang* or by the verbalizations of God or whether God said, “Let there be a Big Bang!” Those types of arguments miss the point. The creation story is just that – a *story* intended to inspire awe in us about the unfathomable nature of God manifesting in material form that cannot be understood in a factual way. Our explanations are only conjecture for that which we cannot know in the same way we know lesser things about our world.

With regard to God’s *Word*, we simplify it to words on a page to our own detriment. Like God, God’s *Word* cannot be known, only experienced with humility and reverence. Hearing the *Word* of God, for those with *ears* to do so, can only be described as an *encounter* with mystery.

⁹⁰ Genesis, chapter 1

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The *Christ* of God – matter imbued with Spirit – is all around us, but once we recognize the Spirit within all of creation we can only be amazed at the depths to which we cannot *know* it. We can only live with it, love it, and stand in awe of our Oneness with it.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “You will know (the Spirit) because (it) abides with you, and (it) will be in you.”⁹¹ When we encounter the *Word* of God we recognize it because it vibrates in harmony with something already inside of us, which is the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul says it this way: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”⁹² The *Word* of God is alive in us via the *Spirit* of God planted within us.

The Word and the Trinity

The *Word* of God is not scripture, nor is it the historical Jesus of Nazareth although it can be encountered in either. If, as I noted earlier, it is only something we can encounter or experience, how are we ever to *hear* or *see* this *Word*? The gospels tell us we first need to develop new ways of hearing and seeing to do so. It is for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. I cannot believe Jesus meant the *Word* is only for a select few who were gifted from birth with unique abilities to see and hear what others do not. Rather, he refers to ways of seeing and hearing that are available to anyone with the desire to learn how to experience God in the world around us.

⁹¹ John 14:17

⁹² 1 Corinthians 3:16

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The mystery of the *Word* is at least partially revealed in the concept of the *Trinity*, which is traditionally identified as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I prefer the non-gender-specific titles of the Creator, Created, and Spirit (which refers to the relationship between the Creator and Created). Although the Trinity is not specifically named in the Bible, it illustrates the various ways God has been encountered and experienced by mankind throughout history and continues to be experienced today. It affirms that there is only One God, but that One God is experienced by us in many different ways. When we experience God as *above* or *beyond* us, we encounter God as Creator or Father. When we experience God as *with* or *beside* us, we encounter God as the Created, Son, or Child. When we experience God as *within* or *inside* us, we encounter God as indwelling Spirit. All are equally valid expressions or manifestations of our One God. I am not a fan of referring to the expressions of the Trinity as *Persons*, as is common in Christian teachings, since that implies the differences in the ways God expresses to us are differences in the essential nature of God.

The essence of our lives *is* the Trinity in action, individually and collectively: God, us, and the Spirit or relationship that connects us. The connection also transcends time, uniting past, present, and future. There is nothing in creation that has ever fallen or ever will fall outside of the Trinitarian expression of God. It is the timeless energy that flows eternally between God and God's creation, which is the relationship we call the Spirit. It is active love. It is what binds us together and maintains us in relationship with God and with each other.

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Author and teacher Richard Rohr has illustrated the Trinity with a *fidget-spinner*, with its three heads spinning around a common core. As it spins it appears as a single, circular object until it slows down enough for the three heads to distinguish themselves from each other. It is in its spinning motion, however, that the *fidget-spinner* manifests its identity. And the same is true of the Trinity. It is through the eternal *give-and-take* between the expressions of God, the spiritual relationship between Creator and Created, that the power of God manifests. It is also along that energetic flow that the *Word* of God appears. It constantly *moves* above, around, and within us.

There are countless expressions of God that are simply beyond our ability to comprehend or know. The creative power and intricate inter-weavings behind all that is cannot be grasped by human understanding. That is God expressing as *above* us. Some say God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, and those are ways of characterizing God as above us. In Trinitarian terms, this expression is called *Father* or *Creator*. There is another expression of God, however, that is infinitely tangible but no less mysterious which is God *beside* us. God expresses in the people and environments around us. We can see, touch, hear, smell, taste, and feel these expressions. We can directly experience God's love and care through everyone and everything around us. This expression is called *Son* or *Created*. A third type of experience of God occurs *within* us. Something moves us or we are given a divine inspiration or intuition that arises within but seemingly originates outside of us. This expression is the *Spirit* of God. It flows to us, between us, through us, and out from us. Each of these expressions are utterings of the creative and creating

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Word of God. We may not understand what is being said or how, but we recognize the truth behind it and humbly stand in awe before it.

The Word and Sound Waves

There is certainly a sense in which the spoken or written word can be a creative and/or destructive force. When we speak or sing, the air forced through our vocal cords produces *waves* of energy which, as they make contact with the inner structures in our ears, creates vibrations that we perceive as sound. While we don't normally think of the sounds we hear from the mouths of others as necessarily destructive, at least not physically, on a larger scale, waves of energy can be very destructive – think earthquakes and tsunamis. Such vibrations create waves of energy emanating out from their source like a pebble thrown in a pond or a hurricane sweeping across the Florida coast.

My point is that speech produces sound waves, and sound waves impact whatever is in relative proximity to the source. When Genesis 1 describes the process of creation as God *speaking* the universe into being (“*And God said, ‘Let there be...’*”), we might imagine creative waves of energy acting on matter and resulting in dramatic changes to the materials acted upon. Perhaps even resulting in a *Big Bang!* In a similar way, words that are spoken produce waves of physical energy that impact the materials around the source. In that sense, reading scripture *aloud* may produce an impact we might associate with the *Word* of God, not because of the words on the page but because of the vibrations created by the speaker interacting with the listener. Energy powers change, and sound waves are a form of energy.

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But words, whether spoken or read aloud, also have non-physical impacts because their vibrations have emotional and spiritual components, too. The childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt them,” is patently untrue in the sense that emotional wounds from careless words can scar a person for life. One can argue that Jesus’ words, along with his life-style, sent *social* waves of energy throughout the area that, as received, changed the environment. Roman and church leaders noted, correctly, that the energy emanating from Jesus threatened their status quo. To others, the energy emanating from Jesus was healing, comforting, and insightful. Either way, Jesus’ energy brought about change in ways similar, perhaps identical, to how the Bible describes God’s creating *Word* bringing about the changes we recognize as the world around us.

If there is to be such a thing as a *living Word of God*, however, it must evidence itself as existing in *and* beyond our *space-and-time* existence. In other words, its waves of energy must not only impact what is across the room and across the planet, but also penetrate between what we experience as past, present, and future. Certainly, the Bible continues to have a significant impact on some folks after a couple of millennia, as do the words and teachings of Jesus.

My main point is that the *Word* of God is *not* a single thing, like the Bible or Jesus. It is a *relationship* or *interaction* formed between something outside of ourselves, like scripture or Jesus, and the Spirit of God within us. In many of Jesus’ healings he told the one he healed, “Your faith has made you well.” Healing occurred in the relational energy exchange between the healer and the healed and

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would not occur without both. It is the *uniting* or *reuniting* of the two where the power of the *Word* manifests. Until that happens, scripture is just words on a page and Jesus is just an enlightened dude who lived in a region long ago and far away. If it does not have *movement* or *power*, if it is not both sent *and* received, if it does not change anything, how could it possibly be the *Word* of God?

If we believe the *Word* of God was spoken only once at creation, or only once in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, ours is a static and feckless faith. No, the *Word* continues to speak and will continue throughout eternity. Its influence and strength is in its power over and within our three-dimensional, space-and-time limitations. Like the *Christ* of God, the *Word* is eternal and manifests from our conscious awareness of the presence of the Spirit within, which secures us in a *give-and-take* relationship between that Spirit and the world around us.

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Chapter 11

The Hero's Journey

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*⁹³

I first learned about *The Hero's Journey* through references to the writings of Joseph Campbell, a 20th century literature professor specializing in comparative mythology and religion. The *Hero's Journey* has little to do with “heroes”, at least as I will present it here, and more to do with our human processes of growth and maturation. We typically think of a *journey* as a trip away from home with a definitive starting point and a final destination. The hero's journey, however, is a *cycle* or a *spiral* where beginning and end are the same place, if not physically then psychologically, socially, or emotionally. And most of us go through a number of extended experiences that could be considered a hero's journey as we go through life, although most

⁹³ T.S. Eliot, from *Four Quartets*

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without naming them as such. Normal growth phases like adolescence, childbirth, and menopause take us through aspects of the hero's journey, for example. Why would I reflect on the *Hero's Journey* as part of a larger collection titled *Crucifying Christianity, Resurrecting the Way*? Because I think Jesus' ministry can be seen as a *Hero's Journey*, so it provides another context for following and applying *the Way* of Jesus to our lives.

There are a number of ways of describing the *Hero's Journey*; most consist of four phases, although some presentations divide those into as many as twelve or more stages. But the course of the journey follows a similar track of moving from the known and familiar to the unknown and unfamiliar and back to the known and familiar. The *hero* returns, however, a changed being. In the words of T.S. Eliot, she or he arrives where they started and knows the place for the first time.

In general, the first step of the journey is an *invitation* for change or, in Campbell's words, a "call to adventure." The invitation means leaving the familiar predictability of one's current status quo and embarking on something new. Examples might include moving away for college, starting a new job, or entering a new relationship. Sometimes the invitation is an actual choice and is consciously accepted, usually with some measure of excitement. Other times we are forced into a change by unpleasant circumstances beyond our control, as with the death of a loved one or loss of a job. In the latter cases, the invitation is not so much willingly accepted as reluctantly endured. Regardless of the nature of the invitation, it always signals the coming of a significant change.

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The second stage, as life becomes less known and predictable, is an *initiation* into the new reality. This might be a formal, organized initiation, like a new-student orientation or a fraternal hazing, or it might be a self-guided initiation as one explores their new environment to establish some sort of familiarity with the current situation and strives to regain a sense of belonging and purpose. This stage tends to be uncomfortable as much that had been familiar is either gone or unavailable, and there is typically no reasonable path of return.

The third stage of the Hero's Journey brings about a *transformation* in the traveler. It is where one begins to understand and become more comfortable with their new reality, learning and incorporating the lessons of the formerly unknown world into an expanded world-view, at least as compared with one's world-view prior to embarking on the journey. *Revelation* is a common experience in this stage as one identifies and releases some of the attachments to their former life that had prevented them from more fully entering this new one.

The last stage of the journey is the *return* to where they began. Some authors describe this as a *resurrection*. This may or may not mean a physical return to their area of origin, but a return to an emotional, social, or spiritual existence that was familiar, predictable, and comfortable to them prior to beginning their journey. Now, however, they return with an expanded vision and greater understanding. Their priorities, politics, and personality may have completely changed as they are now a different person – same body and name but a changed outlook and inner response to once-familiar environmental stimuli.

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The stereotypical *Hero's Journey* is thus characterized by an *invitation, initiation, transformation, and resurrection*. The traveler may begin as a willing participant or one forced on the journey by circumstance. The experience may be exhilarating or devastating, but likely some combination of both. It will change us, and like all change there will be periods of discomfort, sometimes intensely so. Placing Jesus' life and teachings in the context of a *Hero's Journey* may help us in our attempts to follow him by better by understanding how some of what he went through is similar to some of what we go through.

A Personal Journey

The typical cycle for a *Hero's Journey* may be completed in days or weeks, although some hero's journeys last for years, even decades. The use of the word *hero* can be misleading, because although many well-known examples of a *Hero's Journey* were traversed by people who accomplished amazing works for others at tremendous personal cost (think Jesus of Nazareth), most hero's journeys are accomplished by people like you and me going through life as it presents itself to us.

Here is an example of a 40-year *Hero's Journey* of mine (and I am far from anyone's hero) that is particularly present to me with the recent passing of my wife. The *invitation* to this journey occurred formally on February 20, 1987, when Carrie and I became engaged to be married. In Joseph Campbell's words, this was our *call to adventure*. The *invitation*, however, was not a single, momentary event of me getting down on a knee and asking Carrie to marry me. Rather, there was a nearly two-year build-up to the actual proposal as we began dating and became better acquainted

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with each other, culminating in the decision to get married. The actual wedding occurred on October 17, 1987, but I would include the planning, wedding, honeymoon, and even the early weeks of living together as a married couple to be part of the *invitation* stage of the journey. It was all (mostly) one, long grand adventure.

We gradually transitioned into the second phase of the *Journey*, the *initiation*, after a few weeks of marriage when tensions would sometimes build over issues like the handling of finances, sharing of household duties, how to spend our free time, furnishing and decorating our home, and all the other daily complexities of living with another human being. Although I believe we handled most of these tensions in respectful, mature ways, there were certainly times when we both wondered what we had gotten ourselves into, knowing there was no returning to life as it was prior to the *invitation*. At times it was a hard and unpleasant adjustment, but we were committed to seeing our way through the challenges together and returning to the happy, married couple we knew we were capable of being. The *initiation* phase gradually ended as we each gained acceptance that there were certain sacrifices of our individual natures and preferences required if we were to live together as a united couple instead of as two, independent individuals.

The third stage, the *transformation*, made up the bulk of our married life as we constantly adjusted our personal desires to the changing, shared environment. We grew, individually, as a part of a new entity, which was *us* as a couple and eventually for *us* as a family. We progressed in our professions, earned master's degrees, had children, changed homes, buried parents and family members,

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communed with friends, endured illnesses, and the ten-thousand other experiences we go through in the normal course of life. Those events, routine as they often seem, transform us as individuals, but they also changed us as a couple. Thus, the transformation for me was an individual change, but also a change in my roles as a husband, father, friend, and co-worker. And as I changed, everything and everyone in relationship to and with me was also forced to change, although not always in such significant ways.

The final stage of the journey is the *return*. For me (since I'm telling the story of *my* hero's journey) the return was not going back to the physical land of my childhood but back to life as a single man. I lived alone as a bachelor for 15 years as a young adult. I have now returned to life as a bachelor as a not-so-young man. And although I have returned to that same situation of *singleness*, I am knowing this place as if "for the first time." After my nearly 40 year journey with Carrie, I am a transformed person and so everything appears new to me. I return to bachelorhood, now as a widower, but also with amazing adult children, dear friends that knew and loved Carrie and I as a couple, and a home that stands as a tangible testament to the last 40 years.

This particular *Hero's Journey* is unique to my life, but the pattern should be familiar to many because it is repeated by everyone throughout the course of their lives. On shorter, less dramatic hero's journeys the transformations tend to be more subtle, but everything that happens in life changes us in some way. Which is exactly the purpose of the *Hero's Journey*.

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Jesus' Journey

It is difficult to identify the events in Jesus' life leading up to the initial stage of the *Hero's Journey* that ultimately led to his crucifixion and resurrection. The first phase of that journey, the *invitation*, is not usually a single event but a culmination from a series of events that create interest sufficient to make one willing to try something new. Jesus' baptism could be considered the culmination of his *invitation* onto the *Journey*, but there is no information in the gospels about his adult life leading up to that event. There is, however, quite a bit of information available from extra-biblical sources about the area in which he lived and worked prior to his baptism. From that information we can make some semi-educated guesses as to what he might have been exposed to during those missing years.

Although there is little mention in the Bible, and none in any church I've attended of the town of Sepphora, which was located a short distance north of Jesus' pre-ministry home in Nazareth, it almost certainly influenced him. Sepphora was a bustling, regional hub of arts, entertainment, philosophical and religious thought in the area. It was a largely Jewish city with strong Roman influences. It was also a stop along the *Silk Road*, a major cultural thoroughfare where *Western* influences mixed with those of the *East*. If Jesus followed Joseph's profession as a craftsman, as most young men of his age did, he almost certainly worked regularly in Sepphora because that was where the greatest need for craftsmen would have been.

Assuming this to be true, Jesus' pre-baptism days would've offered heavy doses of exposure to philosophical and religious thought from all over the known world – not just Judaism, but also Hindu, Buddhist, pagan, and other

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organized thought about the Divine and its relationship to earthly life. I have frequently stated my belief that Jesus never intended to start a new religion, but to teach a way of life that draws us into unity with the Divine regardless of our religious beliefs or lack thereof. All of the world's great "religions," at their core, teach exactly that – a way of life. Religious dogma, doctrine, rules and regulations exist on the surface level of various belief systems and give them their distinctive traits, but at the deeper levels of all enduring spiritual teaching is the common articulation of a goal that brings us into unity with the Divine and with each other. It matters less *what* we believe and more *how* we conduct ourselves in relation to who and what is around us. It is our *way of life* that is important, not our professed beliefs. To the extent that Jesus participated in deeper discussions with thinkers from other parts of the world, this lesson of unity is what he likely would have heard. Certainly, his message of loving and serving others comes through loud and clear in his teachings and often puts him at odds with both Jewish and Roman leaders whose loyalties were more to their organizational structures than to a more unified and inclusive way of living.

The gospels tell of a twelve-year-old Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem, unbeknownst to his parents, engaged in deep discussions with teachers in the Temple, listening and asking questions.⁹⁴ This reveals his propensity from early-on to explore spiritual thought on a deep level. My sense is that Jesus' *invitation* onto his final *Hero's Journey* began in discussions with spiritual teachers from both the East and the West in Sepphora. When he asked to be

⁹⁴ Luke 2:42-49

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baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River he was accepting the invitation into a new way of living as he grew into his unique way of following and understanding God.

According to scripture, after his baptism he immediately found himself in the second phase of the journey – the *initiation*. This phase occurred in the “wilderness” where he was “tempted by the devil” as he fasted for 40 days and nights. An initiation is a rite of passage marking one’s journey from one phase of life to another. In Jesus’ case, his initiation marked the end of his days as a curious craftsman from Nazareth to become a human incarnation of God. The temptations, recorded in the 4th chapters of Matthew and Luke, occur as Jesus is offered power, possessions, and prestige in return for renouncing his intent to serve as God’s *Messiah*. In order to faithfully fulfil his new mission, he would have to be focused on things of God instead of things of the earth. His initiation through the temptations proved his readiness for the challenging mission before him.

Jesus’ Transformation and Return

The third stage of *The Hero’s Journey*, the *transformation*, certainly occurs in one form or another throughout the change process. In Jesus, the *transformation* occurred most visibly as he gradually assumed his role as a healer, teacher, and some-time miracle worker. One interesting example occurs during the first miracle recorded in the gospel of John at a wedding in Cana. Jesus is there with some of his disciples, as is his mother. Mary tells Jesus the wedding party has run out of wine, as if knowing Jesus could fix the problem. Jesus basically says it’s not his problem and that

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“My hour has not yet come.”⁹⁵ It seems to me he knew what he was capable of but wasn’t sure about the timing of revealing it to others. After seemingly refusing to help, he turns water into wine and the wedding celebration continues.

The *transformation* does not so much occur when he gains his messianic skills but as he begins using them in the presence of others. He knows that his fame and influence will grow quickly and that the Roman and Jewish leaders will limit how long that is allowed to continue. It is interesting, particularly in the gospel of Mark, how often Jesus tells witnesses to his miracles not to tell anyone about them. It is as if he were trying to remain below the radar of those who would find him threatening to their status quo as long as possible. As he became less and less able to remain incognito with his knowledge and abilities, he became bolder and more public with his teaching and healing ministry, knowing it would hasten his transition to the final stage of his journey – his crucifixion and resurrection. As he gradually let go of his desire for anonymity he increasingly transformed into the *Messiah* we recognize today.

Jesus’ *return* to his home area near the Sea of Galilee occurs after his resurrection when he makes numerous appearances to his disciples. His capture, trial, torture, and crucifixion occur as his phase of transformation leads him into the phase of returning home. The transition between the third and fourth phases is not always or even usually so painful and humiliating, but in Jesus’ case it was. The fact that Jesus returned as a

⁹⁵ John 2:1-11

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changed being is clear in the post-crucifixion records in the gospels. He was not readily recognized by even his closest friends, he could walk through locked doors, and he could travel long distances seemingly instantly. Although he was the same essence as before, he was now free of the typical constraints of space and time.

I have provided two extended examples of the *Hero's Journey*: my marriage to Carrie, and Jesus' final years. Not all *Hero's Journeys* are so clear or dramatic – in fact, most are not. They are so mundane and common we usually ignore them. Each day is a *Hero's Journey* of sorts, as it morphs from sunrise to day to night and back to sunrise, returning to where it began – only changed in some way. The seasons of each year are a *Hero's Journey* as are the phases of the moon. And our individual and collective lives are full of such journeys of change and transformation. At any given time in our lives we are likely in different stages of many different journeys of change like interlocking cogs in clock – all moving seemingly independently, yet all interconnected and moving toward the same end. We may submit to change willingly, or we may kick and scream along the way, but we *will* be changed. And the *Hero's Journey* provides a sometimes-helpful context that in spite of necessary times of discomfort, we will eventually return to something more familiar and comfortable. And when we do we will “know the place for the first time.”

Whether we look or feel heroic in the process, we will be drawn back into union with God and with each other, as was Jesus, along the *Hero's Journey*.

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Chapter 12

The *Extra-Religious* Jesus

“I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”⁹⁶

As I have theorized numerous times throughout this book, Jesus did *not* seek to start a new religion. Jesus sought to teach a holier way of living that is consistent with the will of God, was accessible for any time or culture, and could be practiced by anyone *regardless* of their religion beliefs, if any. Jesus never left his Jewish faith, even as the Jewish leaders sought to murder him. Our religious choices do not usually determine how we live or how we treat others anyway. Our beliefs more often influence how we *justify* our actions—we change our excuses long before we change our behaviors. Jesus understood this. He also understood that the religious leaders of his day were not going to lead their followers to God, at least in part because they did not know how to do that themselves. It wasn’t so much because of their evil intentions as because of their

⁹⁶ Quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi

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ignorance. They protected specific Jewish beliefs and practices (and ignored others) from time immemorial as traditional paths to living a life obedient to their God. Not surprisingly, following their chosen beliefs and practices also benefitted them personally, in wealth and social status, because it enhanced their relationship with their Roman occupiers.

And the same occurs today under the guise of *Christianity*. We mold our religion to *justify* our desired actions instead of allowing our religion to *guide* and *change* our actions. It is not that we or our leaders are inherently evil but that we and our leaders are misguided and know no other way. The *Way* Jesus taught and that his early followers journeyed is primarily an *inner journey* that does not require a church, religion, or religious leaders. Certainly, churches, religious beliefs, and leaders can *assist* in the transformation sought, if they themselves have been transformed, but the crux of the journey is between an individual and God. And Jesus showed how that path begins by focusing our attention outward on the needs of those less fortunate than us even as we direct our change efforts inward, seeking to awaken our deepest, inmost selves where our essential nature is and always has been One with God. It is not as hard as it is *unusual*. It is not taught or rewarded in earthly circles. We will not learn that path by any educational system that serves or teaches worldly political or religious powers. The *path* cannot be taught there because the *path* does not exist or lead there.

Mahatma Gandhi, the devout Hindu and non-violence guru who peacefully led his beloved India to freedom from Great Britain last century, was a fan of Jesus. He is said to have studied the Sermon on the Mount

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(Matthew 5-7) regularly. He famously said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. *Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*” And that is a brilliant summation of the point I’ve spent these many words trying to make: *We Christians are so unlike our Christ!* If we separate the life and teachings of Jesus from the rest of the Bible for a moment, we find a few core themes recurring throughout: using non-violent means to achieve one’s ends, loving others (including our enemies), feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the stranger, caring for immigrants. Although we may be able interpret other parts of the Bible as supportive of behaviors contrary to this list, we *cannot* justify behaviors contrary to this list from the life and teachings of Jesus. And if we proclaim ourselves as *Christians*, meaning followers of the Christ, shouldn’t our behavior be as consistent as possible with his teachings? Of course it should!

In his book, *A More Christlike God*,⁹⁷ Bradley Jersak, expands on the need to use the life and teachings of Jesus as the standard by which everything else in the Bible must be filtered if we are to live a Christian life. He quotes the biting, satirical humor of Bill Maher, saying, “If you’re a Christian that supports killing your enemy and torture, you have come up with a new name for yourself... ‘Capping thy enemy’ is not exactly what Jesus said.” Maher continues: “If you ignore every single thing Jesus commanded you, you’re not a Christian – you’re just auditing. You’re not Christ’s followers, you’re just fans.”⁹⁸ While I am no fan of

⁹⁷ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA, 2015.

⁹⁸ pp. 10-11.

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much of Bill Maher's humor, I confess these words hit hard and close to home for me. Yes, if we are to call ourselves *Christian*, we *must* use the life and teachings of Jesus as our standard. Everything else is secondary and must be interpreted and understood by that standard. In the words of a popular meme, "Stop trying to sit at the tables Jesus overturned!"

Spiritual but not Religious

I almost hate to admit this publicly, but I am frequently embarrassed to call myself a Christian. I am careful with whom, when, and where I profess my Christian beliefs, knowing it means very different (and often offensive) things to different people. The problem is not with calling myself a Christian *as I understand the term*; the problem occurs because I do not wish to associate myself with supporters of the fundamentalist, homophobic, violence-supporting, right-wing Republican cult that seems to have co-opted the public face of Christianity today. As I quoted from Mahatma Gandhi: "*(They) are so unlike your Christ.*" When I do expose myself as a Christian, I feel the need to qualify the sort of Christian I consider myself to be. I also confess part of me looks askew at anyone today who openly proclaims themselves as Christian. This causes me great sadness for I still believe *all* people are beloved children of God, even if I don't care to associate or be associated with some of them.

Jesus of Nazareth neither defended his Jewish beliefs, nor did he try to convert others to Judaism, nor is there evidence he considered his Jewish status as superior to those with other or no religious beliefs. His life and teachings were never intended to form a religious belief

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system but to teach a way of life that would bring one into better alignment with the creative and sustaining forces of the universe, forces he referred to as God or Father. He sought to teach a way into what he called the *kingdom* (or *realm*) of *heaven*, which was not a faraway, future destination for faithful Jews (or Christians) but a place where diverse people of all cultures, languages, and religions could live together in harmony. And *that* is the sense in which I call Jesus *extra-religious*. His *Way* is beyond any particular religion, even as it encompasses all religions.

At their essence, at least in my experience, all enduring religious belief systems share a few core values in common: caring for others, reducing suffering, and leading others to a more unified way of living. That's what Jesus taught and modeled for us. It is what the Buddha taught, and it's what the revered teachers of Hindu and other belief systems taught. Certainly, there are cultural differences and other surface distinctions, but at their heart they are One. The problems and schisms occur as we attempt to shrink expansive teachings into firm rules and doctrines, trying to make concrete what was always intended to be fluid, trying to attain certainty about something far beyond our ability to completely understand.

A few of the core, personal directives of Jesus that set us on a path to a holier life, or toward the *kingdom of heaven*, include being *salt*, acting as *yeast*, and being *light* to and in our surroundings. Salt, yeast, and light all act upon and change their environments in transformative ways *just by being who they are* or doing what they do. Salt, used correctly, enhances the flavor of food. It also helps to preserve food so it stays good longer. So being *salt* for others is finding ways to enhance their lives, not by trying

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to change them, but by waking up that which is already within them.

Yeast, when added to bread dough, causes the bread to rise and become a fuller, more flavorful version of itself. It doesn't change the composition of the bread as much as it helps it express more fully a potential that is already within the bread. Acting as yeast is a blessing we can offer to others – not by changing them or pointing out their failings, but by being an encouragement to help them blossom in their own, unique, God-given way.

Light reveals what is hidden in darkness. Physical light exposes the contents of a dark room. Spiritual light uncovers spiritual mysteries. Insight provides information so we can better understand puzzling situations. Knowledge dispels ignorance. Being light to the world does not mean being a spotlight revealing the shortcomings of others but being a source of illumination that helps others discover the treasures they already hold within themselves. All of our fears stem from the lack of light, so as we add light to our environments by being who we are at our essence, more truth is revealed and fear dissipates in our lives as well as in those around us. Light, in its many forms, illuminates the *Way*. It is what Jesus brought to us and what we are to bring to others. No church, no Bible, no creeds or doctrines required.

Christianity, in the sense of being a devoted follower of Jesus the Christ, is a brilliant *Way* that allows us to comfortably choose a religion, a church, or to simply claim ourselves as part of the growing number considering themselves as *spiritual but not religious*. It allows us to live and love in the presence of God and in harmony with all of creation. When the resurrected Jesus ordered, “Go into all

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the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”⁹⁹, *this* is the good news we are to proclaim: that Love, Unity, and Peace are always and ever present for any who seek and accept it, lurking just beneath the hatred, division, and violence we find on the surface of things.

⁹⁹ Mark 16:15

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