

# Trinitarian Conversations Volume 2

Interviews With 15 Theologians

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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Douglas A. Campbell</b>	
1. <b>Understanding the Book of Romans</b>	<b>1</b>
2. <b>Our Participation With Christ</b>	<b>10</b>
3. <b>Sin and Its Seriousness</b>	<b>19</b>
4. <b>In Christ – Conversion and Calling</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Cathy Deddo</b>	
5. <b>Theology in the Everyday</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Gordon Fee</b>	
6. <b>The Book of Revelation</b>	<b>46</b>
7. <b>How Should We Read the Bible?</b>	<b>56</b>
8. <b>Like Father, Like Son</b>	<b>65</b>

**Trevor Hart**

- |     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 9.  | Art and Imagination in the Church         | 72 |
| 10. | God the Father, Reflected in Jesus Christ | 82 |
| 11. | Zooming in on Salvation                   | 92 |

**George Hunsinger**

- |     |                                       |     |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|
| 12. | What Christ Did Was Effective for All | 100 |
| 13. | Our Lives Are Hidden in Christ        | 110 |
| 14. | Focus on Christ                       | 117 |
| 15. | The Eucharist and Ecumenism           | 126 |

**Steve McVey**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 16. | The Grace Walk                         | 137 |
| 17. | We Will Never Overestimate God's Grace | 149 |
| 18. | The Father Gets a Bad Rap              | 159 |
| 19. | What Is God's Wrath?                   | 169 |

**Paul Louis Metzger**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 20. | Relationships and Evangelism             | 181 |
| 21. | The Church Should Include All Peoples    | 190 |
| 22. | Christians Engaging Contemporary Culture | 199 |
| 23. | Consumer Christians, and God's Love      | 210 |

**Paul Molnar**

- |     |                                      |     |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 24. | Keeping Christ at the Center         | 219 |
| 25. | God Chose to Enter Into Our Humanity | 229 |
| 26. | God's Will and Our Decisions         | 237 |
| 27. | The Giver and the Gift               | 244 |

**Cherith Fee Nordling**

- |     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 28. | What Does It Mean to Be Human?          | 253 |
| 29. | What Will the Resurrected Body Be Like? | 262 |
| 30. | Image Bearers for God                   | 271 |
| 31. | What Jesus' Humanity Means for Us       | 280 |

**Robin Parry**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 32. | A Trinitarian Perspective in Worship               | 289 |
| 33. | Lament and the Role of Israel in Salvation History | 298 |
| 34. | Hope for All Humanity                              | 306 |

**Andrew Purves**

- |     |                               |     |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----|
| 35. | What on Earth Is Jesus Doing? | 316 |
| 36. | Theology for Pastoral Work    | 325 |
| 37. | We Are Not Generic            | 334 |
| 38. | Let the Lord be the Lord      | 341 |

**Andrew Root**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 39. | Relationships in Youth Ministry                | 350 |
| 40. | Real Relationships in Youth Ministry           | 361 |
| 41. | Entering into the Full Humanity of Adolescents | 371 |
| 42. | God Turns Death Into Life                      | 380 |

**Alan Torrance**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 43. | Grace Leads to Godly Living                | 390 |
| 44. | God's Wrath, Hell, and the Role of Science | 399 |
| 45. | Being in Christ                            | 407 |

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**David Torrance**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 46. | <b>The Grace of the Finished Work of Christ</b>  | 414 |
| 47. | <b>Not I, But Christ</b>                         | 423 |
| 48. | <b>Not My Will, But Yours</b>                    | 430 |
| 49. | <b>The Importance of Prayer in Pastoral Work</b> | 438 |
| 50. | <b>Already Forgiven</b>                          | 447 |

**Robert T. Walker**

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 51. | <b>Christ Has Faith for Us</b>                 | 454 |
| 52. | <b>Why the Incarnation Is Good News</b>        | 462 |
| 53. | <b>The Implications of Jesus' Resurrection</b> | 470 |

**About the Contributors** 477

**About the Publisher** 483

**Grace Communion Seminary** 486

## INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this book are transcripts of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 100 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at [www.gci.org/YI](http://www.gci.org/YI).

When people speak in a conversation, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In some of the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

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## 1. UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF ROMANS

**Introduction:** Welcome to this unique interview series devoted to practical implications of Trinitarian theology. Our guest today is Douglas Campbell, Associate Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Campbell is author of *The Deliverance of God* and *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*.



**J. Michael Feazell:** Thanks for being here.

**Douglas Campbell:** You're welcome.

**JMF:** You've done a lot of work on the book of Romans, as evidenced by this huge book that reminds me of a Harry Potter book, it's so big.

**DC:** Yes. I'm sorry.

**JMF:** And absolutely just as scintillating. You do a lot of work in the book on the book of Romans, and tell us about the gospel as it springs out

of Romans 5-8, where you spend a great deal of time.

**DC:** I think Romans 5-8 is where Paul tells us what really matters to him. It's where he tells us what God is really like. The reason this happens is because in those chapters he's addressing a couple of very important questions. There are two.

1. I think he's being challenged by somebody who was trying to frighten the Christians that he is looking after and scaring and intimidating them with a future judgment scenario. He's trying to make them feel insecure.
2. The other question is, he's been challenged by somebody who is accusing him of libertinism. "According to your gospel, Paul, how can Christians behave in a good fashion? They seem to be out of control, riotously living, and they're pagans, they don't really know anything about behaving correctly. They're not proper Jews."

So Paul pushes back on both these challenges very, very hard. At the basis of both of these pushbacks is Christology. He says, "The reason why we can be secure against the coming judgment is because the God who does not spare his only Son but gives him up for us all can be trusted to take us through any judgment process, and in the judgment he will be on our side. He won't be on the other side. So you can be completely assured when you face the future.

Secondly, the God who has not spared his only Son but who has given him up to die for us has also transformed us so that we can behave in a way that we need to behave. He's taken us, he's entered into our condition, he's really terminated, he's executed the stuff that was getting in the way. He's resurrected us into a new condition, he's joined us to that new condition not only in the Son but through the Spirit. This leads to the only sort of right behavior that is valid and authentic. Romans 5-8 is where we see the heart of the Pauline gospel.

**JMF:** Isn't that pretty much the opposite of the way most of us have tended to look at...

**DC:** [laughing] You're scaring me now.

**JMF:**...have tended to look at the gospel? In other words, the gospel is usually presented with the idea that "let's make people understand there's going to be a judgment and make them afraid of that judgment" so people respond to the gospel, as it were, because they're afraid of the judgment and they want to escape it. They've got to do something to escape it, which is have faith in somebody that's going to help them. Then we turn right around and try to maintain that position of escape by trying to behave better. The way you're describing Romans 5-8 is the opposite of that.

**DC:** Well, people have just got Paul very, very wrong. If what he's saying in Romans 5-8 is right, then the model that you've just described, which is widespread, there has to be something wrong with it as a

presentation of Paul. It could be that Paul was horribly muddled up, and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he was the good Christological thinker that we think he was and on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays he was the other guy, then on Sundays he had the day off.

But I think when you plant your flag on Romans 5-8, and that's really where we need to plant our flag, because that's where he's doing all his work out of Christology. That's where he's talking about God in the light of Christ, and so that is solid information. If you're planting your flag in Romans 5-8, what you end up with is another perspective on the model that you've just outlined thoroughly, which is usually articulated in relation to Romans 1-4.

**JMF:** That's where you're confronted with "Christ died for us while we were still sinners."

**DC:** Yeah, Romans 5.

**JMF:** And we're confronted with all of the "if he's already done this much for you, how much more is he going to see it through the end."

**DC:** Exactly, yeah.

**JMF:** And the judgment is usually thought of as something scary, like a final exam. What if I don't pass?

**DC:** Right.

**JMF:** But we're talking about the judgment being a *good* thing and something to look forward to.

**DC:** Yeah. The judgment's already taken place, I think, in the cross. When Paul talks about Christ assuming what we are — the sinful nature, the flesh, as he calls it (the *sarx*, in the Greek), and terminating it, and cutting it off and executing it, that is a judgment. That's God's judgment that this situation cannot continue. It must stop. So the hostile part of the judgment is behind us.

When we talk about any future judgment, I think there's a moment of accountability that's coming. Paul is absolutely clear that we will stand before Jesus on the last day. We may have to give some sort of account for ourselves, and that would be a potentially quite excoriating occasion, I think...it could elicit some embarrassment. But I don't think it's a hostile judgment. I don't think it's a judgment where God is going to say, "You've tried hard, you've been a Christian, you've done all the things you're meant to do, but..." It's not going to be one of those sorts of judgments where our deeds are laid in the balance.

You can't get away from the argument of Romans 8, which I think is the finest chapter that he ever wrote, and think anything different. The God who is giving up his own Son for us, giving us the Spirit, is on our side all the way through, all the way down, right through to the end. We really don't need to feel, we really should be living lives of joyful assurance.

The bit that you were worried about is the bit of Paul that's coming

through from chapter 2, coming through from Romans 2. The big problem is, what do we do with Romans 2 when we're really rooted in Romans 5-8? Are we talking about the same gospel at all? This is where the controversies come from. This is what I was trying to do in my book.

**JMF:** What is it about Romans 1, 2, 3 that seems to be in contrast with what we're reading in 5-8?

**DC:** Romans 1-3 is usually read in a certain way. There's a consensus out there — what I call the usual reading or the traditional reading. It's in most of the commentators. These commentators tend to assume that Paul is, as we put it, thinking forwards, and he's building up a picture of the gospel from a problem. He articulates a problem and then he matches a solution to that problem. All the hard work and all the critical theological moves had taken place in the definition of the problem.

If you think that this is the way that you should be preaching the gospel, you will find that reading in Romans 1-3, because it works reasonably well. There was a guy running around there who preaches forwards, there was a guy running around there who has quite a harsh punitive understanding of God, quite a conditional understanding of salvation. You'll find it because it's a reasonably good fit.

**JMF:** You mean that the language of those chapters comes across as though there is a fear of a judgment to come in a punitive...

**DC:** Yeah. Something's going on that's talking about this future punitive judgment. Something, some sort of system where you are being threatened with a future evaluation. So you live in a situation of fundamental insecurity now, building toward this final judgment. It's there in Romans 1-3.

The question is, has the argument been understood correctly if you attribute all of that to Paul? When you have a very clear understanding of Romans 5-8, what you find when you come to Romans 1-4 is there are little hints and clues in the text that this is not what he was trying to do. He's not the person that's setting up this problem and pushing people through to a solution — he's going after somebody who talks this way. So it's almost the opposite of the way he's always been read, or almost always been read.

**JMF:** So in other words, in Romans 1-3 we're reading his presentation of the very argument that he's arguing against in 5-8.

**DC:** Exactly. Paul is setting up somebody, but he starts off setting them up in a Socratic way, which was typical in the ancient world, where he is using the assumptions of this person and driving them against one another to show how this gospel collapses.

**JMF:** So back and forth like a dialogue of Socrates.

**DC:** Right. He's pushing back on a religious person in Romans 1-3, which sounds too good to be true. When I tell people "We've misunderstood what Paul's getting at here. It's not really as negative as people think." And they go, how can you be sure? It makes better sense in

the text because there are these little problems in the text that we've known about for a long time, but we haven't known what to do with them, so we've done what the scholars say, we've anesthetized them or narcotized them. We've just passed over the top of them and pretended they're not there.

**JMF:** Let's go over, look at an example or two.

**DC:** There's a stack of them, but let me run you through a couple of them. The first problem is that when Paul starts off his tirade, Romans 1:18-32, it's a very dense aggressive bit of prose. When you read it in the Greek, what you hear is kind of a texture that isn't quite Paul. It's a little bit like you're reading through a Stephen King book (should you read a Stephen King book), and you hit a paragraph that's written by Jane Austin and you go, oh, something funny is going on here. Somebody is talking in another voice. It's quite an aggressive voice.

Then, chapter 2, we hit somebody who's talking in this way. Who is that person? Tradition has usually said this guy is a Jew. He's not only a Jew, he's *the* Jew. So what Paul is doing is, he's attacking Judaism here. So the way we get to be a Christian is we learn first what it means to be a Jew, which is to be justified by works, and we fail, and then we sort of flip out of that into Christianity.

But when we read what Paul does with this Jew in this text, we build up a picture that isn't quite right. It's not fair. He accuses the Jew from verse 17 and onwards of being somebody who robs temples, who commits adultery, who is a thief, who is a terrible hypocrite. How many Jews do you know that rob banks, sleep with the wrong people on the wrong occasions, this sort of thing? It's a hostile exaggeration. Not all Jews do this; *most* Jews don't. So the person that Paul's going after here probably isn't your ordinary everyday Jew. It's somebody else.

If I told you the Jews were very upset round about the time Paul was writing this letter because 20 years previously the Roman emperor kicked them out of Rome...imagine a decree coming down from Governor Schwarzenegger saying all Christians must leave the city of Los Angeles. This would cause quite a trauma, right? In 19 C.E. the Jews were kicked out of Rome because three Jews had seduced a Roman noblewoman and taken money that she had promised to the Jerusalem temple...and absconded with it themselves. So they were thieving, temple-robbing, adulterous Jews. I think that explains what's going on in this text. Paul's not targeting everybody who is a Jew, he's targeting people who come to Rome who pretend to be Jewish teachers and really aren't.

This fits into the argument that he's developed here, that he's going after somebody else. Then if we read on a little bit further, we suddenly have a little to-and-fro between Paul and this other person. The first guy is going, "I believe in desert, I believe in judgment." The other guy is going, "I

believe in the faithfulness and the compassion and the graciousness of God.” The first guy goes, “No, even if you sin, God is not going to rescue you on the day of judgment, desert must hold. It must hold good.” Then the guy comes back and goes, “But surely if we’re sinful and we get rescued, that shows that God is a compassionate God.” It goes back and forth like this.

The usual reading thinks that Paul is the guy that’s insisting on judgment and desert. How can that guy, Paul, turn around in chapters 9-11 and say God loves Israel, and even though Israel is disobedient, will rescue Israel? He will not lose faith with Israel. How can the guy saying the opposite in chapter 3 turn around and suddenly say something else in Romans 11?

My reading, it’s the other guy that’s insisting on judgment and desert. Paul is the guy that’s saying, “What about the faithfulness of God? What about the compassion of God? What about the love of God for people who sin?” So these little clues add up to a new understanding of this text, where Paul is attacking someone who is fundamentally religious, fundamentally conditional and contractual. I’m summarizing an awful lot of information, and you might just have to buy the book and read it and you’ll find out all about it.

**JMF:** It’s a very long book.

**DC:** Yeah, it is very long. I’m sorry about that. I did my best.

**JMF:** You must have felt that the entire argument needed to be in one volume rather than breaking it into, say, three volumes or two volumes.

**DC:** Right.

**JMF:** ...be unable to get everything into it unless it were all together.

**DC:** Yeah, I thought hard about breaking it into two books, but what’s going on when you read Paul, even though we’re often not aware of it, is we’re bringing what we’ve been taught to the text. It’s structuring the way that we read the text, even when we’re not aware of it. We’ve been raised and taught that Paul teaches a certain sort of the gospel. And the way that we’ve often been taught Paul (and I’m referring to the wrong way) is a way that often also resonates with our culture and even with our politics. So the slightly harsh understanding of Paul resonates with the slightly harsh side to American culture, to American politics, to Western politics.

**JMF:** So how would you describe that, then, this harsh side of Paul? What’s a summary of that way of viewing it?

**DC:** It’s all about compassion being directed to a limited group, who has done certain things to earn that compassion and benevolence, and everybody else on the outside being exposed to desert and, if necessary, just to punishment. So if you contract into the privileged group by doing certain things, then you’ll be okay, but everybody else basically just has to sink or swim by themselves. If they sink, what that means usually in social or cultural terms is they’re going to be punished somehow. This is how we run

our politics, and it is how we run a lot of our culture, and this how we've been taught Paul.

So part of the length of the book was to show this is how we're thinking, but it's not necessarily the way that God is acting toward us in Christ. There's another way of doing things that we're getting from Christ. We're getting a God that doesn't want to leave anybody out. We're getting a God who has acted very inclusively first to reach out to everybody. It's almost the opposite way of doing things. Everybody's been included and there are people that push away and pull out of it.

So a lot of the book and its length is trying to deprogram people from their wrong way of thinking and reprogram them with this healthier way of understanding God, so that when we get to Paul, we can see that this is what he's talking about as well. He's on the same page as we are.

**JMF:** How do you find it being received? What kind of feedback are you getting?

**DC:** There's been a full spectrum of responses, from "this is absurd rubbish" to "this has changed my life forever," and pretty much everything all the way through in the middle. Quite a lot more enthusiasm than I thought I would get, and a lot more tension than I thought I would get.

When you're writing a book like this, you worry that when you finish that it will drop in a black hole and no one will talk about it. Well, a lot of people are talking about it. I get a little frustrated with what they say at times. I don't feel I'm being understood all the time. I don't feel like my arguments are being presented terribly accurately at all times, but people are trying to break through, and I appreciate that.

There's a bit of a generational thing going on as well. There are a lot of scholars that have written equally large books on Paul and Romans, and I'm challenging what they're doing, threatening them. It's very hard for them to turn around and say, "I've been wrong about this all this time," if they have been wrong. The younger generation, the doctoral student, post-doctoral type of student, seems to be very excited about it.

**JMF:** What do you attribute that to?

**DC:** They're putting the pieces in place for the remaining creative research on Paul, so they're at a much more malleable stage of life. I remember when I was like that. There aren't too many costs involved with them saying, "What I was taught was wrong, let's run with this new paradigm." There are a lot of costs involved with the older generation turning around and seeing the paradigm that they're working with is no longer functioning. This is typical if it's a paradigm shift. This is how they always work. It just means that I have to be patient and a little bit lucky.

**JMF:** You're not the only one who takes this perspective, though.

**DC:** I hope not. Certainly not on Paul as a whole. There are a lot of scholars who certainly agree with me about the main thrust of his gospel.

That is absolutely right. I'm standing in a long tradition in terms of reading Paul this way. I would hope that what I'm saying about Paul's gospel is in complete continuity with the way the Patristics have read him, the Cappadocians, the best parts of the Catholic tradition, Orthodoxy, the best parts of the Reformation, right through the modern period. I think I'm in touch with the best theology of the church. It's true, though, that there are a lot of non-scholars reading Paul who aren't quite so thrilled with what I'm up to ... I don't always hear terribly good reasons from them why that's the case.

**JMF:** You wouldn't attribute it entirely to their history of research and study and teaching, though, would you? Because there are examples of major theologians who come across a new perspective and who go with it. What is the attraction to holding onto a view of Paul that is more judgmental than grace-filled?

**DC:** I think you've hit the nail on the head. Whether you acknowledge it or not, theology is always in play when we're reading Paul, and it's almost being scrutinized by that, so we're very defensive about it. If we're not crystal clear on certain theological positions, we will lapse into a conditionality and a sort of a contractualism. If we're not vigilant that we don't do that, if we're not 100 percent committed to a gospel that is unconditional, it is a gospel of grace.

**JMF:** When you say conditionality and contractual, you're driving at what?

**DC:** Certain people present our relationship with God in a way that basically is a contract. They talk about it as a covenant, but it's a contract. A contract is something where I will do something for you if you fulfill certain conditions first. It's always an if/then structure. This is how we run our society. This is how we run our families half the time, unfortunately. This is how we run our politics, and this is how we run our theology. But it's a fundamental *mis*understanding of the way God deals with us.

**JMF:** "I'll give you salvation if you do something for me."

**DC:** Exactly. It seems very natural to us, it's an easy way, it slips off the tongue, doesn't it? But it's a fundamental corruption of the gospel. Once you put that little word "if" in, you have destroyed the gospel of grace. It's as simple as that.

**JMF:** And a covenant, by contrast ...

**DC:** Unfortunately, people have debased the use of the word because they've talked about the covenant, but then they've talked about it contractually, which is what it really *isn't*. We learn about what a covenant is, *the* covenant in fact, from looking at how God has related to us in Christ. It's as simple as that. It's clearly, utterly, unconditional. It's benevolent, it's loving, it's his choice for us from the foundation of the world to be in fellowship with him and to be transformed by him. That's what a covenant



is. There are no conditions. There are no strings attached. There's no "if," there's no "but."

**JMF:** In the Old Testament, it's full of that, isn't it?

**DC:** It is and it isn't. Depends how you read it.

**JMF:** The idea that "I will be faithful to my covenant regardless of what you do."

**DC:** Right. Very much so.

**JMF:** "I change not in my covenant faithfulness, therefore you are not destroyed."

**DC:** Exactly. What tends to happen is a little mistake. People shift from what God is expecting of us in the covenant relationship, and they turn those things into a condition. God lays out that which is really expected of us and appropriate of us — the way we should respond to God in this relationship — and they like to turn that into a contract. We like to introduce these other conditions for all sorts of ultimately pretty sad reasons.

This is the great battle going on in the interpretation of Paul. This is the struggle that's going on in his understanding at the moment. The stakes are so high, this is where the conflict is, at times, so strong, and people are so rooted to the conditional or contractual gospel. This is why they fight back so hard. It's a tragedy that so many good folk in the church have been taught that God is a God of conditions. They're defending "the true gospel" when they push back on a reading that I'm offering, which is a reading based in grace.

**JMF:** If you take grace unconditionally, doesn't that level the playing field, as it were? In other words, there's no room for me to say, "I've been faithful in this way and that way, and you haven't, so I deserve *more* than you. You need to be condemned, and I need to be, I'm going to be..." You automatically think that way.

**DC:** I am superior here in some sense. So we need to find some way of setting that up.

**JMF:** Yeah. It's like therefore we'd have to stand on that in order to...

**DC:** We have to introduce conditions...

**JMF:** Yeah.

**DC:** That's right. It's a sad reflection on....

**JMF:** It seems a rather base way of looking at it, but...

**DC:** It's sinful.

**JMF:** It's religious, as opposed to gospel.

**DC:** Yeah. It's religion at its heart as opposed to gospel. That's exactly right.

## 2. OUR PARTICIPATION WITH CHRIST

**JMF:** I would like to talk about your book, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*, or at least some of the concepts that are in it. But I'd like to start by talking about the cover (it's a very unique cover), and if you could tell us about how that came about and what the meaning of some of these symbols are on it.

**DC:** Well, this is the secret to the book. You have to be nice about the cover because it was designed by my wife.



**JMF:** Very good.

**DC:** I think it was very funky. She's a very funky woman. Buried in the collage are codes about what I'm talking about in the book, so my students always pick it up and have a bit of a chuckle. At the top, there are two boxes and the arrow, A to B, and most people have a theory about how Paul gets you from Box A to Box B. Box B is where you want to go. But there are lots of different theories about exactly how you set up Box A and Box B and how you get from one to the other. I think some of these can get in the way of what Paul is often doing.

But the model that I like, that I really push for in this book, is

sneaking through the middle here. It uses these letters. You've got two Ps and then an M and an E going around the corner. What I'm getting at there is that, I think, Paul's gospel is all about P for participation, and E is for eschatology, which is one of those wonderful words you should use at a cocktail party from time to time. Meaning, there's a sense in which God has brought to us a new reality, a perfected reality, which is superior to the one, in a way, that we're occupying. And in Christ, he's managed to organize things so we actually participate in it in Christ.

How does that work, specifically? I think Paul tells us all about this in some detail, particularly in Romans 6, but also with insights from Romans 7 and Romans 5, a little bit going on in Romans 8, but Romans 6 is really where it happens. What seems to have happened in Paul's mind is: Christ has entered into our situation, the human situation, which is good, but there's a sense in which we're oppressed, and disordered (and fractured even) by evil powers. The power of Sin (Paul effectively spells that with a capital S—the power of Death, capital D). These demonic forces have unfortunately taken up residence in the stuff that we're constituted out of (our flesh), so that we're transient, we're corruptible, we decay, we sin, and we die.

This is a very heavy burden for humanity to bear. What God has done to drag us back (because this is not God's intention for creation, for humanity, for any of us, he wants to pull us back into fellowship; this is something we've done to ourselves), he sends his Son into that situation to become part of it and to assume it. As the [church] fathers said, "That which is not assumed is not healed." So Christ takes on all of this mess when he becomes a human.

Then the crucial thing for Paul is that when Christ is executed, when he dies on the cross, that condition is terminated. It is terminated. I'm in the province of termination, and here we are. That kind of places a massive false stop after all of this corruption, all of this dislocation, all of this disorder.

In order to get us through and transform us and heal us, God really must provide a state beyond this. And this is the eschatology, this is the eschaton, this is the things to do with the end. *Eschaton* is Greek for "end," *ology* is just "words about stuff." So we're talking about the end, but the end has come right to us, now. So, Christ has taken everything that we are, has terminated it, and then has been resurrected again into this new state where he's enthroned and sits on the right hand of the Father.

Now by doing that, because he is God, because he is also the creator, because he is also the new Adam, the second Adam, the one who starts off a new humanity, there's a sense in which this is now true for every one of us. This is a reality for every one of us. But God doesn't leave it at that. There is, of course, the Holy Spirit who draws each one of us into this

reality in a very powerful way, in a palpable way.

So the second P is very, very important. The first P is important, that's the participation in Christ, the second P is the Spirit—it stands for *pneumatology* [after *pneuma*, the Greek word for Spirit]. So our participation in Christ is by way of the Spirit. As we're drawn into what Christ has done, we're drawn into this new transformation of what we are. And this [pointing at the book] is a being, this is a humanity that is in a very real sense one which the power of sin and death and corruption has been broken. So it's quite concrete. I want to say that this is Reality with a capital R. This is more real than anything else that you or I experience.

Now. The sharp-witted among you will have noticed I've only covered three letters. I've done a P, a P, and an E. Why have I put an M in here at the risk of making the whole thing hopelessly complicated? Well, I hope there's a very good reason for this—and that is, as you know, this reality, this new creation that we stand in the midst of, it's not terribly obvious on one level. Paul's converts knew this. They sensed that when he talked about the new reality, sin being broken, the power of death being broken, they couldn't see it. What Paul said to them was, "If you're part of Christ's story, you are absolutely guaranteed the fullness of this reality. You are guaranteed it. But you must be part of the front end of the story."

How do we know we're part of the front end? It's when we participate in Christ's sufferings. So the M stands for the *martyrological* side of what Christ did when he obeyed the will of the Father, suffered, was obedient to the shame of the cross, and he died. It's the story of his faithfulness, his faithfulness unto death. It's the story that Philippians 2:5-11 talks about so much.

Paul is emphatic that as we experience some of the suffering that we do experience in this life, and also at the same time we do experience some of the faithfulness and the obedience, we experience some of the martyrological side of Christ, and we know from that, we know that we are bolted into this story in a very real way, and that we are at the front end of a story that ends in the termination of all that's bad, but a glorious resurrection of all that's good.

That sounds a little complex, but I think this is really the heart of Paul's gospel. This is really what powers him up. This is what excited him, this is what he thinks God has done in Christ. This is what leads him to travel all over the eastern Mediterranean to suffer, to struggle, to found little communities everywhere. This is what gives meaning to the Lord's Supper, this is what gives meaning to the baptism for Paul. Baptism symbolizes beautifully and nets this idea of participating in Christ's death and then also being resurrected to new life. I find it all incredibly exciting and helpful.

**JMF:** Not only Paul, as far as that goes, but we often find throughout the New Testament it's as though the letters begin with the assumption that

the recipients are undergoing some kind of suffering, usually it can be persecution, oftentimes. Then he's moving from that into "but it has this great meaning for you."

**DC:** Very true.

**JMF:** How is that any different from what all of us experience? All you have to do is listen to the adults, if you're a kid, and they're talking about what hurts, and how the government is doing something to mess things up. There's always something going on that's painful, a tragedy, a crisis. We live from one crisis and tragedy to the next.

**DC:** There's a sense in which, I think, apart from Christ, it's hard to give meaning to suffering. We can try, but part of the struggle of life is we suspect often, "Does my pain have value? Does it have worth? Does it mean anything?" I think what Paul is offering us here is an understanding of suffering that does have a real core of meaning in it. It's not any old suffering.

I think we get this from one of Paul's rather neglected letters, very strongly, but 2 Corinthians articulates at great length what it means for him as a leader of the church to suffer. And he talks about this suffering—he hasn't gone looking for it, it's found him. But this is a mark of his authenticity, and a very powerful one, I think. I don't want us to run off and look for pain, but there's a sense in which if it does encounter us, it's something that can mean something.

The other thing that we get from 2 Corinthians is the suffering that Paul catalogs there from time to time is suffering in which he is reaching out, with the gospel, to those who do not know about it, and in a way are even hostile toward it. It's the suffering that's generated when you take the incarnation seriously and you act in an incarnational way. That's when you begin to follow the Spirit into situations and locations where you're uncomfortable, with people that you're uncomfortable with, where God is calling you to go. When you have to push through these barriers and boundaries... (we love to surround ourselves with barriers and boundaries and keep out the people we're uncomfortable with, but God is ahead of us and is often pulling us through those to engage with those people).

When you move through those barriers, you get out of your comfort zone, you get into cultures, you get into languages and situations that you're not comfortable with, you do experience suffering. You experience incomprehension. You experience rejection. And to top it all off, you're arriving with this shocking gospel—a gospel that is a wonderful gospel of grace, but it's also a gospel that says to people, "You can do nothing to please God. God has done everything to help you. God has come the whole way to you." That means, in effect, "All the things that you're offering me, you just have to put away, put away for now."

It's a message that in its very generosity can elicit conflict and hostility. I

think Paul gives us a narrative in 2 Corinthians of the sort of suffering that is often associated with Christian ministry and Christian life, and what he's trying to say is, "It's okay, this is going to happen, enjoy it if you can, rejoice in it, because this is an authentic mark of the reality of the Christian gospel."

**JMF:** Where do you look for assurance of being in Christ if you're *not* experiencing that kind of suffering?

**DC:** That's a good point, and should allow me to clarify something that's very important here. I'm not advocating going and finding pain, but I think that we often define it very strongly with reference to ourselves in quite an individual way. What Paul is talking about is an attitude of burden-bearing. So the pain that Paul often talks about is actually, in part, the pain of other congregations and other people and other groups that he is shouldering and carrying—the pain that he is feeling. I would want to say that God is calling us to carry the burdens of people. This is where we're meant to be going.

I think the Spirit is often way ahead of us. I often think of John 4—when Jesus brought out the disciples to look at the fields and said "a few more months until harvest, and I say look, the fields are white and ready for harvest now." It's incredibly true. The world around us that's ripe for harvest is a world that is suffering and struggling. I think that's where we're called to be. So there's a sense in which well, it doesn't have to be us.

I wonder if we don't need to be in contact with people who are, in a sense, struggling. There should be, perhaps, a story that we can tell sometimes of relationships that have been set up that we've followed the Spirit into where we're trying to help. And, of course, in helping we are helped ourselves and enriched ourselves. Often when we come as people who are prepared to give, we are the ones who end up receiving.

**JMF:** Paul uses that kind of language in the opening to several of his letters where he talks about how one congregation's heart is going out to the suffering of another and that sort of thing.

**DC:** Yes. Very much so. The language of sharing is all over his letters. It's because the reality that he's involved with is such a participatory reality. We are very much bound up with one another, and so what happens to you affects me in a very direct way. The sort of community that we're being birthed into by this process is a communion, really. It's the communion of God, the divine communion, and we've been called to be a part of that, and so we're being called to be part of a community where every person is bound up with the reality and the life of every other person so that we look at Christ, we look at the Father, we look at the Son, we look at the Spirit—they're all defined and inextricably intertwined.

When we're experiencing fullness of our personhood in Christ, what we experience is the reality that we're involved with one another in a very real

way. We're very relational. Personhood is all about these relationships. My relationship with my wife is a huge part of who I am. She is a huge part of my personhood. She's not the only person that's a part of my personhood, but she's a very important one. This is a central truth. So, in a sense, we need to be engaged with the people around us who are hurting, and hopefully they'll be engaged with us when we're hurting.

**JMF:** When you talk about the gospel and you talk about salvation and all, we are not talking about details of rules and laws to keep, per se, we're talking relationships—restorational relationships, building the right relationships, good relationships, being together, being in communion with God and with one another.

**DC:** Absolutely. I mean, that's the church. That's the reality of the church, which is a reality that's in God, and you don't legislate a reality like that. That's to make a big mistake. There's a freedom to these relationships that's very important, because we're in touch with the person who's making the rules, as it were.

And it turns out that this person, God, is not making rules. God is actually just calling us into these relationships that have a certain shape, so there's a flexibility about it, there's a malleability, if you like, which is very liberating. Once you start to try to legalize it and legislate it, you actually mess it up. In the end of the day, there's one legislator, and that's Jesus Christ. If we have any problems, we can come and go to him and ask him about stuff, which is nice—it's a good feeling to be operating in a situation like that.

**JMF:** Often we read Paul as though we have a relationship with the rules...

**DC:** Right.

**JMF:** ...when our relationship is really mediated by the law, our focus is on "where are we falling short in terms of this rule or that rule" instead of thinking about it in terms of living out the relationship into which we've been called, in fact the relationship we've been given that we actually are a part of and participating in whether negatively or positively.

**DC:** Yes. I think Paul was anything but a legalist, and you can see this, I think, reasonably clearly when you lay his letters out alongside one another on the table and look at their diversity and see the very different advice that's going to Philippi from the advice that's going to Corinth. Even the advice that goes to Corinth in the second letter that goes to Corinth, the advice that goes to Colosse, the advice that goes to Rome—extremely diverse, which suggests to me that Paul is very context-sensitive. He's not laying down universal rules, he's speaking out of a universal reality, which is a very different thing. That reality is essentially personal. It's a community that involves people, it involves the divine community.

**JMF:** It's like he gets to the very different needs and conclusions by the

same path.

**DC:** Exactly. Under the same Lordship, one might say.

**JMF:** A lot of similarity in Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and yet addressing different issues.

**DC:** That's right. Paul is what we might call almost a command ethicist. He's very worried about the thought that you lay down a rule, because he thinks while that can be a good thing for a while, as he points out in Romans 7, eventually you can make that rule and go to some situation where it will do some damage—you can exploit it. The demonic forces that are unleashed in the world that stand against us are so much more sophisticated than we are, and they can manipulate these things and they can break you down by putting them to work.

So Paul's approach is, he's no longer orienting himself primarily by written instructions or by rule after rule or even by propositions—he is orienting himself through Christ directly. He's listening to Christ, and Christ is telling him what to do. It's a living situation where he's getting instructions from the one who is controlling and organizing everything. He's getting his instructions from the Spirit and from the Father as well—it's not just Christ who's doing this. That's a very different mentality, isn't it? It's a much more intimate reality, I think, than we tend to live in ourselves.

**JMF:** I think an example of that might be in the way unity is often used with churches. Paul is talking about unity and unity in the Spirit and in the faith, and we, instead of seeing that as being rooted in the relationship of love, we instead use it as a weapon as a church to compel...

**DC:** Right. Legislate.

**JMF:** ...we legislate a lock-step approach to something and *call* that unity as though it's unity, but it it's far from anything resembling communion.

**DC:** I think you're exactly right. What Paul is talking about is, the church *is* actually unified, because it is in Christ, and Christ is unified, and he does hold everything together. What's going on is a complete failure by people to recognize a unity that Christ has established. We don't have to go out and work at establishing this.

**JMF:** To create it.

**DC:** We can respond to something that's already there.

**JMF:** Live in the reality of what is already true.

**DC:** Exactly.

**JMF:** Which means I need to change, as opposed to making everyone else agree with me.

**DC:** Right. Exactly.

**JMF:** Robert Capon calls it left-handed authority as opposed to right-handed authority.



You've mentioned that Paul illustrates some of his theological positions in his ministry concretely in what he wrote about the slave Onesimus and also Lydia in Philippi. How do you see those playing out in...

**DC:** If I'm right about Paul's gospel and what was really making it tick, you've probably detected by now that God comes down so far to us, and we're all so deeply involved in the situation that's wrong, and we're accountable for that wrongness on a certain level, that it kind of levels out all the distinctions that we like to introduce to stratify our relationships. The gospel of grace really knocks down status, and pretensions. When Paul talks about the new reality that we live in, he does so quite clearly from time to time that these old barriers have been broken down and transcended, so that there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, that you're all sons of God in Christ Jesus. That's his most famous saying about those things, in Galatians 3:28.

We're fond of saying that from the pulpit and even our Bible studies, but it's another thing to actually enact the erasure of these status differentials on the ground and to push past them—that's hard work. So the question arises—was Paul himself somebody who was actually committed to doing that, or was he a bit of a theorist? Was this something he was happy talking about, or was it something he actually did?

I was enormously impressed when I pushed into his letter that he wrote to Philemon and reconstructed that situation there and realized that he was really practicing what he preached and the situation in that little letter (and we ignore it a lot, don't we?).

Paul has written to a guy called Philemon, he's married to a woman called Apphia. Apphia is a Phrygian name, and I think Philemon was probably accompanying [the letter to the] Colossians, so it's going to an ancient territory in present-day western Turkey—it would have been ancient Phrygia, so this stands to reason. It looks as though Philemon and Apphia are a Phrygian couple, which make them members of an ancient civilized barbarian race.

Paul is writing on behalf of a guy called Onesimus. Onesimus is not his name, it's a slave name, a Latin name, just means "useful." It's like as we would call "Handy Andy." Slaves were so depersonalized in the ancient world that they weren't allowed to use their own names, but were just called things like Number 1, Number 2, Number 3, or they were called after places where they were born, or they were called pet names. Onesimus is a slave, this is his new name.

When we read the letter to the Colossians, that's also going to the same situation, I think, we read a similar statement to Galatians 3:28 in Colossians 3:11, but it's oriented slightly differently. Paul says there's no Jew or Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. Barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. What's a Scythian doing in

Colossians 3:11? What is a Scythian? Well, a Scythian is a barbarian that rides around the Russian steps. It was a name that was applied to people that were enslaved from the northern part of the Black Sea. Everyone who was enslaved out there was just called a Scythian—you often got a higher price for them if you called them a Scythian. These slaves were brought down into the Mediterranean, and they were mainly sold at Ephesus, one of the great slave markets of the ancient world.

It's very likely that Onesimus or his parents is some poor white guy who's been enslaved by pirates from the north shore of the Black Sea. He's come down, he's been sold at Ephesus, and now he's working for this Phrygian couple, and there's a problem in this household, there's great unhappiness, there's a really fractured relationship.

Paul has run into Onesimus in jail, and Onesimus has come to him and said, "Please help me out here. Something is wrong in this household." This was something you could do in the ancient world—it wasn't quite as bad as running away. If you ran away and you were caught, you were branded, you could be executed, terrible things would happen to you. But you could run to a friend of the family and say, "I'm in deep trouble here, please help me out."

So Onesimus comes to Paul, and as we reconstruct the relationship, this is what happened. It doesn't look like he was a Christian when he arrived. He's just a pagan. He's a pagan boy that's unhappy. He is the lowest of the low. He's an unhappy slave, branded as lazy, he's a white slave from a far-off barbarian land. In terms of social status in the ancient world, he's as low as you go.

Paul practically falls in love with him. He says, "This boy is my heart now, he has become my heart to me while I'm in chains." He sends him back to his master, Philemon, with this letter, but also having clearly converted him. He sends back a cover letter saying to the leader of the congregation, "Look, take care of this situation, look out for him."

Then he says, "Charge any money to my account, I'm coming to visit soon." What I see in there is that Paul has reached out to this, this probably teenager, and really has grasped him, drawn him to the reality of Christ, given him that gift, and set up a relationship that seems deep and committed and genuine between quite a high-status religious figure and this very, very low-status marginal guy who's been causing trouble, this person from the bottom rung of society.

So I thought to myself, well, it looks to me as though Paul's really delivering on this from time to time. It's quite a challenge to us and for us as well.

### 3. SIN AND ITS SERIOUSNESS

**JMF:** In your book, *The Deliverance of God*, you focus a great deal on Romans 5-8 and the very positive, powerful assurance of salvation that is present in those passages. The question that seems to arise when we talk about the power, the strength, and the assurance of grace, which is most assuredly present, are all these nagging questions about the “but”s — the “but”s syndrome — when it comes to grace, but.... What are some of those, and how do we work with those?

**DC:** I think a lot of people resist a gospel of grace for three reasons. They’re worried about judgment, they’re worried about ethics, and they’re worried about sin. They see those things as connected together. What one runs into here is the inability to step outside of an essentially conditional mentality where people think, “If I can’t threaten you with something, if I can’t threaten you with a negative and a positive future state, how can I get you to behave well?”

**JMF:** Exactly.

**DC:** So [if I stress grace] I’ll be soft on sin, I won’t be doing my ethical job, and I’ll let judgment go, and all these things are held together. While this is the model that is pursued with the best of intentions, I think it’s basically wrong on all accounts. It’s wrong as an account of judgment, wrong as an account of ethics, wrong as an account of sin, and wrong about how people behave. Most importantly, it’s wrong about God.

The gospel really wants to do things very differently. Perhaps if we talk about that for a little bit, we can come back and see where the fallacies lie in these sorts of protests. The gospel of grace addresses ethics and sin in a very radical way. It says to you immediately, basically you are so sinful that you can contribute nothing to this process. That’s a very strong judgment on your sinfulness and what needs to change, and people sense this. The

gospel of grace, the flipside of the gospel of grace, is this very stern word of judgment.

You say to me, “How do I behave, once this gospel of grace arrives? Does it just let me do whatever I want?” Absolutely not (to quote Paul, who says that a lot, especially about this question). You’ve involved in a transformed reality now; you really have to cooperate with as much as you possibly can. You need to throw yourself into this new reality, and it asks that of you. It asks you to respond, at least in your relationships that you’re in. It will take every ounce of willpower and effort that you have, and more, to continue to respond to the Spirit and the presence of Christ in your life.

This is what true freedom is. As we respond in these relationships, we discover what liberty is, what it means to be set free from sin, and the tyranny of death, corruption, and sin, and to be free to live for God as God wants us to live. That’s true freedom, but it’s freedom that you have to be involved with. It’s real freedom. *You* are doing this. But what you’re not doing is: choosing to step away from him or choosing to be involved with him. It’s a relationship that’s given to you that you then need to respond to. It’s the freedom of response and the response of freedom.

This is something that’s hard for us to grasp because it’s a very non-modern, non-Western way of understanding freedom, but if I can put it like this, it’s rather like when a beautiful chord is played on a piano. Certain notes that are in harmonic resonance with this chord will resonate with it, and it’s as if God is playing this chord, and we are free to resonate with what God is doing in our lives and to fit into this magnificent orchestration. If God is not playing this chord, we’re not free, nothing happens, we’re inert. But when that chord is played and when we are struck, when that note is struck, we resonate. That is the freedom of God. We can push back on that and refuse to resonate. We can reject the freedom that God gives us. We can reject the gift that comes to us. But that’s not free, that’s not a choice. The Bible calls it sin, and it’s an irrational decision for slavery. I wouldn’t grace that whole operation with the word freedom.

When the gospel of grace comes to us, it reshapes our understanding of what true human freedom is. As our minds are reshaped and our responses are reshaped, I think we live as we’re meant to live, and we see more clearly why these other ways of approaching ethics and judgment and sin are wrong. You can probably see by now where I’m going with this in terms of having someone protest against the gospel of grace and says it’s soft on sin, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Because when I’m looking at grace, I’m seeing something that treats sin with incredible seriousness. When I’m in this relationship of grace, and I know that God accepts me in Christ, I’m then free to see myself as I really am. I’m free to see the depth of the sin in my life because I’m secure.

**JMF:** Without fear.

**DC:** Exactly. I know that I cannot fall out of his loving embrace, and so I can be honest in a way that I cannot be honest in any other situation or system.

**JMF:** There's a huge freedom in that. All the burdens are lifted. There are no more pretenses.

**DC:** The burdens are lifted, but the reality is sometimes slightly horrible, because you begin to go on a journey when you get exposed to depths of sin that you hadn't even suspected were there. So a confessional quality becomes part of your discipleship — it becomes part of Christian leadership, where the deeper we go with God, the more sense, unfortunately, we have with our own struggle with sin...the more we appreciate the enormous accomplishment of Christ on our behalf, who shared this horrendous situation and didn't slip into that. It produces a more honest church culture, I hope it produces a slightly more honest culture of discipleship.

There are some lessons about sinfulness that I didn't even smell a whiff of until I had been a Christian probably 15 or 20 years, then all of a sudden, bam, you're confronted by something that you do, that's a pattern of behavior, that it's been in your life from the get go, and suddenly God is asking you to address that — an issue like violence. You can't even see how deeply immersed you are in violence until one day the Holy Spirit puts you in an incident, puts his finger on it, and says okay, it's time for you to address this now. That is an utterly painful experience, but it's the sort of repentance that needs to happen in Christian lives. It's taking sin incredibly seriously in an ongoing way.

If you're pushing the other kind of model, the one that I'm not so happy with, the more conditional contractual model, you're protesting against my emphasis on grace and you're saying well, what about sin? Aren't you soft on sin? I'm saying no, *you're* soft on sin. If you're approaching the gospel as if sin is something that you learn about and confess before you become a Christian, I think you're treating sin in a trivial way. You're approaching sin as if you can understand it without God revealing this stuff to you in an ongoing way. As if you could understand sin without being confronted by the reality of Christ. You're treating sin as if it's something you and your sinful situation can deal with yourself so that you can become a Christian.

That utterly trivializes sin. The assumption seems to be that through your good actions, you've left it at the door of the church when you walked in and became a Christian. You *didn't* leave it at the door of the church — it walked into church with you — unfortunately it comes back to grab you time after time. So I have a deep worry that this fairly conditional contractual approach to the gospel doesn't treat sin with sufficient seriousness. I find that ironic when I get accused by advocates of that gospel, of being too soft on sin.

I also think that they're soft on ethics. There's this belief that human beings have it in them to generate a certain amount of good behavior in order to become a Christian, before they become a Christian. Once you're a Christian you keep on with the good work. But this is deluded about the depth of sin and the human condition. We cannot generate good behavior and good deeds until God has come down and transformed us and changed us. This is a wildly over-optimistic evaluation of human ability and capacity. These are things that I've learned from standing in the tradition of grace, standing in the reality of grace, that I think the tradition is understood.

**JMF:** Isn't there also the idea of being forgiven, to have your past sins removed, and then the concept... now the Spirit will come and help you maintain some level of righteousness, rather than the model you're talking about.

**DC:** The false model has this sort of funny two-step pattern where you get sins wiped away and then you step through into the church by doing certain things. For example, making a decision of faith...supposedly makes you a Christian. Then the Holy Spirit arrives like the seventh cavalry to help you out when you get into a difficult situation. There's something a little odd about that.

What really seems to be going on is the Spirit is involved from well *before* your involvement. Now, from the foundation of the world, the Spirit with Christ has been working toward your and my inclusion in all of this. The Spirit has been working on your journey often when you're not aware of it, leading you to an understanding of Christ, of the church, of God, of sin. They are all involved together. This is so much more than forgiveness of sins. It is forgiveness of sins, but it's release *from* sin.

There's a little word play that Paul does on the genitive connection [in the Greek grammar]...and you can talk about forgiveness of sins or forgiveness of transgressions, in which the transgressions are the object of the forgiveness. I'm going to forgive those sins over there. But there's also with the same word a sense of release from sins, which becomes release from sin in Paul's genitive of separation — we're getting released out of or away from the sin. This is talking about actually changing us — not wiping away acts, but changing the way we function so we don't act in that way.

**JMF:** This transformation has to do with being in Christ in a way that he is our life, he is our righteousness. It isn't our...

**DC:** Absolutely. There's a danger that when God comes to us in grace we then think "okay, so much has been done for me, now it's over to me to respond" — possibly I've been overemphasizing that. There's a sense in which grace from God doesn't just come all the way to us, it takes us back as well in Christ. Christ is the one who has walked in the way that we couldn't walk. It's as if we're in a massive snowdrift, helpless, bound there, but Christ is the one that has smashed the furrow through the snow — we

walk behind him, he pulls us, he carries us behind him through the snow. God hasn't just come all the way down to us, he's also hauling us and Christ all the way back to him. So all of our acting and responding, in a way, is an echoing of Jesus' perfect response for us.

We see this again in Romans 8, we see so much in Romans 8 — where Paul talks about prayer, for example. We struggle, we don't know what to pray. But then we realize the Spirit is praying in a deeper way than we can pray. Christ is praying for us as well. What's really going on there is, Christ is continually offering up prayer to the Father, the Spirit is offering up prayer to the Father (obviously knowing much more about the situation than we do), and we're entering into that prayer that is being undertaken on our behalf. It is a gift that comes all the way down and comes all the way back. It's a marvelous thing. We could never dream this up. You couldn't think of this. This is not something that a clever person has thought up. This is an act of God.

**JMF:** So we're participating in the prayers of Christ and don't have to worry about whether our prayers are good enough.

**DC:** We don't have to be anxious, we just have to respond to this divine community as doing things on our behalf. All our activity is like that — we're caught up into the worship. We're caught up into worship in Christ, we're caught up into the behavior of Christ by the Spirit of Christ. We're caught up in the understanding of Christ, the mind of Christ. The faithfulness of Christ is something we're caught up in here as well. We don't have to generate this ourselves. This is what God is giving us. It's a gift that's so much bigger than we realize, and yet Paul knew this. He wrote in Ephesians, "I'm going to pray that you would have power to grasp with all saints the height and the depth and the breadth and the width of the love of Christ which is past all understanding." He understood that you could fall forever into the love of Christ. That's a pretty powerful expanse of benevolence, is it not?

**JMF:** Yeah. So our faith that we at the time of believing should not be thought of as a work that causes God to change his mind, causes God to look at us in a new way.

**DC:** No, not at all.

**JMF:** It isn't the beginning point of our salvation.

**DC:** I don't think so.

**JMF:** Or even our transformation.

**DC:** This is where we can get Paul wrong, by turning faith into a deed or a work that accesses all the benefits of Christ. It's like our Visa card — we trot off to the ATM with it and get the money out of the account. Without the card, you don't get any of the good stuff. No. This is a misunderstanding of Paul. Our faith is actually something that for Paul, Christ has as well as us. So in us, it's a fruit of the Spirit. It's very important,

but it's a sign that we are in Christ in our responding to the Father as Christ himself did.

There's a sense in which faith has got many dimensions. It's understanding, correct understanding of what's going on, which obviously is important. One of the most important elements of which is that we understand what sort of God we're involved with — the God of love. It involves trust, unwavering trust, it involves fidelity through suffering. When struggles come, we can be faithful. These are all signs, I think, that the Spirit is bearing fruit in our lives and that we're echoing the character of Christ.

So here I am using this reading of a couple of phrases in Paul that the King James Version got right when it translated them as “the faith of Christ” and that modern translations can seem to emphasize this decision, making the role for faith, unfortunately, changed or reinterpreted them, so they became “faith in Christ,” and recently scholars have begun turning back into “the faith of Christ.” Some scholars have begun realizing that this makes better sense of the texts where these phrases occur. I'm persuaded by that, I think they're right.

**JMF:** The very fact that it's the fruit of the Spirit...oftentimes we'll hear a sermon or a Bible study or group, and fruit of the Spirit will be listed or read from Galatians and then the admonishment is to start living like this because, after all, this is the fruit of the Spirit, so you need to get more of this in your life. Isn't that kind of turning around the whole...

**DC:** That's missing the point (laughing). It's not that we're not involved. God wants a response from us, and we are fully involved in this. But we don't have to generate this out of our own resources. We're not thrown back on ourselves. We don't have to strive to produce these sorts of things as proof that we're involved in the reality of Christ. We can chill out to a large extent, and attend to the glories of the gospel, respond it is as best we can, and Christ and the Spirit will do this work through us. There is restfulness and a sense of relaxation about people that are grasped by this truth. Paul would say people grasp this truth because they're grasped by this truth. This is the hallmark of people who are walking in grace.

**JMF:** Going back to the title of the book, *Deliverance of God...* The subhead is, *An Apocalyptic Re-Reading of Justification in Paul*. Why is it an apocalyptic re-reading of justification in Paul?

**DC:** What I'm getting at there is that there's a bad way of reading Paul, a way that I don't approve of and that gets him wrong. That reading of Paul produces a false model of the gospel, and it springs up out of what we could call “Paul's justification texts.” These are passages where he uses justification words, which in the Greek are using the *dikaio* name. So we could call them in Greek as *dikaio* texts. In those texts, Paul is doing something interesting with faith and works — works of law over here, faith over there, someone's been justified or *dikaio*(ed) and is also the



righteousness of God running around.

Those are the texts out of which a very conditional contractual understanding of the gospel has been generated, particularly since the second and third generations after the Reformation. I think that is where the damage was done. I don't think the main Reformers got this wrong. There was a little bit of it going on, but Calvin, Luther, I don't get the sense when I read them. But later on, second, third generation — certain theological systems were developed in a very conditional, contractual way, and these are the ones that did the damage.

To understand Paul properly, I think we need to eliminate this false dogmatic way of reading Paul. The way we eliminate it from the justification texts is, we grasp they're all about revelation, particularly when Paul's talking about faith. That's what I mean by *apocalyptic*. Apocalyptic is just a fancy word for revelation. It's the Greek word for revelation. *Apokalypsis* is Greek, *revelare* is the verb in Latin. So what I'm getting at is, there's nothing conditional or contractual going on in these justification texts. Paul is really talking about the disclosure of the good purposes of God through the faithfulness of Christ, which elicits from us a response and an echo of faith as we are involved in him. This is what Paul is talking about in all these texts.

We've tended to miss that because we've taken away the faith of Christ and we've taken that faith and made it into an action that we undertake. We've made these texts about human beings and about conditions that we can fulfill. But I don't think that's what Paul was writing. When he says *dikaiosyne theou*, the righteousness of God (or even better, the deliverance of God) has been revealed through *pistis Christou*, he's talking about the faith of Christ. It's Jesus' faithfulness to death on the cross and his resurrection where we see God's definitive righteous purpose revealed.

When we miss that, we misunderstand and misconstrue all of Paul's teaching about salvation. It's a great tragedy that's gripped a lot of the conservative church... We're used to saying that the liberal church has messed things up because they dumped the Bible and wandered off. But the conservative church tooth and nail will defend this as the true gospel...and it's a very great tragedy for the church, because what was going on in Paul was the antithesis of this "gospel." It's time for us to recover that.

**JMF:** It seems like the Christian walk is a lot more fun and enjoyable than it's often made out to be by those who seem to take it seriously...in the sense of being very sober and uptight, unable to enjoy themselves, unable to have fun with other people. It's not fun, it's a burden as opposed to a joy, because it's laced with fear.

**DC:** I think so. Well, what can be joyful about being flung back on your own resources and asked to satisfy...

**JMF:** Especially when you have none, so you have to pretend you have

some, which leads to judgmentalism and to condemnation and to everything that divides people instead of bringing them together.

**DC:** And hanging over your head is this fearsome scenario of what's going to happen at the end of the age, and you're worried, you don't have any sense of assurance.

**JMF:** In the gospel, there is no fear of the judgment.

**DC:** Love drives out fear. I don't believe that God wants us to be afraid for a millisecond of anything, except perhaps our own stupidity.

**JMF:** And there's a solution for that, by trusting over against our stupidity.

**DC:** That's right — trusting what God tells us about ourselves instead of what we perhaps want to believe about ourselves.

**JMF:** That would take another full interview alone.

**DC:** Exactly.

**JMF:** What do you do for recreation, for hobbies?

**DC:** I have fun. I follow the suggestions of my wife, who is an expert at having fun, and we have cats and dogs, we run, we do Pilates and yoga, we go to the beach, we travel. I spend time with the kids, watch a lot of films, read. We have a terrific life. I feel positively guilty about the amount of enjoyment that I get out of life. But you can't have fun in your spare time if you're not having fun at work, often.

**JMF:** What's your next project? What project are you involved in that we'll eventually see?

**DC:** People are asking me to write a slightly shorter version of *Deliverance of God*, and I'm hearing those cries. So I think I will. I don't know that I always explain myself as well as I would like to. The feedback is coming in on the big book. Folk are not grasping the theological issues with as much clarity as I had hoped. So I need to spell those out a little bit more clearly. I think I'm getting a hold of them more clearly as I talk in situations like this. So a shorter book that shows how to read Romans the right way I think is what I'm going to work on in the next few months.

After that I have a very long-running project on the life of Paul, because I've always been passionately interested in how he worked as missionary — where he was, what he was visiting, what ships he sailed on...in a really concrete gritty way. I've visited most of these cities, so I wanted to write a book about that and then collapse. And I should come to you for another suggestion.

## 4. IN CHRIST – CONVERSION AND CALLING

### Paul’s method of preaching the gospel

**Michael Morrison:** You’ve spent a lot of your time, your scholarly work, working on Paul. You’ve got a couple big books here about Paul. You said in one of our earlier interviews that you are interested in the life of Paul. I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about that. I’m somewhat familiar with the conversion of Paul from the book of Acts. But how does Paul himself describe his conversion?

**DC:** We’re a little bit too familiar with his conversion from the book of Acts. We don’t pay enough attention to how *he* tells us he got converted. He never uses the language of conversion when he is describing what happened to him; he uses the language of *call*. He echoes the call narratives of Jeremiah and Isaiah rather strongly to emphasize that God encountered him in a very direct and dramatic way. What took place was a *revelation*.

So on one level, what happened to him is extremely important for us to understand, which is that a meeting with God took place that God initiated, very unexpected. On another level, it’s a little dangerous to make Paul’s “conversion” the paradigm for our conversion, because he had something very special happen to him. He was called to be an apostle. I’m not sure that all of us are called to be an apostle. Some of us, maybe.

**MM:** I’ve never been struck down in the way that Paul was. But does his story have any exemplary value for the conversions that we have?

**DC:** I think it does. But we also need to look harder at what he was doing, how he was converting people. What we find is there’s a network of friendships and relationships that’s spreading. He’s utilizing networks, sometimes in unexpected ways. People are converting in the context of relationships that they already have.

So, for example, he often tries to hook up with family networks or

Jewish networks where he's visiting. When those don't work, he goes and takes employment as a hand worker, and he begins to make friends with the people in the workshop. This is roughly how he met Lydia. Lydia was involved in handworking and textiles. She's somebody who's networking with women. He's not just staying in the networks with men.

He's probably also working veteran networks when he can as well. Remember, there's a veteran at Philippi. There's another veteran probably at Colosse. These are colonies of soldiers that have retired from the Roman Army, they've done their 25 years of service, and they kept in touch with one another, and they probably were working in textiles.

So what we see is Paul doing something very typical of a new religion, which is sort of playing hopscotch from network to network and exploiting those networks and those relationships and people who know him and are friends of his, become friends of his, who are friends of friends, they're converting and forming the basis of his new communities.

**MM:** So could he go into a city and start a church in three weeks, for example? Is that...

**DC:** Well, this is a bit of an exaggeration, I think. In the ancient world, if you went into a city cold and you didn't know anybody, you would die. They didn't know you, you had no food, you had no water, if you fell ill you dropped on the street, you had nowhere to stay. You had to have contacts. These are very hostile missionary environments. They don't like strangers coming in and telling them that they way that they've been doing things for 100s of years is wrong. You need to know somebody who's there already.

Once you've linked up with them, stayed with them for a bit, you need to try and hook onto the sorts of networks and friendships that that person has. This is what we see him doing. In each city around the Mediterranean, he knows somebody who knows somebody, and he goes and stays with them and then links up with somebody else. It's all about who you know.

**MM:** What kind of a message would he then preach in that situation? How would he introduce them to Jesus?

**DC:** This undermines our slightly stereotypical notion of Paul arriving and preaching one dramatic proclamatory message that people then respond to with some sort of decision, the altar call takes place on the corner of the streets of Corinth and the Corinthians all come forward. This is not how it worked.

When you're working with somebody, say you're a handworker and you're working on leather or you're working on sandals or stitching canvas awnings or something like that, you don't preach at them all day. You chat with them. You get to know them. You're probably listening to them as much as you're talking at them. A conversation takes place over many days and weeks and months, and then you turn around after that process, and lo and behold, these people believe what you're saying. You're telling the story

about how the Spirit who once created everything is also gathering us up into this person. It's language that they can understand, but it's also language that challenges them.

It will make more sense if you've heard Jews speaking, probably, if you've hung around the local synagogue, which you could do, if you've heard these types of stories about the God of Israel before. That's going to help you. But Paul is quite happy to communicate even if you've never heard of that material. He can translate his good news into your idioms and your thought forms. He can talk about adoption or benefaction, grace. These are things that every Greek and Roman would know about. They would know about having a patron, they would know about being gifted things, they would know about being adopted into someone's family, they would know about being immersed as a ritual of entry.

This is Paul communicating also in the language of the street, in a way that makes sense. He's a very good missionary. He knows what he's doing. He's contextualizing.

**MM:** You mentioned immersion. One of my questions there is, at what point would Paul baptize these people? Did he realize that they had crossed over from one religious belief to another?

**DC:** I think so. Sometimes there's a dramatic moment when you can point your finger at something and say, an event has taken place here, and we need to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and you would get baptized along with all your household. Other times I suspect that the process was gradual. But at some point it's appropriate for you to get baptized to signify the reality that you're now standing in. This would be one of the things that took place.

You would attend the communal meals where the Christians gathered together. These are meals taking place every day, and these are *meals*. A lot of people in ancient times were hungry, maybe two-thirds of the population was hungry, one-third of the population was very hungry — they lived from hand to mouth. So you went to Christian meals, you went to Christian celebrations of the sacraments partly because they were offering you food.

But in the middle of the food was the breaking of the bread and the passing around of the cup. You're participating in this. As Wesley would say, probably the cup and the bread are functioning like converting ordinances at that time — they're making the reality of Christ present to you. The cup is going around and the bread is being broken and eaten, and people are saying, "We're all part of this, this is all one with us, and we're one with someone who died, but also who is alive now and who is present with us now in a real way."

I assume that, like most Greek meals, you had the food first and then you had the entertainment afterward. The singing would begin, the Christian singing, people maybe would have brought along a song (which

was extremely democratic), and the worship would begin, and you would get a sense, “Goodness me, we’re in the presence of the living God here.”

**MM:** People found themselves in a community.

**DC:** Exactly. A worshiping community. They were gathered up into its worship. In this way probably many were powerfully affected. This is pretty exciting stuff for an ancient Greek — especially if you’re a woman. You didn’t have access to this type of stuff ordinarily. But these Christians were kind of strangely democratic. If you’re a woman you could come along, you could bring a song, you could prophesy, you could pray, you could participate, as long as you didn’t humiliate your husband in public (which is still probably a good rule of thumb) ...this is how these meetings operated. They were very vital and very participatory.

**MM:** Is it just a *story* that Paul is telling, or is there something there that he’s also exhorting them to make a decision? How do you go about growing this community or solidifying it?

**DC:** Right. It’s not *just* a story, it’s a story about a reality that you’re a part of, and that reality has certain claims on you, if you like, has a certain shape. It has a certain set of relationships built into it that you have to respond to. Paul is expecting a response. He has very high expectations of his converts. He’s got very high expectations of their behavior. There’s a strong emphasis on ethics, in particular what we might call the ethics of relationships.

This is where Paul is innovating — where the Spirit of God is doing something exciting, but also slightly intimidating — in the sense that if you’re a Jew, you would be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in the temple at Jerusalem, in a particular place, in a particular building, in a certain state of purity. You’d be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in accordance with fairly strict calendrical observances, fairly strict diet. Paul’s view is that stuff is now purely negotiable. If you’re a Jew you should still do it, unless you’re called to engage with another constituency.

But the pagans that he’s calling in his communities off the street...what he’s challenging them with is the inter-relational stuff that we see so much of in the Bible. How do I relate to you? Am I bitter toward you? Angry, hostile, backbiting, slanderous, am I in a status game with you? All that stuff has to stop. How do I speak to you? How do I talk with you? Am I charitable? Am I humble? These sorts of things. This is what Paul is really pushing his people to do. (Well, pushing is the wrong expression.) He’s talking about something that’s *drawing* them into this in a new way, I think.

**MM:** So the motivation for the behavior is quite different than ...

**DC:** Very much so.

**MM:** It’s like he’s offering them a gift of salvation, but once they’re already saved, then what’s the motive for them to do what is right?

**DC:** What he’s offering them is participation in a new reality. And when

you're in that new reality, you've been set free from a whole lot of stuff that is dragging you down, fracturing you and breaking you and harming you. You see more clearly what the good things are in life that God wants you to do. Basically you're an idiot if you don't want to do that.

**MM:** So he's painting a new reality.

**DC:** He's not painting it in the way that we would *limit* things to that. You're right, he is depicting something that's really here. He's witnessing, in a way, to a reality, so his stories and his depictions are helping Christians to understand what's going on.

It's exciting. This is why he calls himself an apostle. He's a diplomat who's announcing the good news of what God is doing — and what God is doing is really what matters. That's what's central, and that's what's real, and that's why if you're a Christian you're characterized in part by belief, which is, you understand what's going on. You're the one that's walking around with your eyes open. You're the one that's in the daylight. Other people are stumbling around in the dark with their eyes closed. You're the one that really knows what reality is all about.

That's an exciting summons, you know? He's stitching away in his little leatherworks, stitching the soles of his sandals, and he's talking about this stuff to these other impoverished stone workers around, and they're getting interested in it. They're going, "Sounds like a good deal."

**MM:** I was thinking once he builds this community, then he leaves. What are they going to think of that? Or, how long would he be staying in a city?

**DC:** It looks as though he stayed for about a year and a half, roughly, depending on how things went. Then he shot off, which strikes us as rather shocking. But he did keep in touch with everybody. We've got all these letters, because even after he left, he was still networking with these communities. When you see the thought and the effort that has gone into these texts, you realize how much they're actually still on his mind.

And if they get into trouble, he's on a boat straight away and shooting back to visit them. But you're right, he's a missionary, so he's church planting. His plan is to put these communities in place and then move on in the hope and expectation that they will flourish, and also begin to do the same around them. That's probably the plan.

**MM:** As I understand it, letter writing wasn't that easy in antiquity, and yet he invested quite a bit of, I don't know, maybe financial resources to be able to do this. As you say, he's keeping that relationship.

**DC:** It is a big investment. It's an investment of time, too.

**MM:** But then, he also wrote to some places that he had not been before.

**DC:** A couple of times, yeah. Paul believes, as I said at the start, that God has revealed himself to him and revealed Christ to him, and he also

believes that God has revealed Christ to him in a way that has special significance for people converting out of paganism, not for other Jews. So, when pagans are converting around the place, even when they haven't converted through his direct ministry, he feels quite protective about them. And thankfully he writes a letter occasionally to sort them out.

So we have, I think, Ephesians written for precisely this reason. There's a little group of converts, they've converted, they're not Jews, and Paul's view was you didn't have to become a Jew to engage with this new reality, because the Jew/Greek distinction was something that was being transcended. He's not down on Jews, it's just that the Jewish people and its history, its nation, is being fulfilled in *the* Jew, who is Christ, and we're stepping through now into a new reality. So there's no need to go back and around the long way. It's controversial, by the way, they said this, not everybody liked it.

**MM:** So the important part of a person's identity was not their ethnic category.

**DC:** Exactly. That is a shocking thing to say, and something that we're still coming to grips with, is it not? We love to group people. We love to look at ourselves in groups.

**MM:** You're either with us or...

**DC:** Exactly. Paul is saying no, that's not where you are primarily. Primarily you're characterized by the fact that you're *in* this person who has died and been resurrected. Now you're beyond. That's where you are. That's the real you. So it's a shocking thing to say. It's exciting, it's liberating, but terribly, terribly hard to take on board.

## Being "in Christ"

**MM:** Right. Even your expression there (which I know comes from Paul), that you are "in" a person. How does that translate into our modern concepts? We're not physically in a person, but what does Paul mean?

**DC:** That's right. It's a special metaphor that I think is trying to convey to us a couple of things. The first thing that it's trying to convey is that this is real and concrete, so it's referring to your being. It's referring to what we call your ontology, what you're made of, the stuff that really matters that puts you together. So when Paul says you're "in Christ," what he's saying is you're no longer "in Adam." Now, everybody is in Adam in some sense. It's what we all are, it's how we're all constructed.

**MM:** It comes with the flesh.

**DC:** So to say we're in Christ is a very strong statement about what we're constructed out of. The other thing that he's getting at with the "in Christ" motif is when you're in something, you're inside it or it's in you — there's a sense of closeness and intimacy that's being conveyed by this expression. He's saying not just that this is the way you're made, but you're



made in a way that's very close and intimate with this particular person.

**MM:** The word *identity* comes to mind here. Is it identification?

**DC:** You're closely identified, without losing who you are. There's a sense in which (paradoxically) the more involved with Christ you are, the more your own personhood is affirmed, and, in a way, the more you grasp the distinctions between you and him.

**MM:** He gives us freedom to be individuals, different.

**DC:** He gives us the freedom to be persons, not individuals. We're persons. I think we're being rescued from individualism, actually. But a personhood is something that we need, something that we want to have. We want to have full personhood. That is exactly what being in Christ gives us.

**MM:** I see this distinction you just made between individual and person, and I hear you saying that we are really most truly persons when we are in community.

**DC:** Yes. In relationship. Very much so.

**MM:** Which ties back in with, our new reality is in these relationships.

**DC:** It's an interpersonal reality. And because it's a communion characterized by these relationships all interlinking or lacing together, so it follows that the more invested we are and involved in this community, the more fully personal we are.

**MM:** And that's all in Christ.

**DC:** We tend to think of being in a community and being in an individual as a zero sum game — the more community the less individuality, the more individuality...it's almost like people are bubbles. Little areas of space that can't exist with somebody else without popping.

**MM:** Yes, personal space.

**DC:** That's right. Our culture is telling us this all the time. This is a fundamentally wrong understanding of what being a person is all about, according to the gospel and according to what Paul is telling us. Being a person is all about, actually, investing heavily in these relationships with other people. It's all about being relational.

**MM:** And that's why Paul spends so much time telling people....

**DC:** That's exactly right. He is a very relational person. Your personhood is bound up with how these relationships are functioning. There shouldn't be a strong distinction between who you are and how you behave — they're both parts of the same thing.

**MM:** So in the first part of the letter he can say you're not saved by what you do, but then later in the letter he talks about what you're supposed to do.

**DC:** Right. He's getting at slightly different things there. When he says you're not saved by what you do, what he's trying to emphasize is you don't access this reality yourself by doing anything, and you don't control it by

doing anything. There's nothing that you can bring to this party that isn't being done for you. But when you're involved with that, there's an awful lot that you're asked to do by way of response. He's coming from a very different place when he says that. Asking people to behave ethically and in a good way by way of response...it's just a completely different ballgame from telling them to shape up so that they can get involved in something — very, very different things going on there.

**MM:** I like the way you put it earlier — he's inviting them to participate in a new reality, and that reality is in these good relationships.

**DC:** I could put it even more strongly and say he's inviting them to *recognize* this new reality, because I think there's a sense in which God is reaching out to us and working with us and doing things for us even when we're not.

**MM:** It's already there ...

**DC:** I think it's closer than the heartbeat in your throat, you know? But it doesn't help us much if we're not cooperating, recognizing, responding, and obeying.

**MM:** So that's part of the faith response?

**DC:** Exactly. Faith, in a way, is just recognizing what's there. We're also gifted the ability to do that. My advice is not to resist it too strongly. I imagine that Paul's advice was kind of similar. Don't resist the reality that has come upon you. Why would you do that?

**MM:** People have choice in what they actually believe and accept. If you describe reality well enough, isn't it going to automatically [make me] say "that's right," without me making a specific decision, "Okay, I will have faith in this. I'm not sure if it's right, but I will have faith."

**DC:** It's easy to lose our way at this point, very easy. It's important that we respond to this reality freely; this is free. And we need to respond with everything we've got. There's no limitation, no "statute of limitations" on how much we need to give to this. We give it everything. All our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. But I wouldn't describe this as a *choice* that we're making.

The only choice that we would make in this situation would probably be a choice to do the dumb thing, which is to sin or resist or reject. This is what gets us into trouble. We tell ourselves, it's okay if we push back on this reality, it's okay if we disobey, if we reject a certain amount of what's going on here, but the Bible basically calls this transgressing or sinning, because there's something stupid and destructive about it. My advice is not to do it. [laughing]

I wouldn't present the gospel in such a way that you had a choice to walk away from it, because it's a declaration of reality. You can respond to the reality that's in front of you and you can walk away if you really want to, but you're denying what *is*, and there's just something a little bit foolish

about it, and this is why we get the declaring language coming through so strongly.

**MM:** Proclaiming.

**DC:** Exactly. This is how it is. Why wouldn't you be involved with this?

**MM:** Right. The gospel is good news and not a good invitation.

**DC:** That's right. It's a declaration. Exactly. It's a slightly different way of thinking about what's going on, but it's not aggressive because, as I said before, it's worked through in these conversational settings. People are often converting as this washes over them in time.

**MM:** Not putting people on the spot.

**DC:** That's right. You're actually getting to know them, welcome them into your home, feed them, listen to them, talk with them, have a good time with them, share this sort of thing with them, and particularly, if it aligns with how you behave, that will be a powerful witness. You will turn around and after a few months or years, most of those people will have joined your community.

**MM:** Those people will like what they see of the gospel in you.

**DC:** That's right. You'll mediate the truth of the gospel. Fortunately, it won't be entirely down to you or me.

**MM:** That's a good thing.

**DC:** That's right. With God's grace we will imperfectly mediate the gospel. Very much so.

**MM:** You were mentioning faith there, and it made me think of something you have written in the book about the faith of Abraham. The way that faith is described in Romans is kind of astounding. Is this the kind of faith that we need to have?

**DC:** I hope not. Abraham's example is used sometimes in a way that can be a little bit destructive and challenging, as if we are to access this reality by choosing to have faith like Abraham, which opens up the door for fellowship with God. The way Paul describes Abraham's faith is unwavering, without doubt. We need to read behind the lines there. We skip over the fact that Paul is playing with two different stories; he's playing with Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 and also with Genesis 21 and 22. What's going on is the promise of a son, miraculously, to Abraham from his sterile loins. Abraham had to wait about 14 years from the age of 86ish through the age of about 100...

**MM:** Without ever wavering.

**DC:** Without wavering, yeah. If that's what we have to do to become a Christian, we are all in deep, deep trouble. But if in this unwavering trust in God we see an echo of Christ and then we see Abraham in anticipation of Christ's unwavering faithfulness to the point of death and his resurrection, then we see faith as a *gift* that we can receive in Christ, from Christ.

At that point all things become possible. If this is not something we're

having to generate for ourselves, it's something that God is giving us, we're built into, and we grow into, then it starts to make sense. It starts to make sense as an aspect of our discipleship, rather than a criterion of entry.

**MM:** So when Paul was telling this story, he wasn't using it as an example?

**DC:** I don't think so. I don't think he was using it as an example of how we get saved. He was using it as a story that spoke about Christ and spoke about unwavering fidelity, through suffering if necessary, until a miraculous life-creating event takes place.

He was probably saying, if you go back to the start of Israel, what happened? It was a resurrecting event in which a person of great faithfulness endured for a long time and then suddenly the Spirit of God created somebody miraculously out of a situation that was basically dead. Now here we are, talking about Jesus Christ — somebody who faithfully in an unwavering way walked to death and then was raised from the dead, so life was miraculously created. So we're standing, my friends, in the presence of the very fulfillment of the nation of Israel. This is where it was always going all along.

**MM:** What Abraham only pre-figured.

**DC:** In the patriarchs we get this pre-figuration of what has come to fulfillment in the gospel.

**MM:** So he's not the example of what we do, but the example of what God does.

**DC:** Exactly —and what God does is gift us with life, life from the dead. It's an exciting promise.

## 5. THEOLOGY IN THE EVERYDAY

**J. Michael Fezell:** Cathy, thanks for being with us today.

**Cathy Deddo:** Thank you very much Mike. I'm glad to be here.

**JMF:** When we talk about Trinitarian Theology, it sounds so academic to so many people. What does it mean for just plain day-to-day relationships?



**CD:** Well, that's a big question, but what I'm going to try to do with it is talk about my own life a little bit as a Christian minister over the years. I primarily thought that my relationships were what I did for God, and I would go out and try to minister to people and take care of what I thought they needed in

the name of God and then come back and let God know how I had succeeded or failed in doing those things. And I think the best thing I can say, the simplest way to put it is when I began to understand Trinitarian Theology I began to understand that I was not taking seriously the reality, the presence, and the activity of the Triune God in the immediate circumstances of my life - that I was thinking of him as somewhat distanced. So when I began to take that more seriously - that I don't just work for Christ but he is in me, and his Spirit is always working and the Father is always already leading, then I began to realize the best way I could

understand it was, do I believe that God is really here in my conversation with you and my conversation with other people? Is he working already in your life? Am I just participating in what he is doing? I think way to often what I found for most people when they are working in relationships is they do a disconnect. They believe, they can even believe God is triune, he loves me as the whole God, but as soon as they walk out of a service and they go into a situation where they're talking with family or they're talking with friends, they pretty much think of themselves as being on their own. And what I have tried to help other people with, what I have tried to do for myself, is live as if God, the God I've come to know in Jesus, is more real in some ways even than I am. He already is mediating in Christ between me and somebody else. His spirit is already at work so when I am with somebody else, I try to listen to what he is saying. I attempt to live in his presence, abide in him, and not speak until I have a sense of what he has for me to say. It makes relationships more dynamic in that sense and it helps me to remember that my role in being with people is to remain in the peace of God, not try to fix anything, not try to answer all the questions right away, but to see what God has for me to say.

**JMF:** So what is it about God that helps you to feel that way and to have that kind of a sense of being in relationship with other people?

**CD:** Primarily, God always comes to me with grace and light. God is the one who includes me and, as you would say, into his loving circle of Father, Son, and Spirit. God's grace in Christ teaches me that God loved me and loves me before I am ever even interested in him. So when I start my day, that God has already been at work all night and he welcomes me to be a part of what he's doing. It allows me to have confidence that it is not up to me to know, again, what the right thing is to say to somebody else, how to complete something. Let me give you an example with my family. I was visiting my family recently and I wanted to...I had a certain idea of what I wanted to have happen, and some of my conversations, I think, we're all like that. We can go into something with an agenda of what we want to see happen, and it will be successful if I have been able to accomplish my agenda.

**JMF:** So we're focused on the agenda, not on the person.

**CD:** Yes. That's right. And what ends up happening...and then not on God either. I'm focusing on my agenda, but I think I'm focusing on you because I have an agenda for how I want you to go, and I'm hoping that you hear what I have to say. Or think about times when you want to confront people, right? You feel like you need to have this moment of confrontation. But what we often forget is that God is actually living and present. He knows you better than I know you. He knows my mother better than I know her. When I go into that conversation, if I'm living in the, as much as possible, in the reality of the Trinitarian life, then I'm

trusting that God was there before me, that he already is at work in my mother, and he has his own agenda for that time...but that his main agenda for me is to trust that he has an agenda, to listen for him, to be aware of him rather than rushing in, even with my good intentions - our agendas are oftentimes for something good for somebody else. But we stop living in his peace, we stop abiding as soon as we try to make what we want to have happen be first.

**JMF:** So you can actually be in the relationship, enjoy the person for who they are...

**CD:** Right.

**JMF:** ...without...knowing that God has an agenda before, during, and after. He'll be there with that person just as he is with you and me.

**CD:** Right. It makes things a lot more free.

**JMF:** Free, yeah.

**CD:** A lot more peaceful. But it also, I think in some ways, I'm going to use an example, I guess primarily being a mother. I have adult kids and there are times when I feel that my wisdom is exactly what they need to hear right now. I will really be able to straighten this out if they will just listen to what I have to say. But if I believe that God is real, that his grace isn't just a packet I was given but that he's pushing in, into this situation right now with his reality, he is pushing into their lives by the Spirit in Christ all the time, then if I attempt to just listen more to what he's saying and I don't have a sense that he's leading me to say anything, he's not opening a door for me unless of course I try to cram something in and obviously he's not leading me. But sometimes he's leading me just to be quiet and to make a nice meal for my son instead of trying to offer anything more. When we live as if God is real, then we can truly be at peace. We can know his rest. We can be confident that he will always be more faithful than we are. It is never up to us. And it has had a radical effect on my relationships with others, on my relationships with people in the church, in my family, with my friends. If I attempt to be with them by truly letting God lead first.

Another example I can think of. I was talking to a friend of mine who was on a church committee. And she said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to say, Cathy, when I go into this. I'm not exactly sure how to deal with it. There's going to be some conflict." I said, "Well, try to picture Jesus being with you. Try to have an image of him actually...he's in the meeting with you and he's calling you to enjoy his presence while you're there. How will that change how you're in that meeting?"

**JMF:** When we realize he's as much...loves that other person, is involved with that other person just as much as he is with us...it makes it a lot easier...

**CD:** Ah, yes.

**JMF:** ...to just be with the person, enjoy the person for who they are, and not have to feel like well, I've got to get my two-cents worth in, you know?

**CD:** Right.

**JMF:** You can lead a horse to water, you can't make them drink. We know that about horses. But we still try to do it with each other all the time.

**CD:** And what it comes down to is do I really trust him enough? I think the answer ends up being no. I'm not sure you're going to show up. I'm not sure you're going to be active. I'm not sure you're going to be present...

**JMF:** Yeah.

**CD:** ...so I'll cover those last ten yards for you. Besides, I'm really a wise person. I know a lot. And trust me God, I'm sure I can take care of this for you. It's humbling but yes, it's also a lot easier to live as if God is the greatest reality in their life, and he's currently active. He didn't just give you a list to take care of, but he's breaking in, always ahead of you and behind you and around you. There's never a time when he's leaving you alone. So...

**JMF:** And the relationship with a person is more important than some agenda you might have for that person.

**CD:** That's right. Well the funny thing is, what are you trying to invite people into? You're trying to invite them into the peace that you're living in. But if you're frantically trying to get them into that, what...you have nothing to offer.

**JMF:** You don't have any peace.

**CD:** That's right. You left the peace back here in hopes of being able to still have a message. That's the thing we're always afraid isn't going to be true. How much am I going to love somebody unless I get to say everything I think I need to say, unless they come to appreciate me the way I want them to appreciate me. But if God is holding onto that, one of the phrases I've been using recently in my Bible study is we live suspended in the grace of God. If we really are living suspended in the grace of God and the person I'm talking to, whoever they are, also does...they may be resisting that, but that's really where they live.

**JMF:** There's no other place to live.

**CD:** Exactly, there isn't any other place to live. Then I can trust that God is going to allow me to participate in his work as I let go of having to have things go whatever way I think they do.

**JMF:** And amazingly, he may actually be working with you in that setting more than he is with the other person...

**CD:** Go figure. In fact, that's what I often find to be true. I'm sure you have found that to be true as a parent. As God allows you by his grace more and more to let go of all the ideas that you may have had when they were younger about what you were going to be able to accomplish for them, I can honestly say that he has blessed me tremendously through



them. I hope they will learn as much as I have from being their parent. And a lot of times yes, it's been...Well, maybe another way to think about some of this in terms of Trinitarian Theology has been to take more seriously his grace and never allowing anything that he won't and can't redeem in your life and in your children's life. Taking seriously that he knows your sins, your problems, the unwise choices that you may have made at times, and he's going to redeem that. We participate even in our parenting with God. He is the ultimate parent and we're not. And I've had to go through some things in my life where I've had to realize he never called me to be our children's parent because I was perfect, but he called me, he called me knowing that he could redeem everything, he could bring it all to his glory and he's not ashamed to call me his sister, as it says in Hebrews.

**JMF:** That frees our relationships up so much because we can let go.

**CD:** Right.

**JMF:** Without...we can respect the other person in a way that we might not because we often go into conversations thinking we're superior.

**CD:** Yes, that actually brings up another good point.

**JMF:** Or intimidated, one or the other.

**CD:** We can give what we actually have to give in God's hands, and we can receive what the other person actually has to give, which we oftentimes, as you were just saying, we don't do. I won't receive something from somebody if I'm hoping for something else from them. The funny thing I have found about when I live in the peace of God is it helps me to be more actually present to the other person. I can see and hear what they're actually saying instead of thinking ahead to okay, what's the next thing I'm going to say? What's my move in this? More like a chess game instead of an actual conversation. And it's enabled me to rejoice over the little things sometimes that somebody else can give me because that is what they can give me. That may be all that they can give me right now. But in God's grace, that's enough. And I realize way too often I have worked past people instead of actually being present with them. So yes, I would totally agree. That's what it does.

**JMF:** Even in interviewing, you can get into a frame of mind that, you know, you know where you want it to come out, let's say. And so you want to guide it in that direction and kind of get to that point. You see it on TV all the time, especially with pundits and so on. They've got an angle. And so they often don't even let the other person talk. And I find myself doing the same thing. I think well, this is the point I want the viewers to learn from this and so I'm going to guide it in that direction instead of letting it go the direction it needs to go and is going to go because it's the person that you're interviewing.

**CD:** That's right.

**JMF:** The reason that they're there is because you figured they must

have something worthwhile to say. But aren't our kids the same way? Don't we are about the relationship and them more than molding them into some image that we think they ought to have.

**CD:** Yes, and being willing to let go of that image allows us to take seriously the Triune God. A lot of times we just don't take him that seriously. We take a lot of other things about our lives and what we think we should be able to do and what it means to be successful a lot more seriously than we do the presence and activity of the Triune God in our lives. And it's led to a lot of surprises in my life being able to let go. It's also enabled me to be more joyful with people because my joy isn't coming from the immediate situation or the immediate relationship. God is always there. He's always with us. He's already at work. Wow, what will that mean? It's quite an adventure. I have no idea where this might go. And that enables me to be not just more peaceful but more enthusiastic about seeing where he wants to take me next. His plans will always be good and for my good even though, as you were saying, it's a little hard to let go of some of those things we thought made us who we are, and they didn't really.

**JMF:** Sometimes a person that you care about is doing something...you think, well, this is harmful or destructive, I don't like this kind of behavior. And therefore I've got to tell them that and make it clear to them where I stand on this.

**CD:** Right.

**JMF:** And it's as though we forget well, God knows this too.

**CD:** Mm-hm.

**JMF:** And to do that usually doesn't work.

**CD:** No.

**JMF:** It harms the relationship instead of maintaining it so that a person can hear us.

**CD:** That's right. I've had two of my children go through some really difficult times in their lives. My oldest daughter went through anorexia many years ago. And this was probably when I first started working through a lot of this in terms of my family and relationships. And I was watching her really disappear before my eyes. What can I do? What do you want me to do? And we tried forcing her to eat, all kinds of things. And I remember sitting in the kitchen one time and saying, "God, I don't know what...I'm feeling desperate, please. I can't do anything. What do you want me to do? I'm ready to listen. What do you want me to do?" He said, "Make her a cup of tea and just take it back to her and say, 'I love you. You are terrific' because that's what I have to say to her so that's the one thing I want you to say." And it was amazing to me that he freed me in that moment to experience his grace in my own life and to extend his grace to her and to realize that's what she needed to hear - not all, again, not all of my wisdom, not all of my fears. Because a lot of times when we're busy trying to fix

things, the one thing we're forgetting to tell people is God's grace has already broken in. If that were true, what would we be saying to each other? If we were living as that were true, how would that change every single comment that we make and every single interaction that we have?

**JMF:** Isn't that scary for people when they know somebody's doing something that you know is harmful for them and then...and then all you're going to do is say to yourself well, I know that God is...loves this person and is working for their redemption, and he can do that a lot better than I can. In other words, it's just so hard to just give them grace because we feel like we're compromising with sin or something instead of giving them what we need. We're afraid of grace.

**CD:** Yes.

**JMF:** It's like doing nothing or something.

**CD:** That's right. And yet, that's where God starts and that's where he continues to go with us every day. I do not get up in the morning because I decided that I would go ahead living for another day. I just made that decision. I wake up and discover oh, God has given me another day. He continues to love me. He delights in me. And that is a scary thing to say to somebody else. It's a scary thing to hear because we're so afraid that that means, right, that there's nothing that's going to change. But the gospel is God by giving us grace makes a possibility of something changing. And if I want my daughter to change, I want her to change out of the sense that this is not who you are. This is not the last word on you. I love you, and, more importantly, God loves you. The whole God is here, and he has so much more for you than this. Unfortunately, again, a lot of times when we're trying to correct something, yes, we start fearing.

And my son went through something far worse. I won't go into it, but it was...the last couple years of my life have been some of the hardest I've ever had to go through as a mother and as a person. And there would be times when I would have to get up in the morning and I would have to say, "God, help me remember..." Even my prayers could become, "Oh God, please, please, please." But that's not living in the Trinitarian reality. The reality is I'm so glad that even now you haven't left us.

**JMF:** We're in your hands.

**CD:** Yeah. I'm so grateful. Not just me but my son, my family, and that you were there all the way through all of this and you will redeem it because of who you are, not just because of some whim. This is who you are. Having said that, I could go into my day with grace. I could say, when he came out, "Oh, I love you so much. I am so glad that you're here." And leave it at that. It was radical.

**JMF:** Yeah. Don't we even...even with what you just said, don't we like to try to talk them into that? In other words, we can't even leave it like you just said, leave it at that. We have to try to talk them into, you know, God

does love you, and we want to make sure they know that, and we want them to agree with us about that.

**CD:** Right. Mm-hm.

**JMF:** We don't know how to just trust God to be who he is with them and for them.

**CD:** Right. It's a far more radical trust. But this is the dynamic living in God that we're talking about and trusting that Jesus actually mediates our relationships. He never...he never says, "Okay, this one's on your own. Go out there. I hope it works out okay for you." But that is the problem, right. We'll trust him up to a certain point, but oh, gosh, well, if it meant having to give up everything in my life to be a Christian, well, I don't know about this. I mean, does that mean that I have to give up what I think my reputation should be in terms of my mothering, you know, in terms of other things that I do? Do I have to trust in you in all of these ways?

**JMF:** Yeah.

**CD:** But that's really what it would mean to take him at his word.

**JMF:** But when we do that it actually is easier, isn't it?

**CD:** A lot easier.

**JMF:** And it leaves a place, a room for the child to come to their own conclusions instead of having to circle the wagons against us all the time.

**CD:** Oh and it's a lot more fun too. I mean, my son has come home sometimes and found I'm dancing to some music with my daughter. I mean, I've danced a lot more in the last two years than I thought I would because I really do trust that God is at work.

**JMF:** Yeah.

**CD:** And he's at work with me, and I don't have to justify myself. I don't have to be able to say well, you know, all these things that have happened, none of them had to do with me. Yeah, some of them did, I'm sure they did. I was not a perfect mother. To be able to let go of each one of those places, I try to find my identity in my life and know at the bottom, his hands are holding onto me. Yeah, it's...I think I'm a much...I think they like being around me more, you know? As wise as I was before, I think I was somewhat of a battle axe because I had to make sure my wisdom got out to everybody.

**JMF:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that you're far, far from alone. And not just mothers. And fathers often make it even worse because there's the whole authority thing involved as well.

**CD:** Yeah. And we can do that in church as we come in with our agenda for a meeting. And it's not bad to have an agenda, but I've noticed a lot of times, again, God rubber stamps our agenda instead of no, why don't we see if God...let's pray together and see what God has in mind, what he wants to do. We are not in charge. We're really not. If he wants to end a program in the church, let's be ready for that to happen instead of having to

keep things going because we've decided we know what should happen.

**JMF:** People are more important than programs, and being together is more important than getting something done.

**CD:** Right, absolutely.

**JMF:** Because that's what we're trying to get done, is being together.

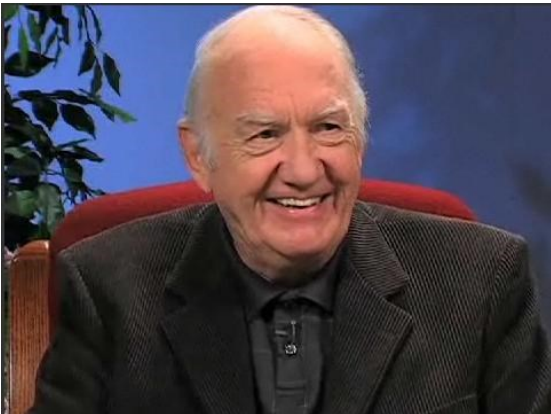
**CD:** Yeah, that's the weird thing about it. That's what I was trying to say about noticing in my evangelism that I had become so uptight about trying to help people become Christians. If I could sit on the other side and see what I was looking like, I wouldn't want to become a Christian either.

## 6. THE BOOK OF REVELATION

**JMF:** Christians the world over look to the Bible as their guide to faith and practice. Yet from the inception of the church, there has been much disagreement over how to interpret what the Scriptures say. Our guest today has done much work in helping Christians with basic principles of rightly understanding the Bible.

Dr. Gordon Fee is a New Testament scholar and recently retired professor emeritus of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is considered a leading expert in the field of biblical interpretation, and is author of many books, including *New Testament Exegesis – a Handbook for Students and Pastors*, and *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* – which he co-authored with Douglas Stuart. Dr. Fee's latest book *Revelation*, which will be part of the New Covenant Commentary Series published by Wipf & Stock [a.k.a. Cascade], is due for publication in 2010.

It's a pleasure to have you join us today.



**GF:** Thank you.

**JMF:** Before we begin, I should mention that we had several wonderful interviews with your daughter, Cherith.

**GF:** She will have done better than her dad would have done.

**JMF:** We'd like to begin by talking about your new book *Revelation*,

which is based, as you explained to me, on your notes for your class at Regent, the last class before your retirement.

**GF:** Actually, it was my last class *after* retirement.

**JMF:** O, I see. And that's due to be published in the coming year.

**GF:** Yeah, hopefully, in early 2010.

**JMF:** We were talking about this earlier, and you mentioned that people either tend to approach Revelation by ignoring it all together, or by obsessing over it. What causes those two reactions?

The passion of my teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible but to learn to read the Bible well. And to do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials that are in Scripture that make up the biblical text -- and Revelation is unique in the New Testament.

**GF:** I think it has to do with the kind of literature, the technical word is *genre*, the kind of literature that it is. And frankly more people, especially those raised in the King James Version, where every verse is a paragraph, so that every sentence, every verse, has equal ... to all of the rest of it, they don't think of it in terms of continuity or in terms of narrative or letter or parable, they just think in terms of little things called verses. And the net result is, not understanding the *kind* of thing that revelation is. They read it... they level it out -- the whole New Testament is simply leveled out ... all read at the same level.

**JMF:** That's an interesting thought because it makes so much sense that we look at the Bible and it's divided up into chapters and verses, and as you just said, each verse is a paragraph, and so it does kind of come across as though verse 9 has no equal weight of the authority of the word of God and should be taken as important as verse 12 or verse 16 and we skip around like that... (**GF:** And on its own and out of context.) but we don't read anything else like that.

**GF:** Nothing else. Nobody reads anything else the way we read the Bible. So the passion of my (what I call) teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible but to learn to read the Bible well. And to do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials that are in Scripture that make up the biblical text, and the Revelation is unique in the New Testament. The only thing else like it in the canon is several chapters at the end of Daniel. But, the Revelation is not like Daniel -- it's a different kind of apocalyptic material -- that is very much in keeping with other intertestamental documents of this kind, of which this is but one -- but certainly, the best and the greatest (what I would call) ten leagues ahead of and over all those intertestamental documents.

**JMF:** And intertestamental is referring to...

**GF:** ... between the Old and the New Testament (if you will) between Malachi and Matthew, 200-year period where a lot of these kinds of books were written.

**JMF:** But Revelation is the only one that appears in the...

**GF:** In the New Testament. Yeah, and there really is nothing as quite like it in the New Testament. But it was a common kind of literature for the people who received it. So they didn't come to it with great mystery and tried to dig out all the things. First of all, John knew his readers and they knew him. It's subversive literature. It's basically telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – right at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and universal domain, here is John, exiled, on a lonely island, basically facing towards Rome and saying, "God's got your number -- your days are coming to an end." It took 200 years for it to happen, but time wasn't John's big thing. It was the certainty of it. So that's what the Revelation is basically about. It's about God in charge of the universe and not the Roman Empire.

**JMF:** And so for us to read it and to try to take Revelation's symbols and act as though they're really about Mussolini, or they're really about Adolf Hitler, is to misunderstand what's going on in Revelation itself.

**GF:** Yeah, we wouldn't do that with one of Jesus' parables. Nor we do that with one of the letters of Paul. So why would we do that to this which is first of all, a letter. I mean it's to the seven churches. And he writes to them individually and

**It's basically telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – right at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and universal domain, here is John, exiled, on a lonely island, basically facing towards Rome and saying, "God's got your number – your days are coming to an end."**

everybody else is reading everybody else's mail. So, they're all in this together, but the document has to do with the fact that they are headed for a terrible holocaust. John recognizes that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum [2:13] is the signal, the harbinger that it's going to get worse before it gets better. And that martyrdom is what really sort of tipped this off... trying to tell the people that the days to come are going to be far worse than you even imagine. And the catacombs are the clear example of the fact that John was right.

**JMF:** Let's talk about the catacombs. How do they demonstrate...

**GF:** Well, first of all, besides being places where Christians met, they were their tombs. And so the burials of Christians underground in huge numbers for those days – huge numbers, was clear evidence that they were an underground movement. Every time they came up above ground and lived well above ground for one emperor, another emperor comes along and wants to wipe them out so, underground they go again – literally



underground. I'm curious as to where the language "underground" comes from the fact that the early Christians literally went underground. So anyway, the Revelation is subversive literature, and the people who received it well understood that.

**JMF:** At the time John wrote, his readers would have understood apocalyptic literature and what the symbols are all about and so on, but when we read it today, what are the lessons we can learn from it, understanding that it's not written about our day in particular, but what do we draw from reading the book?

**GF:** The same thing that we would draw from reading the other New Testament book. What do we draw from reading Acts? Something about our history, something about what God was doing in the first century. What do we learn from Revelation? What God is about, how God is at work even in times of great distress. And that God is the victor. The book ends on the glorious note of triumph after all.

**JMF:** So we draw the same lessons they drew, but we don't have to be misreading Revelation as some kind of a book that's written *really* for us in our time as opposed to written to them, and looking for who is this beast going to be, who is this... (**GF:** Exactly. We know who the beast *was*.) who are the horns going to be and all that sort of thing. It seems that in every age, every generation of Christians, there's a big contingent that thinks that their day is the last days – that Christ is going to return in their day. They go to Revelation and find ways to manipulate the book to fit it with world events to be able to determine that their day is the end time. And that's been going on from the beginning of the church. Why do we feel the need to do that?

**GF:** Well, I really can't answer that question because I can't get into the heads of the people who think this way. On the other hand, we are to be ready constantly – the gospel song, "We cannot see what lies before and so we cling to him the more. Trust and obey." This is how we are to live. But "trust and obey" is how we are to live, not try to figure out all the details as to how it's all going to work out. So it's true, generation after generation went to the Revelation and claims some powerful figure like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, as the Anti-Christ. Come on... This is not about them, this is not about our days, it's about *that* day and where we can draw our parallels out of it like we do with everything else in Scripture. Romans wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us. Revelation wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us, once we understand it as a word for them, and what it was saying to them. That's a way of saying that God is in control and not the powerful empires of the world.

**JMF:** The tyrants are always around, and we're always safe in Christ's hands even if we die at the hands of tyrants (**GF:** right... especially if we die). Going to the Bible in general then, probably the most well-known

book in any seminary is the one that you authored with Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. And you get into some of these principles of reading the Bible, in the way that it was written, in the way that it was intended, and then looking at what sort of lessons we might draw from that. When a person sits down to read the Bible, what are the common, typical mistakes they make?

**GF:** The first... there are two firsts in this, ok? The first if get rid of the numbers. The numbers intrude, there are no numbers in the original text, just get rid of the numbers – (**JMF:** the verse designation and the chapter designation), the verse designation, yes. The Bible Society [Biblical] is actually putting out a translation, TNIV, without the numbers. So that's got paragraphs that are meaningful, but the numbers are out in the margin out here so you know where you are... the numbers intrude and there were no numbers in the original, I can assure you, nor in any copy for 1,500 years. The numbers were inserted by ... what's his name [Robert Estienne], he was doing it on a horse, I think, when he was traveling across Europe. But the numbers are simply ways of finding things. They have nothing to do with the text. So the first thing one has to do to learn to read well is to get rid of the numbers, in one's head – not necessarily go through and scratch them out in your Bible. And once one does that, then you start thinking and reading in paragraphs, the way you read anything.

But even before that, and this is the really important thing – what kind of thing am I reading? You don't read a love letter the same way you read a court document. People *know* that, by instinct. They come to Scripture and they have all of this marvelous variety of inspired stuff, in this variety, and level it all. (**JMF:** So we read everything the same way.) ...everything the same way. So it's like reading a love letter and reading a court document the same way with no sense that these really are different kinds of things. (**JMF:** Or of reading of poem as though it's headline news story in the newspaper.) Instinctively people do understand that the Psalter is poetry and that the doublets are doublets – most people really do catch that. Others don't have a clue that the doublets are doublets but you know they...

**JMF:** Let's talk about doublets. What's a doublet?

**GF:** Well, in poetry, a doublet is saying the same twice in marvelously different language. Sometimes parallel and sometimes in antithesis but ... and there are some triplets as well. But basically the Psalter has just made up these marvelous doublets. So people who read a modern translation which the poetry is set out as poetry – read that and instinctively recognize, "This is poetry. This is not prose." But when you read every verse a paragraph, poetry and prose are lost. So every verse a paragraph and every verse... my verse for the day and I just say, now... I don't mean to be unkind the way I'm speaking about people's habits. But they would never read anything else in their life that way. Anything! If they were to get a love

poem from their lover, they would not read it as prose. But we take the Scripture and level it out and then put numbers in, and in that have a verse for the day.

**JMF:** I hear people talk about, “I read the Bible literally. I’m a Bible literalist.” And by that, they mean to say, “I take it seriously, I believe what it says.” But yet they *do* actually take it literally. What are some problems with reading the Bible literally?

**GF:** I don’t have trouble with people reading the Bible literally, because most of it is to be understood literally. But they don’t read the Psalms that way. And they shouldn’t read the Revelation that way. I mean, yes, take it literally in terms of what it is. But please, let it be its thing -- don’t make it something different from what it is.

**JMF:** Jesus speaks of a camel going through the eye of a needle. He speaks of many things even as parables, and yet these are not truths, news stories of things that actually happen, there was no prodigal son who actually... he’s telling a story, a tale, to make a point. And yet we don’t read those things literally.

**GF:** Well, actually there are some people who do. They think if there wasn’t a true prodigal son and a father and another son, then Jesus was not telling the truth. They wouldn’t say

lie... but **JMF:** But

since he wouldn’t... ) he wouldn’t tell something if it wasn’t true. **JMF:** So therefore there was one). And their view of story is “it’s not true.” A story means “not true.” Come on, that’s not the way you read anything. But that’s a mixed-up view of how to read Scripture, and I find myself really not able to help people like that.

**JMF:** Isn’t the Bible full of metaphors as well like any other form of language? If I say, it’s raining cats and dogs, people know what I mean. They don’t go outside and expect to find a puppy.

**GF:** Yeah, and a lot of those kinds of things (not that particular one, of course) throughout Scripture, and especially in the teaching of Jesus – and he was just rich with metaphors and using ideas of all kinds of things around him to help people catch the fact that the kingdom of God was at hand.

**JMF:** In getting back to the book of Revelation, the chapter divisions... you’ve talked about how there are couple of places toward the end and also chapter 14 where the chapter divisions really kind of...

**These two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes, introduce the whole rest of the book – the gathering of God’s people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions.**

**GF:** Yeah... first of all, to give credit where credit is due, the chapters in Revelation are basically very well done. Nonetheless, the numbers have a way of separating things that should be held together. So when you get to chapter 14, it's the only place in the book where you have a series of small units and you have to come to terms with how these work. It begins with a lamb and 144,000 on Mount Zion whom they'll meet again. Later on there are the three angels who fly in and make a pronouncement. And then there are these two marvelous images of the grain harvest and the trampling out of the grapes. My instincts are that if our chapter 15 began there (as it should), everybody would read those two correctly. But at the end of chapter 14, they just hang there.

But in fact, these two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes, introduce the whole rest of the book -- the gathering of God's people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions. So, that's sort of the intro and then you have the final set of seven, the seven bowls of God's wrath and it's quite clear "wrath" is the right term here -- "wrath" having to do with God's final judgment of which the final one is the overthrow and collapse of Babylon the Great -- which is his language for the Roman Empire. That's followed then by the marvelous picture of Rome as a very high-priced prostitute. (Prostitute is really the wrong word. This is a call lady of the highest order.) And she is seductive, and she seduced the whole world. Rome has done that. So the very next thing is lament over Rome's fall.

And then there are the warnings to escape, and then that's followed by the three sets of woes, which is then followed in Chapter 11:1-9 by three sets of hallelujahs... three woes, three hallelujahs, this is hardly accidental. You understand? This is carefully constructed literature. And then the final thing there is the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast. Right after that, if we didn't have numbers, one would see that the so-called millennium is *an insert* that is assuring the martyrs that they have a place in God's program. The only people mentioned in this are those who, for their testimony of Jesus have been killed by the Empire. And they're given a special role. He says, the rest of the dead, those who aren't martyred, they're going to have their time at the end... I don't think you should take this literally... This means God has secured them, this is a special people, martyred because they believed in Jesus.

And then that's followed by the final judgment Satan and the dead and then you end up the book finishing with the new heaven and new earth and a new Eden. He didn't know it's going to be the last book in the Bible. The book begins with Eden; it concludes with Eden. This is just a marvelous thing that God, by his providence, saw as our canon, so that you have a restored heaven, a restored earth, and then in this restored earth, a restored Eden. And then the book ends. I mean it ends with a lot of little things that

are all important, but its basic story ends in 22:5. It's a marvelous book. And I just cringe whenever I see and hear people take it and make it have to do primarily with something in our future, when the only stuff that's in our future is chapters 21 and 22. Everything else belong back in the near future of these seven churches and all other Christians at the beginning of the second century – wonderful re-assurance.

**JMF:** And it reminds you of course of the passage... of the statement where Jesus talks about you're a little flock; in this world you will have...(GF: Tribulation!) but.. (GF: But I've overcome!) same message as in Revelation in a nutshell.

**GF:** Yeah, exactly! I'm prejudiced, I love this book. This is marvelous stuff. Don't screw it up by making it mean something different from what John intended, and the Holy Spirit intended by inspiring John to write it. It has to do basically with them and with us as we follow in their train. Just as the Gospels had to do with them and with us as we follow in their train. And once one sees that, then the glory of this book just comes alive on the pages.

**JMF:** The dispensationalists' viewpoint tends to take the millennium and make it into the focal point of everything...

**GF:** Yeah, that's strange, because it's actually parenthetical. This is one place I really don't like the numbers, because if this began where it should, in 19:11, if [chapter] 20 began there... and then the numbers went by, one would see that what is our 20:1-6 fits squarely as a parenthetical middle point between the heavenly warrior defeating the Beast and then the judgment of Satan and the judgment of the dead. And then you have the whole new heaven and new earth.

**JMF:** That's a reassurance to those who will be martyred...

**GF:** They're reassurance to the martyrs mostly because, first of all... again, it's the end of chapter 19, if it weren't the end of chapter 19, people would see this better. But the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast. So the martyrs are given a special moment, and then the final judgments. This is so marvelously done and for the most part the numbers don't intrude, but at the end of the book they intrude a bit, and here in particular. I know I sound very confident, positive, but I lived with this book for years, and I just experience enormous pain when I hear it used in a dispensationalist way... because, frankly they almost know nothing about the book as John intended.

**I happen to be among the privileged.  
What pains me is for privileged people in  
North America to not take seriously the  
brothers and sisters in the world who are not  
as privileged as we are.**

**JMF:** It's a shame to miss the reassurance, the peace, the joy, the comfort that can come... we read the Psalms all the time that way, in times of trial, we go to the Psalms and we find reassurance in those.

**GF:** Even though they were written for those people in Israel, they're reassurance to us.

**JMF:** And all the symbols have to do with Israel in that day and age. God is not a high tower, and yet we understand what is meant by that when we are being set upon by our enemies, as it were... but you brought out how this same reassurance and joy and peace, comfort, can be ours from Revelation. But instead we look at Revelation, we think, "Well, when is the end of the world going to come?" And how do we measure the horns...

**GF:** Frankly, a lot of our difficulties is that we're North Americans English-speaking North Americans. Mexican Christians could understand this a little better than we. But when you think of how many places on the earth, how many martyrdoms are taking place, *now*, on this planet, this book is for them. This book is telling them that your martyrdom counts for something. You're being brought into God's kingdom...

**JMF:** And the martyrdom of those you love.

**GF:** Yes, exactly. I think of the Christians in various Asian settings where this book tells them that they can still rejoice and sing hallelujah and praise our God because God is in control even though they may die. And that's what Revelation is all about – God is ultimately in charge. The problem of North Americans (and I speak as a dual citizen of Canada and the United States) is we think we have a special privilege with God... and that we should get all the breaks and none of the pain.

**JMF:** We do tend to think of everything from ... as though we're the center of the... not just of the universe but of the Christian universe as well. If there are missionaries, the mission should be going from us to these other places that don't have the great insight and wisdom. *We* should be the teachers. It's been such been an interesting phenomenon to see Asian missionaries come to the United States as though we need to hear the gospel here. We're shocked by that.

**GF:** As my Australian colleague would say, "Good on ya, mate."

**JMF:** So if there is one thing that you would like people to know about the book of Revelation, what would that be?

**GF:** One thing? It's about the first-century church that is headed for a terrible two-century holocaust. Read it with that in view, and then ask yourself "Where do I fit in?" God is in control -- there is absolute reassurance -- there are three-fold woe over Rome, over Babylon, but there's a three-fold hallelujah to those who are God's people.

God's in control, not ourselves – our task is to bear witness to Christ. And the Greek word *forbear witness* is the word that we have transliterated into the word *martyr*. It is the Greek word for *witness*. The ultimate witness

was martyrdom, so the Greek word *martyr* -- witness -- became *martyr* -- being slain for one's witness, and now we simply think of martyrs as those kinds of people only. But that's the word for *witness*. We bear witness to Christ and we may not live long after we do that, if we're in certain parts of the world. And I happen to be among the privileged. I say that with tears, because I know that I'm among the privileged. What pains me is for the privileged to not take seriously the brothers and sisters in the world that are not as privileged as we are.

## 7. HOW SHOULD WE READ THE BIBLE?

**J. Michael Feazell:** It will be a help to all of us to hear a little of the background of how you came to write *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

**GF:** I'm a little old now, in terms of all the details, okay? But it basically came about because I used to do this in various kinds of adult Sunday school settings, churches, just trying to help people read the Gospels as Gospels, the epistles as the epistles, et cetera. So I was invited to be one of the teachers during the era of the Greater Pittsburgh Charismatic Conferences in the 1970s, and they had teaching sessions—morning and afternoon—and they had invited me to come, and since I did this regularly in churches and especially in my New Testament survey class, I just chose to take my four sessions and walk them through the Gospels, Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation.

And at the end of this series, there must have been a group of about 35 people, adults who had been sitting in the sessions, and the common denominator of their question was, *Why have we never heard this before? How come we don't know this? Why do I have to be 50 years old and never knew that I should think this way in reading the Bible?*

So on the plane on the way home (this was in Pittsburgh and I was in Boston at the time), on the plane on the way home I dashed out the outline for the book—13 chapters, because I was raised in Sunday school after all, and all the lessons are in 13 chapters for the 13 Sundays of a quarter of the year. So I thought 13 chapters, and outlined the whole thing, and then realized that I *could* do the Old Testament chapters, but Doug could do them better. So I went in and told him what the program was...

**JMF:** And you had known Doug for...

**GF:** We were colleagues. I taught at Gordon-Conwell, and so we were good friends. And that's why I went to him, because he thinks the same



way I do about teaching Scripture. But unfortunately, it took two years for him to get a sabbatical so he could write his chapters, but once he did, then it was sent off—and it was a bit of bad timing, actually, because it was between the big push before the beginning of school year, and somewhere in that lull period for Zondervan.

I had chosen Zondervan for some other reasons that aren't necessary here, but we had a former student who was actually working as an editor at Zondervan. And he saw that the book was going to fall between the cracks, and he took the manuscript, got the thing after it was published, and sent it to everybody that teaches Bible everywhere in North America. I don't know how many hundreds of copies he sent, but within a year the sales went like this—just off the charts. And that sounded a little bit boastful...the reason was: it was trying to help people to get at reading Scripture sensibly instead of “every verse a paragraph” that is so destroying. So it just took off. Well over a million of these are now in print. This is the third edition, and there's over a half million of this edition.

**JMF:** This was the one I remember reading.

**GF:** Yeah. That's the first edition.

**JMF:** Now we're already in the third edition.

**GF:** And so, you know, they went over a million. It obviously met a need because people would like to know how to read the Bible well. Although I do need to tell you that Doug is altogether responsible for the title. He's clever in these ways. I always had something like some dumb title—how to...not even how to... “On Understanding the Bible” or something dull like that. And he sat down and just wrote out a whole page in two columns of proposed titles. And the third one down was this one—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. And I knew I didn't have to read any further—it was obviously the title that was going to make the book work. So that's how it came about.

**JMF:** You mentioned paragraphs. People read the Bible—the verses appear to be paragraphs. What's wrong with that? How does that...

**GF:** What's wrong with that is they wouldn't read anything else on the face of the earth that way. The Bible wasn't written in single-verse paragraphs. The Bible was written in poetry—which is four lines, usually (two, two) and in the Proverbs the same way—two or four. And the narratives are narratives. You break up the narratives the way you would break up any narrative. The epistles are letters. And when the subject makes a slight change, you paragraph it there.

It's just common sense to read the Bible the way you would read any other piece of literature. And yet for some reason, people think that every verse a paragraph is sacred—it came down from heaven that way or something, when in fact, it happened because old what's his name [Robert Estienne] was riding a horse across Europe and put the numbers in, half of

them in the wrong places. And we get stuck with that. Notice that the title is how to *How to Read the Bible*. Studying is a different thing. My problem is that most people do not read their Bibles well. And that's what this book is for.

**JMF:** So let's take, just case in point, you mentioned epistles and Gospels. What is different about an epistle from a Gospel, and how would you read Gospels differently from the way you would read an epistle?

**GF:** The simple answer to that is: What's the difference between a short story and a poem? You don't read a poem the way you read a short story, or a short story the way you read a poem. And that's the difference between the Psalms and the narrative. And between an epistle and a Gospel, one is a narrative about Jesus and his mighty deeds; an epistle is a letter. And the epistles (letters) and Gospels aren't even in the same league in terms of kind of literature. Why anyone would ever want to level that out as if it didn't make any difference.... Well, it makes all the difference in the world. *God* chose to do it this way, by the way. This isn't Gordon's discovery. God did this. We need to get in touch with what God did.

**JMF:** So if I'm going to read the Bible, typically...let's say when I was 10 years old and, you know, I'm reading the Bible and I see all these chapters and verses, and I go to a Gospel—let's say Luke (I'm just opening to anywhere) Luke chapter 7, verse 5, "For he loveth our nation and he hath built us a synagogue." And then I might look at 1 Corinthians, which is a letter, chapter 8, verse 2, "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."

This one sounds like it has the same...because it's got a chapter and a verse and a number by it, it has the same power and merit if I put it up on the wall as this one does, if I set it up next to it, and I could use those two without anything else around them, to come to some conclusions about what I think they mean.

**GF:** Indiscriminately, you would have to do that...thoughtlessly, carelessly, I mean...

**JMF:** Any way you slice it, if there's a verse on the wall, [someone could say], "oh, that's God's word."

**GF:** Well, yes, it is God's word. But let's...

**JMF:** Am I going to understand it just by looking at that verse all by itself like that?

**GF:** Let's let God have the say, and he didn't give us a verse, he gave us the Gospel. He gave us the epistle, not a verse.

**JMF:** If I pick up the newspaper, would I find a couple of lines in the middle of the article and pull them out and understand what the article's about?

**GF:** No, but I think people tend to do that all the time. (laughing)

**JMF:** You're right, well, I guess we do that with everything to some

degree. (laughing)

**GF:** If it's a person you disagree with, you read the whole article and you take out two sentences you disagree with and post that somewhere.

**JMF:** With the Bible we'll take out two verses against people we disagree with and then use it as a weapon against them. But you're pointing out the importance of reading things the way they're written, and the way they're intended for the people that they're written to.

We don't get a letter from somebody we care about...well, let's say an email—today we'd get an email from somebody, and we don't divide it up and just take out two lines and pretend like that has the same merit and meaning and power as the two lines earlier. We read the whole thing together...the message of the whole thing.

**GF:** Exactly. So yeah, that's the great problem.... I tell students over the years...I say the first thing you have to do is get rid of the numbers. Just get rid of the numbers. You don't go through your Bible and scratch out the numbers, just...

**JMF:** Pretend they're not there...

**GF:** ...get rid of them in your head. Get rid of them because they're not there. And then get rid of the paragraphs—that is every verse a paragraph, paragraphs. So get a Bible that's got it right in terms of paragraphing. You know, there will be some differences among people, mostly, by the way, for the sake of the readership. If the Bible is being prepared for 10th graders or below, you put more paragraphs in. If it's for older folk, you can put lesser paragraphs in. The paragraphing is not sacred, it's a way of helping the people to read well. So none of that is divinely given, it's a translators or an editor's choice.

**JMF:** And the reason for verses in the first place is just to help us find a spot...

**GF:** Help us find a space.

**JMF:**...so we know what we're talking about.

**GF:** And you understand, on the manuscripts, the ancient manuscripts, which was my first specialty in New Testament studies, they didn't have any of that. But what they had is in the columns, they had little indications of where you were in the text, the Gospel or the epistle. So in this inner column, they'd have a little, a Roman numeral III or an VIII or something like that, and they knew that those numbers represented where they were in the document. So it goes way back to the 2nd, 3rd century, but the fact is, this is a convenience for people to find things.

**JMF:** But it tends to break up our understanding.

**GF:** But it intrudes. It intrudes all the time.

**JMF:** We typically memorize verses and spout them, and sometimes the point is clear from the verse, just one verse, but oftentimes without the rest of the context, you can easily misunderstand what the verse is really about

in the middle of the context where it belongs.

**GF:** There's a famous story about the person who was doing this—"Judas hanged himself" [Matt. 27:5] and then, "Go thou and do likewise" [Luke 10:37]. That's the story that is associated with that kind of reading of the text, which is not reading. It's nonsense.

**JMF:** Well, the other more recent book which, well, let's go to *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*—you also worked with Douglas Stuart on that one.

**GF:** Actually, I ended up writing that entire book. What Doug did was he edited the Old Testament portions. It was the publishers who wanted us to try to do it. It's what they asked us to do, was to do a combined Old Testament and New Testament survey. And neither Doug nor myself could get interested in it. We just couldn't do it.

So he sat down one day and did what is very much like the Genesis chapter in this book. It was much too long and therefore the book would have been much too long, and it was just a little bit heavy, actually. But the moment I saw it, I said yes! So I did the New Testament, a couple of New Testament books.

And the sections are a slight overview of what the whole thing's about, and then a little bit more of what you need to know in order to read this well, and then we take the reader by the hand and say, "Look, now look, now look," and just guide them through it without trying to interpret anything, just let them know what they're reading and when they need to pause before the next...And so what ended up happening is I ended up writing the whole book with, you know, Doug making sure that the Old Testament was up to speed because this turned out to be an extremely useful book for an awful lot of Christians.

**JMF:** And it's a wonderful follow-up to... *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*.

**GF:** Yeah, to the first book.

**JMF:** And, necessarily, it's longer because you actually deal with every, each book.

**GF:** Every book. Again, we're trying to help people be good readers of the Bible. I'm amazed at how few people read their Bibles well. And it's also the same reason a lot of people don't read their Bibles. Because they don't know how to read them well, they get bogged down and weary of it, and these are attempts to say look, this is good, readable, material. Do it this way and see if it doesn't help.

I should say, by the way, I had surgery that put me on the shelf for several months when we were doing this, the second book, my book. And so my wife Maudine and I read every last bit of that book aloud to one another and then all of the biblical text over a couple of month period when I was recuperating from surgery. We had all day to just, you know, sit

around as it were. So a part of that...

**JMF:** You would have never done that if you hadn't had the surgery.

**GF:** Exactly. And, in part, the book *reads* well because we did that. Because we're listening to one another read aloud, and when you stumble over a sentence when it goes four lines, you've got to stop and do something else. So yes, it was a gift. I don't want to go through the surgery again, but it was a gift, so we took it.

**JMF:** [In the first book] you mentioned the 13 chapters and the epistles, the Old Testament narratives, acts, the Gospels, and you have one chapter (chapter 8) on parables, and then a chapter on the law. I'd like to talk about parables first. How is a parable different from a narrative when it comes to the Bible?

**GF:** They're not terribly different, because a narrative and a parable, excuse me, there are more than one kind of parable—that's the first thing people have to hear. Most often, when people hear the word *parable*, they'll think of the Good Samaritan. And that's good. That's right. It's a story. The story tells the story. But the parables get listed under brief sayings, I can't think of one right now, but the very brief kind—the kingdom of God is like....

**JMF:** ...the treasure hidden in the field.

**GF:** Yes. The treasure hidden in the field. So you've got that kind, and then you've got the story. First of all, people need to know this, they're both parables, but they're quite different kinds. One is something like something else, the other one is also sort of like something else, but the parables are intended to "catch" a person. And then at the end, they've got egg in their face or whatever the parable is intended to do, particularly the one with the Good Samaritan, where the guy who asks the question gets blown away because the good guy turns out to be the people they hate, the Samaritans. That's just purposeful, in your face, listen to what God is doing in the world thing.

But, again, a parable can do that in ways that straight prose can't do. Jesus could have said, look, love your enemies. And he did say that, but then he told the story. Oh, you mean Samaritans? Come on. The story does it far better. And people who can tell stories well always get their point across better than people that, like myself, would just do plain prose.

**JMF:** Yeah.

**GF:** I admire them, but I'm not one of them.

**JMF:** I've heard people say that all parables that Jesus told are true stories, but a parable doesn't have to be a so-called true story...

**GF:** What you mean is an actual event.

**JMF:** Yes, an actual event.

**GF:** I don't know why people feel that way—that somehow to tell a story to make a point..., an illustration, ...you tell a story to make a point.

That's not lying, that's not being false, is it? I mean, come on, the *point* is what you're after.

**JMF:** Right.

**GF:** But there are some people that just think that that's deception or something. I don't know. I confess that my wonderful in-laws, now deceased, that they couldn't handle me at this point because for them, if it wasn't true (meaning it didn't actually happen), then it's not true. And I just had no categories for that view of what Scripture is about, so I just didn't get into those conversations.

**JMF:** When I was younger, there were people who felt that fiction was wrong for kids to read... [**GF:** Yeah.] because it's not of true, actual events.

**GF:** It's not *true* (laughing). Well, good fiction is the best way to find truth.

**JMF:** Yeah, to get across a point. The stories have always been a way to...

**GF:** They've always been useful that way. I mean, even in the Old Testament, some of the best moments in the narratives is when somebody tells a story and a person gets zapped by the story. That's just, that's the way it is.

**JMF:** Yeah. David, when Nathan the prophet came and told about the man with the sheep and [2 Sam. 12:1-10].

**GF:** Yes.

**JMF:** One of the books then, this one, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. Many people don't think in terms of the variety of translations—they either have a King James or a...New International Version is a very popular and widespread...

**GF:** Most common...

**JMF:**...best selling. So there isn't much thought as to the differences between translations and what makes one translation superior for whatever the particular purpose may be over another one, and this book gets into that.

**GF:** And you'll notice it's a different co-author in this case.

**JMF:** Yes. Mark Strauss.

**GF:** And the reason for that is that it became very clear to me...I had been asked to write this book by Zondervan. And it became very clear to me early on that we didn't need Old and New at this point, we needed old and young. And I'm old. And Mark is a New Testament scholar who teaches at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, and we're on the TNIV, the NIV committee together.

**JMF:** The TNIV being...

**GF:** Today's New International Version, yeah. We're on this committee together, we're good friends, and when I was asked to write this book, I realized I didn't need an Old Testament person, I needed a *younger* person. I

needed somebody who knew what was really going on in the world of language, and he's a marvelous linguist. So I am totally indebted to him for this book. In fact, when we go to conferences and we present the book, he's the one that does it. He's got it all on PowerPoint and the whole bit, and he's a marvelous communicator.

We had a great lot of fun writing that book. The chapters are pretty evenly divided as to our specialties, but just trying to help people to recognize that if you can't read the Greek or the Hebrew, you're dependent on the people who can, and who try to put it into English.

Now there's a whole group of people out there, a whole group of them, that think loyalty to the biblical language means to be as close to that language as you can possibly be, both in form and in words. Well, no good translator would ever think that. They would never translate some German book into something that looked like German more than English. I mean, you just wouldn't do that. I just cannot understand why people think that so-called literal is better when, in fact, literal is not good English.

What we're after is an English version of what the Greek and Hebrew say. But we've not taken sides on translations. At one point we have a chart showing from literal to the freest of the free and indicate that the middling area is the place that people ought to be for their Bible of choice.

But for some reason, people think that some of these more so-called literal translation have better translations. Well, actually, they're poorer translations. What they are, is my term for it, is Greek-lish. They're neither English nor Greek. You can understand it in English, but nobody would ever *speak* that English. So why not take the Greek and put it into English, which is what most good translations do. We have them all listed there in terms of various usefulness, and audiences for whom they're useful.

**JMF:** And you actually, for your own personal reading, which translation do you like to use?

**GF:** We use what is currently the TNIV, but in 2011 will become revised to become the NIV altogether. That is, the present NIV is going to be taken up into all of the changes that have been made over the years and will be the NIV.

**JMF:** How will it be designated?

**GF:** NIV updated, whatever. This happens regularly with translations. What a lot of people don't know is that the NIV they're reading is a 1978 version of something that happened much earlier and has scores of changes from the earlier expression of it. So this is not a new thing for this particular tradition of translation.

I have people that just live the NASB and NASU now. And that's fine, but nobody would ever speak that English. You would never speak it in the pulpit. It's Greek-lish, it's not English. It does very nicely put the Greek into the English language, but you're reading what the Greek looks like, not

what English looks like.

This is a universal view of translation. This is not one scholar's view. If you're going to translate Luther into English, you just can't keep the German sentences. It just can't be done. In the old story, the American on tour in Germany and he kept asking the German translator, "What's he saying? What's he saying?" He said, "I don't know, he hasn't come to the verb yet." Because the verb is the very end of [German sentences]. (laughing). I said, yeah, you have to translate the whole sentence.

**JMF:** Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time again, but we appreciate very much you being here, and thanks so much on behalf of everybody who has used these books and benefited from them, as they have been such a tremendous help—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, and *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. So thanks for your good work and thanks for sharing your time with us.



## 8. LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

**J. Michael Fezell:** You've been preaching and writing for most of your life, and I just want to ask you to tell us what is it that you want people to know about God?

**GF:** I think I can get at that best by telling a story. I was a freshman at Seattle Pacific College in those days and had a rather remarkable encounter with God. I was there on a basketball scholarship, and it was an idolatry to me. And Stuart really led me to give that up to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. That happened in early December that year, in '52.

Later that year we had a chapel series we called Spiritual Emphasis Week — a special speaker for each chapel in that week. Her name was Eugenia Price. She was a well-known figure in Hollywood— a writer and that kind of thing — who five years earlier had been converted in Billy Graham's first crusade in Los Angeles. She was a marvelous person and a gifted speaker.

Somewhere at the beginning of things she said, "You will never find a more relieved person in all the world than I, when I discovered that God is just like Jesus Christ." She admitted that wasn't theologically well-said, but her point was well-said. I think that's pretty much where any true believer in Jesus, any true Christian must come to terms with theology, with how one understands God.

In John's Gospel in particular where this is put on display in every imaginable way, the Son is revealing the Father. It isn't that the Son is separate from the Father; the Father and the Son and Spirit are the one God. But in the incarnation, God became present among us. My way of putting it is: He came among us, took the wraps off, and said, "Here's what I am like. Here's what God is and what God is like."

Every false theology in history has been a failure to take that seriously — that the only true understanding of God is that which comes through

revelation of the Son, who is the full, perfect, absolute representation (it's hard to find language now when we begin to talk theologically, but understand...) representation of who God is and what God is like. Every false theology is a theology that is steered away from what we learn about God through the revelation in the Son. Every false theology. Because that is where the full revelation of God takes place.

And then...I'm going to probably cry, but it's part of my character...the ultimate expression of that revelation is in the crucifixion. God on a cross with his creatures trying to get rid of him. And instead of getting rid of him, they got him forever. You can't get rid of him. Death followed by resurrection followed by the Holy Spirit with a total complete passion on God's part to do what was intended in the Garden of Eden, and that's to create human beings in his image.

What God has done in Christ and by the Spirit is to recreate fallen human beings back into the image of God so that we live on this planet as the image-bearers of God, which should constantly point people to God, because we bear that image. So I have a great relief that God is just like Jesus Christ. Not well-said theologically, but well-said in terms of the point being made.

**JMF:** Many Christians think of the Father being a scary God of the Old Testament.

**GF:** A mean old man in heaven, yes.

**JMF:** And Jesus is the nice guy who kind of shields us from the anger of this scary God of the Old Testament.

**GF:** Everybody who does this has not read the Gospel of John. "Have I been with you for so long," Jesus asks, "And you don't know who I am? The one who has seen me has seen the Father." It's the Gospel of John that finally takes all of that, that story, that Gospel, that incarnation, and raises it to the next level so that we hear the Gospel story in its theological setting of who this is.

It's in the Synoptic Gospels as well, but John just makes it so stark that you can't miss the point that this is not just another human being, this is God incarnate — taking off the wraps and saying, "Look, this is who God is. This is what God is like."

**JMF:** John also records Jesus talking about his oneness with the Father. But he also prays that the disciples "may be one as we are one." What is he driving at there?

**GF:** That's one of the more difficult texts to spell out in fine detail. But the concern throughout that whole section of the Gospel has to do with just, in this case we know, two believers, two followers of Jesus — that they both together reflect the likeness of God that's found in Christ in their relationship with one another. All of that had to do with how we become the bearers of the image. We do that not because we pray a lot, we do that

because we love our neighbor and our neighbor is often our enemy.

So that...as God loved his enemies, namely you and me, and redeemed us by that love, he wants us to be his image-bearers and to be redemptive agents in a world where people not only don't believe in him but would prefer to curse. They don't even believe in him, but they'll use his name and curse. It's how terribly fallen the human race has become.

**JMF:** Interestingly, when he's saying that about the disciples, they have been at each other's throats over who's going to be the greatest, and he's having to interrupt their disputes over all that, and yet he's talking about a oneness that will transcend all of that.

**GF:** He does scold them a little bit here, but, you know, it's constantly bringing them back. "Look, watch... the works that I do are the works of the Father. I am doing the Father's work. Pay attention, this is what God is like." So people ask me what God is like? This is not theologically well-put, but it says it. God is just like Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** And we're not afraid of Jesus. We read about Jesus and we can see that well, I think I could trust him to not surprise me with condemnation. But we are a little afraid of the Father. We're a little worried about what he might do next.

**GF:** That is understandable, because most of us, many of us, have broken fathers who aren't people we would necessarily emulate. My case is different from that. My father was a true representation of my heavenly Father. So I never had to overcome the frailties and the difficulties and the weaknesses of my own father because I regularly saw the revelation of God and the way he treated my mother and the way that he was a pastor and the way that he created a congregation, became a professor in a Bible college, the way he treated students. He was simply an image-bearer. So that was never a difficulty for me.

But I wasn't long as a pastor or a teacher when I realized that image didn't work at all for some people because their fathers were so bad, so brutal, that they didn't want God to be a father. What had to happen in those cases is that they had to rethink what they would like a father to be and then come to terms with the fact that God is infinitely more even than that. So it's an image that in our culture does have its drawbacks, but I won't leave the image, because not only is it the biblical one, but correctly expressed, it's the best one.

**JMF:** The Holy Spirit comes into the picture as well in John, and Jesus is talking about his oneness with the Father, he's talking about "if you've seen me, you've seen the Father," he's talking about how they may be one...or how the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Then he starts to talk about the Comforter: "I'm going to send you a comforter. It's necessary I go away." How does the Holy Spirit fit into the relationship with Father and Son?

**GF:** That isn't what I call carefully spelled out in the text. That's where theology finally comes in. But it's quite clear in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit both the Father *and* of his Son, and therefore the one Holy Spirit is the full image-bearer of the Godhead. The reason, the point, of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament is that the Spirit is to continue the work of the incarnation by incarnating us with God's likeness. As the Spirit, there's the fruit of the God likeness in our relationships with one another.

This is the great problem with me that I had – in history, the solitary monk, the one who went out into the desert to get Christian perfection [St. Anthony]. That's impossible. You can't find out whether a person is a true Christian until they rub elbows with another Christian. That's when you find out whether the work of the Spirit is really taking place. The solitary hermetic monk was just so unbiblical that it doesn't have a leg to stand on, because the real test is how one responds *to another* when the other is doing things that are either distasteful, wrong, deliberately evil...how we respond to that is going to be the ultimate evidence of the Spirit's outworking, the life of Christ, in us.

**JMF:** Christ is about...Christ forgives, he loves his enemies.

**GF:** That's awful, isn't it?

**JMF:** Well, it's good for us.

**GF:** Yeah, it's good for us.

**JMF:** But we don't like it when he's forgiving our enemies.

**GF:** That's it exactly. We don't like that part of it. Yes. We like to be Christians, but we also like to be fallen at points. But our fallen-ness can still find expression.

**JMF:** Well I'm glad he forgives us.

**GF:** Yes.

**JMF:** He forgives his enemies, which often includes us...

**GF:** Yes, on the cross.

**JMF:** ...and our enemies. And here he is telling us that we can be one with each other, and the Holy Spirit then is continuing that incarnation...and that includes loving our enemies. It isn't just telling us something that we need to do, because we can't. We don't do that. We never have. His ministry is the doing of that which we fail in.

**GF:** One of the difficulties with this is the enormity of the population and the fact that these are spoken in basically rural contexts, where people live in small villages and they have to get along, or the village won't make it. We now live in a global village where almost no one can live in isolation anymore.

The context for us is so huge that we have a hard time even imagining what it's like to truly love our enemies, because we don't even know who our enemies are. I was a kid growing up in grammar school during World

War II. And how would one love Hitler? I'm sorry, Hitler was the incarnation of evil. So I quit thinking in those categories. The question is, how do I love the neighbor next door?

**JMF:** Our neighbor is the one we're having the immediate problem with.

**GF:** Yes, so this is the person that we must love, but it's easy to overlook that person in thinking in broader people terms. You know, I love the people in my church...I still want to have dinner with some of them, you know? It's the one-on-one thing that Jesus is about — not that global or larger communal. How do I love somebody out of their evil? I would assume that's the basic reason for loving them.

**JMF:** But Jesus does that.

**GF:** He does that.

**JMF:** And he's in us, therefore we can rest in his doing of that, without us having to take the burden.

**GF:** Here's where the Holy Spirit must come in.

**JMF:** It's really a rest, isn't it?

**GF:** Yes.

**JMF:** He does what we're unable to. He heals us.

**GF:** Yes. Good thing, too.

**JMF:** You've done a lot of work with reading the Scriptures in the context in which they were written. As you just mentioned, this is written in the context of a village kind of thinking. It really doesn't address details and specifics of our kind of world in which we live on a block where we don't even know most of the people who drive by the front of our house.

**GF:** Yes, exactly.

**JMF:** We have a different kind of relationship from any of the relationships people would have known then. They talk about a stranger...but when a stranger comes to town, everybody knows that a stranger has come to town, and it's one, or one little group. Pretty soon everybody knows a whole lot about them, because they make it their business. We can't do that.

**GF:** Yes. And how that translates for us is very difficult. I don't pretend that I would not answer that in our context. I think the greater question is, how do I love those neighbors that are closest?

**JMF:** The neighbors that I do know.

**GF:** Yeah, that are around me. And in our case, Maudine and I, we live in a ten-unit complex of individual units. We think in terms of how do we love? We happen to be in a very good community. We're the only believers, but we get along well with everybody. They get along well with one another. There's very little of the kind of fighting that I know happens in a lot of these kind of communities. But that would be the next step for us. How do we love? How do we care for somebody if they're ill? How do we get food

to them or something like that as a way of demonstrating that we're a part of, we're a part of this community...not trying to convert them by, you know, the four spiritual laws, but trying to love them as they are and then perhaps at some point they might ask what we're all about.

**JMF:** Being ready to give an answer, but not cramming the...

**GF:** Pushing it down their throat, yes.

**JMF:** Isn't there a certain amount of trust in the Spirit's power to work with somebody instead of taking it all on ourselves?

**GF:** Altogether. But on the other hand, sometimes the door sits wide open and we get hesitant and don't step through the door. But part of that is a personality matter, too. Neither my wife or I are extroverts on one-on-one relationships, so...

**JMF:** And most people aren't.

**GF:** We have to push ourselves to move in that direction.

**JMF:** We tend to try to assume that everybody should be the same when it comes to evangelism, and yet there are so many different aspects of how we are with other people according to the way God has made us as individuals. And we're not all the same.

**GF:** True evangelism has to stem out of good relationships. The only other evangelism, of course, is the kind that happens in church when there's a sermon and a visitor is there and they hear it and the Spirit speaks. But, you know, true evangelism is a relational thing where the relationship is secure and you really hope they might ask you, "Why are you so weird?"

**JMF:** So it's a good idea for Christians to make friends with unbelievers.

**GF:** Oh yes.

**JMF:** For the sake of friendship.

**GF:** Neither Maudine or I are good at that, to be frank. But if they make the first step, we're good at it. It has to do with our personalities.

**JMF:** In today's world, studies have shown that people would rather live next door to almost anybody than an evangelical Christian because of the stereotypes of evangelical Christians being so pushy and judgmental...

**GF:** ...and aggressive.

**JMF:** ...and aggressive. Yeah.

**GF:** The New Testament makes it quite clear that you love your neighbor by doing good for your neighbor. And evangelism will come out of that, and no other way.

**JMF:** The St. Francis quote is always so interesting, "Always preach the gospel. If necessary, use words."

**GF:** This comes from my wife, but many years ago she was struck by how many times in Scripture it talks about doing good. Doing good. Not doing works, but doing good. Doing what is good. Somehow evangelicals have never caught on, it seems to me, to that's the primary biblical text on how we live in the world.

**JMF:** It's so funny when you hear a discussion going on about we're going to do in the church, "And here are some good things we can do in the community as a church." There's always the "okay, but then how do we set it up so that the good thing we're doing gives us an opportunity to hit them with the gospel?" In other words, it's like we don't know how to do good without also having to say something, or else we haven't done what we are supposed to do. The "saying something" is the most important, and the "doing good" is only a means to the end rather than doing good being the end.

**GF:** Taking a casserole over to the young couple that just had a new baby. That's what you do.

**JMF:** Not so that you can give them a spiel.

**GF:** No, just because you're doing good!

**JMF:** But because that's the good thing to do.

**GF:** It's the good thing to do, exactly! A lot of people who don't make any profession of faith at all understand that better than Christians do — that we should do good. Too many evangelical Christians are more interested in evangelizing as the first matter of business rather than loving their neighbor as the first matter of business.

**JMF:** That's a good point. I was listening to Jack Hayford once talking about that some people tend to see evangelism as scalps on your belt...

**GF:** Oh yeah, oh dear me, yes.

**JMF:** ...rather than living with people as Christ would.

**GF:** Loving them for their own sake.

**JMF:** For their own sake because they are people.

**GF:** Yes, and made in God's image. We need to be recreated into Christ's image.

**JMF:** We sure appreciate being with you again. It's always a joy to talk to you. Enjoyed the time together.

**GF:** Thank you. Pleasure.

**JMF:** We've been talking with Dr. Gordon Fee. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.

## 9. ART AND IMAGINATION IN THE CHURCH

**Introduction:** St. Andrews, Scotland, is well known as the birthplace of golf some 600 years ago. Here also stand the 850-year-old ruins of the Cathedral of St. Andrew, three of whose 100-foot-high towers rise majestically over the east end of the city. Nearby, the esteemed University of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, is the home of St. Mary's College, the university's renowned divinity school, which still uses its 16th century buildings. In College Hall, a room within one of those buildings, *You're Included* host J. Michael Fezell, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Dr. Trevor Hart. Dr. Hart is Professor of Divinity and Director of the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, and *Hope against Hope*, which he co-authored with Richard Bauckham.

**J. Michael Fezell:** Thanks for joining us today. We'd like to ask about



historical Christian art. How has it helped to shape how Christians view doctrine and practice?

**Trevor Hart:**

Much more than many Christians often suppose and realize, art has had a central place in the church for many, many centuries. Clearly, at the time of



the Reformation, and for very good reasons, there were some questions asked about certain ways of using art in church. Those remain important. But art has always been a way in which Christians have interpreted and made sense of the gospel.

There are lots of ways in which as human beings we make sense of things. We tell stories... Art such as painting, music, drama, have all featured very centrally in the ways in which Christians have made sense of, interpreted, and represented to themselves fundamental truths of the faith, fundamental stories from Scripture. Whether we're thinking about what actually goes on in church, or outside church, art has been a central vehicle for the communication of the gospel.

**JMF:** There are so many different forms of art, often we think of painting when we think of art, but actually art goes everywhere, from illustrations of stories, ideas, human imagination in so many ways. Don't we have to use our language and our experience... we're trying to talk about things unseen and things we really don't have a clear picture of, and yet we're trying to bring them down to our level. Doesn't that leave room for misinterpretation?

**TH:** Of course it does. But then, if we limit ourselves to words, we get misinterpretation as well. I think one of the advantages, whether we are thinking of painting or of music, or if we bring things up to date a bit, film, and the more contemporary forms that now would be recognized as among the arts...one of the advantages is that art engages us at levels and in ways that words alone can't. I say "words alone," and I say that advisedly, because it does seem to me it's very important to hold together the levels at which art operates visually or through sound or through action, whatever it is, engaging our emotions as well as our intellect and our imagination. It's important to hold that together with words. But words alone can only take us so far.

A lot of the more familiar ways in which we think of the Christian gospel, biblical stories being interpreted limiting to words can actually end up being rather dry if we're not careful. I think most people know that [when] listening to a sermon or reading a Christian book — it's when the writer or the speaker resorts to story, for example, which is an artistic form, things actually begin to take off and get more interesting.

There's a place for what we might call clear-cut reasoned thought, and there will never be a context in which I think we can let go of that or stop doing it. But that needs to be supplemented. It needs to be brought to life. The ideas are important and they need to be clothed in flesh, we might say, and made more accessible. But I don't want to suggest for a moment that art is simply a matter of illustration or making abstract ideas more palatable. It can certainly do that, and I think we should be grateful for the fact that it can. But art can also open up depths of meaning that words alone can't

reach. In tandem with words, taken together with words, art can be very a powerful force to put us in touch with realities that, as you said yourself, often go beyond the level of our understanding.

**JMF:** What are some examples of the depth of, let's say, music? When you bring music to church, sometimes the music can affect us in a very negative way or a very positive way.

**TH:** It can, yes. That's a very complex subject, and there are people far more expert than I am who understand how it works, but it does seem to me fairly clear that sometimes the interplay of the words, and when we're talking about music, words set to music and the sound, whether we're actually listening to it or indeed when we're participating in it, when we're singing, we're doing something, making sound in a certain way which can complement and amplify the meaning of the words when it's done well.

Equally, I think a bad setting of a set of words...whether it's church music (or any other sort, for that matter)... seems to me to be one where the sound, the music, doesn't work with the words, the ideas, but in some way against them. That can be very hard to pin down and explain, but I think we know when it happens. Somehow it doesn't work. There's no sync between the meaning that we're articulating through the words and the meaning that is being articulated in sound.

**JMF:** It seems that sometimes in some of our Western churches today, there seems to be a carryover from rock concerts into the church service. The volume tends to come across that way, and in my experience, many elderly people have asked if the volume could be turned down, and yet they're willing to, if it helps the young people, but let's do that. Is it a historical phenomenon for what is art in contemporary life (or secular life, let's say) to be brought across into the church, and is that usually productive, or should the church have its own art that does not reflect just what is around us?

**TH:** I think there are elements of truth in both sides of that. For many centuries, while the culture was shaped by the church, much music was written and performed as church music. The church was the key patron for the arts, at least music. Someone like Bach was writing to order for church patrons, Catholic and Protestant. The division between secular music and sacred music only arises in the 17th century and beyond, when music, among other arts, was forced to find business, as it were, outside church because there were more constraints or opportunities for it than within the church. Since then it's usually been the case that church music has, to some extent, been willing to draw on wider currents of musicality. Not though, in an injudicious way.

I think the point of your question is a good one — that one can't simply go out borrowing absolutely anything simply because it might attract the young people in. We need to be careful. As I said a moment ago, music can

work at deep levels which we don't always understand. So that judiciousness and that discernment needs to be carefully done. But, done well, done carefully, all sorts of things can be baptized and brought into the sanctuary and made good use of. There's a long history of that. Many hymn tunes and carol tunes, for example, were borrowed from the wider culture of the day. And we forget...we just claim them for our own in the church. That's been obscured long since. I don't think there's anything wrong in principle with doing it, but I do think it needs to be done very carefully.

Music written within the church, for the church or from a Christian standpoint — we think not so much of music for worship now, but music composed by Christian composers — I think can have a powerful impact on the wider culture, too.

**JMF:** Much of contemporary music today, or what's called (at least in the United States) contemporary Christian music (much of which was written 40 years ago, or 50 years ago in some cases) seems to have very catchy tunes, very repetitive tunes, but much of the theology seems to be weak, and yet that seems to be most popular and most repeated in many Evangelical churches.

**TH:** I've always thought that if I wanted to start a new theological movement or a new Christian church with peculiar doctrines, the most efficient way by far of populating such a church would be to write songs, popular choruses, hymns, call them what you will, with appropriately theologically orientated words and get people to sing them, because when people sing things, they very quickly begin to believe it. I think we're far too careless in the way we pick up and sing things in church. We aren't really thinking. I try to make it a habit of my own to always read through a hymn that I'm not familiar with and see whether I want to sing it. Now, we don't all need to have theology degrees and be able to analyze church hymn lyrics in a precise way, but I think we should be cautious about what we sing.

The flip side of that is I think it's incumbent upon hymn writers, writers of songs, to do a good job and to be better informed theologically, so that what they write is carefully thought through and not simply driven by the beat or by whatever. The best church music is a happy synthesis in which words, good words, and good music complement one another. It's very easy, and I suspect it happens, for bad words to arise because the music seems to drive it, just as it's possible for good words to be spoiled by bad music. But you're correct that we need to be judicious about what we sing and not be driven too quickly by the currents of music or fashion or what passes in as popular in theological terms.

**JMF:** Are there other forms of Christian art that could bring enhancement to a typical worship service?

**TH:** It's a shame that in the Protestant churches and in the Evangelical tradition, commonly we're still quite nervous about the use of visual art in

church. The Reformation was very careful in the direction of its criticism about the use of visual art in church. The key Reformers differed quite markedly on their attitude toward it. Luther was far more forgiving about the presence of visual art in church, was quite happy to tolerate it. Calvin was much more nervous and quite careful about what he thought was permissible. The key concern was about idolatry. Calvin's worry was that if you put things in churches, people would tend to treat them in a way which might end up in idolatry and therefore it was far better to have them removed from churches. He was quite happy with art of a certain sort outside the sanctuary, not so happy with art present in the sanctuary.

Luther's attitude was much more that idolatry is a matter of the heart. If you take away paintings, they'll simply find something else to latch onto — deal with the idolatry and then the paintings won't be a problem. There are a range of issues about which we need to be very careful, therefore, about using visual arts in church. But it does seem to me that painting and other forms of visual art can be very powerful communicators of the gospel. They can enhance our church buildings in a range of ways which enrich worship, and used carefully, used judiciously, so that we don't fall foul of the things which the Reformers quite rightly were worried about, it seems to me they could be a massive enhancement of our worship in a number of ways.

**JMF:** Art is a reflection of human imagination, and you've done a great deal of work on the imagination in a broader sense and how it is a reflection of faith and practice in our walk with Christ. Can you tell us about that?

**TH:** I got interested in this when I was asked to write an essay on imagination and the Christian hope and I started to reflect on it, reading around, thinking quite hard about it. It's very apparent, when one thinks about hope, that imagination is bound to be central. What you're doing when you're hoping is picturing things that aren't yet the case and making them very concrete, so hope is one obvious example of a place in Christian faith, Christian life, where we are employing our imaginations. There are so many others.

In very down to earth terms, if you ask yourself, what are most Christians doing when they pray? Most of us, I suspect, when we pray have a picture in our minds. Perhaps to some it will be a picture of God as father or something. Perhaps for others it will be Jesus. It's very hard to pray to a person without picturing them in some way. So again, that's another context in which for the life of faith imagination is quite indispensable.

Then I got around to thinking, how about Jesus himself? Weren't Jesus' teaching strategies highly imaginative? In breaking open quite complex and difficult ideas — the kingdom of God, whatever it might be. Jesus tends to bring things immediately into the sphere of the imaginative and say, look, it's a bit like this, and he would tell a story or compare something abstract

to something concrete so that people could get a handle on it. It began to become apparent to me that in all sorts of ways, in almost any area of Christian life and faith, the imagination crops up very soon and seems to have a central function to play.

I think one could describe Christian faith itself as a way of imagining the world. People will get nervous about that because imagination tends to be locked together very quickly with another word — imaginary. I think the automatic association between the two isn't helpful. There's nothing wrong with things that are imaginary, but not everything that we imagine is imaginary. Lots of things that we have to imagine, because we have no other way of picturing them, are all too real. And when one comes to faith, one thing that happens is a completely different way of seeing, and feeling, and tasting the world, slides into view. If that's not a matter of the imaginative, I don't know what is. It's a way of picturing reality, picturing the world, picturing our relation to God in a completely new way as if someone has changed the backdrop against which we're situated. So a very fundamental way in which to be imaginative seems to be basic to what we are, and in the life of faith, that has an absolutely basic role to play.

**JMF:** Many Christians will shy away from the idea of it, and yet everybody does it — we can't be alive without having some goings on in our brain that put together ideas and bring something...and that is imagination. Can Christians go too far? Is there something they should be worried about or careful about?

**TH:** Sure. I like to think of the imagination as whatever's going on in the mind's eye, as we might call it. That can be good and healthy, and it can be bad and unhealthy. It's perfectly reasonable that Christians might be concerned about certain things the imagination is capable of.

One of the things that I'm always slightly cautious about is that in the 19th century in particular, there was a rediscovery of the imagination and a tendency to associate it rather too quickly, almost automatically, with things of God, with the divine spirit, and so on. So one of the things I like to do with my students is point out to them that the imagination can be enormously dangerous. What I usually say to them is there's nothing more imaginative than a torture chamber. One very concrete example of how we can use our imaginations to devise things, which far from being good and healthy and the things of God, are actually manifestations of evil. That tends to be the thing which underlies a lot of Christian concern of imagination, is it can be the maker of all sorts of things which are dangerous and damaging.

But imagination also lies behind most of the things which are good and life-giving and healthy. For example, knowing how to deal with somebody who is in a difficult place — an act of love, we might say, or mercy, or charity, call it what you will, is a highly imaginative thing. Knowing how to

relate to another person effectively and well in any context is an imaginative activity. We need to realize that the imaginative is a fundamental disposition of what we are as human beings, and like most of the other things that we are as human beings, it can be used for good or ill, and be in the hands of God's Spirit or can be a device we use to withstand God's Spirit and struggle against it.

So I don't want to automatically, as it were, baptize the imagination and say that everything that's born of the imagination is necessarily good and healthy, but I do want to recapture it, to reclaim it, for the kingdom of God, and say, God made us these imaginative beings. We can't remember, we can't think where we've come from, without exercising our imaginations, we can't anticipate or hope for what lies in the future without using our imaginations, we can have no sense of who we are, where we're going, where we've come from, or what we should do and who we should seek to be. So the imagination is a place in our lives where if God's Spirit lays hold of it and renews and redeems it, can be a remarkable resource for good.

One of the ways I sum that up is to say as Christians we talk about God's Spirit being present in us and transforming us from within. We're not so good at trying to identify the places where that happens. I have a hunch that if we talk about the imagination in that broad-brush sense of our mind's eye, the way we envisage things, the way we see ourselves, the way we see the world, then the imagination could be one place, if not perhaps the main place, where God's Spirit, present and active, works in renewing us and conforming us to Christ.

**JMF:** Our imagination is all we have, isn't it, as far as any kind of planning, ideas, coming up with what to do next? We're continually...

**TH:** Anytime we move beyond in our mind's eye where we are now, then we're being imaginative. Whether we're thinking about what happened yesterday or what we might be having for dinner tonight, that's imaginative. If we're thinking or planning a service for the weekend, that's imaginative. If we're expecting something to happen in life, that's...I mean, almost anything you can think of that gets us outside of the immediacy of the here and now, this moment, involves the imagination to some extent and in some way.

**JMF:** As Christians we're participating in the life of Christ. As we read Scripture, that is a part of that process as Scripture becomes the witness of who Christ is with us and for us...how does imagination play into that?

**TH:** The first thing I'd say is if...as Christians we sit down and look at the content of what God has given us as a book through which he makes himself known to us — just how much if it is actually imaginative, highly imaginative, and the sort of the thing that any literary critic would say oh, that's an imaginative genre? Story, poetry, parable, and so on and so forth. History, I mean history which figures God in it, is a way of patterning

things, creating a pattern through a series of events over centuries. That is highly imaginative in terms of the actual content of Old and New Testaments and the pattern in which we trace through them a story leading from creation to the last things.

But it's not just the content of Scripture that's highly imaginative in that technical sense. The ways in which as Christians we read the text, make sense of it for ourselves, find ourselves as well as God in its pages, as it were. Here, God's speaking to us through its pages. That demands huge acts of imagination. It's not a way in which people ordinarily would see or think of themselves, but we're called to do it. God gives us these texts, calls us to read them together, and to seek his voice. Again, seeking and finding are highly imaginative activities. Imagination is a living and vibrant thing through which we come to see ourselves differently, and therefore to live differently. It seems to be to be fundamental to the ways in which we engage with the text of Scripture as God's word within the church.

**JMF:** Aren't there some principles or guidelines that Christians can bring to keeping their imaginations within some sort of reasonable boundaries when they come to the Scriptures, because often, as we read the Scriptures and bring our experiences to them, we can begin to abuse other people and as we interpret the Scripture, assuming that our view is God's view. How can a person not let their imagination lead them astray as they're going through the Scriptures?

**TH:** You're quite right. We can do all sorts of things with the text of the Bible if we wish to. We can misuse it as well as use it well. Putting that back in terms of the question — that can be good imagining and bad imagining in relation to Scripture. We have to be guided by what we find in the text itself. It's not a free-for-all. We can't just do what we like with the text. We have to be guided by the patterns that we find in the text and work with those.

I don't think Christians have ever thought that being faithful to the text of Scripture was simply a matter of reiterating the text. The best practitioners of the Christian faith, and the best theologians, have been those who have identified the patterns within the text and then extrapolated them in a way that's faithful to the text but applies it to new situations, answers questions which the text itself perhaps doesn't answer directly but to which it's relevant, almost in the way that one might think of a jazz pianist or saxophonist improvising on a theme or on themes that are there within the piece, but now there's something new and imaginative to be done on the basis of it for a new context, a new situation.

Yes, it's possible to use the imagination badly in relation to Scripture, just as it's possible to use it badly in relation to almost anything else in life. We're fallen in our imaginations, just as we're fallen in our minds, in our wills, and in our bodies — that's all the more reason then to suppose that

we're also redeemed in Christ in our imaginations as well as our minds and our wills and our bodies. The other thing to say when we're talking about Scripture is that we should do it prayerfully.

**JMF:** Is there something to be said for doing it in the context of the body of Christ as opposed to just on our own...

**TH:** Absolutely. I do think, and this is to some extent something that Protestants and Evangelicals at least perhaps need to rediscover — the importance of the church for the reading of Scripture and that it's not primarily an individual exercise, it is primarily an exercise within the Body in which we have to listen to others, learn from others, as well as offer our own voice, and expect to meet Christ as we meet others and engage with them and not in isolation.

That's not to say that God doesn't speak to people — that we can't meet Christ in the privacy, as it were, of our own space, but I think the more normal expectation is that that will happen as we engage with other Christians in faith, in the community of faith, and share our interpretations, voice the things that we think we discover in the text, and see whether those are resonated by what others find there and see whether they're confirmed or called into question by what others find.

**JMF:** I've seen a bumper sticker on a number of cars that says something like, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." They're talking about specific social issues about which they have reached a conclusion in which they're condemning those who do it, and it's their way of using the Bible as a tool to get across their agenda.

**TH:** Yeah. I think we need to be very cautious about that. It's always complex asking questions about issues to which the Bible itself sometimes appears to give no clear answer but which it would be very easy, by using it in certain ways, to make it seem to speak. The secret to that is to approach the text prayerfully, to seek to be as aware as we can about our own failings, of our own tendencies to make it say what we want to find in it, but again to situate our reading of it in the community — to air our readings, to hear the readings of others, and to seek truth together prayerfully, because at the end of the day what we're concerned with is not faithfulness to our own readings or even those of our tradition, but faithfulness to what we hear God speaking in the text as we read it together.

**JMF:** Speaking of imagination, the fact that we have it and the fact that Christ is one of us and therefore shares imagination as well, but more than that, we're made in the image of God, then we have to think that God has imagination which transcends our imagination and is the source of being of our imagination. How would we think about God and imagination? Is that a fair question?

**TH:** That's a huge question. There have been theologians who have wanted to use the term *imagination* very directly of God. Any term we use in



speaking of God we're using very carefully, because as Christians have long recognized, God is not like us, as God says in Isaiah, "My ways are not as your ways," and that otherness is very important. However, the Bible doesn't hesitate to use human terms of God — thinking, speaking, acting, and so on. It seems to me that imagining is a perfectly reasonable one to use. I have to think of God, in some sense, on the analogy of human imagination in his dealings with things, can help us get a grip, perhaps, on the ways in which God deals with things sometimes.

But we need to handle the terms carefully. We can't simply project all the features of human imagining onto the clouds and assume that they're true in some amplified sense of God — that would be a very dangerous way to go. But I wouldn't resist the term *imagination* just because it's one that we don't find on the pages of the Bible all over the place. It seems to me that the Bible does show God acting imaginatively, creatively, if you prefer the term, in response to all sorts of situations, so that it seems to be reasonable to use it in that way.

**JMF:** Even the term *imagination* has to do with *image*, a created image of which we are.

**TH:** Yeah. Christians have sometimes wanted to use the image of the artist, coming back to artistic imagination, as a particular way of picturing God's creative relation to the world. There are some ways in which we need to be careful about that, but it seems to me as a picture to work reasonably well in certain respects...and the idea of God taking care over something, pouring gratuitous amounts of effort into the making of it and then standing back and...

**JMF:** The Scripture uses the potter and the wheel as the image of God.

**TH:** Indeed. And I think that sense of aesthetic judgment that we get in Genesis 1 where God stands back and sees that it is good. I think that all those things do speak very much to the human experience of making something, doing it well, doing it as well as you can, and being pleased, satisfied, with the outcome. And, of course, caring for what you've made, putting great value on it.

## 10. GOD THE FATHER, REFLECTED IN JESUS CHRIST

**J. Michael Feazell:** How did you first become acquainted with Trinitarian theology?

**Trevor Hart:** I was an undergraduate student at the University of Durham in England. In about the second year of my three years of study, someone introduced me to Tom Torrance's work. They lent me a copy of *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, and I confess it took a little bit of reading. But I moved quickly on and picked up some of his other books, *Theology and Reconstruction*, *Theology and Reconciliation*.

It was in his writing that I, for the first time, realized that it was possible to do hard-nosed, thorough, rigorous, systematic theology in a way that touched base on almost every page with the things that mattered to the life of faith. Sometimes I wasn't finding that in the people I was reading. That's not to say that the theologians I was reading weren't men and women of faith, it's simply that the theology seemed to be doing something other than a game in which actually conscious, self-conscious meshing of theology with Scripture, with the tradition, and with the practical concerns of Christian life and living was apparent.

I found that very encouraging, slightly daunting, because he did it so well, but also refreshing. I moved on, because reading Tom Torrance, you don't go very far without finding allusions to other figures very quickly. One of them was Karl Barth. So I started to read Karl Barth as well, and again found the same sort of thing in Barth that I found in Torrance, and both of those were very much casting the whole of theology in this Trinitarian way of understanding things.

## Reading Karl Barth

**JMF:** Karl Barth has such a huge body of work that it seems that people...there's so much, that they don't even undertake to read it. And there's a lot of misunderstanding, or has been. Do you think that that is improving? Is Karl Barth being better understood?

**TH:** I suspect so. I hope so. Barth is a complex figure, as you say. His work is daunting, there's an awful lot of it. In a way that I think is analogous to Torrance too, it's not easy to get into. Part of the reason for that is he has his own way of saying things, putting things. There's a huge level of overall consistency between the different parts of his work, which means that you really need to have read all the others before you start any one of them. So wherever you leap in, it's going to be hard work at first. But if you stick with it, it becomes very readable very quickly, and you see the same themes occurring, you recognize where you are within the map, as it were, of his thought.

What struck me when I first started reading Barth, and still strikes me, is his clear dedication to the gospel, his concern that it be understood, and that its significance for life in the world be worked out and made manifest for as many people to see and to grasp as possible. He does that at huge length, with great care, but I think it's probably true that certain parts are less daunting than others in terms of their accessibility.

Usually I would encourage an undergraduate student wanting to start reading Barth to go and have a look at *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [*Church Dogmatics* volume 4], where the themes are familiar ones: atonement, incarnation, and so on. He treats them in a way which is sometimes difficult, but sometimes just "home from home." What students get when they read that is the sense that even if they're not understanding everything on every page, nevertheless this is someone with whose thought they can feel at home.

Not that Barth won't stretch them, not that he won't actually make them re-think some things, maybe fairly fundamentally. Not that on occasion (and this remains true after 30 years of reading his thought) they may not end up disagreeing with him fairly fundamentally about one or two things, but they will have grappled at a very deep level with some very basic themes in the gospel, in their understanding of who God is and in their understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ and in the way that that plays out in the wider story of life in the world. For that, it's very hard to better Barth, although I think if I were wanting to cluster theologians who do it well, Barth and Torrance would be in the first league.

**JMF:** There are some very interesting small books that are authored by Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam* and *The Humanity of God*, and many people have found those very helpful. In *Christ and Adam* he goes through Romans 5 and it's very short and easy to read, but so meaningful as he takes you into

the love of God that is in spite of who you are and what you've done.

As a taste of what can come of reading Karl Barth, it just seems so different from the way we typically go to church and hear a sermon about how you should be obeying and if you don't please God you're coming under the curse and you're going back like a dog to its vomit, and you come away discouraged. But when you read Barth, you come away encouraged about who you are, the commitment toward the same way.

**TH:** Yeah. Barth himself famously talks about the strange new world that you find in the pages of the Bible, and I think many readers have a similar experience when they first pick up Karl Barth, that here too there is a strange new world and you might not yet be able to identify all the landmarks or even pick out the horizon. But nevertheless, you know that you're in somewhere that's unfamiliar, in a sense.

I cited a couple of moments ago that Barth's theology in some ways has a very familiar ring to it. But you also get the sense that even though these are familiar themes and familiar landmarks, somehow the configuration of them is different. The difference is one that is intriguing, and I think when most people read it the first time, it's attractive. There's something about it that has changed. Yes, the players are the same players and the storylines are the same storylines, but something has been done to them which gives it a completely different feel.

I think you're right. It is that sense of the God who is from first to last *for us*, and determined to be for us, no matter who we are and no matter what we've done and no matter what we amount to, who values us not for our achievements but for who he has called us to be and who he has made us to be in his Son. That is so completely foundational to Barth's thought; it colors every chapter of the story he tells. I think people catch that.

Even if they don't understand it at first and they can't see how it all plays out in the larger structure of their understanding of the Christian faith, most of the people I've met who have read Barth and engaged with him at any length find that attractive immediately. They find it's something they want to hear more of, and that's because it is the gospel. It is the story of the God who gives all for us and is determined to be for us. Barth's got his finger on that pulse from the very first, and it's shot through the whole of his theology. There's no part, I think, of his theology where that doesn't come up again, and again, and again, and shape the whole of the substance of what he has to say, no matter what he's talking about.

## The doctrine of election

**JMF:** When we think of Calvinists today, we aren't necessarily thinking of John Calvin himself perhaps, but we're thinking of a kind of theology that excludes people... On one side there's a declaration of assurance of salvation, but on the other side, there's a "How do you know that you're

among the elect?” Well, you know by the evidence of your works, and yet that proves nothing to you. Is there a difference between John Calvin’s theology as it lies and what has become of it, and what influence has Karl Barth brought to that understanding?

**TH:** Barth is a Reformed theologian, self-consciously so, and therefore I think his appropriation of the Reformed tradition and his reinterpretation of it at certain key points, not least in his treatment of the doctrine of election, has actually forced people, not least some Calvinist theologians (Reformed theologians) to go back and examine again and see whether the way in which Reformed theology has sometimes schematized that theme has been healthy, helpful, but more importantly biblical.

What Barth saw and shows is that you can’t actually formulate a doctrine of election, or indeed any other sort of doctrine, simply by lifting verses from the page of Scripture and laying them out and putting them in a logical order. That’s not how it works. It never has worked like that. You have to go further than that. You have to relate doctrines to one another. You have to ask questions about certain themes that perhaps have priority logically, theologically over others.

Barth’s fundamental conviction is that while the theme of election, God’s choosing, God’s deciding, ultimately the sovereignty of God, is fundamental to the way Christians conceive of God and should conceive of him in biblical terms, that it’s in the person of Christ that the theological center of gravity falls in Scripture and, therefore, in theology too, it should be.

His thorough-going insistence on rethinking what it might mean to say that God chooses, concerning a person’s eternal well-being, in the light of Jesus Christ and his refusal to acknowledge the meaningfulness of talking about any God who, as he puts it, is hidden *behind* Jesus Christ, forced him to a very radical re-reading of the doctrine — that it’s the fundamental conviction that it’s not in the text of the Bible pure and simple as some work of literature that God reveals himself, finally it’s in a human life lived, a death died and raised to life again that God has made himself known fully and finally. All the rest needs to be worked out in the light of what that means and the significance of that fact.

As Barth sees it, the significance of that fact is that this is who God wills to be, and what he has done for each of us. Whatever we say about election or any other theme theologically has to reckon with that fact. That can’t be something we come to after we’ve worked out the other things. That has to be where we start; that God’s purpose eternally was to be the man Jesus Christ and to do what he does in Christ for us. That forces you to rethink some themes. So Barth has caused some rethinking of that doctrine, but obviously for some people that’s problematic, and some people find him difficult to cope with theologically because they’re fairly convinced that the

traditional version of that doctrine is non-negotiable.

## Jesus as God

**JMF:** Why is it so significant when Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”? What is so important about that?

**TH:** One way of answering that question is pastorally rather than theologically, differentiating between those two for the moment. (I wouldn’t want to drive a wedge between them, incidentally.) But let’s look at it pastorally. Most people, if they think of God at all, have a question mark about what sort of God it is they’re dealing with. Luther famously had that question, “How can I get a gracious God?” Even Christians sometimes live with this lurking suspicion that God may turn out to be rather unpleasant or to have a grudge against them or a good case against them.

What Barth sees and says so clearly is that Christian life ought to be based solidly on the God we see, and the face of God that we see in Jesus, that we can be sure that God turns out, finally, to be like Jesus, like his Son. That provides a huge ground for assurance, because what do we see in Jesus? We see God forgiving sins, we see God loving the sinner, rehabilitating the sinner. Once we realize the Father is no different in that, from the Son he sends into the world to do it, then I think it banishes any specters we might have of a God who, even though Jesus is like that, may turn out to be rather different.

So on a pastoral level, in terms of the God we pray to day and night, or the God we hope to meet at the end of our lives beyond life, if we live with a question mark, it seems to me we’re going to live finally with fear and guilt and a suspicion, and possibly be driven to some form of seeking to secure ourselves by earning salvation through good works or some form of that. It’s very hard to shake that off completely when you don’t think you know the answer to the question “What is God like?”

Once you’ve come to the realization that God is no different to Jesus, on this level at least, he’s like Jesus. God’s character, the Father’s character, is fully reflected in the face of his Son. That sets you free from all those fears and guilts and suspicions and enables you to live life in a liberated way, in a way that is born out of gratitude and joy rather than fear and guilt. So, on a pastoral level, quite apart from the theological niceties of it all, it seems to be fundamental that we can say, when it comes down to it, there isn’t anyone (when we come to talk about God), there’s no one there who isn’t fully reflected in the face of Jesus and Jesus’ dealings with us.

## Jesus as a human

**JMF:** The theological term “vicarious humanity of Christ” – what are we talking about?

**TH:** I think we’re talking about something which most Christians, most

evangelical Christians anyway, will be fully familiar with as a category in one certain respect, and that is to say most evangelical Christians would be happy enough to think that Jesus did something in their stead. Most of them will think that that thing he did for them in their place, in their stead, is die on the cross. That's absolutely right.

What's captured in the phrase "vicarious humanity" is the realization that it doesn't stop there. In Jesus, God stands in for us at almost *every* point of our relationship with him, because we fail him at almost every point in our lives. No matter how hard we struggle and strive (and most of us are very good, even though we know we shouldn't, at struggling and striving), we don't do it. To use a biblical category, we're not very good covenant partners for God most of the time.

The thing with "vicarious humanity" picks up on the idea that in Jesus, God stands in for us in all aspects of life, that it's not simply in his death that he takes our place and does what we can't do, it's in his faith too, in his obedience, in his responses to the Father. At each point God, as it were, looks at us through him and in him and together with him, and not standing isolated on our own.

I suppose this is a Pauline image, but I like to think of it as God being like a parent who kicks out his kids on their way to school in a set of clothes... (We have school uniforms in the U.K. - I don't know whether you have those... [JMF: Some schools do.] Typically a parent will buy a school uniform several sizes too big because that way it lasts longer. Of course you don't fit the clothes, they're way too big for you, but eventually you grow into them, or begin to.

As an image, that works nicely. In a sense, we're clothed with Christ. Every aspect of us is covered with him. When the Father looks, he sees Christ, Christ's response, Christ's obedience, Christ's prayer, Christ's faith.

The biblical term isn't "vicarious humanity." That's a nice technical term. The biblical category is *priesthood*. Jesus is the great high priest who mediates our human responses to God through himself to the Father. That's what that means. That Jesus stands in our place and does for us what we can't do properly for ourselves.

But the flip-side of that, and it's a vital flip-side, is that that sets us free *to do it for ourselves*. It sets us free to do it because we're not afraid of falling. We're not afraid of any wrong. Why? Because our eternity doesn't hang on whether we get it wrong or not. Our eternity rests on his response made for us. So we can get on and do it, and if we fall he'll pick us up.

In the meanwhile, we grow into the uniform. We never quite fill it out, I don't think, but nevertheless we begin to grow more like him, so that our faith becomes more adequate, our prayer becomes more appropriate, our obedience becomes more identifiable as the Spirit gradually makes us more like Jesus. But our relationship with God doesn't rest on any of that. Our

relationship with God rests on what he has done once for all, not just on the cross, but at every point from his birth through to his death and resurrection.

## What are people afraid of?

**JMF:** That's so radical in terms of the way most people think. [**TH:** Yeah.] Why is it that something that good is so difficult to accept? Why are we afraid of it? It's as though we think, "If I believe that and I accept it, then it's like saying that I don't have to do anything, Christ has done it all, so if I accept that, God won't like me because I'm assuming on his kindness or something." I don't know what it is, but some preachers even get angry about it and say, "Don't listen to that kind of nonsense because God calls you to obedience."

**TH:** One reason why someone might be uncomfortable with it might be that it could be seen to encourage an approach that says: "Well, if Jesus has done it all for me, then I don't have to do it for myself, do I?"

**JMF:** "I can go out and live any way I want."

**TH:** Exactly. That's what in technical theological terms we call antinomianism, or something like it. That's a worry. We can do almost anything with grace, can't we? We can reject it, we can turn it to what we think is our advantage. That's not proper to the idea of the reality itself.

That's why I said that Jesus does it for us precisely so that we can do it for ourselves, and the work of the Spirit draws us into the Son's work and brings it to fulfillment in individual lives. I think that's one reason why I can imagine a preacher being nervous, because "maybe my people won't try so hard anymore." Well, maybe they're trying too hard in the first place. Maybe *trying* is not what it's about. But I can see that that would be a concern.

**JMF:** Isn't it an irrational fear? Those who believe don't really do that.

**TH:** That's probably right. It probably is an irrational fear. I wonder how much it isn't itself a little bit of resurgence of sinful pride in us, whether as preachers or as individual Christian men and women. Because grace has this one massive advantage which is also a bit galling, and that is, it says, "God isn't really taking your responses, in a certain sense, as the most important responses." It devalues the things we like to think we can take to God to deal with him. You know, I bring my little bit of righteousness along to God and say, "Here God, I have something for you."

Now, don't get me wrong, I think God absolutely delights when we bring righteousness to him. What he doesn't like is when we try and make it the basis of a trade, as if we have something to give to him, and now he can give something back to us. The message of grace, the gospel of grace understood in this way, in terms of this category of "vicarious humanity," really robs us of that, because it gives us nothing. There's nothing left that



we can give to God and say, “God, you need this, and here we are, I’m giving it to you, so now you give me something that I need.”

That’s wrong. Everything has to be predicated on the idea that God gives everything freely. I’m sorry, that devalues the currency that you’re working with. I think in our heart of hearts we, even those of us who believe this gospel, still, on occasion, find ourselves, I suspect, thinking, “You know, I’d rather like it if I had something to give back to God.” Well, you can give it, but now you have to give it freely and joyfully, not as the basis of some sort of trade.

**JMF:** That reminds me of how you have to give your five-year-old some money so they can get you a gift.

**TH:** Absolutely. And then when they get to 15, it becomes even more expensive (laughing).

**JMF:** It all comes from God in the first place, and so anything we offer back isn’t ours to begin with.

**TH:** But it doesn’t kill the dynamic of giving, and I think the unfounded fear is that somehow the idea that God gives everything and we’re only here to receive is going to deny the capacity, or simply not provide a context in which we can offer back to God. On the contrary, I think the complement of “vicarious humanity” is a life lived from first to last in, if I can use the term, a Eucharistic manner, and that’s to say, thanksgiving.

Everything, because it’s freely given to us, we can now freely offer back to God without fear that our offering won’t be adequate and therefore will come back to haunt us because we did it badly. It sets you free to give and to offer back rather than killing it. But there’s always that little bit of sin which wants something of its own to give to God.

## **Why confess our sins?**

**JMF:** Some people ask, “Since we’re already forgiven and we stand in the forgiveness of God, why are we asked to confess our sins?” How does that work together?

**TH:** I think I’ve moved a long way as a Christian on this one. I remember when I first came to faith and I was part of an evangelical congregation, and I remember every day confessing my sins and having that sense that my eternal well-being depended on doing it well. There’s a benefit to that, in a certain sense, because everything was pretty intense, and I knew that this matters.

I think I was liberated from that precisely by discovering the gospel of grace and of God’s grace in the whole life of Jesus lived in my place, so if I didn’t confess all my sins, I wasn’t on an immediate slippery slope that evening. There is a slight risk that the immediacy and urgency of confessing sins gets lost. It does have an important place, and I think the important place it has, is precisely as this constant recognition that we are actually

sinner. It's just as well that our salvation doesn't rest on our shoulders, because we continue to get it wrong.

With that mechanism with gratitude, with thanksgiving, I think does go also a sense of penitence, that actually God has given so much to us and continues to do so and yet we fall so far short. No matter what we seek to do in and of ourselves, we continue to betray him, to hurt him, to act in ways that deny who he would have us be. I think it's vital for the health and well-being of our lives as Christians that we keep that firmly in our sights precisely so that we also keep firmly in our sights the importance of turning to Christ and having him stand in our place.

They're like two blades of a pair of scissors. If we lose either of them, it becomes pretty useless very quickly. If there's going to be any purchase [i.e., a means of achieving something], then what God has done for us in Christ needs to be constantly being applied by the Spirit in our Christian day-to-day living.

**JMF:** That was my experience when I was a legalist. In confession, I couldn't be quite sure that I had done it well enough to feel like I'd been forgiven, so I had to do it over. Then I had to do it with more intensity. And then with more...

**TH:** It's just a small-style version of what I know Tom Torrance talks about, and his brother James (who is a great hero of mine and a colleague of mine at one point) used to talk about. I've seen it in my own experience as a preacher in small churches, very often evangelical congregations, where, at the end of the Sunday evening service there will be an altar call of some form, and very often the same people, not necessarily every week, but on a regular pattern will get up and go forward. If someone were to ask them why, they would say, "Because I'm not really sure I had a real experience of repentance last time." That seems to have got things wrong because it puts all the focus on you and your faith, on the quality of your response.

At that point I'd just want to go at them and say, you don't have to repent harder. If you've repented at all, if you've opened yourself and turned to Christ and seek to lay hold of him, then *his* repentance is the one that counts. You can be thankful for that. That doesn't mean that repentance and penitence doesn't continue to be important, but your eternal destiny doesn't rest on your response, which is just as well, otherwise we'd all be up there every Sunday, week in and week out.

**JMF:** It brings such comfort and relief. It's like a participation in the assurance of the forgiveness that's already ours.

**TH:** Yeah. My own tradition, my denomination is Episcopalian, and for good or ill we have a weekly celebration of the supper, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. It seems to me that that is a very tangible way of reminding one's self and constantly putting one's self in the way of the priesthood of

Christ and saying, I do eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in taking the bread and wine, and then what I'm doing is I'm symbolically identifying myself with Christ's response to the Father for me and realizing that that's what matters.

It's not my response. It's only ever as I eat and drink of him that I'm actually drawn into the presence of God. That shifts the gaze a little bit away from the individual's own isolated spiritual response to the Father. There shouldn't be such a thing. We don't have an isolated spiritual response to the Father. We have an indirect one that goes through the Son.

## 11. ZOOMING IN ON SALVATION

**J. Michael Fezell:** Let's talk about salvation. We talk about Christ has saved us, we want salvation, salvation is a good thing. What is it we're being saved from? Are we being saved from something, for something, what is salvation all about?

**Trevor Hart:** That's a huge question. It seems to me no coincidence that Scripture and Christian theology use lots of different *pictures*, we can call them, in order to answer that question. Some of them have more prominence in the Bible than others, some of them have more prominence in certain strands of Christian tradition than others, but there are a number of them. For example, we're being saved from something which is very like being, in terms of the court of law, guilty. We're being delivered from the dangers hanging over us of guilt. When you think in those terms, then you use the same language of the law court to explain what it is that God has done to deliver us from that...so then the language is of judgment, of the execution of justice and so on.

But there are other ways of describing it, too, so the Bible will talk equally of us being in bondage to some sort of slavery, whether it's personified in terms of Satan and evil spirits or whether it's left more abstract than that. In some sense we're struggling with something that we can't break out of ourselves. And the language of salvation is cast in terms of deliverance, of being set free, redemption, the liberation of the slave in the marketplace, being bought with a price, all that sort of imagery comes into play. There are others — disease and healing is another one. Victory over forces that we're struggling with. Someone is victorious over them for us, because we can't defeat them ourselves, and so on and so forth.

I think what all that leads us to realize, is that salvation is multi-faceted. Whatever it is, it involves something way beyond our understanding. It's

complex.

Correspondingly, the human situation — that which we’re being rescued from — also needs all these different pictures and probably plenty of others to help us to articulate it. One that I haven’t alluded to yet and probably should, given its contemporary relevance, is debt. We have this huge debt that we can’t possibly pay. So what are we going to do? We’re crushed by it, we have no resources to pay it. So then the corresponding picture of salvation is, someone steps in and pays the price for us. All these pictures help us to get some partial purchase, it seems to me, on the mystery which is salvation, and helps us to see, therefore, the scale of the problem that confronts us.

If there is an overarching answer to the question, “What is the problem?”, it has to be answered at a fairly high level, and say, “It’s the consequence of being in a broken relationship with our Maker. It’s the consequence of being out of kilter in terms of our relationship with God, for fellowship with whom we were created.” I think that’s the fundamental premise, is that we were created, we were made to be in fellowship with God as Father.

Once we get that out of alignment, once we become alienated from God as our Father, then all sorts of things go wrong in all sorts of departments of life, and we need all these different ways of thinking and speaking to make some sense of what’s going on, because frankly, we don’t know what’s going on anymore — we’ve lost the plot. We’re in a mess and we need someone to get us out of it. I think that’s the other *leitmotif* [or theme] that sort of moves along with the story of salvation is, we can’t fix it. We may have got ourselves into the mess in some sense, but we certainly can’t fix it, and so salvation is God doing what needs to be done for our sakes to get us out of the mess and to put us where we were always meant to be — back in fellowship with himself.

**JMF:** It sounds like there’s a sense in which we’re saved now, already, and yet that we’re also saved in another sense in the future. The one blossoms into the other...

**TH:** This is another one of those things where if we’re going to take the whole of what the Bible has to tell us on board, and seriously, then we have to reckon with some things that seem to run into conflict a little bit, but actually need to be held in tension. Yes, there’s a sense in which the most important thing has already happened, and I think that’s what the Bible leads us to have to say is that God came in his Son Jesus and did what needs to be done. As C.S. Lewis puts it using the military metaphor — the decisive battle has been fought and won, but there are lots of skirmishes still to be carried out before the war is over.

In a sense, yes, what has happened for you and for me has happened. Nothing can undo it. But for the meanwhile, we still live in an age where

that remains to be worked out through whatever is left of human history. That classically is understood as the Spirit's work applying what God has done for us in Jesus Christ — living his life, then crucified, then risen in our individual lives. So Paul used the same imagery of crucifixion and resurrection about what goes on daily in a Christian's walk with God.

It's important to see it not just as, "God's come and done the most important thing, and now there's this inconvenient time where we're not one thing or the other and we just have to hang on and eventually it will all come right and God will bring it all to a close." I don't think God does things without reason, and I suspect that's something important...that what he has done for us needs yet to be worked out in us — it's important that this happens to you and to me through the threescore years and ten or whatever it proves to be of our lives — that that application and working out in and through the particular circumstances of your life and mine matters for who we shall be when finally, we're raised anew and brought into God's presence in the kingdom.

## What about other people?

**JMF:** Yet, there are those who come to faith and then they're killed or die. How do we equate the two?

**TH:** That's a huge question and a difficult one to answer with any clarity. It suggests that we don't all need to have a certain amount of time in order for things to be worked out in this life for salvation to occur. Salvation, in some sense, as we've already said, has been done. It's a done deal, once and for all, in Christ. And God deals with individuals individually.

I think it matters that you or I continue in faith for several decades or whatever it is. Perhaps in God's purposes it doesn't matter that someone else doesn't. We have to simply trust that their salvation will be worked out in full (as it were) in some other way, so that they are who they are called to be in the kingdom. I don't think the process of working it out in life is, in that sense, *necessary* to our salvation, but it seems to be important nonetheless when it occurs.

**JMF:** In the *Narnia Chronicles* [by C.S. Lewis] sometimes one of the kids will ask Aslan about somebody, "How come this is happening to him and not to me or vice versa?" Aslan always says, "That's his story. I'm talking to you about your story."

**TH:** Exactly. God calls us to be who we are. Karl Barth says in his discussion of this that God grants each of us our time. We don't know how long our time will be, but that's the time God calls us to be faithful in. Our salvation, in a sense, doesn't depend on it. Our salvation depends wholly on Christ and what he has done. But for now, this is who God calls you to be, and your task is not to ask about others and about the brevity of their

appearance on the stage. It's to get on and live faithfully the part he's called you to play so that when the judgment comes you can say, "I tried to be faithful to what you called me to be." That's what will matter. Salvation won't rest on it, but it matters that we do it, that we're faithful and not unfaithful.

**JMF:** Which raises the question, what about people we care about and love who didn't hear the gospel? Is there anything wrong with thinking that the heart of God toward such people is certainly more full of love than we can possibly have for them?

**TH:** I think we have to believe that. It's such a powerful question and a painful question. It ought to be painful for any Christian because Christian faith is driven, or should be, by the realization that that is precisely who God is — that God is a Father whose heart beats with love for all those he's made — that he created them to call them into fellowship with himself, that's the reason for their being, that's the calling to which they're called, and his greatest desire is that they should fulfill that calling. That has to be the context in which we ask questions.

It also has to be the theological context in which we interpret passages of Scripture that seem to point to the possibility of that not happening. I don't think we can treat those passages lightly. I don't think we can ignore their teaching. But I do think we have to interpret it in the light of that fundamental conviction. That makes it far more difficult, and far more uncomfortable than Christians have sometimes been, to consign people to some wherever other than in an eternity in communion with the Father.

It means that any consideration of that question has to be with fear and trembling. It has to be undergirded by that fundamental conviction that who God is, is who we see him to be in the face of his Son for everyone — not simply for us. We can do no more than commit people to the God who we know in that way, rather than speculate about their eternal destiny. We should certainly be concerned about it, we should pray for them, we should do everything we can to bring them to know the Father if they don't already know the Father. But finally, it's in his hands and not ours. To go back to something you said a moment ago, what God calls each of us to be concerned with is our story, not theirs, at a certain point.

**JMF:** While you were talking it raised the question: in the Inquisition the idea was supposedly (apart from the political considerations and so on) that in doing everything we can, we have to get somebody to come to confession of faith, because torturing them is worth preserving them from the alternative and so on. What is wrong with that thinking? I'm assuming it's wrong because it seems so, so...

**TH:** It raises the question about what the confession of faith is at heart, doesn't it? If we're agreed that faith is about gratitude — it's about not simply discovering who God is, discovering the Father, discovering him to

be our Father, but discovering that and receiving it joyfully, and with gratitude – then extracting intellectual assent or apparent intellectual assent from somebody under the pain of torture or worse seems to me to be an absolute nonsense in terms of allegedly bringing someone to faith — it simply has nothing to do with it at all.

Thomas Erskine, the Scots theologian from the 19th century, says somewhere that you can't frighten people into love. Even if we're not forcing them to confess something with the use of pain, it seems to me that another version of that over Christian history has been to extract confession from people by frightening them into making that confession. Again, that seems to have very little to do with the true nature of faith and response to the gospel. That seems to me to be the thing that's the most wrong with it, is that it misunderstands completely the nature of faith as a response to the good news.

The other thing to say, I think, is that the good news for Christians is not simply good news for Christians, it's good news for all. That's the message, that this is who God is. It's not simply who God is for some, it's not simply who God chooses to be on certain days of the week, it's who God is. That has to set the boundaries and the context in which we reflect on what it means to bring others into a saving knowledge of this God. Until they discover that that's who God is, they can't respond in an appropriate way. Getting them to tick boxes or make verbal confessions of one sort or another has got nothing at all to do with it. It's a fundamental shift of disposition, to discovering that this is who God is, this is the sort of place, therefore, that the universe is as God's creation, and this is who I am as God's creature, and I'm responding joyfully to that. That's in God's hands, not ours.

## The fear of hell

**JMF:** Much of evangelism is still done with the idea of fear, of avoiding hell. It seems that knowing God as the God who is for us, for humanity, changes the face of evangelism – the approach – turning it around.

**TH:** Yes. I don't think it means that we lose sight of the language of hell, for example, or the sense of urgency about accepting the gospel. But it's a different sort of urgency, it seems to me. Who, knowing if this were true, would not want to respond to it and respond to it quickly? You're missing out on something so good. It recasts it completely, because it means that it's now a message of genuine good news, unalloyed good news, not a threat with a salvage hatch provided, but news which changes everything. News which changes the way I see the whole of life, the whole of my own purpose and existence, and to which there can only be a response of gratitude, it seems to me.

When that's not forthcoming, that is, as Barth somewhere else says, the



ultimate mystery; why would someone genuinely hear the good news, understand it as good news, and then say no to it. He characterizes that as the most mysterious of all things. He leaves it open as a possibility, but he sees it as an absolute denial of all that we are as human beings to do that. That means that if we are going to talk about danger of loss of salvation or hell, then it has to be cast in terms of the shadow cast by the light.

The fundamental thing about the gospel is that it's light, that it's good. That is who God is. God is not someone who is out there to get us, or waiting for an excuse to get us — some Dirty Harry character that's waiting for us to make his day, just itching for an excuse to judge us. God, on the contrary, desires nothing more than our salvation and goes to whatever lengths he has to go to to secure it. But there remains that colorfully illustrated inference that if people, notwithstanding all that, and for whatever reason finally identify themselves so thoroughly with that which is incompatible with God and his purposes for us, that then they will finally isolate themselves from that.

That's very hard to reckon with theologically. It's a very odd circumstance, in a way. If God is this good and all-powerful and loving Father who seeks our salvation, it makes that very problematic. But I think Scripture compels us at least to reckon with the possibility that if someone so identifies themselves with evil, and the things of evil, to cease even to want anymore to respond to that goodness, then that's where the language and the imagery of hell starts to come back into play. I don't think we can ignore it. I think we have to take it very seriously. I'd rather people found that problematic and got a grasp of the good news as good news.

**JMF:** It was so strange, in terms of the gospel, after the terrorist attacks in 2001. We had all the images and descriptions of the firemen who saw the building was in distress, but went back in to try to pull out as many as they could, and were killed. Then on the following Sunday, many preachers, rather than calling them heroes as everyone else had, they were consigned to hell because they had not, those who had not become Christians before the building fell on them.

It was kind of a message of something like that could happen to you at any moment, and if you don't want to be like them, then you need to accept the gospel while you're still alive. It presented God and the gospel as kind of inept, in one sense, because he doesn't care about the selflessness of the people who went in to save others — that amounted to nothing and was no reflection of him and he really didn't care, or, conversely, maybe he was wringing his hands and saying, "I wish somebody had gotten to them with the gospel before that." It doesn't make sense, that sort of preaching. At least it doesn't seem to square with the...

**TH:** It's very problematic. I would say a number of things. One would be, the temptation is for us to slip into thinking, of course they'll be saved

because they did what they did. Actually, I don't think that's relevant. I think it's hugely to their credit that they did what they did, but that's not really where the stakes are in terms of salvation or loss of salvation. They proved themselves to be brave and worthy human beings, and I think that's what needs to be said at that point, and they gave up their lives for others. Whether or not they are saved will not rest on that.

The thing about, does God rely on the ability or inability or the timing of human beings, does he get caught out by something like 9/11, brings in a whole raft of problems that we could go around in circles on for a while. I think at that point we just have to say look, what we *do* know is that God loved each one of those people in the towers, each one of those people who went into the towers to get people out and themselves gave up their lives — that he made them to exist eternally in fellowship with himself, that he sent his Son to die for their sins, and that he desires nothing more than their salvation. When we've said that, we've said the most important things.

Then at some stage we have to hand it over to God and say, God, in your mercy you deal with these people, because you know whether or not any of them had made in their heart of hearts some sort of a decision in life which distanced them so much from God as to exclude themselves from that. I think is up to him to know, not for us to know.

Dealing with that sort of an extreme instance seems to be unhelpful because it puts the issues in the wrong place and suggests that it's in those sorts of extreme circumstances rather than in the everyday living of life, where these life and death, in a sense, decisions confront each of us day in and day out. That's where what matters really occurs in life. And the thing that really matters is what God has done for us, not the decisions we make day in and day out. Although they may seem to be vital decisions, they're overshadowed by that one big decision.

## Eternal life

**JMF:** Let's talk about eternal life for a moment. When we speak of eternal life, the Bible says that we've already entered eternal life. The Bible has us already seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father. How should we understand eternal life in that context as something that's already taken place, and yet we want to think of it as something that takes place in the future after the return of Christ?

**TH:** It is, in a sense, a matter of things which we believe will be the case after the return of Christ already breaking in and shaping, reshaping, the quality of life in the here and now. Maybe the word *eternal* there is a bit of a misleading feature, because we tend to think of it in terms of temporality, we tend to think that something eternal is something that goes on and on and on like a dreary lecture or sermon or something, whereas the temporal aspect of it is difficult to picture, and we don't really know what temporality

or non-temporality will be like after the return of Christ.

I think it's more important to picture it as a *quality* of existence — that it is life with a capital L, as John talks about — “and this life is in his Son.” If we think about it like that, then perhaps we can see how, in a sense, we both look forward to having that quality of life in the hereafter — when history has reached its close, when God has judged the world and wrapped everything up and handed it over to his Son.

But that already breaks in *nom*. The way in which it breaks in now is that we already have communion with the Father. When people say, “I can't picture what the quality of eternal life is going to be like,” I tend to want to say, “no, of course, in a sense you can't picture what it's like, but you're not left wholly without some indication.” Probably the most obvious indication is those moments of intimate communion with God that we have in prayer and in worship and so on, because that is relationship with the Father though the Son in the power of the Spirit. That is going to characterize the whole of our experience, it seems to me, in eternity.

That qualitative aspect seems to me to be helpful in making sense of the idea of eternal life, because we do have that now. We only have it partially, we only have it on an occasional basis. We're probably not conscious of it, most of us, for much of the time. But we get glimpses of it, we can anticipate it, and we can enjoy it in part already. So rather than thinking about it in terms of a temporal model of eternity, what might we be doing for all that time, we think about it in those qualitative terms, of enjoying God's fellowship, and that's probably a more helpful way.

**JMF:** In the time we have left, if there's one thing you would like for people to know about God, what would it be?

**TH:** If I haven't already got it, I think it is that God made them to enjoy being in his presence — that really was in his mind and his mind's eye from the very first, however we imagine, the very first, it shapes absolutely everything he does and who he is. And he has done all that is necessary for them to enjoy that. That's who he's calling them to be. He has not waited for them to decide that it's a good idea, he's already decided it's a good idea, and now offers it freely for them to lay hold of and make their own, and enjoy in this life and then in the life to come, too — that God isn't a problem, God is the one who calls us to enjoy being his children in the Spirit.

## 12. WHAT CHRIST DID WAS EFFECTIVE FOR ALL

**J. Michael Fezell:** Our guest today is George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary's Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology. Dr. Hunsinger is an ordained Presbyterian minister and a major contributor to the new Presbyterian Catechism. He is author of several books, including *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, and *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*.

Thanks for being with us today.

**George Hunsinger:** I'm very glad to be here. Thank you.

**JMF:** You're part of the Reformed tradition as a Presbyterian minister.

**GH:** Yes.

**JMF:** Could you tell our viewers something about the Reformed



tradition and the role it has played in the history of Christianity?

**GH:** The Reformed tradition developed in the 16th century at the same time as the Lutheran Reformation.

The Reformed tradition originally was based in Switzerland and southern Germany and eventually came to be associated with the name of John Calvin, but there were many different theologians who were founders, so to speak, of the Reformed tradition, and that's why we don't usually hear about "Calvinistic" churches. You hear about Reformed churches or Presbyterian churches.

Then it spread to places like Holland and Hungary and then, in its English language versions, England and Scotland, and eventually to the United States. Our most prominent theologian historically is John Calvin, and the Continental version of the Reformed tradition used the Heidelberg Catechism as its basis of instruction, whereas in the Anglo-American version and then coming into the United States, the catechisms and confessions that were used came out of the Westminster Assembly that was held in the 17th century. The Westminster Catechisms were the English language catechisms, as opposed to the Heidelberg that was used on the Continent.

**JMF:** You're also president of the Karl Barth Society of North America and you're active in the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship. Can you give us some perspective on how Calvin, Barth, and Torrance fit into major theological themes today?

**GH:** Karl Barth has been described as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas—those were actually the words of Pope Pius XII. He was a larger-than-life figure who wrote a massive amount. Theologically, his great work is called *Church Dogmatics*, but he wrote much more than that. Like Luther and Calvin, he was also a person of affairs. He played a leadership role in church and society in the course of his life. He was born in 1886 and died in 1968.

Barth is often remembered for the role he played in the confessing church, which was that element of the German Protestant Church that stood up to Hitler. Barth was the principal author of the Barmen Declaration, which now has a kind of confessional status in my own church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. We include that in our book of confessions.

Thomas Torrance was Karl Barth's most important English-speaking student. Torrance went from Scotland to Basel to study with Karl Barth, and then when Barth was about to retire, he had hoped that perhaps Torrance would become his successor. But Torrance wanted to stay in Edinburgh and continue there, so that didn't happen. Torrance—there are actually at least three Thomas Torrances. There's Torrance the dogmatic or systemic theologian, there's Torrance the figure who did groundbreaking work in the dialogue of theology and science, and Torrance the historical theologian. He's the one who's least well known, but the one I profit the most from, I think.

Along with being a historical theologian...and there's not a single major theologian in the history of the Christian tradition about whom he hasn't written at some length—these things are scattered in journals and anthologies and so on. But Torrance was also an ecumenical scholar and devoted a great deal of his career... especially to dialogue set up between the Reformed churches and Eastern Orthodoxy. That's also a part of the Torrance legacy that I try to follow in.

**JMF:** You've written a book, or one of the books that you have written, is *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*.

**GH:** Yes.

**JMF:** I wanted to talk about a few things in here. On page 106 you make this comment, "Two points above all seemed essential to Barth about salvation. First, what took place in Jesus Christ for our salvation avails for all. Second, no one actively participates in him, and therefore in his righteousness, apart from faith." Could you elaborate on that?

**GH:** Sure. That's actually a very deep aspect of how Karl Barth understands salvation. It's a little simple, but it makes the point...sometimes a distinction is made between the objective pole of salvation and the subjective pole. So the first part of the statement that you read has to do with the objective pole—what God has done for us in Christ apart from us before we know about it, before we receive it, before we make any response to it.

And here, Barth, starting with the central conviction of the Reformation based on Christ alone and the significance of Christ alone as the exclusive Savior of the human race. He started from there and tried to think it through in a way that really had little precedent in the West. What he ended up doing in some degree was...he thought himself into the Eastern Orthodox and Greek wing of the church. So (and Torrance has written about this) in many ways, Barth is closer to Athanasius, a great figure in the history of the [Eastern] church, than he is to Augustine, who was formative for the Latin West.

It's not as uncommon in the Eastern Orthodox traditions to give more centrality to the idea of the universal significance of Christ's saving work—especially in its objective pole so that...when the New Testament says all, A-L-L, which it does quite a lot, that shouldn't be marginalized. That has an important place in our understanding of Christ and his saving significance.

But in the West, because Augustine started from the bottom up and thought about whether we love God more than ourselves or ourselves more than God, the self-love and love for God were seen as competing with one another, and apart from conversion to Christ, self-love trumps everything and therefore you have the two loves, you have the two cities. The city of God is composed of people who order their loves properly by subjecting self-love to the control of love for God, if not eliminating self-

love completely in its selfish forms. You have that city, the city of God, and you have the earthly city. Augustine, in this bottom-up approach, thought it back into the reality of God. The two loves and the two cities had their eternal foundation in God's eternal predestination of the human race. So this division is thought to be ultimate—it has the last word.

It's not how Athanasius thought about these things. If you go to the great St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, it's a huge structure. You walk in and they actually have markers showing where other cathedrals would fit in. You know, Cologne and so on would end here. And it's just filled with magnificent art. But way toward the front, there are these huge statues of four figures of importance to the whole church, and even to the Roman Catholic Church. On the one hand it's Augustine and Ambrose, and they're all bishops, and Ambrose was important in bringing Augustine to the faith, and Augustine is more the theologian and Ambrose is more the administrative Bishop of Milan.

But then they have two Greek-speaking theologians. One of them is Chrysostom, which means he had a golden tongue, he was a golden-tongued orator, and the fourth one is Athanasius. I mention that just because if you sort of flee from Augustine to Athanasius, it's not like fleeing from the clutches of the bear into the jaws of the lion—you're going from one great world historical theologian to another.

Athanasius, and the Greeks in general back in the early centuries, 3rd, 4th, 5th centuries, thought about these matters not so much in a bottom-up way as in a top-down way. Athanasius thought about election beginning with the Trinity and the Incarnation. When you do that, you don't have to marginalize the passages that say that Christ died for all.

It turns out that 2 Corinthians 5:14 was a seminal verse for Athanasius, and then later for Karl Barth and also for Tom Torrance. That's the one that says, "One has died for all. Therefore, all have died." It goes on that "those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised." But that first part, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

That's such an interesting verse because it doesn't follow. It's a non-sequitur. It's not logically the case that just because one died for all, all died. The substance of the matter, that's what the death of Christ means according to Paul in that very important passage of 2 Corinthians 5. I've looked this up—it's the same verb tense each time—died is aorist in the Greek, which means a completed event. I actually thought it would be in the perfect tense, which has some kind of ongoing consequences, but it's the stronger sense. One died for all, therefore all died.

Even though it's aorist both times, the death of all can't be exactly the same as the death of the one. But somehow the all are included, not just potentially. This is how Barth read it, this is how Athanasius read it. It's not

*potentially* that all died, or that it's *sufficient* for all but efficacious only for those who respond in faith. No. In some mysterious way, *all* are included in the death of Christ. That's the objective pole of salvation.

It means that if someone comes to faith, it's not a transition from being an outsider to being an insider. We're all insiders, whether we know it or not. Christians are those who are brought to the point of awakening, of realizing that Christ has already accepted them, has already embraced them, that they may have been resisting their salvation. They may have been resisting their election, but their decision of coming to faith or their being awakened to faith, however that happens, doesn't bring about the transition from being an outsider to being an insider. That has been accomplished by the grace of God apart from us.

That's the objective pole of salvation, that has this strong universalistic element. But it's not fulfilled. It doesn't reach its goal until each person comes to acknowledge and recognize Jesus Christ for who he is. The way Barth thought this through...it's something like that old story many of us have heard one too many times about the pair of footprints on the beach: at first there are two pairs of footprints and then there was only one pair, and then there are two pairs again, and where there are only one pair of footprints, that was the most difficult period in my life, and where were you while I was alone? Christ was absent somehow, and the Lord says, "That's when I was carrying you."

The Lord is somehow, in an incognito way, at least carrying all of us whether we know it or not. There comes that point at the end of all things when who Christ has been for us is disclosed to each one. There's no one, whether before Christ or after Christ, as Barth understood it, who isn't included in the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to whom Christ is not present in any number of mysterious and imperceptible ways that will only be made fully known at the end.

But on the subjective side, it's absolutely essential that Christ be acknowledged as Lord for who he is. We have the great verse, for example, in the hymn in chapter 2 of Philippians, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. Again, it's an "all" passage—*every* knee whether in heaven or on earth or under the earth. That's intriguing. I don't quite know what those distinctions are about, heaven or earth and under the earth. It's not crystal clear how to interpret that, but it's perhaps hopefully that even under the earth, Jesus is acknowledged for who he is.

I think the line of continuity, if there's a difference between faith and sight, you know, that final transition from faith to sight, there's also a transition from lack of faith to sight for those who don't come to know Christ and acknowledge him and love him and serve him in this life. At some point, everyone will see him and know him for who he is. His identity will no longer be hidden—he'll be revealed in glory. That's at the end. But



here and now, some are called to faith and called to be Christ's witnesses, called to be Christ's servants, called to be the people who know and proclaim him through word and deed here and now. That's the subjective side, and that's what Barth is getting at in that passage.

The difference between...and this is like, this is not exactly what Athanasius would have said, but actually the longest single quotation from any theologian as far as I know in the *Church Dogmatics*, which is a 10,000 page argument, is from Athanasius. Barth wrote large-print sections and then he wrote fine-print sections where he went into historical matters, like long footnotes or digressions, so they're little essays on their own. In a fine-print section, when he's talking about election, and he's taking this Trinitarian, Christocentric, top-down approach, he goes into this very lengthy quotation from Athanasius. It's the longest quotation from any single author, another theologian, in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and it's precisely on this point.

I think what Barth discovered there was that Athanasius anticipated what he wanted to say and Barth took himself 150 pages to do it whereas this is about 3 pages in Athanasius. Athanasius's view is Barth's view in a nutshell. But in the West we are kind of conditioned to think that the Augustinian way of reading the New Testament on these matters is the only way.

There's a rule of biblical interpretation that says that the clear passages should interpret the obscure passages, or the less-clear passages. That's great, that's a good rule, but it presupposes that you know what the clear passages are and what the obscure passages are. Augustine decided that Matthew 25 was the clear passage. That's the passage with the separation of the sheep and the goats. He made that the controlling idea for anything else, and that's why the "all" passages got marginalized in Western biblical interpretation.

Whereas you might think the statement "one has died for all" is pretty clear, but in the West, and this is true of the Reformed tradition also, Calvin included, and Luther, in the West it was thought that these "all" passages always had to be read with some kind of mental reservation because the clear passages told us that "all" was not true or it might be too good to be true.

Because of the emphasis on the universal efficacy of Christ's saving death in the theology of Karl Barth, people have thought, well, he's a Universalist. He's just preaching universal salvation, and if you're a universalist, what does it matter if you come to faith—as if the only reason to come to faith is to save your own ultimate skin, there's a kind of the self-serving reason..."you need to turn to Christ to escape some sort of terrible outcome," which is, if you think about it, not the best way of preaching the gospel. But it's the whole Western tradition.

One of the wisest things I ever heard said about Karl Barth's theology...and he's known for representing what's called dialectical theology, which means that you create tensions and you don't resolve them. Somebody once said, "It's amazing how many wheels within wheels Barth's dialectical engine can keep spinning." So you might read him up to a certain point and then stop and say okay, he's a Universalist. But no, there's a wheel within a wheel there. The dialectical engine goes on.

Almost all mistakes in interpreting Barth's theology, of which there are very many, come down to not thinking dialectically enough with him and not seeing how he's got...and he doesn't always take care to stop and say, okay, there's a tension here and now I'm going to develop one side of it. No. He just develops one side of it and it might not be for several hundred pages later that you get the wheel within the wheel. It takes a long time to get the overall sweep of it.

Barth takes a position that I call reverent agnosticism. That is, he leaves the question open in hope. He doesn't give up hope for anyone. He thinks we don't have to give up hope for anyone. Think of all the anguish that devout Christians have gone through if a loved one or a parent or a child or someone close to them dies without coming to faith in Christ. It means, the only alternative is that they are lost eternally. They're in eternal damnation, eternally cut off from the love and joy of God.

Barth says, okay, we're human beings, we're not God. We have to leave the outcome to God. He takes a view that I call reverent agnosticism. He leaves the question open in hope. So if the option is not all are saved, the Augustinian option where all are saved (which actually goes back to the theologian Origen and some others in the East, Gregory of Nyssa and so on, it's not the standard eastern view. They don't embrace universalism outright either, but it's more prominent in some of the historical sources in the East than in the West), Barth rejects that forced alternative. He won't say all are saved, he won't say not all are saved. All are saved *in some sense*, but how that will work out he leaves open.

There's a wonderful little line at one point where he's talking about that sort of last judgment that each of us will face. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. It's like that ultimate interview situation where you're confronted with Christ and you find out about the footprints in the sand and so on. And Barth says, "Perhaps the Holy Spirit will have a little less trouble with the others than he had with us."

**JMF:** (laughing). Going into Torrance, then, how does he build off of those concepts of Barth?

**GH:** Torrance, as a rule, seems to position himself somewhere between Calvin and Barth. So he doesn't go quite as far in the direction of universal hope as Barth does, but he doesn't retreat from it either. It's just that he feels the tug of the historic Reformed tradition a little more strongly—not a

lot, but a little more than Barth did. Barth is just fascinated and delighted by all the passages in the New Testament which use the word “all.” Barth really wants to take those passages seriously.

It’s so interesting, the biblical literalists as we know them in the U.S. and in the English-speaking world, they can’t take the word “all” seriously or literally because of this Augustinian...they know that that’s not true, so wherever it says *all* it can’t quite mean *all*. It has to mean all in some qualified sense. Even Aquinas takes that view. Aquinas says that the death of Christ is sufficient for all, but efficacious only for some. It has saving power only for some. That’s the kind of standard distinction. You find that in Calvin, too. Torrance, he stays a little ambiguous on this point. He doesn’t reject Barth, but he doesn’t depart as much from Calvin and the Latin West as dramatically as Barth did.

**JMF:** Going back to your statement that Barth made about being...maybe the Holy Spirit won’t have as much trouble with them...can you elaborate on that just a little more?

**GH:** Barth was really a Reformational theologian. He saw his task as trying to go back to the Reformation and rethink it from the ground up, because there’s a sense in which the Reformation was unfinished and didn’t fully break from, according to its deepest insights, from the penitential way of thinking about salvation that was established in the medieval church. This medieval penitential was... well, it’s one of the reasons why, in the Roman Catholic tradition (and I don’t think this is a terrible thing, but, you know, everything has its downsides)...the Catholic tradition always has Christ hanging on the cross, famously. The Reformed traditions, the Protestant traditions, have an empty cross.

The Greek church doesn’t have Christ hanging on a cross, either, but it’s a church of splendor and magnificence—usually they’ve got a gilded cross, with jewels and so on, but not Christ hanging on the cross. That man of sorrows, that sense that Christ sacrificed himself and shed his blood for us, that focus on the moment of the cross, that negative, sorrowful moment, it has its place, absolutely. But it tended to eclipse other aspects of the gospel that are equally, if not more, important.

Barth certainly felt that the East was more correct by putting the accent on joy and resurrection than on the cross, keeping them in full tension. In the end, you can’t take the cross too seriously, but no matter how seriously you take the cross, you have to take Christ’s resurrection even more seriously—something like that.

**JMF:** Romans 5.

**GH:** Exactly. So putting the accent on... Barth liked the 18th century for its optimism. Even though he thought its optimism at the surface level was off, secretly, in a hidden way, it had some insight into Christ’s resurrection whether it knew it or not. But, by going back to the

Reformation and trying to think it through again from the bottom up and to get outside this dominance of the medieval penitential tradition and introspection, and having to do penance for your sins, and worrying that your salvation is constantly at stake because if you have a misstep and maybe a terrible misstep, if you commit a mortal sin in the medieval penitential tradition and in Roman Catholicism to this day, you lose your salvation. So you're the weak link in the chain. You can blow it all no matter what has gone before.

This is not Luther, this is not the Reformation. Part of what it meant for Barth to go back and try to rethink the Reformation on its own terms was to pick up on Luther's insight that all sin is mortal sin. That's what Christ saves us from. It doesn't mean that some sins are not worse than others. They are. But it does mean that sin is categorical first before it's a matter of degree. You can drown in a few inches of water, or you can drown at the bottom of the ocean, but if your head is not above the water line, you can't breathe. Sin is like that—it's like death. You're either dead or you're not dead. Or pregnancy—you're not a little bit pregnant, you're either pregnant or you're not pregnant. You're either a sinner or you're not a sinner.

Some people like Mother Teresa, she may be close to the top of the water, and others, like theologians, they're down there near the bottom of the ocean, and there's a whole gradation in between. But all sin is mortal sin, and therefore when Christ saves us from our sins, and Luther says this explicitly in his great commentary on Galatians, it's *all* our sins—past, present, and future.

So the idea that the Holy Spirit might have a little less trouble with *them* than he has with us, is kind of a wry way of saying we're all sinners. It's connected not only to sin being mortal sin, but being *simul justus et peccator*, Luther's great insight that to be a Christian is simultaneously to be sinful and justified, saved, at one and the same time. That's a dialectical or a paradoxical...I think it's a really liberating idea.

I think we see the consequences of the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches not having fully grasped or accepted what this is about, because they have to be too holy, they can't allow criticism and divine judgment beyond a certain point, they have to make all these sort of qualifications. Even for Protestants, you either have to sort of delude yourself that you're not as sinful as you are, or you fall into despair and you're so sinful that you've blown everything.

This is the great liberating aspect of putting the primary weight on the objective pole of salvation—that Christ's love for us and grace toward us comes to us as lost sinners. This is Luther. Grace always comes to lost sinners and only to lost sinners. See? When that is known and understood, to me, that's really the liberation of the gospel. This is true even for those who do not *yet* (that's how Barth puts it), do not yet know and acknowledge

Christ for who he is.

**JMF:** Like the woman who Jesus spoke to—who loves God more? The one who is forgiven more? She knows her sinfulness, everyone sitting around the table...

**GH:** And is she going to have smooth sailing from then on? No lapses? No, of course not. There's always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

### 13. OUR LIVES ARE HIDDEN IN CHRIST

**JMF:** I'd like to go into your book again, *How to Read Karl Barth*, and ask you to comment on something from page 124: "Salvation is not a process imminent within us in any sense that we can observe or perceive directly from our own experience," and then further down, "The truth of our being in Christ as Barth understood it is not only real and hidden, it is also yet to come."

And then you go on to discuss how we're not only included in his being, and in his humanity, in his history, in his transition from shameful death to glorious resurrection — it is transformation of the old creation into the new. "We're also confronted by his being here and now as the real but hidden future of our own being, and so on." Could you comment on that?

**GH:** Yes, thanks. Well, last time, you remember, I tried to begin by thinking about a particular verse from the New Testament. I find it helpful to try to peg these difficult and complicated theological ideas to certain verses from the New Testament. So I talked last time about 2 Corinthians 5:14, the first part, "One died for all therefore all died," as a way of suggesting those parts of the New Testament would seem to lift up some sort of universal hope.

Other verses that I didn't mention that we could cluster in like, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," one of the most beloved verses in all of the New Testament, John 3:16. It's the *world* that's the object of God's love, and it's the world in 2 Corinthians 5 that is reconciled to God in Christ. So part of the genius of Barth's theology is to make those ideas more central to theological teaching than they have been, by putting the verses that suggest some sort of ultimate division between the sheep and the goats, not excluding them, but capping them by this more inclusive hope.

The verse that I think goes with the passages you began with out of my book is Colossians 3:3. I learned to appreciate the significance of this verse from a comment that Karl Barth makes somewhere near the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics*. He says that this verse is decisive not just for Colossians but for the entire New Testament. I had never thought about it that way before, but it turns out that yes, Colossians 3:3, if you watch for it as I have, is really important for Luther. It's really important for Calvin. It's really important for the Reformation.

Colossians 3:3 says, "You have died, yet your life is hid with Christ in God." Where does that link, in a way, with the verse we thought about before, 2 Corinthians 5:14? People who are alive are spoken of, and here addressed, as those who have died, you know? So there is some sense in which by the grace of God they have died, because they are already included in the death of Christ.

This is profoundly mysterious, but it is one of the ways in which throughout the New Testament that ordinary patterns of thought about time where things happen one after another in sequence — that's all presupposed, it's never denied, but it's not the whole story. There's another level, there's a higher level, there's another dimension. These sequences, I think, are real for God. But God's apprehension of time as we experience it is not limited to these sequences. There's a sense in which — and this is mysterious and there's no way to really see *how* this can be the case, but *that* it is the case is affirmed — these sequences are seen by God somehow also as being simultaneous.

You get all that strange language in the New Testament about things having happened "from before the foundation of the world." In Matthew 25 when Jesus says, "Enter the kingdom that has been prepared to you..." he says to the sheep, "...from before the foundation of the world." Or, in Ephesians 1, we are elected in him "from before the foundation of the world," and then that extraordinary verse in Revelation, Revelation 13:8, "The lamb being slain from before the foundation of the world."

What's being suggested here? What's being gestured at with this phrase? What kind of intuition? It's the intuition that time doesn't mean the same thing for God as it means for us, or more precisely, it's not perceived by God in exactly the same way as it is for us. Things that are only sequential for us are held together in a kind of simultaneity for God.

I think, and this is sort of Barth-ian, I think there's a sense in which the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election from one perspective, not every perspective, are not three different events. They're three different forms of one and the same event. So you get the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world or you get the last judgment occurring on Calvary, which is also a Johannine-type affirmation.

Colossians 3:3 fits into this general pattern of intuitions — that you

have died, you're alive, but in this deeper sense, from God's standpoint, God sees you (it's actually plural here, each one individually also) — you have died, and God sees you in and with the death of Christ, as being included in it. Your life is hid with Christ in God. That hidden-ness is from our standpoint. It's not hidden to God, but we don't see ourselves as having died. We don't grasp the full sense of that already.

What has taken place objectively by grace? First, we participate in Christ and his obedience and his saving significance. We participate in him by grace whether we know it or not. Eventually, whether by faith or by sight or eventually both, it becomes subjective. It becomes a matter of our direct apprehension. But for the time being, the time between the times, as it's sometimes talked about in theology — between the already and the not yet, between what has already taken place in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for the sake of the world, (that's the already), and the not yet (when it is fully revealed and fully actualized and fulfilled). We live in the time between the times.

There's a lot that's hidden to us here and now. But our true selves, our reality, is not what we see and apprehend even by faith directly; it's who we are in Christ in God's sight. God does not look upon us except as we are in him because he has embraced us by his grace in Christ already to begin with.

So Colossians 3:3 has three aspects, it seems to me. Our life is real (that means eternal life), our life is real, it's hidden — we don't see it directly, we might get glimpses of it, but the point about not having any direct apprehension of it which you quoted from what I wrote — we don't know about that life, and about our inclusion in it, and about its really belonging to us on the basis of inferences that we can make about what we see in our own lives or on the basis of judgments that we can make in our own case or anyone else's case.

We know about it from the gospel. Where else would you learn Colossians 3:3 except you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in death? This is proclaimed to us, and it's proclaimed to us not necessarily because of the spiritual progress we might think we're making, but very often in *spite* of the progress that we're not making or in spite of the setbacks and falls and the disasters that we're making out of lives. It's real, it's hidden, and it's yet to come. It's a matter of hope.

Now sometimes, in order to make this more intelligible, people will say, "It's just a matter of hope. It's not yet real." But the way Barth reads that verse, and I think this is correct, it's already true in one sense, and it's yet to come as a matter of promise and fulfillment in another sense. Just because it's yet to come doesn't mean it's not already real. Just because it's hidden doesn't mean that it's not already real. We need those three aspects together — real, hidden, and yet to come. You have died and your life is hid with



Christ in God.

I think the same thing is true for Luther and Calvin when they're talking about our righteousness. Your righteousness is hid with Christ in God. For Luther, the great summary of the gospel was Christ is our righteousness and our life. Both of those are hid with Christ in God. They're real, they're hidden...that means we have to take it by faith and not expect to see too much or at least not base our understanding of ourselves on what we can observe or judge about ourselves. That's the main thing.

There's that hidden element, but it's still a promise that will be brought to its fulfillment either with us or against us or both. Grace works against us as much as it works for us and with us. It has to work against us insofar as we still remain fallen and still remain hostile to the grace of God.

**JMF:** Which is exactly why we need grace.

**GH:** Yes. Exactly how grace works is a...there's a great German word, *trotzdem*, in spite of everything. That's the Protestant word, "nevertheless." Nevertheless I am with you always, until the end of the age. I may have fallen into sin — "depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful human being." In and of myself I still remain a sinner.

Baptism is supposed to have drowned the old Adam, and a joke that Barth liked to make is, "It turns out the rascal can swim." There's a certain sense in which Adam is drowned in baptism, but in the time between the times, Adam is trying to pull us back under, and it's a matter of hiddenness and tension that sin and grace exist in us in an ambiguous and complicated way until that final resolution.

**JMF:** Doesn't that give us a sense of rest and peace with our brokenness and our struggle with sin and so on to know that we have been made new in Christ already and that that is real even though we don't see it?

**GH:** I think that's exactly right. The objection coming out of the old Latin theology is "Well, then it doesn't matter what you do with your life, or there is no necessity for good works." It's taking everything out of the realm of necessity and translating it into the realm of freedom. I like to think of that great hymn by Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. (I think that Charles Wesley was the greatest hymn writer in the English language, but Wesley said...this was very moving to me...he would have given every hymn he had ever written if he could have written *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.)

It says in there, and this is exactly right, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." That's the transition from freedom to freedom. The free grace of God, love so amazing, so divine, eliciting the free response of total self giving back to God. This is how much God has loved you. This is what God has done on your behalf. Look to Christ on the cross to see the depth of the love and grace and mercy of God.

It's not what you have to do, what do I have to do...what do you *want* to

do? It goes from the indicative to the imperative [from a statement to a command – i.e., a statement of salvation followed by commands], whereas the other way is, “If you do the right thing, you’ll have a good outcome.” That’s conditional. Whereas this [the hymn] is not putting the indicative in the conclusion – it’s putting it in the premise. This is what God has done for you, therefore act accordingly. Therefore, make the proper response.

And what response could there be, but a life of total love and self-giving to God in return for so great a love that God has bestowed on us?

**JMF:** Going back to the earlier comment about the universality of inclusion of humanity in Christ and the idea of everyone participating in Christ because that’s the nature of human existence, to be in Christ, how does that work? How does that look for someone who is not yet a believer? In other words, how does a non-believer participate in Christ? What does that look like?

**GH:** There are no formulas, right? There’s just no one way. That’s hidden. That’s hid with Christ in God, I think. But, you know, Nietzsche for example said one time, “Why don’t the redeemed look more redeemed?” That’s a pretty good question. Sometimes people who are not redeemed look more like the redeemed than the redeemed do, and they set a standard that the redeemed would do pretty well to live up to.

Sometimes there are these incognito ways in which the grace of God seems to be at work, and if we have this concept of the church militant... sometimes the Holy Spirit is more militant than the church, and if the church is not ready to move, the Holy Spirit will move somewhere else...and I think in general this is true of the whole Enlightenment. There are ways in which the Enlightenment has taught the church to be more truly the church than was happening out of the church’s own traditions. Now we can see that many of the things that the Enlightenment stood for, have their proper grounding at home in the gospel.

The Enlightenment sometimes had trouble hanging onto them indefinitely. But there are ways in which grace is operative outside the church. How do we know that? Well, we know it when it seems to be at least compatible with the gospel — an expression of things we wish the church were doing, if the church isn’t doing it.

Bonhoeffer one time went to a student evening...Karl Barth used to have gatherings of students in his home from time to time, and they would talk about some theological text or events of the day, and it was open. It was an open evening, it was called.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer never had Barth formally as a teacher, but he was visiting, and went there. He caught Barth’s attention by quoting from Luther when Luther said, “There are times when the curse of the godless is more pleasing to the ears of God than the hallelujahs of the pious.” The grace of God will work outside the walls of the church in ways where

people who are not yet Christians will recognize injustices and try to do something about it, or will raise a cry of protest that also needs to be incorporated by the people of God. Sometimes their piety is really a form of unbelief, and a form of evading the grace of God.

Barth also liked to say that Christians go to church to make their last stand against God. This is what was at stake in the idea of “the religion” as sin. The religion becomes a form of self-justification. It becomes a way of defending ourselves against the rather threatening apprehension that we are sinners deserving to be rejected by God — that God’s love takes the form of wrath whenever it’s resisted, whether in subtle ways or blatant ways, and certainly including religious ways.

God doesn’t compromise with sin. God doesn’t call sin good. God does not turn a blind eye toward it. The wrath of God is a very important part of the gospel, but it’s not split off from his love. It’s the form that God’s love takes. It’s the wrath of God’s love when God’s love is resisted, and God’s wrath overcomes all forms of resistance, but finally in such a way that the sin is removed and God’s purposes are fulfilled even for the sinner in spite of the sin.

**JMF:** The only source of anything good is God. So anytime we see good things in anybody, whether it’s any form of love, any form of courage or sacrifice, or self-sacrifice, every good virtue and every good thing can only have one source, which is God, and it seems that they would be God’s love and grace working itself out in humanity even though a person may be an unbeliever and may not know the source of every good thing. But every good thing does come from God.

**GH:** How could it be otherwise? Yeah. Hegel has this wonderful phrase about the divine cunning that is at work in history. These unexpected moments of goodness or grace in unexpected places, this is the divine cunning in history. The difference between believers and unbelievers at this point might be that believers are equipped to see it for what it is.

**JMF:** At least a little better.

**GH:** A little better sometimes than the others. They have the key because they have Christ. Whenever it’s Christ-like, we know that somehow this... I mean you wouldn’t preach it, but you could perceive it and sort of hope and pray that this seems to be some sort of work of God. It could be in ways that don’t make sense from more worldly ways of thinking. Somebody who thinks that mercy toward a wrongdoer is preferable and more God-like than vengeance and exacting retribution.

I would see that, and it happens sometimes, as a Christ-like occurrence, whereas other people might feel that no, that’s not what justice requires, no, that will jeopardize our security somehow and we can’t take those kinds of risks, it’s naive to try to implement the concerns and values of the gospel in a hostile world. I think God and God’s grace have a way of prevailing even

when it doesn't always seem immediately to make rational sense.

**JMF:** On page 154 in *How to Read Karl Barth* you write, "In Jesus Christ we see that God does not exist without humanity and that humanity does not exist without God." It's a great quote, and I'd like to have you expand on it.

**GH:** Well, there is such a thing as a godless human being — that is, a human being who tries to live as if God does not exist, and in that sense God is not real for them or acknowledged by them. But it's one of the great quotations from Barth, and it's very difficult to put into English. But if you're a godless human being it would be *Gottlosigkeit*, godlessness of the human being.

Barth says there's no humanity-less-ness of God, no *menschenlosigkeit*. English would require us to say something...there's no such a thing as a God without humanity. Even though there are human beings who are godless, there's no human-less God, because God has made the world, and God has made humanity within it his own in the incarnation.

God has made the sufferings of the world and the sin of the world his own, irrevocably, in and with the incarnation as it reaches its fulfillment in the cross, and then the resurrection. God has committed himself to being God with us, and therefore there's no such thing as a God who does not have humanity by the grace of God. This is God's free decision, of course, but there's no human-less-ness of God.

**JMF:** Just as there's no Father without the Son and the Holy Spirit, and no Holy Spirit without the Father and the Son, and Son.

**GH:** But that's true by nature.

**JMF:** Yes.

**GH:** But this is true by grace.

**JMF:** Yes. So we can't think of God in any other way except as the God who has included humanity in himself.

**GH:** Right, and that means we can't think about God except in terms of the covenant as it reaches its fulfillment in the incarnation and death and resurrection of Christ.

**JMF:** I think Tom Torrance said something similar to that when he said...in *The Mediation of Christ*...when he said, "God has bound himself to us in such a way he will never let us go."

## 14. FOCUS ON CHRIST

**JMF:** I'd like to talk about one of the subjects you brought up in your book, *How to Read Karl Barth*, and that is *ordo salutis*, and how that plays out. Could you begin by talking about or by telling us what it means in English, and then about the history and...

**GH:** *Ordo salutis* means order of salvation. This idea, this term, comes from the 17th century. I tend to think about these things more from the standpoint of Calvin and Luther and the original Reformers, and not what the later more scholastic theologians did 75 to 100 years later.

Is there a temporal sequence in which things have to fall, or, if not, are there ways in which one thing necessarily presupposes something else first? Like, can I have faith without having first repented? That might be temporal, but it might also be logical. The very idea of faith presupposes that I have repented. Calvin thought repentance, for example, was a lifelong process.

Sometimes it's related to how justification and sanctification are related. First you would be justified in point of time and then that would kick off a process of sanctification. But it might be not temporal, but logical. You couldn't be in the process of sanctification if you had not logically already been justified. And where does adoption fit in? Do you have to be adopted first in order to be justified and then sanctified?

One that I think is pretty important and is (not always but sometimes) brought out in this idea of ordering is: when do you enter into union with Christ? Calvin's idea was that the person is brought into union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who creates faith. So Calvin taught that faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit and faith joins us to Christ. Then Calvin would use the word *simul*, and then simultaneously out of union with Christ, there's a "double grace" he put it, *duplex gratia dea*, a two-

fold grace of God, justification, and sanctification. So Calvin did not make sanctification dependent upon justification. He made justification and sanctification dependent upon union with Christ. That's the order that I would hold do.

There's another order that you find in some of the later Lutheran theologians, that you have to be justified first in order to enter into union with Christ and to participate in Christ. That almost seems contrary to Luther to me, insofar as I understand it, because of Luther's emphasis, as I mentioned in an earlier segment, that grace comes to lost sinners. So grace brings us into union with Christ, Christ enters into us, we enter into Christ, there's a kind of mutual indwelling. You don't have to be made holy or righteous in order to have union with Christ. It's union with Christ which brings about justification and sanctification, righteousness and life. That is at least one way in which the question of the order of salvation is still important.

Does union with Christ depend upon repentance or justification or some other thing, or is it the foundation of everything else? Calvin and Barth, and if I'm not mistaken also Luther, all believed that union with Christ was bedrock and was given by grace through faith. Every other aspect of salvation, whatever it might be, comes out of that. But from that point on it's a kind of a hodgepodge. There's no clear order. There's no logical set of ordering principles, no temporal order.

The important thing is union and communion with Christ by grace through faith. After that, the idea of *ordo salutis* becomes a kind of a distraction. It does direct your attention to how you're doing when living out the Christian life, as opposed to keeping your focus on Christ alone. It's almost like Peter being out there on the water, and he's looking at Christ, but all of a sudden the question of *ordo salutis* arises and he looks to himself and starts sinking. I mean, there's a way in which Christian piety can become too preoccupied with itself, and the *ordo salutis* concept is perhaps one way in which that is fostered. The important thing is to keep our focus on Christ.

**JMF:** In your recent book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you have a passion for unity in Christ between churches and the ability to take communion together. What triggered that? What lays behind your interest in the topic and the development of it?

**GH:** If you think about it, it's profoundly disordered that we should have so many separate churches and denominations. Jesus came that we might all be one. If we have reached the point where some Christians are excluded from the Lord's Supper or the Eucharistic celebrations of other Christians, this is not only wrong in itself, but it's a terrible testimony to the world. I read a story recently about a man in India who was a Dalit, a member of the untouchables, and he became a Christian. He had been a

leader among the Dalits, and he said, “Christianity recognizes the dignity and the full humanity of all human beings and therefore of the untouchables. We should all become Christians.”

The response he got back was, “We can’t become Christians because if we did we would lose our unity as Dalits.” Of course, a lot of them have become Christians anyway, but it’s a sign of how the missionary movement imported the divisions that had grown up in Europe to the rest of the world by reproducing those divisions in the mission field. The ecumenical movement in recent times has come out of the missionary movement in the great conference that took place in Edinburgh in 1910. It was missionaries gathering together to see what could be done to try to recover some more robust expression of Christianity so that it wouldn’t be undermining the efforts that they were engaged in around the world.

It just seems profoundly wrong to me that Christians have allowed things to get to the point that there’s not Eucharistic sharing. This is something that is perceived in some sectors of all Christian traditions and communions.

Vatican II has a very strong decree on ecumenism, the Vatican has been very dedicated in doing what it can, within limits of course, to overcome the divisions, especially in the outreach to the Eastern Orthodox Christians. There’s a new openness on their part to trying to work together to see if we can’t live more faithfully in accord with Christ and the gospel, because there’s this perception that there are true Christians in all of the different denominations and traditions, and yet we’re divided at the point where we ought to be the most united.

So it’s a matter of faithfulness to Christ and obedience to the gospel that we should all strive to do what we can from our side to make sure that we are all one. There’s a scandal to this wound, around the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

**JMF:** In the book *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you say this, “The Christian community is called to attest, mediate, and anticipate the unity of Christ in the Eucharistic assembly.” Can you expand on that?

**GH:** We did talk once before about Colossians 3:3, “You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God.” There’s a sense in which that’s true of our unity in Christ. It’s hid with Christ in God. We are one, and we need to become one, we need to become what we are. Attesting that unity means attesting it in its reality as it exists in Christ with God. That can’t be undone, even by our divisions. But it also needs to be anticipated. There will be a day when these divisions will be made to seem rather ridiculous and indefensible, but they won’t be in force anymore.

I like to think of the promised future in terms of a meal, in terms of the Messianic Banquet or the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. I think the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist is the present tense form of that final meal. It’s the

presence of that future here and now. I've talked once before about the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election as being three forms of one and the same event, the Messianic Banquet, the Last Supper, and the Last Supper and Calvary together in a complex unity — these are three forms of one and the same event. So the Lord's Supper also mediates that unity.

The present tense form of that unity is most significantly and intensively expressed when the church gathers together around the table in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. That's bringing you Christ in his saving significance into the present from the past where his once-for-all sacrifice was accomplished, and it's also anticipating that which is yet to come. We are attesting something, something that has taken place in its perfect and definitive sense, the finished saving work of Christ, that once-for-all aspect of it. The only thing we can do in that respect is to attest it.

We can't add to it, it doesn't need to be added to. We can't possibly add to it, it's a finished and perfect work, but we're called to be witnesses to Christ and his once-for-all obedience and saving sacrifice. We attest it, we anticipate that future form that it will take in the kingdom of God, and it should be mediated here and now, which means that we shouldn't be excluding one another from our individual denominational celebrations of the Lord's Supper. If we're doing that, we need to dig into the roots of what's behind these divisions and ask what can be reasonably and faithfully done to overcome them, so that that invisible unity which already exists can be made more fully visible for what it is here and now.

**JMF:** So, ironically, when a church that doesn't have communion with other churches or share communion with other churches, partakes of communion, they're actually attesting and anticipating the day when that very attitude and exclusion will not exist anymore.

**GH:** I think so. But the people who have these exclusions think that they're the only true church and that the ecumenical solution is that we should all join *their* church. Every denomination has people like this. To me, it just can't be true. There are real Christians spread throughout the churches, and it needs to be worked out that these sinful divisions are suffered and overcome and not just tolerated and written off as if they're insignificant.

Another thing to keep in mind is the shape of world Christianity. There are about 6 billion people in the world, roughly, these are rough figures. How many of them are Christians? Roughly a third of them are Christians. So there are about 2 billion Christians in the world. Let's just stick with that, and that's a pie-shaped graph. How many of those 2 billion are Roman Catholic? It turns out about half of them. So there are 2.2 billion, 2.1 billion...half of the pie-shaped graph are Roman Catholic.

What about Eastern Orthodox churches? It's hard to find out. I wrote



to some Eastern Orthodox scholars, and I think it depends on how you define Eastern Orthodox churches and are you talking about active members or people just on the rolls, and you get these kind of problems with statistics, but as a ballpark figure, 15 to 17 percent more. So we're looking at almost 70 percent of the world's Christians that have this high sacramental understanding of the church and the Christian life.

What about Protestants? Protestants as a whole, including Anglicans and Episcopalians, they might be another 20 percent. But they're fragmented among themselves. I think there are more Anglicans than there are Lutherans, they're within this little piece of the pie, and there are more Lutherans than there are Reform. So I'm a Reformed theologian, I'm a Presbyterian minister, but I represent one sliver of world Christianity, maybe leaving one or two percent in there, and then, where things are burgeoning is with the Pentecostal and the charismatic churches.

But the Roman Catholic Church also is growing very rapidly in the global south. My little sliver there is (where I have my home, so I think about that), you know how many different Reform denominations there are? They did a study of this, the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, they did a study. They were shocked. There are 750 different Reformed denominations. So it's like we've got this little sliver of pie...you have to be like a Japanese chef, you've got to divide that little sliver up into 750 pieces.

From a Catholic standpoint and an Orthodox standpoint, that's exactly what they would expect. They thought you get rid of bishops, you get rid of any institutionalized form of authority, you're going to fragment, you're going to disintegrate. We're not back in the 16th century anymore. The evidence is in. Protestantism is fissiparous, as they say. You know, it breaks up into parts.

You may know the little book by C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis's idea of hell is that nobody can get along with anybody else, so they're constantly moving away from one another. This is almost an image for Protestantism. Every time somebody does something that you think is wrong, you do what's right in your own eyes, and you form your own little new denomination. There's something wrong with this picture. We need to give serious thought to what it would take to bring the church into some sort of tolerable unity. To me, that means Eucharistic sharing. It doesn't mean one monolithic church structure, but the Catholics and the Orthodox, they have their own set of criteria about what would be necessary if the divisions in the church were to be healed and overcome.

Here I have to be both pragmatic as well as principled, because I'm thinking we've got 70 percent of the world's Christians that we need to bring into some sort of reconciliation along with all these other Protestants. I don't know what to do in my book about Pentecostals and Anabaptists

traditions, so I just sort of factor them out for the time being (and finally that will be a work of the Spirit and not the work of the theologians, so I figure I'll just leave that to one side), because I don't know what to do about that. But we're not going to achieve consensus.

In the ecumenical movement, it's understood now that visible unity in the form of a single church structure is not only not going to be achieved, it's not necessary. One of the terms that is used is "reconciled diversity." The project in my book, in part, is how can we widen the circle of acceptable diversity? I've tried to go back to some little-known developments from the time of the Reformation that I think would be fruitful for my tradition, the Reformed tradition, to adopt and that might have some appeal across the board.

I've gotten pretty favorable reviews so far from Roman Catholic writers. The Orthodox are a question unto themselves. They think they have the true church and they won't... When I would talk to people about my book and I'd say, "I think the divisions about the Lord's Supper as they developed in the West have a lot to do with the absence of an Eastern Orthodox voice. At the time of the Reformation things split apart and polarized in the history of the Western churches that the Orthodox have had together.

I thought they would say, "This is great, you want to make ecumenical progress and you want to draw upon the Orthodox traditions." No, it's like, So what? My words fall to the ground. The average view is they don't need us, we're very problematic, and the solution is that we should all become Orthodox. Even when the Orthodox participate in the World Council of Churches events, that's kind of the underlying attitude. They're waiting for the rest of us to find our way back to Eastern Orthodox. I don't think that that's the solution. I think the Catholics will actually bear the burden of achieving that reconciliation with the Orthodox.

But meanwhile, in my hope of expanding the circle of acceptable diversity, I had to figure out some way of determining what views are church-dividing, that's the way they talk ecumenically. What views are church-dividing, and what views aren't? How do you know what views are church-dividing and what aren't? It so happens that Vatican II decided, so this is an official Roman Catholic position. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles...

**JMF:** Vatican II being the church council.

**GH:** Of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles in principle, you have to state this carefully, from the Roman Catholic side to Eucharistic sharing with the Orthodox, but the Orthodox hold any number of views that are different from official Roman Catholic teaching. If there are places, as there are, where Eastern Orthodox views are more possible for Protestants than Roman Catholic views as

we're familiar with them, then if we can adopt those views without compromise, as I think we often can, there's an ecumenical imperative that we ought to move in that direction for the sake of achieving unity and Eucharistic sharing.

So I try to argue that nobody has to give up anything that is essential to them, but everybody has to stretch to accept some things that they thought they had to reject. I think the history of the Eucharistic controversies has largely been the history of false contrasts, and trying to show that things can be held together that were split apart is an important part of the argument in my book.

I'll give you just one example, it's a simple example, not a terribly complicated one. In my tradition we talk about the Lord's Table. There was a professor in a previous generation at Princeton Seminary who used to tell his students it's a table and not an altar, and it's not a table unless you can put your feet under it. So "table" is good and "altar" is bad, and if you read Luther's catechisms and so on, he's constantly using the phrase "the sacrament of the altar." He gets this phrase from Augustine, to me there's nothing wrong with it. But when Luther starts using it and then as the Lutheran tradition developed, there's a kind of hardening. It's not just a rhetorical term anymore, it becomes more of a semi-technical term. It's an altar.

*Altar* has its metaphorical home in priestly and cultic activities. *Table* has its home in thinking about the royal office of Christ — Christ as the Messiah, the Messianic Banquet. The priestly office of Christ and the royal office of Christ can't possibly exclude one another. These are two different ways of talking about one and the same Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. And again, it's not like a pie where you divide them up into parts, these are two ways of looking at Christ as a whole.

There is a term in the tradition, and I learned about it from reading an Eastern Orthodox writer, Alexander Schmemmann, who has this wonderful book called *The Eucharist*. In that book, even though he primarily talks about the sacrament of the kingdom, and he uses table imagery and so on, so royal. In a way, the Eastern Orthodox ethos is (even though it doesn't exclude the priestly), it's oriented toward the splendor of the kingdom of God. The goal, the icons and the precious gems and so on...there's something royal about this. Schmemmann uses the term "altar table."

I was at a conference, I was asked to speak in Strasbourg...all these ecumenical figures from across Europe were there. I said Schmemmann has this great phrase that he uses that shows how we bring things together that in other places have been split apart. So my tradition will say table, but it won't say altar, Lutherans tend to say altar but maybe not so much table. It's a false contrast. You don't have to polarize around this. So Schmemmann has this great term.

Then the next day the Eastern Orthodox speaker from Romania got up and said, “I have to correct one thing that Professor Hunsinger said the other day. It’s not just Schmemmann who talks about altar table. We all talk this way.” This was simultaneous translation; he was speaking in German and he had a German text and photographs of Eastern Orthodox liturgies and so on. Right there in the German text was “*altar tisch*,” there it was.

So I started watching for it and this is a term that has deep historic roots. I’ve seen it in some Roman Catholic writings, and in the Reformation there was a figure named Martin Bucer who was the reformer of Strasbourg. There was a period when Calvin had been called to Geneva and then he ran into conflict with the city fathers and he had to leave Geneva. He went to Strasbourg. Martin Bucer became Calvin’s mentor, and then later Calvin went back to Geneva. Bucer is an important figure, that’s what I’m getting at. He was also very ecumenically-minded and even in that period was striving to do what he could to hold the Reformation together and to make sure that there weren’t these divisions about the Lord’s Table. Bucer also knew the term “altar table.”

So there’s no good reason, it seems to me, why Reformed Christianity or Protestants in general can’t develop this vision that we need both the priestly and the royal aspects. This perception has a lot of implications that we might want to talk about, but the priestly side has been lost by much of Protestantism. We have an atrophied understanding of the priestly elements of worship and of the Eucharistic liturgy and the Catholics still have priests, the Orthodox still have priests, the Episcopalians have priests.

We don’t have priests anymore. We have ministers and we have the priesthood of all believers, which is great, I think that’s important, but what does that mean? It’s almost a priest without a portfolio. It doesn’t have a great deal of meaning, and while each person is a priest to every other person, fine, we intercede for one another, fine. But it doesn’t have a lot of development and currency. Recovering that priestly side of things...see, it’s not just the Messianic Banquet, which would be royal, it’s the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which is priestly and cultic. These are two different...

In the book of Revelation, what’s happening? It’s the lamb who is sitting on the throne...well, who is beside... The royal aspects, the royal activities and offices are somehow assimilated to the lamb. To me this suggests that there’s something central to this priestly complex of images that we need to recover. Liberal Protestantism had an aversion to all things priestly. I read something recently by H. Richard Niebuhr (who have a lot of respect for), he talked about sacrifice and love, and these “primitive” ideas. They thought they could move beyond all that... Expiation and propitiation, and who needs that?

We need to find a responsible way of recovering these ideas without theological compromise, because they’re essential to reestablishing the

Eucharistic unity of the church. So I'm looking for ways in which we can stretch to accept things we thought we had to reject without theological compromise. We're going to have to tolerate a fair amount in other traditions and communions that we're not entirely comfortable with. But if we can just reach the point where we're not excluding one another from our celebrations of the Eucharist, that would be huge. That would be the correct thing to do in its own right, but it would also have great implications for the church's witness to Christ in the world.

## 15. THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

**JMF:** I'd like to talk about a couple of terms that our viewers are no doubt familiar with, but maybe you could define them and then move on to a third term that you put forward in your book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*. Most of our viewers are familiar with “transubstantiation” and “consubstantiation” and that there has been controversy, but they may not remember what the controversy was, and what the definitions are. You introduced the concept of “traselementation,” so could you describe those and move on to traselementation and the potential you see for that term?

**GH:** Thank you. There are three main issues that need to be addressed if we are to get beyond the impasse in ecumenical discussion about the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. One has to do with the real presence of Christ. That's where your question about those terms comes in. Then there's the question of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and finally there's the question of the ordained ministry. I try to address all three of those areas in my book.

The churches have divided historically over the question about how are we to understand the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. It has to be given a very special formulation of just what's at stake. It can't just be that Christ is somehow really present with the Lord's Supper. It has to do with the bread and the wine as consecrated elements, and in what sense are the body and blood of Christ present *in* and *through* and *with* the elements of bread and wine.

The historic Roman Catholic answer to that is *transubstantiation*. This is now a term that has been defined by a church council for them. The Council of Trent gave a technical definition to transubstantiation, so that's the one we have to look at. The word was around much longer than that, but it didn't have a technical definition prior to the 16th century. The

Reformation forced the Catholic Church to come up with a more careful definition of what they meant than had been true previously. That then divided the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church. What the Council of Trent did was to draw largely upon the definition that Thomas Aquinas had developed in the 13th century.

Transubstantiation involves conversion and containment. The bread and the wine are somehow converted so that they become the body and blood of Christ in a particular form, and the body and blood are then contained in the bread and the wine, respectively. So transubstantiation is, in a sense, a theory of descent and containment. The grace of God descends from heaven, and when the priest presiding at the Eucharist or the bishop says the words of consecration, the words that Jesus is recorded as having said at the last supper, “This is my body, given for you, this cup (in the New Testament) is my blood, shed for you.”

When the priest says that in the Catholic liturgy, a bell is rung, because that’s where you’re really supposed to pay attention — that’s where the miracle and the wonder takes place that the bread is no longer merely bread, the wine is no longer merely wine but is the body and blood of Christ. But the outward form, called the *accidents*, remains. This distinction which comes from Aristotle about substance and accidents was used by Aquinas, and the Council of Trent changed it just slightly and instead of talking about accidents, they used the word *species*, but it was all the same thing. It’s kind of form and content.

The outward form remains the form of bread, and the outward form remains the form of wine. But the inner content, the inner substance, has been converted and transformed into the body and blood of Christ, which are then contained by the elements. The Reformation felt that this was really a terrible idea, and it made no sense, so they didn’t want to have anything to do with it. Whether they had a suitable alternative or not is another matter. The Lutherans and the Reformed within the Reformation split apart over this question. In the first generation of Reformers, the Reformed were from Switzerland and Southern Germany, but especially Switzerland, were led by the Zurich Reformer Ulrich Zwingli. The Lutherans were led by Martin Luther from Wittenberg.

Zwingli had what is thought of as a very low understanding of how the bread and the wine function in the Lord’s Supper. They are merely symbols of something that is not necessarily present. There’s more than one way to work this out. I won’t go into the details, but basically what happened in the past, in Christ’s once-for-all saving work, that is symbolized and remembered in the Lord’s Supper — that was Zwingli’s basic view. What the Reformed tradition was especially concerned to protect was the integrity of Christ’s human body after his resurrection and ascension. They thought if Christ was somehow substantially present in the Lord’s Supper, it was

impossible to maintain the full integrity of his human body in heaven.

Even Calvin, who modified Zwingli's views there considerably, still had that as a primary concern. One reason they had that idea, that conviction, was that they believed salvation was at stake. If Jesus' humanity ceased to be real humanity in its full integrity as a human body, as a part of his humanity, then the very ideal of our salvation was destroyed. He had to remain a real human being, even after the ascension.

The Lutheran view is sometimes called the *consubstantiation*, the term you mentioned, and some Lutherans are okay with that term, but some aren't. There are Lutheran documents from the 16th and 17th century that deny that this describes the Lutheran position. There are others who still use the term. Partly it's a matter of definitions. Consubstantiation can mean more than one thing. If it means that you just have two substances together — the substance of the bread and the substance of the body of Christ (whatever substance means... even for Catholics this whole substance/accidents scheme is kind of perplexing today, nobody quite knows what to make of these Aristotelian terms).

There is a view, kind of a dictionary definition view of consubstantiation, which is the two substances coexisting together. The bread remains bread, but the body of Christ is joined to it somehow mysteriously. Maybe it's not taken any further, but you get the impression sometimes that they're externally related — that they're coexisting side by side. I don't think that was Luther's view, but it is a view that is ascribed to Luther and accepted by some Lutherans.

Luther said different things in different writings, he's not an easy theologian to pin down, because he's so situational and he'll say one thing here and another thing there, and it's like a bell-shaped curve, one or two standard deviations... In his great treatise of 1520 called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, one of his most widely read treatises, he takes a position that was somewhat neglected, or put to one side, in the heat of Reformational controversies between Luther and Zwingli and their colleagues. In *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther focuses on the verse 1 Corinthians 10:16. That verse says "the bread that we break, is it not a (blank) in the body of Christ." In English the word that I left blank is often translated as "participation." Luther knew it in the Greek. The Greek word is *koinonia*. One way of interpreting the verse (and there's more than one way) is to say that the relationship between the bread that we break and the body of Christ is a *koinonia* relation. It's some kind of participation of the one in the other. The idea of participation is not always kept in mind when the term consubstantiation is used. But consubstantiation can be used to cover this other case where there's a more intimate kind of indwelling, at least of the body in the bread.

The Eastern Orthodox view that I have found to be so helpful as a way



of moving beyond the impasse ecumenically...it's not called consubstantiation by them, but Luther's view in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, based on 1 Corinthians 10:16 and other verses, is not far from that ancient Orthodox view. The Orthodox have a number of different terms that they will use, and it makes it hard to find out what they actually think, but if you read around long enough as I did, you can see that there's one term that stands out among the rest. That is what I put forth in my book as transelementation, *metastoicheisis*. It's really just an interpretation, a deep one, of 1 Corinthians 10:16.

What is a *koινωνia* relation? There's more than one way to work that out, too, but it can be a relationship of mutual indwelling. If you take that view, then the bread can remain bread (without any loss of its definition as bread — it's not substance and accidents), and it somehow participates in the body of Christ. It's not just that the body of Christ participates in the bread, but there's a relationship of each being in the other.

For the Catholics and for the Orthodox, and for this view that Luther espoused, it's not just the body and blood of Christ that are thought of in detachment from the rest of his person, this is the form in which he's present to us — this sacrificial form...in and with the sacramental form of his body and blood, the whole person of Christ is present. But he offers himself to us under the sacramental form of his body and blood. He gives himself to the church in that form, and in the same way he unites the church to himself.

As in the incarnation, he assumed human flesh, he made himself one with us...even though he was God, he emptied himself and took the form of a servant even to death on a cross, as we read in Philippians 2. He took that flesh, he made himself one with us in order to bear our sins and bear them away — the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He also makes us one with himself through that very same body and blood, that very same sacrificial death. There's only one body of Christ, it is definitively present in Christ's life and death there and then, but then it becomes sacramentally present. It's here and now under the forms of bread and wine.

The image that was used in the ancient church to bring out this idea of transelementation was the image of the iron in the fire. They used that image both for the incarnation and for the relationship between the bread and the wine and Christ's life-giving flesh. There's kind of an incarnational analogy here which is important. In the council decision at Chalcedon in 451, the fifth-century decision defining the person of Christ (and this is a decision that's definitive for Catholics, for Orthodox, and for Reformation Protestants), they had to try to give some account of how Christ's deity and humanity were related. They said that they were related "without separation or division."

That meant there was, to put it more positively, an inseparable unity between them...and then “without confusion or change.” The deity of Christ in the union remains deity, the humanity of Christ in the union remains humanity. It’s a mysterious thing. How can they be together in one person? That’s the mystery of the incarnation. If God by nature is immortal, how can the immortal God assume mortal flesh? Questions like that. That’s the mystery of the incarnation.

There’s a third element here that’s implied, a kind of a symmetry... Deity and humanity are not on a par with one another. They wouldn’t balance the scales if you could put them on some kind of scales. None of these images would be perfect then. Let me use another one for a moment that has real limitations, but Gregory of Nyssa, the great Cappadocian theologian from the fourth century, said that deity and humanity in Christ were something like a drop of water in the ocean. The deity of Christ has this immensity to it and the humanity has a kind of smallness, and, relative to his deity, a kind of insignificance. The problem with that image is that it loses the idea of “without confusion or change.” If you put a drop of blood into the ocean, it disappears. But in terms of the scale that we’re talking, or the *incommensurability*, the absolute difference between deity and humanity — it helps us to imagine that.

We need three things to think about the person of Christ, and this carries over by analogy to thinking about the bread and the wine. You need asymmetry. You need the priority of the one over the other. You need unity, you need an inseparable unity of these two that would not otherwise come together except for the miracle of grace, and in that unity, you need an abiding distinction. This is the model that the Orthodox have used for thinking not only about the incarnation, which is true of all Nicene Christians and Caledonian Christians, but they use this incarnational analogy to think about how Christ’s life-giving flesh is related to the Eucharistic gift — of bread and wine — without separation or division, without confusion or change. So unity, distinction, and...

This is what’s missing now from transubstantiation, this element of asymmetry which gives the precedence to Christ and his body. It’s not just that the body is contained in the bread, it’s that Christ in the power of the Spirit takes these Eucharistic gifts and joins himself to them in a certain respect so that he himself, not the priest, is the acting subject in the working of this sacramental miracle in order to offer himself through the priest to the people in these sacramental forms.

Transelementation involves an explicit place also for the work of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox have this wonderful idea, in the Greek it’s called *epiclesis*, invocation, the Spirit is invoked in the course of celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy. But the Orthodox don’t pin it down to a particular moment in the liturgy itself. There’s no bell that is rung and then the

transformation takes place. In a sense, the whole liturgy is one long *epiclesis*, one long invocation of the Spirit. The Spirit is thought to take the bread and the wine into the presence of Christ, who then joins himself to the elements and offers himself in a sacramental form through the bread and the wine to the faithful.

So the bread remains bread, and the body of Christ remains the body of Christ, but that iron in the fire image is something like that Caledonian pattern that I was laying out. It's an impersonal image, it has its limits, but the iron remains iron. It doesn't cease to be iron. It doesn't lose anything of what defines it as iron. It doesn't lose its substance. The fire remains fire, and yet the two become one. As long as the iron is in the fire, there's this inseparable unity, so there's an abiding distinction and an inseparable unity.

If you push the analogy a little bit, there's also that asymmetry. There's a way in which the iron is in the fire in a different sense than the fire is in the iron, because there's more to the fire (if you think of a campfire situation) than the iron itself. So you get that sense of something larger entering into the iron, the fire being like the deity or being like the glorified body of Christ joining itself to this more ordinary element, as it were, of Christ's flesh in the incarnation or the bread and the wine in the Eucharist.

So the image that illustrates this mutual indwelling in the idea of transelementation is the image of the iron in the fire. But it turns out that not only did Luther essentially have this idea (without making it as explicit as I make it), but he actually had the image of the iron in the fire. I don't know where he got it, but maybe he just got it from reading ancient theology.

The Orthodox are out of the picture. The church split apart in the 11th century and the East and West had gone their separate ways. I think one of the reasons things polarized so badly in the West is because the Orthodox were absent. They didn't have a voice at the table. They managed to hold some things together that entered into one of those either-ors, one of those false decisions that have characterized Eucharistic controversy in the West.

But there are some Protestant Reformers, not just Luther, who essentially knew about this idea, and for my purposes the important thing in my book is not that they took this idea of the iron in the fire or the idea of transelementation and made it central to what they wanted to teach about the Lord's Supper, but they knew about it and they didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it. That's all I need in order to make my argument that we need to take every step we can toward achieving unity in the church around these divisive issues as long as it doesn't involve us in theological compromise.

So here's a view that's different from the Roman Catholic view but that the Roman Catholics don't reject. The Roman Catholics, at Vatican II, the official church council in the 1960s called by Pope John the 23rd, decided

that from the Catholic side there's no reason not to enter into Eucharistic fellowship with the Orthodox. The Orthodox don't, as a rule, subscribe to the technical definition of transubstantiation that is official Roman Catholic teaching. They have the iron in the fire idea, transelementation, and there were Reformed theologians, not just Lutherans, who knew of this image and knew of this idea and talked about it, sometimes used it in argument, they didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it.

The important figure here is not very well known, but his name is Peter Martyr Vermigli. He was a close associate of John Calvin. He is one of the few Reformers with who, as far as I know, Calvin never entered into any serious disagreement. They were not in the same place at the same time, they just had a correspondence. Calvin said at one point, "Nobody has a better understanding of the Lord's Supper than Peter Martyr Vermigli." It was Vermigli who discovered this idea of transelementation, which is how I learned about it. But I didn't know what it was until I was able to connect it with the image of the iron in the fire.

Vermigli found it in an Eastern Orthodox theologian dating back to the 11th century (because in those days the Reformers wanted to show that their ideas were not coming out of nowhere, that they had backing in the tradition. The patristic theologians often said things...or the theologians in the church wanted to say, that the Catholics were the ones that had gone off the rails and the Reformers were recovering the authentic traditions.

Vermigli, more than any of them, because he wasn't a Reformer who had a city and church to superintend, was a scholar...this is my supposition...he had time to go digging around in the library, and we now have a fair number of his writings in English just in the last decade or so because there's a whole Vermigli industry that has sprung up centered in Orlando, Florida, and all these people are busily translating Vermigli and putting his works out there. One of them is called the *Oxford Disputation on the Eucharist*. Vermigli is debating this really high-powered Roman Catholic theologian, and he needs all the ammunition he can find. So I imagine him having the time that Calvin didn't have, or that Martin Bucer didn't have, or that even Thomas Cranmer in England didn't have, to find out about these precedents. He's the one who gave this term, transelementation, prominence.

Then it shows up in the most important, the most lengthy and important writing on the Lord's Supper written by Thomas Cranmer. People have had trouble figuring out where does Cranmer finally come down. Some people think he's very close to Zwingli, which would give him a low view — others try to see him in a different light. In his treatise that Cranmer wrote, there's not a page where he's discussing the same figure...that I think it was Vermigli who must have discovered... it's an enigma wrapped in a mystery again and again.

This guy I had never heard of named Theophylact from the 11th Century. I eventually found out he was a very distinguished theologian, kind of on a par with Anselm in the West. He became the Archbishop of Bulgaria and was kind of in exile there. He was constantly longing for the society and the theological conversations and the libraries of Constantinople, but his bishop made him go to Bulgaria, so he lived out his days in Bulgaria. He wrote commentaries on Scripture. Vermigli found Theophylact...in Theophylact, he finds the term transelementation, so he used it. He didn't know that it went all the way back to Gregory of Nazianzen and Cyril of Alexandria and the most seminal and important patristic theologians on the Greek-speaking side of things. It has a heritage, a lineage that even the Reformers didn't appreciate when they embraced this idea.

Here's Cranmer, writing this treatise, which some people think is basically Zwingli, but he'd come to Theophylact. He has Theophylact by name, he has the image of the iron in the fire, he says, the bread and the wine really become infused with the body and blood of Christ so that they are the presence of the body and blood of Christ in sacramental form. This might look like transubstantiation, says Cranmer, it isn't. It might look like a problem, but it isn't, he says.

Calvin's mentor Martin Bucer also, interestingly, has the term transelementation. So here's Vermigli, Cranmer and Bucer, each of whom is making use of this idea that has its roots in the Greek Church and in Greek-speaking theologians that go all the way back to very ancient times, and they don't find anything wrong with it.

There's even one little passage in Calvin's *Institutes*, not very explicit, it doesn't have the image of the iron in the fire and it's an overlooked passage, but Calvin says the ancients...(every time I read that, until I started working on this book, I thought he must mean the Latin theologians, but I think he means the Greeks). The ancients had the idea that the bread and the wine are elevated into a different domain. This is (I'm being a little more explicit than Calvin was) so that they don't cease to become bread and wine, but they're converted. He does have the idea of conversion. They're converted into the body and blood of Christ. Again, this is not an idea that Calvin does anything with, but he says, explicitly, of this, "to this, we have no objection."

So insofar as this Eastern Orthodox understanding was known by the Protestant Reformers, it was embraced in various ways and not rejected. I think this is a way that we could reach convergence on this historically divisive issue. I find it to be a very deep and a rich idea that Christ's body and blood, without ceasing to be definitive in their historical enactment in his life and death on earth, can assume a sacramental form. It means that Christ is not separable from his saving significance or from his work and

benefits. If he's present, his work is present, his benefits are present. And in the Lord's Supper, they're present in this unique and miraculous way that the bread and the wine, without ceasing to be bread and wine, come to enter into an inseparable unity with his body and blood so that he gives himself to us under the forms of bread and wine.

George Herbert, the 17th-century Anglican minister and poet, has a line that says, "Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine, which my God feels as blood and I as wine." I think that's compatible with the idea of transelementation.

So it's not descent and replacement, which is what you get in transubstantiation, it's elevation and enhancement, where the bread and the wine are enhanced by being joined into a kind of mystical union with the body and blood of Christ. (It's very odd to do all this focusing on the elements and so on, but it's necessary, because that's where the divisions have arisen.) The mystical union with Christ with the bread and the wine becomes the means by which we enter into mystical union with Christ. He gives himself to us and we enter into union with him through his self-offering under the forms of bread and wine, which are really the sacramental forms of his body and blood.

That's roughly the way I try to work things out in that part of my book, and I don't see any losses here for the Reformation church. This is no compromise. None of the Reformists... I could say in principle there's no compromise, and make a case, but I don't even have to do that at all by myself, I've got Vermigli and Cranmer and Bucer essentially doing the same thing, and maybe Calvin...he's not explicit enough for me to rely too heavily on him, but he has a very promising idea that could help get us beyond this impasse around how to think about the real presence of Christ. There's a non-church-dividing alternative to the Roman Catholic view, that is not church dividing from a Catholic standpoint.

This is part of a more general strategy in my book. There are often places that the Orthodox don't agree with the Catholics that are more congenial to the Reformation. Insofar as we can move closer to the Orthodox and go on their coattails, so to speak...because remember, we Protestants are little slivers in the big pie that comprises world Christianity, and Catholics are 50 percent, and Orthodox are 17 or so percent. That's a big chunk. There are other questions that I wouldn't think would need to be considered so intensively if they weren't important to the Catholics and the Orthodox. But if they think they're important, and if we're striving for church unity, then we have to make a good-faith effort to try to find a way that we can approximate what they're calling for without compromise.

What I found in my argument was at every point, as far as I can see, it leads to an enrichment for Protestants — and not losses, which is what the Reformers always feared — that if we came too close to the Catholics and

we did not know much about the Orthodox, it would just be compromise and loss. Well, there's another way of trying to work this out that doesn't lead to losses. We're recovering elements of the ancient tradition which would only be to our well-being and the well-being of Christianity.

**JMF:** Do you see progress along these lines actually being made yet?

**GH:** Nobody has yet really come to terms with the argument I make in my book, because it's too new. By and large, Catholic reviewers have been favorable. Orthodox, being Orthodox, they're not going to embrace it with open arms, but they're not hostile. It's a kind of parallel movement that I don't engage with very much, but that I need to give some more thought to now that I've gotten things to this point in my own mind with the book.

Let's say we want to do something with this idea of transelementation. You have to figure out what kind of language you would want to incorporate into your worship. How would you express that? What difference would it make liturgically? This can be incorporated without anything terribly extensive or elaborate. You don't need the kind of arguments, you don't need the kind of explanations that I need to give to back it up at a theological level. On this parallel track of thinking about liturgy and the language of worship, yes, progress is being made. Insofar as a theologian can give good reasons for why this liturgical progress should continue, that's where it finally has its payoff. How does it show up in the language of worship?

**JMF:** The average Christian who comes to the Lord's Table and partakes of the Lord's Supper knows ...if anything, very little about all this kind of discussion and meaning and all that. All they know is that this is what Christians do, and so they do it. It's the hierarchy and the government of a given denomination, church, or whatever who decides they're not going to have communion with someone else because they don't understand it the same way and so on. But in the case of the believer, it seems that this idea of the iron in the fire is what's going on with the believer. They're participating with Christ and it happens regardless...

**GH:** Yes, that's right! That's another application of the word transelementation. It's used to cover that case, what's going on with the believer.

**JMF:** As we talked about, I think in a previous interview, the irony of the fact that your taking of the Lord's Supper is expressing in that participation in Christ, in his body and blood, regardless of how you interpret or understand it or describe it or how your superiors do in the church. It is pointing to the unity that exists in spite of all of our...

**GH:** To a large degree. There are people, though, who think...when Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," there's a an established Protestant perception that this is a mental event. As you are receiving the blood and wine, you're supposed to remember something.

**JMF:** Yes, so you're thinking about that as a...

**GH:** Actually a better translation is, "Do this as my memorial." I don't have time to work this out, but it's like Passover. The original Passover becomes present in celebration of the Passover, and the people who are celebrating here and now are in some sense incorporated into the original Passover so the boundaries between past and present are transcended in the celebration.

**JMF:** They're taking part in the deliverance that occurred originally.

**GH:** Yeah. The enactment is the memorial. It's not a second mental event along with it. Apart from all this theoretical work that I've just outlined, the ecumenical minimum has to be there to overcome these divisions, because we have to be able to say, regardless of how we get there, without crossing our fingers, that this is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ shed for you — that it really is the case that this bread and this wine are the body and blood of Christ.

Luther uses the incarnational analogy. He says, just as we can point to this man and say this man is the Lord, and we don't mean that his humanity is his deity, but by virtue of the union this man is the Lord, or the Lord, the man on the cross, is God. By virtue of the union we say these things that would not otherwise be possible. By virtue of the relation, we can say this bread is the body of Christ because of that *koινωνia* relation, because of that mutual indwelling, because of that mystical union accomplished not by the presiding minister, not by the priest, but by Christ himself in the power of the Spirit through the priest and with the congregation. That's the breakthrough that the Reformation needs in order to be able to say, without crossing their fingers, this is the body of Christ, at least the Presbyterians.

**JMF:** It's a "so what" until someone partakes of it.

**GH:** Exactly. But the communion in the elements is what brings us into communion with the living Christ himself, and he's not absent. There's this terrible, I hate this term that is sometimes used, the real absence of Christ — the real presence and real absence. There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ, I mean, "Behold I am with you always until the end of the age." He's present in some sense, then, where two or three are gathering together, which is probably a Eucharistic passage anyway. "I am in the midst of you." There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ.

He's present in this mode — he's present under the forms of his body and blood, the sacramental union of the body, the life-giving flesh with the bread and the wine. That's crucial, that's ancient, that's deep, that is not just a "so what" kind of perception — that Christ is with us in this palpable way that brings his sacrificial death to us and him in his sacrificial significance so that we are renewed and nourished by our participation in what he did there and then. It becomes present to us sacramentally here and now so that we are given an active share in it by grace through faith.



## 16. THE GRACE WALK

**MM:** Steve, you've written a book called *Grace Walk*. It's sold quite a number of copies now, and in the book you describe the story of how you came to an understanding of grace, and I wondered if we could start today by rehearsing a little bit of that story as to what it was that motivated you to write this book.



**SM:** Sure. I grew up in a Christian home. My parents were Christians; they're both in heaven now. But I was taught about the Lord from the time I was a small child and was very sincere. I understood the gospel when I was 8 years old, and by

the time I was 16 years old, I was preaching. I preached my first sermon at 16 years old and was very sincere....became a senior pastor at 19. Can you believe that? 19 years old and I was a senior pastor of a church with about 100 people — about 80 of them were over 65, which seemed old to me back then. It doesn't seem so old these days.

Anyway, I was very sincere in my Christian walk, but little by little I found happening to me what I think happens to a lot of people, and that is

my focus began to be, in small increments, it began to move away from being on Jesus and began to be more directed toward my own performance — how well I was doing and living the Christian life.

The essence of legalism is thinking that somehow we can make spiritual progress or gain God’s blessings based on what we do, making sure that we do the right things, making sure that we’re keeping all the rules. In the modern church, I think we get grace when it comes to evangelism for unbelievers, but then once people believe, it’s like bait and switch — we turn the tables on them, you know what I’m saying? It’s like “OK, it was grace for you to understand the gospel, but now that you’re a believer, everything’s changed. Now it’s all about you and what *you* do.” I lived that way for the first 29 years of my Christian life. 17 of those years I was a senior pastor.

In my first book, *Grace Walk*, which was published in 1995, I described how the Lord brought me to a place where I realized that although my heart had been in the right place, my head was in the wrong place. That book starts out with me lying on my face in the middle of the night at 2:00 in the morning crying in my office, as a pastor, saying, “If this is the Christian life, it’s overrated, and if this is the ministry, I want out.” How’s that for a sort of tease introduction to a book? A pastor who wanted to quit.

**MM:** It sounds like you’d been a successful pastor, if you had 19 years, and if you then continued to focus on performance, perhaps that’s because you were “performing” well.

**SM:** That’s right. It’s really interesting. I write about it in the book, that for many years as a pastor I felt successful. I felt that way. I got that from accolades of other people, the affirmation of my ministry and those kinds of things.

But I began to pray a prayer, and I tell you this is a prayer that the Lord takes very seriously. I began to pray a prayer, and I said, “Father, I want to know you more intimately than I’ve ever known you. I want to be used by you. I want you to work through my life to impact people with your love, your life, more than I could even imagine it.” Then I said this: “And whatever it takes, I want you to do it to bring me to that place.”

Well, he heard that prayer. I’m making a long story short...I wrote a whole book about it. Shortly after that, I made a move from a church where I served as senior pastor in the state of Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia. I moved to Atlanta anticipating that I was going there to build a megachurch, and that I would see unprecedented success in my ministry. The church I was going to had been dying in every measurable way for five years before I got there, but I thought when I got there, things would turn around.

But to my surprise, things didn’t turn around. The church kept dying and it just kept dying, right out from under me. After I had been there a

year, that's when, as I mentioned a moment ago, I was approaching the first anniversary date of my tenure as pastor, and I found myself lying on my face, and I said, "If this is the ministry, I want out. If this is Christian living, it's overrated."

But the ironic thing is that what the Lord used in my life (as he does in, I think, all of our lives when he wants to bring us up to a deeper or higher understanding of grace), is he had to bring me to the place where I had discovered my need for grace. You see?

We "get" grace [i.e., understand it] for unbelievers. But sometimes as pastors, especially, we don't get it. We think, "I'm preaching the Bible, I'm counseling, I'm doing all the things a pastor should be doing. I'm having success with it." The Lord has to work in our lives to bring us to the place where we say, "I can't do what I thought I could do," so that we'll be open to what he wants to teach us.

**MM:** So in some ways, failure was good.

**SM:** Failure is always good, because failure is not the end. Suffering and pain and what we interpret as failure is sometimes not failure at all. It's the principle in the Bible about dying to live. Jesus said unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it abides alone; you've got to die to live. The Bible is full of paradoxical statements like that. We have to think about that the Bible says we die to live. We have to be weak in order to be strong. We go down so we can go up. It has to get dark before the light comes.

But we're wired in this world. Our flesh is programmed this way. Especially those of us who live in the Western culture, we're wired to think that we have to succeed, and we have to make our mark, and there has to be this continuous upward trajectory toward success and what we're doing. But we don't get strong enough for God to use us. We have to get *weak* enough for God to use us. The best way to learn that is in the midst of our failures.

**MM:** That kind of thing kind of hurts, though, doesn't it?

**SM:** It does. Just like when my children were small and I took them to the doctor for their vaccinations, it always hurt. When I took them for their booster shots, it hurt, and it was for their own good. It was a good thing, though in their little minds it didn't seem like it. In our own minds, as human beings, sometimes when we're in painful circumstances, we think, "If God cares, why is he letting this happen?" If we could hear him answer, we would hear him say, "It's precisely because I do care, that I'm letting this happen."

In my situation I came into that church and it kept dying out from under me (numerically, I mean), and I had always been used to growing churches. So I prayed, "Lord, what's going on?" I began to feel weakened. I began to feel discouraged, despondent, finally despair. I kept praying, "Lord, make me stronger, make me stronger."

I realize now what he was saying is, “Steve, I’ve got a better idea. I’ll make you weaker.” I’m going to say it again. We don’t get strong enough for God to use us, so we might as well stop praying “make me stronger,” because grace isn’t afforded to the strong, you know what I’m saying? It’s not the strong people who tap into grace. It’s weak people who understand our need for grace, so we’ve got to become weak, so that we’ll reach a point where we can become recipients of grace in an experiential way.

**MM:** So when we have strengths, we tend to rely on our strengths.

**SM:** Absolutely.

**MM:** For some people, it’s physical strength, others it’s intellectual, some social.

**SM:** That’s right. That reliance upon our own abilities and our own strengths as we’re describing it — the biblical word for that is the “flesh.” When the Bible talks about walking after the flesh, it’s not talking about the skin, these physical bodies. It’s can’t mean that. Paul said to one group, “You’re no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit.” He didn’t mean they were ghosts. What he meant is “You get it. You finally get it.”

“The flesh” is you or I trying to live for Christ instead of understanding that we can’t live for him. We weren’t called to live for him. Grace is the enablement by virtue of his indwelling life for us to live his life because he’s expressing it through us, not because we’re doing it for him, and there’s a big difference between the two. To experience that kind of outflow of grace from our lives, we’ve got to come to the point where we realize, “I can’t live the Christian life no matter how hard I try.”

It’s a great day for any of us when we discover that the Christian life is not hard for us to live, it’s *impossible* for us to live. There’s only one who can live the Christ-life, and that’s the Christ himself. And he will live it, if we come to the end of ourselves and abandon ourselves in total surrender to him. The gospel is not just the gospel for unbelievers, it’s the gospel for believers, too. We need his grace just like unbelievers need his grace.

**MM:** People tend to rely on their strengths — sometimes they call those spiritual gifts. How do we tell the difference between our fleshly strength and a spiritual gift?

**SM:** That’s a good point you make, and there’s a fine line sometimes, because the abilities that we have come from our Father. He’s given us those abilities. The key distinguishing factor revolves around one question—what animates those abilities? What is it that I’m relying on to give expression to those abilities? Is it me? Is it my own know-how? Is it my own determination? My own willpower? My own intentionality? Or is it an attitude that says, Apart from him I can do nothing, so I rely upon him and by faith I trust him to be the one to animate those abilities.

For those first 17 years as a senior pastor, I tried to do things for the Lord. My heart was in the right place, it was my head that was messed up,

not my heart. My heart was toward him. But when the Lord brought me to brokenness in 1990 and began to teach me this grace walk and what it means to let him live through me, I'll never forget the changes I began to see, because the most evident change is I began to see I didn't have to struggle anymore. I could simply rest in him knowing that he is in control of my life. It's not even my ministry. It's his ministry, and if I just yield myself to him, he will do through me what he wants to do.

He's done that in ways that exceeded anything I could have done or imagined. It's not just like God has a favorite and he'll do for me what he won't do for somebody else. He doesn't pick folks like you and me and say, "I'm going to do something with their lives, but you guys on the margin, on the periphery, I won't use your life or I won't work for you." No, no, no. He wants to use all of us. Paul told the Corinthians that "You see your calling, that it's not many that are noble and mighty and strong..." You know the passage...but he goes on and says, "God chooses the weak."

So I would say to those who watch us that if they feel like, "I'm just not strong like that guy. I'm weak. I've never written books. I don't have the education or the abilities, or..." No, no, no. You're perfect. I'd say to them, "You're the *perfect* candidate for God to use you, because you know it has to be him that does it, and that's the kind of person he will use and takes delight in, in fact."

**MM:** But he doesn't necessarily use us in the way that we associate with success.

**SM:** Absolutely not. God's definition of success and ours, in the religious world at least, is very different. It's not possible for you and I not to be successful as we depend on Jesus as our life source, because *he* is our success. Christ is our life. In him we live and move and exist, Paul said on Mars Hill, and he was speaking even then to unbelievers. He said, "In him we live and move and exist."

Christ is our life, so success is our union with him. We just can relax. It's not about striving for success anymore. It's about just resting in Jesus and letting Jesus be who he is in us and through us. There's success right there, whatever it might look like.

**MM:** So, I can be a success even without doing anything, achieving anything.

**SM:** Absolutely. In fact, we don't achieve anything. We're not called to achieve anything. We are receivers, not achievers. The great Achiever lives inside us, and he will accomplish through us whatever he wants to do as we depend upon him. We don't have to make something happen — as I said, we don't live for him, we don't have to do anything for him.

Now, for people who have been groomed in the legalistic mindset, they're thinking, "That guy's talking passivity." No, I'm not talking passivity. I can only speak for myself...well, I can speak for more than that.

I can speak for all the people I have seen who have embraced grace in saying this: He will do more through us in a day than we can do for him in 25 lifetimes. We just need to stop the struggle.

Jesus said, “Come to me...” (I’m quoting the King James—it’s the one I grew up on—so this is the way I have memorized it.) “Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I’ll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Religion beats the daylight out of us. (Sound of whip cracking) “More, more, more!” That’s what legalistic religion does. But grace is the voice of Jesus saying, “Come to me and I’ll give you rest.” Yet it’s not passivity, because it’s a life of active rest, where he lives his life through us and does more through us than we could ever do for him.

**MM:** What’s the role of our decisions in that? How do we let Jesus live through us without us taking the credit for the results?

**SM:** It’s a mindset. Once we’ve failed enough to realize “I will mess it up every time I try,” that’s a good teacher. When we see God doing something through us, we begin to realize “This is not me. I couldn’t have done this.”

Can I give you one example? First time I saw this after I began to understand... (to *begin* to understand, notice, because we’re still growing in grace, all of us are). When I began to understand this, the first example that I saw in my own life...here I had been trying to make my mark for Jesus. I was senior pastor at the time. My secretary comes in and she says, “Pastor, there’s a guy here that would like to talk to you.” I said, “What about?” She said, “About attending church.” I said, “Okay.”

The guy comes in; he was from Africa, from Cameroon. He begins to talk to me about the church, and I quickly realized that he doesn’t understand the gospel or anything about our faith. So I share the gospel with him and the guy believes. He trusts in Christ that very day. Every week he began coming for me to disciple him on Tuesday. I did that every week.

One week he comes in and he says, “Pastor, have you noticed that every week when I come, I take notes of what you’re saying?” I said, “Yeah.” He took copious notes every single week when I was discipling him. He said, “Do you know why I do it?” I said, “I guess you take them back and study.” He said, “No. I go over here to the shipping place and I mail these notes to the chief in my village in Africa. Every week the chief is getting these notes, and he goes out and he calls the village together. He’s sharing with them what you’re teaching me.”

He said, “A lot of people in my village are trusting Christ, and they’re asking the chief questions that he doesn’t know how to answer, and he’s asking me, and I don’t know how to answer, so I’m supposed to ask you. If I translate, will you answer the questions of the new Christians in my

village?” All of sudden, it just washed over me. I thought, “Here I am sitting in Atlanta, Georgia, with one man across the desk from me, and I’m evangelizing and discipling a whole village of people in Africa.”

**MM:** How strange is that? Pastoring them, too.

**SM:** Exactly. I couldn’t make that happen in a million years. That’s the point I make. When we strive to do things for God, all it is, all it results in, is what the Bible calls “dead works.” It’s just religious works. But if we give up on our struggle, and as the writer of Hebrews says, “enter into his rest.” (I used to think that meant dying and going to heaven — that’s how anemic my Christian life was. No...enter into his rest.) That is, I stopped struggling and striving, and I’m just going to trust that God is my life and that he’ll live through me.

If we’ll do that, the kind of thing I just described, that one anecdote, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. I’ve been on six continents sharing this message and seeing God do things that there’s no way I could take credit for. How do I know it’s him and not me? Because I’m not smart enough to do the things he’s done through me. As you started out by saying, people might see his life expressed in different ways. It might not be something that they would consider on a grand scale, but it doesn’t matter, because when Christ does something through us, we recognize, “That happened from a source beyond my own abilities. That was *him* through me.” We see it, and that encourages us and motivates us to want to trust him more.

**MM:** That reminds me of Susanna Wesley, who had no idea that her role as a mother would turn out to be so influential. Just an ordinary station in life, she thought, and yet the Lord was able to use what she had done.

**SM:** Perfect example. I wrote about her. I wrote a book called *Walking in the Will of God*, and I make the point toward the end of the book, that very point. I said, fulfilling God’s will in your life doesn’t mean that you have to see your name in lights or anything. And I gave the example of Susanna Wesley. What greater contribution could somebody make than Susannah Wesley made by being a godly mother? Look at what Charles and John Wesley gave us – and continues till today, in fact.

**MM:** You said your heart was in the right place, but your head was not. *What* about our head knowledge is going to make a difference, the kind of difference that you describe?

**SM:** Here’s the big thing that I see in the modern church. The big idea is that we think God has called us to himself because he needs us to do something for him. I’ve got good news and bad news. I’ll start with the bad news. The bad news is: God doesn’t need us. If we think God needs us, then we greatly underestimate him or we overestimate ourselves. I often say you can take a blank sheet of paper and write down a list of everything you think you have to offer God on that paper, and stand up to the edge of eternity and hold that list up to the God who stood on the edge of

nothingness and said “let there be” and there *was*, and tell him what it is you think you’ve got that he needs. No, He doesn’t need us.

But the good news is, he *wants* us. He’s not looking for a maid, he’s looking for a bride. This is biblical, Acts 17. The Bible says, “Neither is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.” I like the passage in the Old Testament where God told Isaiah, he said, “If I were hungry, I wouldn’t tell you.” You know why? Because there’s nothing we could do about it. God doesn’t need us.

But the religious culture of the world today, even in the Christian world, somehow communicates, “God has shown you his grace by bringing salvation to you, and now you understand that he’s forgiven your sin, you’re one with him now, so now it’s up to *you*...now you’ve signed up for something and now it’s up to you to accomplish something, to achieve something, to do something for him.”

It’s a misguided, albeit sincere, intention, because it suggests the very contrary of what I’ve just shared from the Bible. God doesn’t need us. We have been called to live in this union, this, as you guys here know very well, this *perichoresis*, this inner penetration of inner love and harmony. We’ve been called to live in that group hug and then to live out of that group hug expressing the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit in our day-to-day activities.

That’s a far cry from religion. Religion demands that we *do* things, but when we live out of the circle of the Father, Son, and Spirit, we find it’s not demand, it’s desire. It’s not law, it’s love. It’s not responsibility, it’s relationship, it’s privilege that motivates us to want to express the divine life of the Father, Son, and Spirit to the world around us. And that’s a country mile, as we say down south, away from religious obligation.

**MM:** A lot of people have a picture of God that’s a bit austere, and not very inviting. But you’re describing a more attractive God. Is that part of the head knowledge that makes a difference in our relationship?

**SM:** How we see God, our theology, is everything. That’s the foundation. Sometimes people say to me, “What difference does theology make?” The answer is: it makes all the difference in the world, because our view of who God is, our understanding, our concept of who he is, will affect the way we see and do everything else in life. It will affect how we see ourselves, it will affect how we see others, it will affect how we see situations that we face.

Many of us have grown up... if we grew up in the evangelical world it was almost inevitable that we would come to the conclusion that we serve a God whose primary interest is in matters of right and wrong, and that his primary focus is that once he’s forgiven us of our sins, now he’s going to teach us how to do the right thing.

**MM:** Well sure. In the Bible we see all sorts of commands – do this, do that.



**SM:** Right. But we don't see those commands through an unfiltered lens. We read the Bible just like we look at our God, and that is through the skewed, tainted, blurred lens of our own making. All the way back in the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned and they...immediately they had this skewed sense of who God is, and they began to see him through the distorted lens of their own guilt and shame. Ever since then, we've done that.

Don't think just because a person trusts Christ and says, "Thank you, Lord, for forgiving my sin, I'm a believer," don't think that that lens just instantly goes away. It doesn't. There's this renewal of the mind that has to take place.

I've had two monumental paradigm shifts, radical changes in my life since the time I trusted Christ as a child. One was what I wrote about in this book, *Grace Walk*, when I began to understand my identity in Christ...that I don't have to try to live for him, but that I died *with* him and now he is my life.

The other was just less than six years ago when I began to understand the Trinitarian viewpoint. That is this idea of who the Father, Son, and Spirit are, and that our God is not a punitive, judgmental, harsh, demanding, exacting God who's looking down on us saying, "When are you going to ever learn to quit doing the wrong and start doing right?"

Why, for God to do that would be a violation of what he had told Adam and Eve in the Garden when he said, "Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." But they did, and suddenly everything became about morality, and it became about issues of right and wrong. We lifted up that filtered clouded lens and we looked at the face of our God through that.

But sin didn't change God, it only changed Adam and Eve. Our God never was, never has been, never will be, a God who's preoccupied with issues of right and wrong. Our God is preoccupied with *us*. It's about relationship, not rules.

When we read the Bible, if we read the Bible through a particular lens, we're going to see a lot of demanding things in Scripture. But let me give an example, if I could, and excuse this kind of familiar example, a personal example. When I go home from California, back to my wife, if my wife says, "Get over here and kiss me now," if she *commands* me to come kiss her, okay, her commandments are not burdensome, to quote Scripture (laughing.)

You see what I'm saying? The commands of the Bible, when we understand the New Testament...first, we're free from the Old Testament law. Paul said in Romans 7, "We are made to die to the law so that we might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead." We're out from under the law — we don't even live in that world anymore.

But the commands in the New Testament, that's like my wife saying, "Get over here and kiss me." John said, "His commandments are not burdensome" (King James, "His commandments are not grievous."). We *want* to do those things. God gives us a new motivation, and the motivation is desire. It's not duty, it's desire. For anybody who's watching who reads their New Testament and thinks it's filled with commands that they have to struggle to try to keep, I think it does come back to their concept of who their Father is. Because once we know that we're totally accepted, listen, that changes everything.

Life is not a test. Life is a *rest*. Jesus said, "Come to me and I'll give you rest." He didn't say I'll give you a test. There is no test. It's a rest.

**MM:** There's not a final exam.

**SM:** There's no final exam. We've passed, we've scored a perfect score with flying colors because the grade that we have is the grade of Jesus, because he is our life, we're one with him. Paul said, "He who joins himself together to the Lord is one spirit with him." It's so simple. No wonder Jesus said, you have to become like a little child. Because our religious minds and our adult minds, and our Western-world minds, we tend to miss it. It's so simple. If I could just say it as simply as the Bible says it, just believe! Just believe it.

It's called the gospel because it's good news—if we could just believe it. God in Christ, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has made everything right. We're restored, we're reconciled, it's all good now. So all we can do, all we need to do, is just live out of the overflow, the celebration, of that *perichoresis*, the *koinonia*, that fellowship that we have with the Father, Son, and Spirit because of the cross. Sounds too good to be true, and when it does, it's probably the gospel, it's grace.

**MM:** Many people think that that's not very workable. They just don't...

**SM:** It's *not* (laughing). It's not workable, you can only *trust* it. That's a good point, I like it. That was a little slip there, I like it. It's not *workable*. It's not of works, it's of faith. Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't resist that.

**MM:** That's good.

**SM:** But you make a good point. A lot of us think that that we're forgiven our sin and now we're in Christ, but now we've got this *manual* here [the Bible], we've got this...

**MM:** Yeah...isn't right and wrong found in there?

**SM:** Yeah, it is. And we're told to avoid it. We're told...see, here's the key. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin. You can do the right thing and it still be a sin.

It's not about right and wrong, it's about trusting Christ in us to live his life through us. We're capable...and this is where the modern church misses it, in my mind. We're capable of more than right. You don't even

have to believe in Christ to do the right thing. I know many people that renounce the gospel who don't commit adultery and don't steal or kill, or we could go down the list. But we're capable of more than right, we're capable of living righteously.

We're capable of more than morality. Morality is that system of right and wrong based on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one God said stay away from. We're capable of more than moral living, we're capable of *miraculous* living. By that I mean that the deity, Father, Son, and Spirit, flows through us, out into this world like a river of living water from our innermost being.

**MM:** Right. But we're not doing it.

**SM:** You mean the modern church is not experiencing that?

**MM:** You say that we're capable of this, but yet in a way *we're* not doing it — it's Jesus working in us.

**SM:** That's right. We're capable because he has enabled us.

**MM:** Our role is to get out of the way?

**SM:** That's right. We are capable because he's made us capable. We are responsible, response-able, we're responsible, we're now able to respond to him and say, "OK, I get it, I don't have to struggle."

I wrote in *Grace Walk* an experience I've seen, I've witnessed many times. When I was a pastor of churches I'd visit hospitals. A guy might have had heart surgery, and he's on a breathing machine. Have you ever been in the room with somebody when they wake up on a breathing machine? They have to kind of learn with that thing, because if they're not careful, it happens a lot of times when a person wakes up in a recovery room after surgery and they're on a breathing machine, they try to breathe.

And when they try to breathe, they're fighting against the machine, and all kind of alarms go off, and it's very uncomfortable for them. I've seen it again and again. My own dad had heart surgery, and I saw him on one when he was alive. The nurse will come in and say, "Calm down, don't struggle...." Listen to this, "You don't have to try to breathe, just relax. The machine will breathe for you." Sure enough, I've watched it again and again. The people would just kind of let go and relax and quit struggling, and the machine takes over and begins to breathe for them.

Isn't it interesting that the word for Spirit is *breathe*? So when we rely upon the Holy Spirit, we don't struggle to breathe. We just depend on the Spirit of Christ in us, the Spirit of Jesus that indwells us, and as we learn to just rest and realize, "I don't have to make it happen, I just trust him." As we learn that, then he does it through us. It's a rest.

It's one of those paradoxical statements. In Hebrews the Bible says...I like it, it's almost comical to me, "*Strive* to enter into that *rest*" (laughing). The reason we have to strive to enter into that rest is because it's not the default setting of the flesh to rest, and so we have to be very intentional

about that.

We have to say, “No, no, no, no, I’m not going to take my life or my circumstances, my will, I’m not going to try to take this back into my own hands, I’ve already proven I’m not capable. So I’m going to just, by intentionality, which is the striving part, I’m going to choose, I’m going to decide, I’m going to go against the current of modern religion, I’m going to go against the current of my own fleshly inclinations, and I’m going to just trust and rest and let him be who he is in and through me.” That’s grace. It’s the unilateral expression of his life and love in us and through us. He does it all. We’re containers and we’re conduits of his life, but we don’t work it up.

**MM:** And that’s the grace walk.

**SM:** That’s the grace walk. Him doing it in us and through us. It’s not a passive lifestyle. It’s a lifestyle where we actively rest in him, and he does it all.

## 17. WE WILL NEVER OVERESTIMATE GOD'S GRACE

**MM:** In an earlier interview, you talked about how you had a couple of theological transitions in your life and you gave a synopsis of the first one. Maybe you could give an even briefer synopsis now, and then describe the second one.

**SM:** Sure, I'd be glad to. First let me back up and say that I understood the gospel as a young boy. I grew up in a Christian family and I believed in the Lord at a very early age, became a senior pastor at 19 years old, and for 17 years as a senior pastor I was very sincere, but I was caught up in the typical, I'll call it traditional, religious legalism, and that is the mindset that says that God blesses me or approves of me because I'm doing all the right things that I need to be doing, reading my Bible, praying, involved in church, sharing the gospel, those kinds of things.

In 1990, the Lord brought me to a place of brokenness. That is, I came to the end of myself and my struggle of trying to be the perfect Christian and trying to be a good pastor. He began to show me that it wasn't about me and what I could do for him, that he didn't call me for that, he didn't make me for that, but instead it was about him and what he wanted to do through me. I wrote about that in my first book, *Grace Walk*, in the early 90s. It came out in '95, and I wrote about that time in life.

That was the first, I'll call it as you said, monumental shift for me in my thinking. I realized, first of all, that I was in union with Christ and that it wasn't Steve with a split personality, an evil twin living inside, you know, a new nature and an old nature combating, but I began to understand co-crucifixion — that the old Steve was crucified with Jesus and now Christ is my life. I began to understand what it means to walk in grace instead of

religious legalism, instead of building my life around rules, just relax and let him live his life through me. That was in 1990. We talked about that last time.

For another 15 years, I taught that message. It's what many have called the "exchanged life" message — that "exchanged life" is a phrase that some missionary coined to describe this idea of biblical truth, that our old life died with Christ and that in its place he's given us a new life. I call it the grace walk, Hudson Taylor called it exchanged life, some have called it the higher life, the deeper life, I think Andrew Murray called it the abiding life, Watchmen Nee called it the normal Christian life. Whatever you want to call it, it just means Jesus living his life through us, and understanding that our identity is in him.

The second, I'll call it cataclysmic event, a revelation even, if I can use that word, that came to me and I began to grow in, was about six years ago. It was when I began to think...I've been a Calvinist for about 27 years. I believed, and still believe, in the sovereignty of God. That was the thing I found attractive about Calvinism, and so I'm not trying to be disrespectful to those who hold a Reformed theological view or are Calvinist. But I know in my own teaching I had said for many years, "No matter how big you imagine God's love to be, it's bigger."

Then I began to think about it and I thought, now wait a minute. Some of what I'm teaching about how big God's love is, is actually inconsistent with the tenets of what I have professed to believe, the five points of Calvinism (and for those who might be watching, they are represented by the acrostic TULIP, total depravity, unconditional election, and it was that third one that I began to grapple with — limited atonement, and then there was the irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints).

But I began to think about that "limited atonement." I thought, now wait a minute. Did God choose everybody, or not? Because I've said everywhere, God's love is bigger than you can imagine it to be. I thought, if God is love the way that I'm teaching, how could this God that I'm teaching and that the Bible clearly says is love by essence, how could he intentionally choose the majority of his creation, his people born, to be reprobates, to never have the opportunity to even know him? How can I say that's love? How can I say that a minority of us will go to heaven and celebrate forever how loving he is, when he purposely chose not to elect the majority of people?

My theology, my concept of God, began to mess with my biblical understanding. Some people might get rattled with me for this, but it wasn't that I looked at the Bible and said, wait a minute, my Calvinistic understanding won't line up with Scripture. That wasn't what precipitated the change in me. What precipitated the change was, I began to say, wait a minute, the Christ who lives in me, who is the exact representation of his

Father, I know him. He's not somebody who would decide to never choose the majority of those that would ever be born and never include them in the finished work of the cross. My understanding of the Father through the Son who lives in me and the Spirit who illuminates truth caused me to say, I've got to go back and look at the Bible again. I went back and I began to study the Bible again with fresh eyes, if I can use that phrase — I hope that makes sense.

**MM:** With new lenses.

**SM:** A new lens. That's right. It was the lens that said my God is not a punitive judgmental God, but my God is love, pure and simple. That's not one of his characteristics. Love is not "one of his attributes" — love is the DNA of God. I began to go back into the Bible and study it again. You know how the Holy Spirit works. I began to see things in Scripture in a different light, through the different lens, that I had never seen. I began to realize that this God the Father did indeed express who he is through the Son in his earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit does give us revelation of his love. I began to see a shift.

As I did begin to see a biblical transition in my thinking, the Lord brought along folks that, lo and behold, had written on this very subject of what we know is a Trinitarian perspective. The Lord began to bring people across my path, guys like you here at Grace Communion International, and people like Baxter Kruger, and Thomas Torrance, and J.B. Torrance, and others, Robert Capon, and some of these others that have written from that perspective. It's like wow! All these years I've been teaching the grace of God as what I call the grace walk, and now I get it. The grace of God is even bigger than I had thought. I don't guess we'll ever overestimate God's grace, will we?

That's a long question for a short answer, but that at least sets us in the direction of where my thinking came from and where it is these days.

**MM:** So you examined the Bible from the perspective that God is like the Jesus you had been taught about, or the Jesus you had experienced. Was there previously a "disconnect" between what you thought of God and what you saw as Jesus?

**SM:** The problem with speaking of my experiences...it might sound to somebody like I'm being critical of the evangelical world, and I'm not, but I will say I don't think my experience is unique. I had the idea that I think many do, that you have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the Father, in my thinking at the time (not now, this is not how I see it now), but at the time, this Father was a *just* God who demanded that there be payment for sin, and he had this seething anger, and to get it out of his system and balance the books and satisfy his justice, somebody had to pay. That somebody was going to be me and you and everybody else. I had this concept of this judicial, punitive, harsh God who found everything in him

screaming out that his justice be avenged.

Then I had the good cop (you know what I mean? Bad cop, good cop...) Jesus who says “Father, it’s okay. How about this? How about if I go down... [and I’m using hyperbole, okay. I’m not being fair to the evangelical perspective I grew up with, sometimes I exaggerate things to make a point, so let me concede that at the start, but there’s some truth in this]...

It’s like my mind said it was Jesus who said, “Father, how about this? I’ll go down to the world, I’ll live a sinless life, and I’ll go to the cross and you can vent all this anger you have against sin toward me, so that you won’t have to vent it toward Steve.” God says, “Okay.” So Jesus comes down into this world, lives a sinless life, goes to the cross, and God kicks the daylight out of his own Son at the cross. He pours out his anger, he pours out his rage about sin onto Jesus and he gets it out of his system. And now I believe on Jesus, and so God won’t pour out his rage on me, because he’s poured it out on Jesus.

But even then, I had this idea that God still is this judicial God who’s really obsessed with right and wrong, so that even as a Christian when I would sin, God still would have come at me, but Jesus was going, “Father, Father, the scars, the scars.” God would say, “Oh yeah, okay, you’re right, the scars.” I thought God saw me through his Son Jesus, and that’s what protected me.

The fallacy in that, is that what we got is a schizophrenic God. And the Spirit, well, we don’t even go there, because I didn’t belong to a charismatic or Pentecostal denomination, so I knew the Spirit existed, but we didn’t talk a lot about him. I knew the Spirit existed, but in my mind I had this harsh, judicial, judgmental God who had to have justice through punishment, and I had this loving Jesus.

But the fallacy in that view is that Jesus said, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” There’s the disconnect. What? How can I see loving Jesus and him say I’ve seen the Father, if the Father was indeed angry and had some sort of justice (and that’s a distorted sense of God’s justice) that necessitated that he vent anger against somebody about sin. No. Our triune God, three in one, all share the same heart, and all share the same love and the same passion. They, he, has lived in this *perichoresis*, in this circle-dance of love that has existed through eternity past, it will exist through eternity future.

One day our God said, if I can take a little literary liberty — I’m a writer and a preacher, that’s the double danger here. If I can use a little imagery here, he says, “This love we share, Father, Son, and Spirit, it can’t be improved on. It’s perfect. It couldn’t be improved on, it’s already perfect. But you know what we could do that would intensify it? We could share it. We could widen the circle.”



So the Father, Son, and Spirit said in Genesis, “Let us make man in our own image.” You know the story. It starts right there in the garden, where God created mankind. The reason we’re here is so that we can be loved by the Father through the Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit. That’s what it’s all about. It wasn’t a good cop/bad cop. Even the fall of Adam didn’t change God. Adam hid because he thought God had now gone over the edge and was angry. No. God came for his walk in the evening just like he’d always done.

**MM:** Even though he *knew* what Adam had done.

**SM:** Exactly. Adam’s sin didn’t change God — it changed Adam’s perception of God, and it’s affected us and contaminated our view of God ever since, unless we see the truth in Scripture that we’re talking about today. So God came...and from the get-go he told him, “You don’t have to sweat it. Your seed, his seed will bruise the heel of your offspring, but your offspring (speaking of Jesus) will bruise his head [Gen. 3:15]. One day the devil will be destroyed, and in the meantime I’m going to cover you with these animal skins, these bloody skins, to show that the remedy is on the way, don’t panic. I’m going to banish you from the Garden and keep you out, so you won’t eat from the tree of life and be doomed to this life of sin and distortion, forever living under the delusion and the lies.”

From the beginning it’s grace, grace, grace, grace, and then when Jesus came to the cross, contrary to my view (which as you understand, and some of the viewers will, is called the penal substitution view — the idea that Jesus took our punishment so that we wouldn’t have to take it).

The apostle Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting those trespasses against them.” God the Father was in the Son. Over in Hebrews it said he offered himself by the eternal Spirit. We’ve got the whole Trinity. We’ve got our Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit on a rescue mission, not God the Father punishing Jesus, but the Father and the Son and the Spirit in sync working together to rescue us from this destroying thing called sin that would, to use C.S. Lewis’s kind of imagery, make us wither away into nothingness if he didn’t come along. I get excited about this.

**MM:** So there was no change in God’s attitude toward us because of the death of Jesus?

**SM:** Here’s a verse some people know: “God says, I am God and I change not.” God has never changed. God’s always loved us. God’s heart was toward us before the death of Jesus. That’s why Jesus came. It’s not that God the Father was against us and Jesus came to change God’s mind about us — Jesus came to change *our* mind about God the Father, not to change the Father’s mind about us. The Father, the Son, the Spirit had always loved us, and Jesus came to help us see that.

Lo and behold, who were his biggest critics when he tried to show and

express that love? It wasn't the drunken cursing sailors, was it? It wasn't the woman taken in adultery, it wasn't the harlot who washed his feet with her hair using the perfume from the alabaster box. No. The people who got all bent out of shape about Jesus saying let me show you the kind of loving Father you've got, the people that got bent out of shape by it were the religious people.

When I teach this message today and you teach it and everybody you have on this program teaches it, we find out the same thing still happens. It's not those "out there," so to speak. I hate to use that term in a dichotomy like that, but it's not those who don't believe, it's those who profess to believe who get mad as the devil about the love of God. They're the older brother in the story of the prodigal. I know, I'm a charter member of that club. You know what I'm saying? I've lived there.

**MM:** I know. But you, as the older brother, finally went in to the party.

**SM:** Which gives me hope. That's why I share this message of perichoresis now, because if I could one day say, you know...and thank God it speaks well of my Father that he stood out there in the darkness of my own religion, he stood out there in the darkness when I was saying, "No, no, God's not like that. It can't be that good. You can't tell me everybody gets off scot-free. You can't tell me everybody's included. You can't tell me that God loves us all. No, no."

My Father didn't give up, but he kept pleading and appealing and showing and wooing (that's an old word, isn't it? That's a biblical word), and enticing me to see his love, until finally like that prodigal, at least we know, he melted in his father's embrace and accepted it. The interesting thing about the older brother in the story in Luke 15 is we don't know if he went in or not, but one thing we do know, the Father never went in without him. He didn't go in, but neither did the Father. Our God doesn't give up on us.

This whole idea of this perichoresis, this dancing with deity concept, this idea that we live in the communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit and we live out of that as our reality, that's enough to excite anybody. It's not just us, but the essence of this program that you guys have here, *You're Included*, points toward the good news of the gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself. Everybody was wrapped up in that big bear hug, that big group hug at the cross — not just the religious people. (That would be a sour party, wouldn't it?) Not just the people who believe, but we're all wrapped up in it.

Somebody's going to watch this and say, "Don't you think we have to believe?" Sure. Who wants to stand outside in the darkness of unbelief if you're missing the party? But let the record show: both sons had the same privileges. It's just one accepted his acceptance, and the other didn't.

**MM:** What are the consequences if we don't believe?

**SM:** You're going to stand out there in the cold and the dark and miss out on the party, but don't blame your Father, because as the Father in Luke 15 said, the accepting father in that story that we call the prodigal, he said to his older son, "Everything that I have is yours." The problem with unbelievers is that — unbelief. It's not like there's something left for God to do for them. God's done what he's going to do for all of us. He's done what he's going to do for humanity.

The problem that exists, and listen, I'm speaking as a pastor, I've been preaching since I was 16 — for 40 years I've been preaching. I was pastor at traditional institutional churches for 21 years, and I'm telling you the problem is in the modern church world (I don't mean it to be mean, it's just a fact), the problem is we don't preach the pure gospel. By and large, we preach a *potential* gospel, not the pure gospel. We say, here's what Jesus did for you, now *if* you will believe, then he'll forgive your sin. No. It's not *if* you believe, then you'll be reconciled to God. No. *If* you believe then he'll do this or that. No, no, no.

That's not the gospel. That's a *potential* gospel. The gospel is good news that he says he's already done it whether you believe it or not. If you don't believe it and want to stand out in the darkness, you're going to miss out on the party, but the *truth* is that the objective reality of what he did at the cross is real, whether you believe it or not, but by believing it we experience it. And experiencing it is where the abundance comes in that Jesus talked about in John 10:10 when he said, "I've come so that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

**MM:** You said earlier that Jesus didn't die as a punishment. God didn't punish Jesus on the cross. Why then did he die? What's the connection between his death and our salvation?

**SM:** Good question. Because this thing called sin had infected all of humanity through Adam, and it's a congenital disease that everybody's born with, and incidentally it's fatal — the wages of sin is death, and such sin was being passed down from person to person to person through the generations from Adam. God saw that, left to ourselves, we would be destroyed by sin. Our God said "No, sin shall not have the last word. Sin will not be the trump card. I didn't create mankind to wither away into nothingness. I didn't create humanity to die out. No. Sin won't have the last word."

To use a literary imagery, it's like the Father, Son, and Spirit said, "We're going to go down there and we're not coming back until this thing is done." They came — Jesus the Son came empowered by the Spirit, superintended, if you will, by the sovereignty of the Father. He came into this world to finish a job. What did he come to finish? Daniel 9:24, prophesying about the Messiah, says, "He'll make an end of sin." He'll make an end...he'll finish the transgression. Along comes Jesus all these centuries later showing

up on planet earth. The angels said, “Call him Jesus, because he’s going save his people from their sin.”

Come on down the road another three decades or so and here’s John the Baptist saying, “Look, it’s the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And before his crucifixion you’ve got Jesus holding up that cup saying, “This is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for the remission of sin.” We’re getting closer. He came on mission to finish a task. All the way from Daniel, he’ll finish the transgression (Daniel 9:24), make an end to sin. Here’s Jesus on the cross.

What does he do? He takes all the sin of the world and he draws it into himself. It’s not God the Father punishing Jesus. It’s *sin* punishing Jesus. Let’s be clear, sin brings punishment. It’s not God who brings the punishment, it’s sin. The wages, the punishment, the penalty of sin is death. Jesus draws that into himself. It’s not God. I’ll give you an example. A poor diet and poor exercise habits will lead to the punishment of bad health. It’s not God that’s punishing you with bad health, it’s your own choices. Those habits are pregnant with punishment, with penalty. And so it is with sin. It wasn’t God punishing Jesus, it was sin punishing Jesus.

He drew it all into himself. When he had drawn the sin of the world into himself, now that which had been started in the eternal circle of heaven before the beginning of time comes to a climactic finish at the cross when Jesus said, “It’s finished.” He dealt with it, and that’s the gospel we proclaim.

Later on, John in his epistle would say, “You know that he appeared to take away the sins of the world.” The writer of Hebrews would say, “He put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” The question I would ask the evangelical church (and myself included) is, Did he succeed, or not? Did he fail, or did he do what he came to do? We know he did what he came to do, and he did succeed, and it is finished, and it’s all over now except the celebrating. Those of us who believe it are celebrating.

**MM:** But yet we look around at the world around us, we even look in ourselves and say, “the sin isn’t completely gone.”

**SM:** That’s right. We live in this little box called time/space, and we need to be clear about one thing, and that is the old Adamic race died with Jesus, and he did defeat sin. He conquered it once and for all, as the phrase goes, once and for all. We know the truth...people say the truth will set you free. The truth is, Jesus dealt with sin.

No, no, no...the Bible doesn’t say the *truth* will set you free. The Bible says, “You shall *know* the truth and the truth will set you free.” It’s not just the truth that sets you free, it’s *knowing* the truth that sets you free. The truth is, he has dealt with sin. He’s conquered it. It has no power over us. But if you either don’t know or you don’t believe the truth, then a person will still live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

If they appropriate the lie, then guess what they're going to live like? They're going to live as if the lie is true. It's not. They're going to live in a counterfeit reality, which seems like an oxymoron, but you get my point. They're going to live out of a delusion, they're going to live as if Christ didn't really do what he did, but he did.

Back to the 2 Corinthians 5 passage, if I can turn over there, I want to read it instead of try to quote it. Verse 17, "If anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation." Most Christians know that one. But let's come down to verse 19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." There's the objective reality. That's real whether anybody believes it or not. Then it says, "And he's committed to us the message of reconciliation, therefore we're ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us: we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." There's the subjective reality. In other words, it is real whether you believe it or not, but we're begging you, we're appealing to you, believe it, so that it will be real to you.

**MM:** The verse said that he wasn't counting people's trespasses against them, does that mean that I don't need to ask for his forgiveness?

**SM:** Bingo. In fact, it insults the finished work of Christ when you do ask for forgiveness. I'm glad you asked that because this is one of those things that are so misunderstood in the church world. How about Colossians 2? Let me just turn over there a minute. (You better be careful, you're going to put me in a preaching mode here in just a minute, because I do get excited about this.) How about this one? Colossians 2:13, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees which was against us and hostile to us, he's taken that away and nailed it to the cross."

I would say to everybody to watches us, do we believe this Bible or not? Because this Bible, Colossians 2:13 says he's blotted out all our transgressions. Somebody says, "You mean my future sins?" Here's a question, how many of our sins were future when Jesus died? They were *all* future sins. Yes, he dealt with all of our sins at the cross. They were all future sins, and he's dealt with them all.

Let me add real quickly, to *confess* my sin doesn't mean that I'm asking for forgiveness. Because somebody's going to throw out 1 John 1:9, that's what always pops out. I've been teaching this a long time now. That's not to say I won't confess, I won't admit. Confess just means to agree, to say the same. I'm going to acknowledge it when I've sinned, but I don't do it to *get* forgiveness, I do it because I've *already gotten* forgiveness. There's a big difference between the two.

1 John 1:9, if I can give an amplified explanation or paraphrase, might

read like this. Since it's the nature of the believer to constantly admit it when we've sinned, so is it the nature of God to constantly relate to us from a posture of forgiveness, keeping us cleansed of all unrighteousness. My part is that I admit it. What else am I doing to do, lie? He knows. His part is to keep me in that state of constant forgiveness because of the work of the cross. What else is he going to do? It's finished.

**MM:** Often we try to repent and prove our repentance and show how sorry we are.

**SM:** That's idolatry, you know. Do you know why it's idolatry? Because if I think I have to show my sorrow and I have to wallow in self-condemnation and I have to rededicate myself and promise God this or that, then what I'm really saying is, I don't believe the work of the cross was enough to deal with sin, there's a contribution *I* need to add to it. And what I add is going to put it over the top, right? Idolatry.

Let's just relax. We're forgiven. Let's just believe in the finished work of Christ. Somebody says, "If you tell people that, they're going to go out and live like the devil." No, they won't. Authentic grace won't do that. Paul told Titus, "The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and how to live soberly, righteously, and just in this present age" [Titus 2:12]. Grace is divine enablement for us to live a godly lifestyle. It doesn't create a desire to sin, it creates an appetite for righteous living. That's what grace does, real grace. Anything else is disgrace.

## 18. THE FATHER GETS A BAD RAP

**MM:** Last time we were talking about the sacrifice of Jesus, and you were commenting that many people view this sacrifice as God punishing Jesus. You objected strongly to that notion, and I thought maybe you could tell us a little bit today about why you think that's so important that people have an accurate understanding of what was going on there in the crucifixion of Jesus.

**SM:** I think that it is important because how we understand what happened at the cross will affect our view of the Father and who he is. In my own tradition growing up for a long time I didn't have any problem connecting to the idea of being intimate with Jesus because of what Jesus did for me. But when it came to the Father, I had a different understanding, because of what my view was, and I think it's a common view, is that Jesus took the punishment from the Father so that the Father wouldn't punish me. It's inevitable that if that's our view, we're going to think that Jesus is like the loving one and the Father is the stern harsh one who is exacting, and who insists on the books being balanced. It's almost like an angry father, and a mother who's trying to keep the dad from getting onto the children. That's kind of how I saw it, like Jesus was the loving one and the Father was the angry one.

When we look at the cross, if we see it that way, through the lens of what's called penal substitution — that Jesus was the substitute who took our punishment from God the Father so that the Father wouldn't punish us, how will we ever experience a sense of intimacy with the Father? That's very out of line with what Jesus came for. Paul the apostle told us about Jesus, that he is the exact representation of the Father. So, just as Jesus the Son is loving, so is God the Father and God the Spirit are equally as loving. I'm not saying that there wasn't a substitution there. Jesus did die on the

cross in our place. He was our substitute. But he drew the penalty of sin into himself. The wages of sin is death.

Let me back up to the Garden of Eden. God didn't say to Adam and Eve, "If you eat from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I'll kill you." He didn't say that. He said, "If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll die." He didn't say I'll kill you, he said you'll die. In the same way, coming back to the New Testament, it wasn't God that punished Jesus, it was sin that punished Jesus. Another word for punishment is the word penalty. It's the same Greek word. It's punishment, it's penalty. The penalty for sin was death.

But what did Jesus do at the cross? God the Father was in the Son empowered by the Spirit, and our Triune God drew the penalty, the payment, the wages, the punishment that sin brings, into himself and away from us so that we wouldn't have to be punished by sin but that we would be delivered from sin's punishment. He took it into himself and died for us so that we could be free.

Why is it important to see it that way? It's important because if we think God the Father is angry, then Jesus didn't do a very good job of letting us know what he was like, because when Jesus came here he said, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father." Study the Gospels — you don't find Jesus portraying for us a God who's angry with us about our sin. To the contrary! Every time you see Jesus encountering people in sin, he extends grace, and mercy, and love, and forgiveness, because that's the Father.

Even in the story of the prodigal, the story that Jesus told...we call it the story of the prodigal, but it's really not the story of the prodigal, it's the story of the father. That story wasn't told to show us something about sinning people, or for that matter, even self-righteous people (the older brother). That story was told to teach us something about our Father. And what he told us in that story is this: He told us through the illustration of the younger brother, the prodigal who came back with his decision to rededicate himself and promised his father that if he'd forgive him, he'd do better, he'd serve him more, he'd be a better...but the father didn't even let him give his speech. I spent my life rededicating myself to God the Father, promising him I'd do better, I'd try harder... In that story of the prodigal, the boy tries to give the speech, but the Father interrupts him and doesn't let him give it.

Then you've got the older brother, who's self-righteous. You've got the unrighteous on the one hand and the self-righteous on the other hand who says, "Look, all these many years I've served you and I've never violated and transgressed your commandments. The father says, "Son, what do you mean? All that I have is yours. What do you mean, I won't give you a party? All I have is yours." Both of those boys missed the point, because the one boy, the younger, the prodigal, thought that he would be rejected because



of his misbehavior. The other thought he should be accepted and honored because of his good behavior. The father was trying to say to them both, “You don’t get it. It’s not about you and your behavior, it’s about me and how much I love you, independent of anything you do or don’t do. It’s about me.”

And so it is with our heavenly Father. He wants to see (and that’s what Jesus came to reveal) that he loves us unconditionally, unilaterally if need be. Those of us who are believers love him, but why do we love him? We love because he first loved us. That is a reciprocal response to his love for us. It’s all about our concept of God the Father. He’s got a bad rap because of the religious world. In spite of all Jesus did to give us the clarity on it, the religious world has clouded it.

**MM:** For a long time my concept of God the Father was like Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, sitting in this huge throne, stone, impassive, stern, and it wasn’t really the sort of God that I wanted to spend eternity with.

**SM:** Exactly. Back to the story of the father in Luke 15. You don’t see some austere dignified father there. In fact, I love it, you see a picture of a father who sees his son in the distance and he stands up, and he’s wearing these long flowing dignified garments, that they wear still in that part of the world, and he pulls those garments up high so he can run, because he can’t run with them down at his feet. He pulls them up high above his knees so he can run and he takes off running.

And understand, nobody in that part of the world till today sees their dad’s naked legs. Here’s the key — that’s a shame, it’s a disgrace. That father didn’t care. Here’s what he did. He pulled the robes up and he and ran, acting in an undignified way, but he was acting out of passionate love, even willing for those who were witnessing that scene who might have seen it to cause them to look away from the boy covered in the filth of the pigpen and look to the father and say, “What is he doing? He’s running naked down the street,” because he had pulled his robes up above his legs and they’d never seen that.

The kind of love that father had for the boy — he was willing to take the shame off of the boy and bring it onto himself if need be because he wasn’t interested in protecting his reputation, he was interested in embracing and receiving his son back. That, Jesus wanted us to see, is the kind of father you have. He’s passionate, he’ll run down the street with his robe pulled up above his knees. He’ll take the shame on himself to rescue him from your shame — different picture than the God sitting in the judge’s chair than we imagined, huh? Totally different picture.

The beauty of it is, about this younger and older son in Luke 15 — and I didn’t plan to say so much about this chapter, but another point comes to mind. The older boy, there’s your religious church-going boy. There’s your believer. The father says, “I love you, but I love this one the same.” The

privileges were extended to both equally.

Both were missing out on experiencing their abundant life their father provided for them, one because of his unrighteousness, the other because of his self-righteousness. The story in my mind there illustrates that sometimes it's easier for an unrighteous person to enter in and experience grace than it is a self-righteous person. Notice that self-righteous brother in Luke 15 — when the unbelieving son began to believe and accepted his father's acceptance and came into the party, the older boy got all bent out of shape about it. He didn't like that at all.

**MM:** The younger son had reached the bottom. He knew where his works had ended up.

**SM:** That's right. The religious son didn't want the younger one to be included, but he was. And the church world today doesn't want everybody to be included, we just want *us* to be included. After all, *we* go to church. We read our Bible every day.

**MM:** We're the ones that have been "cleaned up."

**SM:** That's right. To quote that older brother, "Look, I've served you all these many years, I've never violated or transgressed your commandments in any way. What gives with you bringing this guy and telling me that he's as accepted as I am? I've behaved a lot better than he..." The father's saying, "Are you beginning to get it? It's not about your behavior. I don't love because of how good you are. I love because of how good I am." We're all included. Now if you can live in a pigpen, in the penitentiary of the pigpen, or like that older boy you can live in the penitentiary of your performance, but both live outside the pleasure of the grace of God.

We talked in the last program about this shift in my own mind. It's what you guys here at Grace Communion are all about, and it's what this program is all about...one thing that's shifted in my own mind is the understanding that we are all included, that what Jesus did, he didn't just do for good boys, so to speak. (I don't mean that literally — I say that tongue in cheek, because that's how a lot of folks would see church-going leaders.) He did that for everybody.

We all stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross, and we all need his grace the same, and thank God it's been poured out on all of us the same. Those of use that believe it enjoy it — we're in the party dancing and eating barbeque. Those that don't are standing out in the dark in the hell of their own choice. But don't act like they're out there in a hell because there's something left for God to do — he's done everything. They're out there because of their own pride and stubbornness.

**MM:** So you would say a person that's an atheist, even some of these militant atheists, their sins are already forgiven?

**SM:** Absolutely. That's the gospel. Let me tell you a story. I've told this story for 20 years, but I've used a different application. I want to tell it for

the sake of those who are familiar with my ministry and heard it and for those that aren't. Those who have heard my ministry are going to go "woah...now he's telling that story differently now. He's making a different application."

This story started, I think, with Bill Bright — the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, the largest mission-sending agency in the world. Bill Bright used to tell about a guy named Mr. Yates out in Texas that had a farm. This was in the Depression days, right before the Depression struck. Mr. Yates was trying to eke out a living and the depression struck and he fell behind on his farm payments. One day a representative from the mortgage company came to him and said, "You're behind on your payments. You've got to make your payment on the farm or we'll foreclose and evict you." Yates said, "I can't make my payment." The guy said, "You're going to have to pay or you're going to be evicted." Yates said, "Well, I don't know what to do." The guy said, "In 30 days we're going to file a dispossession notice and get you off the property."

The day started winding down and Yates didn't know what he was going to do. One day he heard a knock at the door and when he opened it up it was a man from an oil company. The guy said, "We're doing some wildcat drilling out here and we wanted to see if you'd let us drill on your property. We have reason to think there may be oil here." Yates said, "Go ahead." He's thinking in his mind, "I've lost it all anyway, I don't have a penny." They come onto his property the next day and they sink a drill into the ground and bang, they hit a gusher, 80,000 barrels, 85,000 barrels of oil a day come gushing up out of that well. Bang! Instantly Mr. Yates has millions of dollars in cash accessible to him.

Here's the question. At what point did Mr. Yates become a millionaire? The answer is, he became a millionaire on the day he bought the farm. Why was he living like a pauper? Because he didn't know what he had.

The way I used to make that application is, I would say, "You see? You always have had riches in Jesus since the day you've been saved, since the day you trusted Christ, since the day you prayed and believed on him, but it's by believing it now that you experience it." But here's where that falls short, and here's where I've changed my story. I don't say anymore that we became millionaires on the day we trusted Christ. That was the day we struck oil. We became millionaires on the day Jesus died. For whom did Jesus die? I believe the Bible teaches he died for everybody. We're all included.

So if everybody's included, then the benefits of the finished work of Christ at the cross belong to everybody. Then why is everybody not living out of that spiritual wealth? It's one of two reasons — either they don't know it, or they don't believe it, but it doesn't change the reality. The day they struck oil on Yate's property and he began to make withdraws, cash

the checks so to speak, he began to live like a millionaire. But objectively, he'd been a millionaire all along. It only became a subjective experience when he cashed the check.

There you go — the objective work of Jesus for everybody. If he died for everybody, then what he did for everybody is true of everybody, if that makes sense. Does it matter whether we believe or not believe? Of course! It makes all the difference in the world because it's by believing that we cash the check and live out of the wealth that's ours in him. But it doesn't change the reality of what he did, even if we don't believe. We're living like paupers if we don't believe, but we're not paupers, we just don't know. Did I tell that in a way that makes sense?

**MM:** I think so. It might have made a story about the acres of diamonds. People had diamonds in their field and didn't know it. It was theirs, they just didn't know the value.

**SM:** That's right. I remember that book from years ago. That's it. What Jesus did he didn't do for just a few of us — he did for everybody. So I don't say to an unbeliever, "If you will just pray and ask Jesus into your heart, he'll forgive your sin." That implies there's something left undone. That implies that what Jesus should have said at the cross was, "Okay, your move. I've done my part, now it's your move. What are you going to do? The game comes to a standstill until you make your move." No, no, no. Jesus said, "Game over. It's finished. You're in. Game over. Fold the board up, put it up. Game done. Now it's finished." If you don't want to believe it (and I don't mean you), if you don't want to believe it, okay. Live like a pauper then.

**MM:** All we're doing is telling a story of something that's already been done.

**SM:** That's the gospel. That's why it's good news. As I said in the last program, it's not a potential gospel like God's done something and now he's waiting for you do something — he's done it and it's finished. There's nothing left. Now you can live in that reality or you can live under the lie, again back to the garden. You can live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve and hold onto all this distorted skewed thinking about your Father and who he is and what he's going to be like ...you can get all this messed-up thinking in your head and live outside the pleasure of it, you can go right on off into hell clinging to your lies if you want to, but there's nothing left for the Father to do — he's done it all.

**MM:** A hell of your own making.

**SM:** A hell of your own making and a hell of your own choosing. People said God's sending people to hell. You're already in hell if you're not believing this good news. Hell is not the absence of God...let's throw that snake on the table, since we're talking about some things here. Hell is not the absence of God, ask anybody in the Eastern Church. We in the Western

world have the idea that hell means God's checked out and going home. No. Do we understand and believe where the Bible tells us that all things that exist consist by him? In other words, everything that holds together holds together because he's there holding it together. So if hell itself was the absence of God, then hell would implode or explode, and would cease to exist. Hell itself is not the absence of God. This is another discussion and it may open a can of worms, but I believe hell itself is the presence, the inescapable presence, of the love of God. Those who loathe and detest it find it to be hellacious, but those of us who receive it find it to be heavenly. What did James say? He said if you love your enemy it seems to them like you're doing what? You're heaping coals of fire on their head.

**MM:** So it's the same reality, but a different perception.

**SM:** Absolutely. I'm not making this stuff up as I go. I'm not smart enough to do that. I've studied it and read it, and I can tell you outside our Western world, the Greek Church right now, the church in the Eastern part of the world, they get this. We, you and I, and the people watching us in this part of the world, we've been so influenced by Augustinian theology (and not just theologians, but even people like Dante and others) about what hell is and is not that, we've got it all scrambled in our brains.

I think the Eastern Church has a beat on this thing that God is love. So if I can say it this way — any and everything that can be understood about God must come to love as its resting place, or we haven't gone far enough, because God is love. Everything and anything that we're going to connect to him has to be an expression of that love, or we're not going far enough in our understanding to get to the root of it.

**MM:** Well, to get back to the crucifixion of Jesus. What then was its role? What changed for all humanity? Was it just a forgiveness of sins or was there something deeper than that?

**SM:** Oh, so much, so much changed. Forgiveness of sins wasn't even the main thing. Forgiveness of sins was the B Team. That was the secondary issue. There had to be this forgiveness of sins thing so that the main event could take place. And the main event that took place was *we received life*.

I'll give you an example, a few verses. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shouldn't perish but should have everlasting forgiveness (no, no, life)." John 10:10, "I've come so that you might have forgiveness and have it more abundantly (no, life!)." All the verses about life. He's come so that we can have life — life, not forgiveness. What happened at the cross, here it is. I'm going to be succinct and people watching will just have to dig this out for themselves instead ...look at all these other programs on *You're Included*. You've got them archived. I learned a lot watching the archived programs right here. I'm not saying that because I'm sitting here — it's the truth!

There's a lot of good stuff on here.

Here's what happened. What the first Adam did was wrap us all up into himself as the federal head and brought humanity down into this place of sin. We were doomed and damned. We were condemned — not by God, by sin, as humanity. Jesus comes along — the Father, Son, and Spirit say “That's not going to stand. We're not going to let Adam get the final say on all this.” So here's the Incarnation — Jesus comes, the last Adam, and he did (in a sense like the first Adam did), he was our federal head, and he wrapped us all up in himself, all of us, everybody that had been in Adam.

Paul said that what Jesus did was much more than what Adam did. He uses that phrase more than once. Much more. He wrapped us all up into himself and then Adam's race went to the cross with Jesus, and died with Jesus, and was buried with Jesus, and then, and this is pivotal, this is the good news, when Jesus came up out of the grave a new species was raised up with him. Those in Christ, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature, a new species.

Who do you think died with Jesus? As a Calvinist I used to say, only the elect, only those who were chosen. But listen to this, 2 Corinthians 5:14, this is out of the Bible. Let me hold it up where people can see I'm reading. “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died.” Who's the one that died for all? Jesus. Therefore, who did he die for? Everybody. He tasted death for every man. Therefore, all died. We all died with Jesus. We were all buried with Jesus.

But when Jesus came up out of the grave, a new species came into existence, something new. And the gospel is...here's what the cross did. The cross provided forgiveness of sin. We don't have to tell people he'll forgive your sin. He has. Jesus is the elect man, the elect one. He is a man. There's a God-man in heaven today. He's the elect man in whom we all reside. And therefore we were all elect. We were all chosen. We were all made holy.

What does holy mean? The word means set apart. In the evangelical church we think, if I say he's holy, so and so over here, he's holy, people think, that means he lives a squeaky clean life. No, no, no. They don't mind calling this book a Holy Bible. That Bible doesn't live any way. They don't mind calling God's temple the Holy Temple — it just means set apart. In that sense he's called us all, set us all apart. He made us holy.

Righteous — that's another one. You use the word *righteous*, and one understanding of the word has to do with living a certain lifestyle. But now wait — if you look up, in Strong's Dictionary for instance, the Greek word righteous, one definition is living your life based on a certain religious or moral code. We know good and well that's not what the New Testament tells us our righteousness is. The other definition of righteousness is being made in a right standing with God. Ding ding ding ding! There's the one!

There it is. It might be Number 2 on the list, but it's the one we better go to.

**MM:** I can see that in there.

**SM:** Yeah. We better go to that one because we know it's not about living a moral code. So there it is. So we've all been made right with God. We've been reconciled. So much happened on the cross. We've been joined in the union. There's the big one — we've been joined into union with him again. So the obvious question then people ask me sometimes is, "You sound like a universalist. Are you saying everybody drops dead and wakes up in heaven?" No. I'm not saying that.

**MM:** You've already talked about hell.

**SM:** That's right, I did. I've already talked about hell. No, no. If I can paraphrase him — and I hate to try to paraphrase someone as eloquent as Robert Capon, but Robert Capon the theologian and author said, he said, on the last day nobody goes to hell because of sin, because that sin issue has been dealt with. He said now if you get to judgment day (he too is a literary speaker), if you get to judgment day and face God and say I won't accept your acceptance, then you can just go to hell, he says, but don't act like it's because of sin, because sin has been dealt with in totality by the finished work of Jesus. So, no, I'm not saying everybody's instantly in, whether they believe or not. I think that faith in Christ is essential — otherwise, back for the umpteenth time to the older brother, we'll stand out in the outer darkness if we don't believe, but it's not because God's locked us outside or won't let us in, it's because of our own stubbornness and pride.

**MM:** You've described how Jesus dying on the cross...God was in Jesus reconciling us. But yet the scriptures say that Jesus on the cross said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

**SM:** I'm glad you asked that, because that's one of the biggest misunderstandings in the modern church. You nailed it. You said Jesus asked the question. What did God answer in that gospel, in the Gospels? What was the answer God gave? He didn't, did he? He didn't give an answer. So people looking at God through that wrong lens assume God the Father forsook his son Jesus.

The answer is, he didn't forsake his Son. That was the cry of Jesus when he became sin for us. If he had heard the answer right then and there, God would have said, "I haven't forsaken you." How do I know? I'll prove it.

Psalm 22 is the Messianic Psalm from which that verse, that cry of Jesus came. First verse, Psalm 22 of the Messianic Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You can go on down and read that Psalm and bit by bit you see it's talking about the cross right down to them casting lots for his garments — everything. It's describing the cross.

If you go down to verse 24 in Psalm 22, you get the answer to the question. It's not recorded in the Gospels, but it is in Psalms. Psalm 22:1,

“Why have you forsaken me?” Verse 24, “He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted nor has he hidden his face for him. But when he cried to him for help, he heard.”

Now here’s the neat thing. All the Jews knew these Psalms. If I say to you, anybody in America, I don’t care how old you are, if I say to you...well, if you’re old enough...I say, “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz,” you know the rest — what is it?

**MM:** Um...I don’t know.

**SM:** You don’t know? I bet those watching know. How about this?

**MM:** Oh, is that Alka Seltzer?

**SM:** Alka Seltzer! Okay, now I’m going to pressure you because you’ve got to know...plop, plop, fizz, fizz — what’s the rest of the jingle? Oh what a...

**MM:** Relief it is.

**SM:** There you go! All right, let’s try another one. Let me give you another one.

**MM:** When I was a kid we didn’t have TV.

**SM:** Oh, you didn’t have TV. Well then, you certainly won’t know this one: “Winston tastes good like a...”

**MM:** “Cigarette should.”

**SM:** And you didn’t even have TV and you know that, you old heathen! (laughing) All right. It was the same way with the Psalms. When people standing around the cross heard the first line of that Psalm, they knew the rest of it. When Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” every self-respecting Jew standing there knew the rest of it, and the answer was he has not forsaken him or turned his face on him. But here we are 20 centuries later saying, he asked the question why did God forsake him — God must have forsook him. We’ve missed the point. No, he did not forsake him. He was right there in him and with him the whole time.

**MM:** We see in the resurrection that he didn’t forsake him.

**SM:** That’s right. The Father never forsook the Son. People say, Well, they were fragmented. Are you kidding? Deity being fragmented? The Godhead would have ceased to exist. Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in that perichoresis, in that circle of love. It’s never wavered for one moment, even at the cross, which is encouraging to us, because like Jesus, when we cry out, why have you forsaken me, we can know God says, “I haven’t. I’m with you.” He’ll never forsake us.



## 19. WHAT IS GOD'S WRATH?

**MM:** You talked before about the love of God, and I agree with you on that, but I did want to ask you about the other side. The scripture talks about the *wrath* of God as well. How does this fit in with a God who is love?

**SM:** People often raise that question, and I will cut to the chase and give the bottom line and then we'll unpack it. The question suggests that there is a dichotomy between the wrath of God and the love of God, and that would be a mistaken notion, to think that somehow God's wrath stands apart from his love. Let's go back to the fundamental essence of God. John said God is love, not God loves, God is love. Love, *agape*, is not one of the incidental characteristics of God's personality. Love is the foundational essence of who he is. If you could break down God's DNA, what you will find is love. Everything we understand about God has to be understood through the lens of his love, or else we've not studied it far enough ...

Let's use a syllogism here. God is pure love. Here's a certain act that is not an expression of pure love. This act then cannot be God, all right? So let's take wrath. God is pure love. Pure love can only express pure love. Wrath cannot be an expression of anything less than love if it comes from God. And, in fact, the wrath of God is an expression of his love.

This is where we get back into this whole thing of our Western mindset and Augustinian views of theology and all of this. We have had our minds tainted about the very subject of wrath through misguided teaching — some of it coming out of Augustinian thought, some of it coming from extra-biblical sources like Dante. A lot of people, their imagery of hell and the wrath of God is from Dante's *Inferno* and not from the Bible. Agreed?

**MM:** Yeah.

**SM:** So we've got to come back and say, no, wait a minute. Just like I've

done with other things connected to God and who he is, I've had to come back to this whole subject of wrath and say wait a minute, wrath can't be God being mad, pouring out hate, because then he wouldn't be pure love. So I came back to that word *wrath* in the Bible. You're a seminary professor, so I'm sure you know this more than most of us. Let's start with the Greek word for wrath, what is it, teacher?

**MM:** *Orge*.

**SM:** All right. The Greek word *orge*, which is the biblical word for wrath in the New Testament, is an interesting word. Again, let me hit the pause button and say, the definition that we use with words sometimes depends on our preexisting concept of who God is. Words can have more than one definition. For instance, I say I love my wife. I love Mexican food. Nobody thinks I hold Mexican food in the same esteem that I hold my wife. The same is true with biblical words, words like wrath.

If you look in the Greek for the definition of the word, and for the average person who's not a seminary prof, we have to fall back on more simple things — thank the Lord for the internet because we can go to places like Crosswalk.com or BibleGateway.com and we can click there on certain verses when we want to know a word. Let's take the word wrath. If I can just put this out there for those that are watching us, go to Crosswalk.com and type in the word wrath and look for it in the New Testament because we're going to go to the Greek now.

Find the word, let's say in Romans, where the word *wrath* is used a lot. Look it up in the New American Standard Version on Crosswalk.com, or the King James Version, and then when you look beneath that verse you have some options, and one of them is the interlinear version. (You know, and those that watch may not know, but the interlinear version is going to give you the meaning of the Greek words.) So you click on "interlinear" and it will put up that verse with every English word as a link to the Greek. When you click on the link, it will take you to Strong's and it will define that Greek word.

Now we've done that in our minds. We're talking people through that. We've done that, and so we've found the word wrath and we want to know what it means. One definition of wrath is going to be an expression of anger. But if you look down at, I think it's the second definition, maybe it's the third, you're going to see that another definition of wrath is "any intense emotion."

Let's come back to the Greek itself, the word *orge*. *Orge* is an interesting word. Now remember, it's [often] translated wrath, but it can mean any intense emotion. I'm only using this example because I want to make a clear point here. I'm not using it to be crude, but the word *orge* is the origin from which we get the English words *orgy* or *orgasm*. Those are intense words. Those words in mixed company almost would make you

blush to use the words. But I make that point because I want it to be clear to our viewer that the word *orge*, which can yield the word *orgasm* or *orgy*, in that sense it has nothing to do with anger. In that sense it has to do with a very strong passion.

I'm going to come to a pause on this in a minute, but let me finish this train of thought. If you look at the word *orge* and you go back to the root of that word, because *orge* is the derivative of the root, and you go back to the root of the word *orge*, it means to reach out and to strain in a quivering violent way, a shaking way, for something that you long to possess. Having said all that, you know where I'm going.

So the wrath of God...let me put it as a question: What if (and I believe it) the wrath of God is not God pouring out contempt on people in hell, but what if the wrath of God is him pouring out violent love? Grasping, quivering, reaching, shaking, but those who reject it are so adverse and opposed to his love that to them it's torment. From his perspective it's not that at all. The love of God is wonderful to those of us who receive it.

It's like the gospel — it's a savor of life unto life. But to those who reject it, it's horrible. It's hell. It's the savor of death unto death. James said (I mentioned it on an earlier program, but I'll say it again for those that might not have seen it), "When you love your enemies, it is as if you were pouring out heaping coals of fire on their heads." I don't think that the wrath of God is an expression of contempt. I think the wrath of God is a violent expression of God's love, and people hate it unless they perceive that love.

**MM:** So God might intend it for good, but they perceive it as bad?

**SM:** Absolutely. If I can give an example, let's suppose I see my little grandson out in my back yard and he's holding a snake in his hand. I see that snake coiling, and love rushes up in my consciousness for my grandson. So I run as fast as I can toward him. He's holding the snake and he looks up and he sees on his granddad's face this look of horror and rage. He's going to interpret what he sees through the only paradigm he has. He may not understand the danger of the snake. He sees this expression of rage and anger in my face, and it strikes terror in him. I run over to my grandson, and imagine I pick him up and I shake him and I shake him. That poor little boy is going to think he's never seen me so angry with him in his lifetime. But the reality is I'm not angry with him. I'm trying to shake something out of his hand.

So do you get the comparison I'm making? Back to the fire. Daniel, I believe it's chapter 7:10, talks about a river of fire that flows out of the throne of God. I think that's the white-hot love of God. And as they say, the same sun that hardens clay melts wax. Same with the love of God.

Can I give you a quote? I don't want to preach a sermon, but I brought a note here. I don't want to trust my memory on this. I brought a note here.

This is Saint Isaac the Syrian, one of the early church fathers. Here's what he said: "Paradise is the love of God wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness." I've been going on about hell, here's what he says, one of the early church fathers. "I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. Nay, what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love?"

**MM:** In Romans 1:18, Paul writes (and this is the first use of wrath in Romans): "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppressed the truth by their wickedness." He's saying that the wrath of God is being revealed. Doesn't that sound like God's kind of irritated by their refusal to accept what he's doing?

**SM:** I have to give you credit. When you use the word *irritated* in connection with wrath, that's understating it. I think it's more than irritated. But again, it depends on the lens you use to interpret the scripture. If you start with the fundamental belief that God is love, again I'll come back and say we have to interpret the scripture in light of everything that comes from God as being an expression of love, or else there's an incongruence in God that can't be explained. There's a conflict. He's not pure love if something comes from him that is something other than love.

There are those who will say well, then, love is just one of his characteristics, love is just *part* of what God is. He's part love, he's part wrath. Then I would say are you suggesting that God is schizophrenic? He's love some of the time, he's hate some of the time? No. Let's go back to the passage. Let me be clear on this for those who are watching. I'm not suggesting that the wrath of God is not real. The wrath of God is very real. What I'm saying is it's possible, and in my opinion I think probable, that many of us have misunderstood what that wrath is, the nature of that wrath. Let's look at the passage you quoted, or you read. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven." Think of wrath there as an intense, violent expression of love is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

Back to the illustration I gave about charging up to my grandson holding the snake. That was wrath. It was an intense expression of love, and it came out as violence because of the contempt that I had in this imaginary story for the snake, but it was love for the child. But the child, if he doesn't clearly understand my heart, may think that what's he's seeing is anger against him, and that's not what it is.

Notice that Paul talks about in verse 18 of Romans 1, the verse you read, he talks about the unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. For them to suppress the truth, the truth is already in them, or they wouldn't be able to suppress it. To suppress means to push down something that's already there, and there can't be any real

disagreement with people watching about this, because go down to the next verse. It elaborates and says in verse 19, “Because that which is known about God is evident within them.” Not outside them, within them, for God made it evident. God has put this intrinsic knowledge in us, and when we reject or suppress the truth of his love for us, then you know what he does? He expresses wrath. Let me say it another way. He turns up the fire of his love so that it becomes hotter. You’re not going to beat God’s love, so stop trying, is the way I might say it.

Can I read another quote from Saint Isaac the Syrian that we mentioned earlier? Can I read one more quote from him?

**MM:** Well, he’s not my favorite author, but...

**SM:** All right, I think he does a good job expressing the Orthodox tradition on this. Here’s what he said: “The power of love works in two ways. It torments the sinners even as it happens here when a friend suffers from a friend, but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Therefore, the same love of God, the same energy will fall upon all men, but it will work differently.” It’s just what Paul said, the comparison, the parallel. It’s what Paul the apostle said of the gospel. It’s the savor of life unto life for those who believe, but it’s the savor or stench of death for those who don’t believe.

**MM:** Okay, suppose these people don’t like God’s love. Why does God insist on doing something that he knows that they’ll find unpleasant?

**SM:** Because he’s sovereign. Because his love is agape, it’s unconditional. He loves whether you love him back or not. He doesn’t love because he anticipates a certain response from us. You see what I’m saying?

**MM:** He’s going to love whether we like it or not.

**SM:** He’s going to love because that’s who he is. That’s right. He’s going to love whether we like it or not, and whether we receive it or not. That’s who he is, he’s God. He’s love. God is love. For God to do something other than love would be a conflict of who he is. He’d cease to be who he is if he didn’t love.

**MM:** And you can’t just ignore it.

**SM:** Well, you can, but it’s hell, buddy. Right? (laughing) You can, but it’s hell if you ignore it, if you try to resist it. Let’s play this out a minute. I understand you’re the seminary prof., but I want you to play the devil’s advocate, okay? I’m going to walk this out and I’m going to ask you the question that I think maybe the viewer would. Can pure love...is God pure love, first of all? The obvious answer is yes.

**MM:** Yes.

**SM:** If he’s pure love, could anything come from him that’s not loving?

**MM:** No.

**SM:** No. Does wrath come from him?

**MM:** Yes.

**SM:** So is wrath an expression of his love?

**MM:** Somehow, it must be.

**SM:** It's got to be. You follow down that trail and there's just no other way around it. If God is love, and he is, and if pure love can only do what's loving, and that's true, and wrath comes from God, and it does, then it has to be an expression of love or else God is not loving. It has to be. People that watch and grapple with this main difference, "oh, I don't believe that." Well then, what are you going to believe? How are we going to explain the wrath of God unless we say God is not....

There are those who watch and there are those that I've talked to who say, well, love is just one characteristic of God. Oh really? What are the others? Well, wrath. By wrath do you mean hate against sinners? That was the Calvinistic view I held. I thought God hated sinners, reprobates. That was my view when I was a Calvinist. I'm not out of line with mainstream thought when I say that's the viewpoint many hold. So you're saying God is part love and part hate? At the least you'd have to admit (I'd say to this imaginary critic) that God is not pure love if he's part hate.

**MM:** You need to catch him on a good day.

**SM:** Exactly. And what is agape? Let's back it up a step. Not only is he not pure love, but he's not even agape, unconditional love, because if it's unconditional, then what would make him hate. If this would make God hate instead of love, then the love that's left is not unconditional because there was a condition that wasn't met that caused it to become hate. Am I talking in circles or does that make sense, you think?

**MM:** It connects with a couple other ideas — but many people think that the wrath of God means that God desires to punish. And that ties in with what you had said earlier about God not punishing Jesus on the cross. God has no desire to punish us — he wants to rescue us.

**SM:** He has rescued us, in fact.

**MM:** Oh. Done deal.

**SM:** It is finished. I heard that line somewhere before.

**MM:** Yeah.

**SM:** It is finished. He has rescued us whether we acknowledge it or not.

**MM:** Continuing in Romans 1, I find it interesting that Paul describes what God does in his wrath. Paul is eloquent about how bad they are, and in verse 24, "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity..." etcetera... in other words, he let them do what they wanted.

**SM:** That's right. What's the rest of the verse? So that their bodies would be degraded among them. What's sin going to do? Left to itself, what will sin do in a person? Those people or any of us, what will sin do? It will...

**MM:** It hurts.

**SM:** It hurts. There's a penalty. We will spiral downward. The wages of sin is still death. But guess what? Once we get down to that place of death, now we're in a great spot, because guess what? Our God's grace doesn't make *sick* men well, our God's grace makes *dead* people live.

**MM:** Dead men alive.

**SM:** So for God to raise you up, you have to get dead enough. So does God call sin sinful behavior? Of course not. But again, the grace of God is so big that sin won't get the last word. Our God will say, let sin give its best shot. And when it's killed you, I will raise you up, because that's what I do. That's my thing — resurrection.

**MM:** But in a way, Jesus has already killed sin.

**SM:** He has. You guys do a remarkable job here at Grace Communion International of helping folks understand the difference between union and communion, objective and subjective. There is the objective reality that exists, and it's real. Hebrews 9:26 says, "At the consummation of ages he's been manifest to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Jesus, in the objective sense, he's dealt with sin once and for all. Here's the wonderful thing. Sin is not an offense to God. It's not like sin does something to God anymore. God defeated sin. He absolutely vanquished and defeated sin. Sin does nothing to God.

Then somebody might say, then why does God care about sin? Does God not hate sin? Sure he hates it. Why? Because of what it does to you and me. We still live in this little box called time/space. The objective reality is he's dealt with sin, but in this little box we're living in called time and space, in the experiential subjective sense, we can still experience the consequence, the penalty, the punishment of sin. God hates it for that reason, because he loves us and doesn't want to see us hurt. God doesn't say to us, "Don't sin because I hate it when people do that. It really just bugs me — I'm holy and righteous and I'm so squeaky clean it just disgusts me to see people do something nasty and dirty and sinful."

**MM:** Violating my rules.

**SM:** Exactly. You're offending my sensitivities. No, that's ridiculous. No. God says that same thing he said to Adam and Eve about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Don't do that because this is going to kill you. Don't do that, it's going to hurt you, it's going to kill you, and I love you, and I hate sin not because of what it does to me, God says, but because of what it does to you. I love you and I don't want to see you hurt. That's God's thing with sin today, in this world we live in. It's not what it does to him, but what it does to us in the subjective world.

**MM:** That would explain why we should avoid sin even though we've already been forgiven.

**SM:** That's right. We avoid sin because sin is drinking poison and God loves us.

**MM:** What if we really like the taste of that poison?

**SM:** That's a good question. And the one who would seriously ask that, would reveal that they don't know their identity in Christ. Because the truth is, we *don't* love the taste of that poison. Here's the thing — that apple tastes good until it gives you a stomachache, and then you realize yuck, the pleasure of sin is, as the Bible says, for a season. It's got a sweet taste coming in, but boy does it turn sour on my stomach in a hurry.

The picture I've given is a guy walking down the road and he looks over here, and here's the sin house. He hears music and there's a party going on, and it looks like they're having a fun time in there. The guy says, "I'd like to live in that place." He goes in there, and the minute he walks into the sin house with all kinds of things going on, the guy immediately says, "This is as wonderful and exhilarating and thrilling as I thought it would be," because there is pleasure in sin for a season. It's gratifying. Not satisfying, but gratifying.

He gets a rush out of it, but then after a while he's in the sin house and he starts thinking, "This is getting old. I don't know." But the thing of it is, he finds out he can't find his way out. And the longer he's trapped in there, the more he hates it, until finally the place that he couldn't wait to get into, now that he's in it, he finally, in fact soon, reaches a place where (because it's not his nature to live in that house), from the depths of his being he finds his heart crying out, "Dear God, get me out of here. I don't want to be in here." Why do we like the taste of sin? The answer is, we don't. We only *think* we do. It's got a momentary flavor that appeals to us, but it will quickly turn on you.

**MM:** The perception is the key element in all of it.

**SM:** Well, it's not our nature to like sin. Sin is resident in us. Paul said in Romans 7, "So now if I'm doing the thing I don't want to do, I'm not doing it, but sin which dwells in me." He said that in two verses in Romans 7, within three verses apart. He was drawing a distinction between his authentic self, his true identity in Christ, and the power of indwelling sin, which he says again and again in Romans 7 is "in my members." It's not who I am.

I jokingly tell people the first time I went to London, England, I had a kidney stone, but I never asked anybody to call me Rocky. It was in me, but it didn't define me. In the same way, there's the power of indwelling sin that's in our members, but that's not who we are. Let me tell you who we are. Who we are is that we're righteous, called, holy, set-apart people who, if we will get out from under the lie — and how do you do that? You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. (And by the way, the truth is a person named Jesus, and when we really come to know him, we will understand I don't want to live a life of sin.)

Back to the verse in Titus we've referenced a number of times, "The



grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires.” It doesn’t teach us to sin. Grace doesn’t make you want to sin, grace makes you want to glorify the Lord and say no to sin.

**MM:** To me it says we desire the divine life more because of the grace, and this other part and these other things aren’t part of the divine life. It’s like there’s no attractiveness there.

**SM:** Right. There’s an inconsistency. There’s a momentary appeal to it. Let’s not talk as if there’s *no* attraction to sin. But the fact that sin is pleasurable doesn’t say something about our nature, it says something about the nature of sin. Do you see what I’m saying? That speaks of the nature of sin, not our nature. It’s not natural for us to live in sin because that’s not our nature. I can teach your dog to walk on its back legs, but it will never be comfortable doing it, because it’s not his nature to do it, nor, Peter the apostle said in 2 Peter 1:4, “We’ve become a partaker of divine nature.” We sin, but there’s always this internal conflict when we commit sins, because something deep within us, namely the Spirit, the new man knows that’s not who I am. It might gratify, but it won’t satisfy, because I’m not living out of my core. I’m not living out of my authentic self when I do that.

**MM:** I wanted to go back to your image of this person trapped in the house of sin.

**SM:** Okay.

**MM:** How real is...they think they’re trapped.

**SM:** Good point.

**MM:** How real is that house?

**SM:** It’s all an illusion. They’re not trapped.

**MM:** It’s all a hologram.

**SM:** It’s like the elephant at the circus. You come outside the circus tent and there’s this 2-ton elephant standing there with a chain link this long and he’s hooked to a little post in the ground that big. That elephant could drag a Greyhound bus down the road, but he thinks that thing’s holding him there. Why does he think that? Because when he was a baby elephant, they put a big chain around his leg and put the other end on something he couldn’t drag, and he lived that way day after day until he began to be conditioned, “I cannot move when this chain is on my leg.” So he becomes this huge elephant, and he could drag a bus down the road, but when they put the chain on his leg he stands there thinking he can’t move.

What holds him in that spot? Is it the chain? No, what holds him there, it’s a lie. It’s a faulty perception that holds him there. That’s what keeps people in this imaginary sin house. They think they’re trapped. They believe the lie that they can’t get out. But the truth is, sin has no power over us. When we understand the grace of God, we’ll know what Paul meant when he said, “Sin shall no longer have dominion over you because you’re not

under law but under grace.” We understand that when we lock in on what grace really is — unconditional love and acceptance, divine enablement for us to be all that we’ve been called to be and do all we’ve been called to do. Then we can walk out of that house just that quick. It’s a mirage. It’s not even real.

**MM:** A lot of people walk out of that house and kind of want to go back in sometimes.

**SM:** Then they didn’t stay long enough.

**MM:** (laughing).

**SM:** I’m serious. Martin Luther said this: “When thou sinnest, sin boldly.” That green apple didn’t give you a stomachache? Eat three more and watch what happens. They hadn’t hit bottom, in other words. They haven’t hit bottom. I’m not advocating sinful behavior, but I’m telling you one thing. Let sin run its course, and the wages of sin is death, and you won’t want to go back there again.

**MM:** A little aversion therapy.

**SM:** Yeah. That’s the good point. We found out that the new man, which is who we are in Christ, does have an aversion to sin. Read Romans 7, verses 16 through the end of the chapter where Paul says, “I don’t understand myself at all. I’m going the things I hate and the things I want to do I don’t do.” Read the text. Does that sound like a man who wanted to sin? Not at all. It is our nature, when we understand who we are in Christ, to hate sin. It is our nature to hate sin. We don’t want to live that way. If we think people are going to do what they want, let them, they’ll hit bottom. I think we’re overly sin conscious in the modern church. If we were as Christ-conscious and taught others to be Christ-conscious as the Bible says we can be, sin would become a moot point.

Here’s a passage in Hebrews (I love talking about the Old Testament sacrifices). Hebrews 10, starting in verse 1, “The law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, it can never by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year make perfect those who draw near” [NASB]. Let’s stop there. Paul said the law cannot perfect ...the sacrifices of all could not perfect people. Look at verse 2, “Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered?” Why? “Because the worshipers, having been once cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sin.”

**MM:** Hmm.

**SM:** Paul, or whoever wrote Hebrews, says that if the old covenant sacrifice had been a perfect sacrifice and those people had been permanently cleansed, they wouldn’t have even thought about sin anymore. He goes on and says, “But,” verse 3, “in those sacrifices there’s a reminder of sin year by year.” The implication is, we come over to the new covenant and Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and we have been cleansed completely,

past, present, and future, so we don't need to live with sin consciousness. We need to live with Jesus-consciousness.

**MM:** Focus on the positive.

**SM:** Focus on Jesus. I often tell about how I loved basketball when I was a teenager, and I played every weekend. On Fridays I played till late at night, because I didn't have to go to school. If you had said the Friday will come, the time will come you can't play basketball on Fridays, I would have argued and said you're crazy. But one Sunday I went to church and on Sunday morning in Sunday School a girl came in that I had never seen, and when I met that girl I thought, "I want to ask her out." I ended up asking that girl to go out on a date, and I went out the next Friday night with her.

The next morning on Saturday my friends came over banging on my door and said, "Where were you? You know we play basketball every Friday night." 16-year-old boy, I said, "I was with a chick. I didn't have time for basketball." I dated that girl every Friday for three years and I ended up marrying her, and I've been married to her now since 1973, and I cannot tell you when I played basketball on Friday night. Why? Not because I disciplined myself to give up Friday night basketball, but because I found something I wanted more. That's the thing about sin. We don't live with sin consciousness — we fall so in love with Jesus that sin loses its grip over us and we just walk out, because we're holding hands with Jesus and walk away from it without even thinking about it, without struggling against it.

**MM:** That is great.

**SM:** Isn't it great? I think of the old song we used to sing when I was a teenager — you're my age, I bet you remember this one song we sang that said, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face. Do you remember the next part? No? You lived a sheltered life didn't you?

**MM:** I did. I didn't go to church.

**SM:** You didn't go to church? There you go. No wonder.

**MM:** I didn't have TV, didn't go to church.

**SM:** You were spared some things and you were deprived of others, and I won't say which is which, but I'll let you figure out which one you were deprived of and which one you were spared from, but there's the old song that says, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. And that's it.

God's not mad, God's delivered us from sin, back to what we started out with — the wrath of God, that even that is an expression of his love. Let's get it down in our minds once and for all — God is love. And if you ever hear, read, see anything that seems to contradict that, then let's step back away from it a minute and say, wait a minute, I must be misinterpreting what I'm hearing, seeing, or reading, because God is love. Let's settle that once and for all. Let's not have to put God on trial every

time something comes along we can't make sense of and say, is God really love? No. Let's settle that.

We may not have answers for everything. We won't, but that's okay. We don't have to have answers for everything. Our God is a mystery, so we push up to the edge of our understanding as far as we can push and then we stop and say okay, all I know is that in the fog there beyond what I can see, there's a God who is love, and we live with that assurance even we can't make sense out of it whether it's hell, wrath, the sin house, anything else.

## 20. RELATIONSHIPS AND EVANGELISM

**JMF:** We're talking with Dr. Paul Louis Metzger, professor Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Metzger is founder and director of the Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins, and author of several books.

He also serves as the executive editor of a forthcoming multi-volume series on the Scriptures for InterVarsity Press, for which he is writing the volume on John's Gospel. His newest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, co-authored with Dr. Brad Harper. Dr. Metzger's passion is integrating theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. He is a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, and has developed a strategic ministry partnership with Dr. John M. Perkins called, "Drum Majors for Love, Truth and Justice."

Thanks for joining us today.



**PLM:** Thanks, it's great to be here, Mike.

**JMF:** I'd like to begin by just finding out what led you into the study of theology in the first place.

**PLM:** I was back in college, Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota, and in my junior or senior year I was interacting

with a couple of professors and one, Walter Dunit, really introduced me to the discipline of systematic theology and just how it's all-encompassing. While there's the descriptive element in talking about what the church has believed in the past... and there's also that prescriptive element about what do we believe and present today for the church and the society at large.

I always had a desire to bring theology into the present context. So that was very intriguing to me in terms of that all-encompassing enterprise that also has present-day import. So that's really what led me into the discipline and the study of God, and I could think of nothing greater than the study of God and especially the triune nature of God.

**JMF:** Well, somewhere along the path you moved into Trinitarian theology. Specifically how did that go about?

**PLM:** I was a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a couple of my professors there had encouraged me for my doctoral studies to consider applying to King's College, London, to seek to work with Professor Colin Gunton -- he was a leading Trinitarian Theologian who died a few years ago and he was a major player in terms of the renaissance in Trinitarian theology. Working at King's in London was really a great introduction into Trinitarian thought forms and it was just great to be able to work with him. And then, there were others, such as John Zizioulas, who would come in and teach and lecture, and many others as well. So it was a great place within which to study Trinitarian theology.

**JMF:** You're author of a book called *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, in which you take a look at Colin Gunton and his work through the eyes of a number of authors, maybe we could talk about that a little later. Right now, as we introduced you, we mentioned that your passion is the integration of theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. What is an integration of theology and spirituality? What's the difference and what do you mean by integration?

**PLM:** I think that theology by nature is a very integrative discipline and very much concerned for various domains of thought and life. As a Christian, I think everything we're about... should be about spirituality, and while I'm not doing spiritual theology in that classic sense of the discussion that Professor James Houston will be about, I have great respect for his work, but the types of theological thought forms I'm working with within Trinitarian theology -- participation in the life of God, union with Christ -- those are central motifs for me in my own writing and research, and then that has import for cultural sensitivity dynamics in our postmodern, post-Christian context of how we engage alternative spiritualities. We need a robust understanding and awareness of the spiritual dimensions bound up with the holy love of God, and Christ, in the power of the Spirit. So that's bound up with what I'm thinking of here.

**JMF:** By "spirituality," you're not talking necessarily about spirituality in

the sense of mysticism... you're talking about a holistic Christian life as theology informs it, particularly Trinitarian theology. What is practical about Trinitarian theology then in the Christian life?

**PLM:** The way I look at Trinitarian theology is that when it's framed in light of the holy love of God in Christ and that we're called to participate in this God's life and not simply to emulate (which is part of our work), but actually to participate -- it gets us beyond a form of religion, or rules, and legalism and "sin management" (as some will talk about it) of do's and don'ts and Paul is very much against that in his book on Colossians where there was this kind of faulty asceticism of "don't drink, don't chew, don't date girls who do" type of thinking back in the ancient world and the Christians were getting bound up with them and they thought that their identity with Christ was really about sin management -- keeping the rules.

And Paul is saying that our life with Christ goes far beyond sheer concern for moral rights -- it must be about union, communion within the life of God. So he says in Colossians 2:9, 10 "All the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ." That's the kind of union that Paul is concerned for. You said before that it's not about mystical or mysticism per se, well to me there is a mystical component. It's not the kind of Buddhist mysticism, a pantheism, it's not that at all, but the Reformers were very much concerned for union with Christ in the spirit, where our hearts are wed to his heart, and so there really is that participation, and I would call that mystical, but it really is bound up with the holistic frame of reference with practical import to such things as you mentioned in getting beyond legalism toward a real relational model of spirituality.

**JMF:** Now, by relational model -- you're talking about how to get along with each other.

**PLM:** Yes, and that God communes with us heart-to-heart, not simply thought-to-thought, but really heart-to-heart, because that's where the best communion really does take place. And so our thoughts, our actions, our moral initiatives really flow out of that heart-to-heart communion with God. I like to pick up from Martin Luther and his side-kick Melanchthon, when Melanchthon and Luther both in the 1500's talked about we don't change hearts by changing behaviors. Our behaviors are changed by our hearts being changed. That only occurs by way of the Holy Spirit being poured out, as Romans 5:5 says, "The love of God is poured out into our hearts with the Holy Spirit." When our hearts are transformed, then these other things flow from them. And that's what I would call an affective spirituality that's bound up from Trinitarian thought.

**JMF:** Now, cultural sensitivity then, flows right out of that, in an authentic Christianity that's coming from the heart as opposed to list of rules. Cultural sensitivity is going to be the natural by-product... What are

some of the ways that you focus on with regard to bringing cultural sensitivity into that process?

**PLM:** Well, because God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that God did not seek to... I like to use the imagery of he didn't come to take back Jerusalem or take back America from his enemies, and so often in the evangelical Christian movement (of which I'm a part), we're so often concerned for our rights, and taking back America from those who live very differently from us. And while I want to follow the Bible through and through and live according to God's desires for us as his people, nonetheless God is calling us to love people where we're not seeking to shape them by way of certain kinds of behavioral frames of reference but as we relate to people, relationally, not behaviorally -- and they get to see that we really do care about them, I think that's where there's the opportunity for people to actually have a change of heart themselves and we've been known more, as it's been said elsewhere and I agree with this, we're known more in the conservative Christian movement for what we are against than what we're for.

And so as I'm engaging in cultural issues when I'm working in Portland, Oregon, and it's not the Bible Belt, and when I'm working with the Buddhists and others and they're very concerned about what they've seen in evangelical America of seeking to take back America from them, there's a lot of fear that they have of us, and I think that an imperfect love is driven out by fear, but a perfect love casts out fear. And when they really come to understand that we're concerned for their well-being and that we want to care for them in the love of God in Christ, that changes the dynamics of how we deal with people with different spiritualities and different moralities. And so I think it's that relational context that really gives birth -- comes forth from God's heart -- that gives birth to a kind of cultural engagement that is not about enforcing Christianity on people, but it really comes from the inside out, not the outside in.

**JMF:** In the Gospels, Jesus is described as a friend of sinners and yet in our evangelical traditions, we tend to shy away from being friends of sinners, the last thing we're going to be is a friend of sinners. We want our children to go to private Christian schools, we want to keep ourselves in kind of an enclave of our friends within the church, not outside the church, and yet it sounds like you're talking about the need to be friends of sinners, like Jesus was and for the same reasons as Jesus was, because people are human beings created in the image of God and that it's the heart of God that reaches out to all people. So often though, Christians are told to make friends with non-believers with an ulterior motive of getting the gospel to them (**PLM:** bait and switch) -- it's a project where the *real* goal is to get the gospel to them, as opposed to them being the goal as a person, worthy of friendship because the love of Christ is in us and he's a friend of sinners



(**PLM:** absolutely!).

**PLM:** With that whole frame of reference, Trinitarian theology gives rise to a concern for people as people, and not as a means to an end of something else. So I couldn't agree with you more, that we don't engage nonbelievers and build relationships with them simply to get the gospel to them, because there's a very problematic notion of the gospel if we don't see the gospel itself in terms of its DNA as *relational* -- that's the good news, is that God desires relationship with us. And if I'm only after relationship for the sake of seeing people come to Christ, then relationship is not the goal -- relationship is a means to an end of something else, and often that's a behavioral rationalistic frame of reference -- understanding certain things about God and doing certain things, rather than heart-to-heart communion.

And so when I talk about a desire to build relationships with people, that goes beyond even whether they come to Christ or not, because I think Jesus would *want* me to care for them, for the oppressed, those who are in hunger and need, even if they don't come to Christ. I think he would still feed them and would still care for them, and we should too. But of course we always want to see people come to know Jesus personally as Lord and Savior -- that's our desire because *we* know this communion with him, we want others to. So it's an invitation rather than a negation.

**JMF:** It's a living out of the gospel, rather than a formulaic presentation, by words, it's being the gospel.

**PLM:** It's a gospel of word and deed and especially in our context today, because we have created so much fear in the broader community and so many contexts as conservative Christians with our kind of "take back America" strategy, that I find that we have to create the space with our lives for our views to be heard, and that's going to require a lot more sacrificial living than we've been accustomed to. And so that we'll look a lot more hopefully like the early church context. And I'm excited about that even though there's some fear on my part of what that will entail, but I think for us to move toward a more remnant mindset of being as a missional outpost in our culture rather than some dominant super-structure, actually makes for our depending on God and Christ more, not less. And so I'm excited about the opportunities that the church will have in North America in days ahead.

**JMF:** Speaking then of cultural sensitivity, your book *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, you point out that race problems are not necessarily a thing of the past even though overtly many of the structures are gone, that within the church, there tends to still be race and class divisions, could you talk about the title, what you mean by consuming Jesus and also what these race and class divisions look like.

**PLM:** In terms of the title, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, I'm doing two things with the words, *Consuming Jesus*.

One, negatively, we have with consumer culture these projections we place on Jesus. We make Jesus to be what we want him to be. So consumerism consumes our perspectives on Jesus and I think here of the movie *Talladega Nights*. There is this prayer by Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell) where he's praying to Jesus, eight pounds, six ounce baby Jesus to help him win a race, and other people at the dinner table are talking about how they like Jesus looking like this or Jesus looking like this, but it's all based on their own preferences rather than on who he is in himself. So the negative aspect is how consumerism impacts us and we distort the biblical perspective on Jesus with our own cultural preferences.

The more positive notion, in terms of how I use the words, is that I long for the church to be consumed by Jesus and a more noble vision of our concern for the church being his people, his community, where there are no divisions including divisions of race and class -- those are torn and destroyed. And so that's the other aspect of how I'm using the words "consuming Jesus."

To develop that further, the issue of how race is still with us today (and race and class divisions tend to go together in American culture historically and even in the present day), but there's a noted book called *Divided by Faith* on evangelical religion in America where the authors themselves, Emerson and Smith, talk about how we're not in the slavery era of race problems, we're not in the Jim Crow era of separate drinking fountains, sitting at the back of the bus, but in the post-Civil Rights era, people think that because we don't have these legal structures in the same way that we may have in the past, a lot of people think that racism is no longer with us.

And so they develop this at length about how racism, racialization, how race impacts everything from economics to where you live, to job placement, etc, etc. They talk about how race is still with us. And then race is a variable, not a constant -- it's always fluctuating -- racialization and how race impacts in our culture. So with that as a backdrop, I would say and argue in the book that one of the ways in which racism is still with us is by way of consumer preference. And we all tend to flock with those or toward those who are like us, and a lot of churches cater to that.

And there's been use of this missions principle, the homogeneous unit principle, applied to church growth strategies in America to help the church grow fastest, you work with people with same socio-economic feather and if you target them, they will flock together and they will flock quickly. And so it's very difficult for getting churches to move beyond these kinds of principles because it's very pragmatic: it does grow churches quickly when you're working with preferences of people, and people tend to choose (if you listen to them) they would choose churches based on what they like rather than where God is calling them.

Just listen to how people say, "I chose this church because I like the

worship, I like the way the pastor speaks.” You don’t hear much about “God called my family to this church.” And that might be hard to configure at times, what’s the call of God like, but nonetheless you don’t have people even wrestling with that. And so if a pastor’s going to talk about race divisions, people will be thinking, normal families will be thinking, “what this have to do with my family? I just want to see my kids raised up morally and I want them to have good Bible teaching. I’ll just go to the church next door where we don’t have to listen to this stuff, and what does this have to do with the gospel?”

And now I talk about how these things are related to the gospel message because Paul says in Galatians 3: “There’s no longer any division between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.” And while the Jew-Gentile issue is different from black/white issues, for example today, because you could become a Jew if you’re a Gentile by circumcision and other things -- but a black person can’t become a white person, a white person can’t become a black person, but those same divisions between Jews and Gentiles have pertinence and relevance to the divisions we have on racism and racialization today.

**JMF:** And morality seems to be the thing that we’re so focused on with our children, maybe not so much with ourselves, but certainly with our children, we want our children to be moral, it reminds me of *The Music Man*, we want the children not to be playing pool, we want them to be moral, so we get them into band. But through all that search for morality, or that effort to focus on morality, we can actually get to the place where morality becomes so important that we look down on sinners, we even despise them, we talk about them in negative ways of reflecting how we feel about them, as opposed to being like Jesus who is a friend of sinners to letting his love flow through us because these are the very people he came to die for. We are all sinners before we come to Christ anyway (and of course, we still sin afterward), and yet we focus on morality, but the gospel focuses on relationality. And you’ve talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, how it relates to that.

**PLM:** In that context, you know, when Jesus is talking about morality because he’s being challenged in the context of the Good Samaritan parable, he’s being challenged by a religious leader, by asking what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus gets into that whole discussion of caring for one’s neighbor and Jesus frames morality relationally. Of course he’s concerned, as God, for morality, but how he shapes, or frames, morality is always relational, and the religious leaders were often so concerned for a kind of behavioral, individualistic morality, they missed the real essence of the law -- which was to love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

And so Jesus says, “this is what it means to care for one’s neighbor.”

And our neighbor is not the person I most like. As Henri Nouwen said, “a true community is the place where the person you least like always lives.” And so who does Jesus use as the hero in the story of the good Samaritan, the Samaritan who had extraordinary mercy, as one particular translation frames it. And in that context, it’s the religious leaders such as this man’s peer group, who don’t care for the Jewish man (I’m assuming it’s a Jewish man) -- someone of their own who’s been oppressed, who’s been beaten, left for dead, it’s a Samaritan who comes to his aid, and in the issues of race and poverty matters that I’m concerned for in *Consuming Jesus*, I’m not looking at people of different ethnicities as bound up somehow with sin, but how we relate to people or not relate to them, based on them being different from us. That’s the sin issue, that we don’t care. And Jesus is concerned for mercy, and justice and sacrifice and breaking down divisions, especially in the church, but also beyond. And Jesus was very concerned; Paul was very concerned for these things in the church.

**JMF:** I’ve always been intrigued by Peter’s statement to be ready always to give an answer for the hope that lies within you. And it implies that you’re not supposed to be always going around blurting out the hope that lies with you, but you’re prepared, you’re ready to, when the opportunity and the circumstances call for it. Even Paul said something about, in another context, about an individual that he said not to associate with because of his behavior within the church and they were, in effect, putting him out of the church for a season, and he have to correct them... about, look, when I said that, I didn’t mean not to associate with anyone who’s a sinner, I was talking about the individual who purports to be a member of the church who was grievously and overtly sinning in public. But he said you’ve got to associate with sinners and unbelievers, otherwise you have to come out of the world.

And it as though there’s a recognition of the fact that relational Christianity is going to and needs to engage people who are not believers, that means it’s right and appropriate to be friends of sinners, and you can do that without taking up their behavior, and yet how can we reach out to them showing them what the gospel is and what Christ is like in the world if we don’t engage them, if we keep them at arm’s length, if we’re just... see them as a target of our condemnation and we’re constantly trying to pass laws to put them in jail?

**PLM:** Exactly, and with Christ, even with the leper, even though you wouldn’t say that was a sin issue that the person have leprosy, maybe some people want to make the connection, he has this because he’s a sinner, but if you look at it from a legalistic sense of the law, looking at the letter not the spirit, Jesus, by touching the leper broke the law, from that reading. But by touching and healing the leper, he fulfilled the law. And so Jesus is about a relational engagement, a transformation of people, and while I share the

concern for being holy people and we're called to be holy people, yet it's a dysfunctional spirituality, it's so fears engaging the world that we don't have contact. We need to be so captured by God's holy love in Christ that the real force of movement is from us to them in God's holy love, not a fear of coming out from the world so that we're not tainted...

Again, where's the transformation coming from, are we being conformed, are we being transforming agents? Jesus in John 17 prays, "Father, I don't pray that you would take them out of the world, but that you protect them in the world." Where did Jesus hang out, and where was Jesus' greatest rebukes going? Who was the audience for his rebukes that were most forthright? For the religious leaders. And I think that in terms of a concern about myself, because it wasn't the tax collectors and the sinners, the prostitutes that he attacked -- he called them to repent, but his attacks were for those who consider themselves so righteous and they don't need him. That's where his rebuke was, and it was a stinging rebuke, and my question to me, as a religious leader, is, if I read this Gospel and I'm thinking he's attacking mostly the nonbeliever person who is the "sinner," I'm missing the point. Am I broken? Am I sensing my own need for him today? That's where I think all Christian leaders should be going, and that we have that sense of desperation for him to show up and transform *us*. Because then, we will be in a position to speak to people in our midst.

## 21. THE CHURCH SHOULD INCLUDE ALL PEOPLES

**JMF:** In your book, *Consuming Jesus*, you have an afterword by John M. Perkins, you have a strategic ministry partnership with him, and in the book you quote him, in the beginning of the book especially, some extensive quotes, and one is, “We have substituted a gospel of church growth for a gospel of reconciliation.” Tell us about that.

**PLM:** What Dr. Perkins is getting at there is that our emphasis is so often on quantitative growth, and while there is a place for that, I mean the early church [had] 5000 right off the bat, but we’ve taken the focus off of qualitative growth and discipleship and have put our focus on the quantitative growth dimension. So he says we’ve replaced the gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. He’s really calling for a more holistic spirituality and a church that gets beyond issues of race and ethnic division and the like, and that’s the context for that particular statement.

He also says in that same context that the American Evangelical church is the most racist institution in America, and I know that at least one blogger raised real questions over that statement in analyzing the book, and really misunderstood what Perkins was after. He’s not saying that evangelicals are the most racist individuals, but institutionally, we’re often blind. Because of our emphasis on individual people, we often don’t account for the structural dimensions.

Even in church growth, we structure religion and spirituality by way of, what I have said elsewhere, along the lines of this homogeneous unit principle of working with people, targeting people of a certain sociological, social, economic bent, if you will, sort of demographic. And that’s not

expansive enough. We need to take into account people's whole stories, their contexts, and I'm for, for what it's worth, a focus on language and location, but not likings. So to work by way of preferences gives rise to separating people in America today along consumer lines, and that often tracks with separation by way of ethnicity and economics and other related matters. So that's what I think Perkins is after when he says that.

And we don't know, and this is something I would add here, we really have no idea, at least by and large, in the evangelical movement about a prophetic voice of what Dr. Perkins is really calling for. We know how to make a profit and we write books on how to grow your church and make a profit in religion, but we really know very little about prophetic voices such as what Perkins offers. And we need to reengage the Scriptures in terms of its call to a holistic spirituality.

**JMF:** So what you're talking about is the fact that most evangelical churches are going to have white faces, predominately, and be more of a middle-class constituency as opposed to reflecting the whole culture, and you're proposing certain ways to address that. How do you suggest churches begin to look at things, and what should they do differently?

**PLM:** If I could just step back for a second and make the point that I think that's where we've been as a movement. If we're going to have growth, we need to be concerned for diversity. Not in some kind of politically correct manner, because that's where a lot of people will raise questions... is this just trying to be PC, fit in with American culture? That's not it at all.

Are we really missional in our orientation? Do we really have our eyes open? Are we really reaching out to the communities around us? And America is not becoming increasingly white. America is becoming increasingly brown, if you will. And I don't look at that as a threat, I look at it as a great opportunity. And where the growth is going to come, I think, by and large, in the years ahead will be in non-Caucasian contexts. That's already happening in certain contexts, but the dominant evangelical superstructures are not there. They're not in that way.

Our leadership in our institutions of churches and education and parachurch, I would still say are largely white. And I happen to be a white person, and I'll often joke with people when I'm speaking to them, remember I'm a white guy. I'm not out here to attack white people, but we need to be missional. We need to open our eyes. We need to be concerned for doing church, as I said earlier, based on language and location, not likings. And if we have eyes to see, we'll see that there's more diversity in our communities than we've often been able to or willing to acknowledge. It's there, but are we really being intentional about looking to see how diverse our communities really are?

That is what I would want to maintain in addition to other principles,

even in how we do theology, what we preach on, how central the Lord's Supper is in our worship services...not as a placebo tablet with the Supper, but more by way [that] it's not simply about individuals before God, it's about persons in communion with God and with one another. And the Lord's Supper in Corinth was meant to break down class divisions, and yet the Corinthian church, 1 Corinthians 11, was dividing people even at the Agape Feast by way of class. And Paul says, "not on my watch. That won't happen here, because it is the Lord's table, where all are equal, where all are welcome." We need to make sure that all people are welcome to the bountiful harvest of God's communion.

**JMF:** Now, even if all people are welcome at a given church, wouldn't it still work out, in general because of the way people are, that churches still build up around racial and ethnic similarities...don't most people feel more comfortable worshipping together with others who share their cultural and ethnic background and history?

**PLM:** Well, surely people feel more comfortable with that orientation or with that framework, but that doesn't mean it's most biblical. And that's what the Corinthians were doing. They were doing things based on comfort-ability. And so the rich were in their dining rooms in the house church eating with each other, because that was the Greco-Roman culture, it allowed for that, and the poorer Christians were without. They were not able to have anything of the feast. They were, so to speak, in the courtyard with their faces plastered to the glass looking in.

Paul said that's not going to happen. Even though that's your comfort zone, that's not going to happen at God's table. And so we need to replace comfort-ability with the comfort of the cross—and all are equal there. That might sound really pious and super-spiritual, but I don't mean it that way. It's a matter of, do we really have a heart for seeing the church look like what the kingdom of God would be?

In another book that just came out, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, my co-author and I talk about [that] we need to live now in light of what will be. And as a friend of mine has said elsewhere, if the kingdom of God is not divided, how on earth can the church be? So we need to live now in light of what will be in God's eschatological kingdom before the throne. As that kingdom and community now, we need to look different, because Scripture calls us to do that. It's not to beat ourselves over the head if there are no people of different colors in our community, and we don't have to bus people in from hundreds of miles away, that's not the point. But are we truly seeking to be missional.

So I want to get beyond what I like and my preferences with worship services, this is a lot of where the generational divisions occur, and I don't necessarily like a lot of the worship, per se, in churches with the praise choruses. I like a lot of hymns. I like liturgy. But I'd rather put down my



own preferences for the sake of worshiping with people of different generations.

So we have the generational gap, the worship wars and generational divisions. I think that's going to hurt us long-term. It's already hurting us long-term, where young people don't feel connected to churches and they leave churches for their own type of church later. We need to worship as a family. So I'm very concerned about all these services, contemporary, traditional, is bound up with the same kind of consumer preference. And it's subtle, but it ends up with very destructive tendencies in the long-haul.

**JMF:** What is a way around that, though? Because in a given church...you take a black church or a Korean church, typically a white person is not going to feel comfortable there, likewise a typical Korean worshiper is not going to feel comfortable in a white church or a black church. They're going to prefer to go to a Korean church. And in that context, you've got rich people, young people, generations as well as socioeconomic levels.

There can be an effort to make everyone in the generations and the rich and poor welcome in that context, but how do you go about it, and what procedures, or how do you.... It's one thing to be welcoming, but will really happen where churches begin to become missional to the degree that all races can enjoy and meet together as one body? Will that ever become a reality?

**PLM:** I think it's a very long process, and it's a hard road. It's very painful, because those wounds are still deep. A lot of people think the wounds have gone away, the racial tensions for example, but it's often from people who haven't even engaged in the issues. They haven't asked the questions. They haven't come alongside of others from different backgrounds and really started to ask questions and live life together. And if we do, we'd see that these things are real issues and open wounds in many contexts. It depends case by case, but they are there. They are very much present in American culture.

As I said before, [it's OK to distinguish] language and location, not likings. So you can have an immigrant community from Africa, or somewhere else in the world where they're speaking in their native language first generation. I'm thinking, okay, second generation, third generation, and are they still seeking to be set apart? And often at that point, it simply becomes a matter of cultural preference.

I'm not trying to do away with cultural distinctiveness. I love and long for church contexts where we celebrate the diversity of our worship styles and the like. And we need to be intentional. It's one thing to say we're welcoming. Anyone can say that. I never talk about that we just want to welcome people. I want to be intentional about making sure that they really do have a place at the table, and that they have ownership.

And so, how do I change structures, even leadership structures, where if I'm a person in a position of authority, how do I use my gifting, my influence, my position to make it possible for people of other gifting experiences to actually have ownership and leadership? In some ways it's a death to myself.

When the issue comes back to making people feel comfortable, we're just going to nurture that same problematic orientation. I do not believe in making people feel comfortable in church. I want to have people know that they're loved and cared for, but not comfortable as in making sure they feel that all of their desires and wants are met. That's the consumer problem. It's giving people what they want, when they want it, at the least cost to themselves. That's the consumer problem in the church.

And so, if you deal with these issues of ethnic division and economic division and generational division and that doesn't whet their appetite, they'll go next door. And that's very problematic. So how do we change the preaching? How do we change the ideology? The mentality? The spirit of our churches where we're just catering to people because we want to make sure people come in the door? Again, I don't mean it by way of a kind of false piety or it sounds all good.

To me this is DNA, and it's in part because this is my own life. My wife's from Japan, she's a Japanese national, a Japanese citizen, our kids are dual citizens. I have to hear what my son experiences at school and what my daughter will experience and what my wife has experienced going into an immigration office to get her a green card years ago, (I talk about it in the book *Consuming Jesus*, it wasn't as sexy or as funny as Hollywood's green card version). It was a very painful experience, and I felt like a helpless hopeful just like the Mexican applicants looking for green cards and citizenship papers. I felt on the outside looking in with some of the things we had to endure. And I saw another side of America. As much as I love our country, I saw another side.

A lot of people experience that in the church. And [do] we want people to feel welcome? Absolutely, as long as everyone feels welcome. But that doesn't mean comfortable, because Jesus calls us to carry a cross so that we die, so that we can truly live and find a truly meaningful life that's beyond our best life.

**JMF:** Now it sounds like there has to be a passion, in other words, I don't see that happening unless there's a passion in the pastor to preach and educate the church in a way that helps it to see itself in a new light and fresh light as opposed to just being a church to attend for the various social reasons that oftentimes we attend church, for the friendships and the security in the sense of support and so on, but for the church to see itself differently.

**PLM:** I would think it's partly the pastor's role, but just like the

president of the United States, the president of the United States isn't fully in control. There are a lot of other people who have ownership of the issues. So the pastor is certainly a major player [as well as the] elders or church council, the lay people. There's a sense in which we all need to be in a state of desperation.

Perkins says we've replaced this gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. That's not good news. And a watching world looks on us, and it's not like we're trying to tickle the ears, it's not like if we just do the race issue right then the world will like us. I don't believe that. But I think they see the hypocrisy when we talk about the love of God in Christ and all people are welcome, and yet Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement from way back in the '50s or '60s is still true today. The most segregated hour in Christian America, even in a post-Christian America, is Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. And how can that be in God's household?

So we have to have a sense of urgency and desperation. And that doesn't come overnight for a lot of people. It would be wonderful if the Holy Spirit would just move in such a way that people would be awakened to it. And sometimes the Spirit does work in that way. Other times it's a long-haul.

I've been in church situations most of my life, even talking about these things, where the dominant structures aren't thinking about moving toward change anytime soon. And it's a marathon race. It's not a short-term sprint. And if I didn't have this confidence and hope that Jesus will make this reality of the church that is truly unity in his eschatological kingdom, I'd give up hope and I'd despair because it is so painful and it is so slow-going. So I think there has to be that sense of urgency and desperation that our lives must create the space for our views to be heard.

And when we have a segregated church economically, ethnically, and in other ways, what are we saying to the world? Are we really salt and light? I don't think so. I don't see it from the standpoint of wanting to put a guilt trip on people and be moralistic. It's a longing for something more noble, more profound, a Christianity that really gets at the heart of God. That's what I long for. I've seen what it can be like. I've been in situations where it's more beautiful and more profound, and I just long for us to look like what God calls us to be as his church.

In John 17, "May they be one as we are one, Father, that the world might know that you have sent your Son." So we're telling the watching world that God hasn't sent his Son if we're not truly one. And that's not just ethnically, economically, it's not just generationally. It's in a host of ways in which we don't have unity. The turf battles we have in churches and beyond. The denominational warfare and the like, turf. And it's often ego-related.

Paul challenged that completely head-on in 1 Corinthians: [they were

saying] “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas,” and they weren’t of Christ. And so the ego problem is usually the biggest problem along with, in American culture, the comfort-zone problem. So those things need to be dealt with prophetically and passionately, calling people to something more beautiful and noble. (Because if it’s guilt-tripped, that just doesn’t help anyone.) It’s helping people to repent, but to repent so that we enter into something more profound together. And I’m part of the problem. I want to be part of the solution. I know a lot about these things, the question is, what am I doing about them? And I have to live them out all the more fully.

**JMF:** And yet Paul wrote that 2000 years ago. And here we are 2000 years later, and we still have the same problem. In your book, you propose a few concrete suggestions about moving from here to there. Can you talk about those?

**PLM:** In various contexts, I’ll talk about the kind of preaching that needs to occur, and I had already mentioned that aspect of prophetic speaking. And the kind of theology we’re teaching, you know, what kind of theology we foster. Trinitarian theology is communal, it’s relational, it’s not individualistic.

There are many practical principles that the book sets forth from different angles—some theological, some in terms of worship, you know, how we do the Lord’s Supper, how we view the Lord’s Supper. Also, as it relates to community development work, we mentioned Dr. John M. Perkins before, and even how we engage as the church in the broader community. And he’s talked at length about principles of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. Perhaps we’ll have time to talk about those things, and it’s bound up with our own partnership that he and I have developed.

Third, there’s a network called the Mosaic Global Network, which is helping churches move toward being more multi-ethnic. There are a lot of things that can be done, developed, different models for how to be integrating, even how we do (and this is beyond the book), but how do we greet people? What does our literature indicate? What does it suggest? And again, how do we do worship? Who are we targeting? And I don’t like the word targeting because it’s too narrow in its orientation. I want to be missional, but often targeting is, “I’m going to focus on this niche group.”

Again, our whole community should be who we’re seeking to minister to. Jesus’ band of disciples was diverse, even though it was Jewish men, it was pretty diverse. I mean, Jesus always had to have his sleeping bag in between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector every night because tax collectors were hated by Zealots. And, you know, given the chance, who knows what Simon the Zealot would have done to Matthew the tax collector? Paul rebuked Peter for not associating with the Gentiles and he talks about it in Galatians. In the early church, James talks about the

economic, what we would call class-divisions today, with the leaders giving preference to the rich and despising the poor.

Who makes up the boards of our churches? Is it the power brokering of the world that we have, or is it the cruciform existence of the cross? Not many of us who were called to Christ were great or noble by way of the world's standards. Where is greatness to be found? A theological, a spiritual, a missional perspective, is all-encompassing. It takes years to develop. It takes a lifetime to live out. And it is costly, but it's more profound, I think, in terms of what God is calling us to.

**JMF:** How did you come to meet John Perkins?

**PLM:** Back in around 2000, a friend of mine said to me we needed to get John Perkins to come to Portland to speak at Multnomah where I teach, and I direct this institute on the Theology of Culture, New Wine, New Wineskins. So we invited Dr. Perkins, and he accepted, and he came to Portland to speak for this New Wine, New Wineskins conference on justice issues.

One of the places he spoke at was Reed College. Reed is talked about every year in the *Princeton Review* as being one of the most godless or non-religious secular irreligious schools in America, depending on how you want to word it. It's not seen as a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy to say the least. And yet the Reed students wanted to hear this evangelical social-justice advocate civil-rights leader from the deep South, John M. Perkins, which struck me.

When he spoke there, he just shared his testimony, but it was radical and it was transformational to me. I felt, as a Multnomah Biblical Seminary professor, I had come to Christ in Reed College's auditorium hearing Perkins share his story about how he was led to Christ, how God called him back to the deep South to give his life for the poor, and then after he was nearly beaten to death, God called him beyond bitterness to be broken and holy love for even his oppressors. God called him through that traumatic ordeal where he had a heart attack, vital organs of his body were shredded, he said God called me through that incident with these white police officers beating me to the point of death, God called me to race reconciliation for all people.

The Reed students stood up and gave him a standing ovation for a life so well lived. And while they might not have agreed with his evangelical convictions at that point, they knew there was something beyond religion here that really was an encounter with the living God through this man. And that, even now, just sends shivers down my spine because that is a more profound form of Christianity than I ever had experienced to that point. I want my life, I want my family's lives, I want the church of Jesus Christ and of North America to enter more fully into that kind of radical, sacrificial, spirituality that is simply bearing witness to and participating in

the life of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** And you are partnering with him in a particular ministry, and how does that contribute?

**PLM:** Back around the time of the release of the *Consuming Jesus* book, and this was after years of reflecting upon his story, theology, my own family's story, you know, life in Portland and beyond, it was my own kind of manifesto, so to speak. When he read the material, and he had come back to Portland for another New Wine, New Wineskins conference that was geared toward the oppressed, the poor, ex-offenders, how do we relate the gospel compassionately to them in a holistic manner.

Dr. Perkins asked me if I would partner with him, and this is one of my mentors. This is a man whom I have the highest regard for, and that he would ask me to partner with him was one of the greatest privileges of my whole life. Having studied under Colin Gunton in London and then being able to work with this evangelical community development civil rights leader, it's a great marriage between Trinitarian theology and a life that really lives it out, illustrates that life and how to develop it.

He could sense that there was a theology I was developing by the grace of God that really resonated with what God had called him to do as a Bible teacher and as a practitioner for decades. Now he's in his late 70s and he's thinking about the marathon race ahead and the legacy, not in terms of an ego issue, but a stewardship. You know, how would these things be carried on for the long haul. And he's partnered with a variety of different people, and I'm one of them. And this partnership, Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice, is bringing together a biblical theology of engagement that's led to his profound practices of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.

So we've spoken in different parts of the country and we're looking for other opportunities to go out and speak, to really inspire people to become themselves. Members of the marching band and the imagery comes from one of Martin Luther King Junior's messages where he wanted to be remembered as a drum major for justice. And again, love, love is the driving force of justice and the biblical framework. And there's a need for justice. There's so much injustice in our world today, in America, with all the greed that's bound up with the current economic mess and the lack of concern for biblical truth.

Love, Truth, and Justice, that as a catalytic force, they simply want to bear witness to the Triune God as he engages sacrificially through the church in our cultural context. So it's putting together that biblical theology of engagement with what Dr. Perkins has been about with his community-development work for decades.

## 22. CHRISTIANS ENGAGING CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

**JMF:** You're partnered with Dr. John Perkins in an organization called Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice. Can you tell us what that's about?

**PLM:** The drum majors partnership is something that started a little over a year ago when Dr. Perkins had asked me to join him for this partnership where it brings to bear the theology of engagement that I have developed that's based in Trinitarian thought, and then also his work as a practitioner with community development motifs...and to join those two in a word of inspiration and exhortation to the church at large in terms of how we should engage and challenge and build up the church in terms of confronting race and class barriers in American Christianity and beyond today.

We've gone out and spoken in different places. The Luis Palau Association sponsored the Drum Major's Conference in Portland. We spoke at the CCDA Convention last year together in Miami, Florida, and we spoke at Calvin College for a conference earlier this year. We're looking for opportunities to go out and speak and really encourage other people to join the band, so to speak. The imagery for this work comes from Dr. King's own sermon where he talked about being remembered as a drum major for justice. We're about love, and love is the impetus, or it's the momentum building for issues of justice and truth. We want everything to be captured by God's holy love in Christ, and then truth and justice.

We live in a culture where biblical truth is not often taken seriously, and we want everything to be grounded in biblical truth. And justice...we live in a culture of greed and consumerism, where people are taking advantage of

the system to get rich as the poor get poorer. So we want love propelling or moving truth and justice forward. That's our message to encourage, invite, challenge the church at large, to join in this movement of God's Spirit as we seek to be catalysts for this work under God's direction.

**JMF:** If a church wants to join in with that movement, what does that look like in terms of the effect on the local church or what the church would do?

**PLM:** We would look for opportunities to go out and speak together to a church or churches or schools, institutions. We do several things in terms of our speaking because it's an inspirational work. We're not trying to do the work for people, but to come in and give biblical theology, practical applications and illustrations, talk to leaders and work with them on things that they can be doing in their communities, and maybe we can talk a little bit about what Dr. Perkins has stood for, by way of relocation, reconciliation, and distribution—his three principles that he's been known for, for decades—advisor to several U.S. presidents on these matters...on poverty and racism.

With relocation, it's a matter of following God's own incarnation, where Jesus was incarnate—he relocated from heaven to earth...and so to be intentional about locating or relocating into communities in disrepair. There are different ways in which that can be done, but one way is a group of people actually moving in and living in the community and staying in a community to build the community up from the grass roots—a community that's been in disrepair.

Reconciliation, first the vertical component of being reconciled to God, because that's huge: On issues of race and class divisions, we need to be born from above, because the movement of God's Spirit is essentially important if we're going to move beyond those historic and present tensions of jealousy, envy, greed, hatred, whatever you want to call it, and even those more benign forms of simple indifference. So we need the movement of God's Spirit. Reconciliation with God then flows forth in a love for neighbor, reconciliation with our neighbor—black and white, Asian, Hispanic, you name it. Again, breaking down those divisions. It's not just race—it's class divisions and beyond. So that's reconciliation.

And then redistribution. It's not simply about giving money to a situation, because you can throw money at something and not be very relational or communal or caring—it's just ease of bad conscience. With redistribution, it's a life-on-life form of solidarity, where people are moving into a community, or people coming in from outside. As long as there's an incarnate presence working amongst the people, other people can come in and associate too, in sharing not only financially in a work, but also with talents and resources—expertise.

I would add there that it has to go beyond charity. Perkins has written a



book called *Beyond Charity*, and what I would add to that, is that Jesus wasn't condescending in his engagement of the Samaritan woman. He was really in need. He needed water there in John chapter 4, and she gave him a drink. There was that sense of...from Jesus coming in this humility and love of equality. He saw her as a precious human being created in the image of God, and so he cared for her, I would say, even as an equal.

We need to get beyond charity, where we keep the poor, as I like to say, on the far end or at the far end of our outstretched arm—that we are into token gestures rather than really entered into relationship and seeing the value in them—and also our need for them, because there are so many ways in which we ourselves benefit from that relationship with people who are in impoverished situations.

Not that poverty is sexy, it's not, but at the same time, how many stories have you heard of missionaries or churches going to Mexico or elsewhere and coming back and saying, "These people had so little and yet they had so much in Christ, and we have so much, and yet so little in Christ." They're moved toward a greater sense of discipleship and concern for Christ having his way in their lives. There's a sense in which, in those encounters, people come away impacted and can actually be built up. The need is mutual rather than a token gesture of condescension. It has to be incarnational and communal, so to speak.

**JMF:** Is there an example of that that you can give? Of a church that made a transition like this and began to experience their Christian walk in a fresh way?

**PLM:** There are churches that have been concerned for this. I think of Irvington Covenant in Portland, Oregon, formerly pastored by Henry Greenidge. He's an African-American pastor, and is intentional with people in the community, people with different ethnicities being intentional in concern for the plight of the urban poor. They have a ministry to the ex-offender population, amongst others, the work with the elderly. And so Irvington Covenant in Portland would be an example.

Another church from this vantage point would be Lawndale Community in the Chicago area. Coach Wayne Gordon is the person who is responsible for founding that work, I believe, and he's a close associate of Dr. Perkins. And there are other works around the country.

A movement that's concerned for multi-ethnic (and I had mentioned this before in another segment) is the Mosaix Global Network. Mark DeYmaz and others are seeking to be intentional along those lines.

I'm excited that different works are developing. There's the Christian Community Development Association that meets annually. It's a network to encourage groups working in this regard. I would also mention your denomination's own Office of Reconciliation Ministries, which is an outreach ministry of Grace Communion International. Curtis, who we both

know, runs that ministry, and it's a vital work that the denomination is developing, with Curtis May as the leader of that. So that would be a work that people within the denomination and beyond could connect with to learn more on how to go forward in this regard.

Then there's the John M. Perkins Foundation in West Jackson, Mississippi. All these works are great resources to help, along the lines of what we're talking about.

**JMF:** And Trinitarian theology...how does Trinitarian theology come to bear on this work?

**PLM:** In the context of consumerism, for example, we have to move beyond the commodification of human identity. What I mean by that is where we treat people as objects; we use them to get what we want. If you go back to the slave days, the trade triangle of sugar, slavery, and shipping, it was all bound up with what we might call materialism, or what have you. They needed slaves to get the sugar to put on the ships to send back to Europe, and it was the commodification, the using of people for financial value, financial gain.

We don't do that in the same context today, but when we use people for whatever means or end we have in sight, rather than seeing them as people having inherent dignity and value, as I was talking about before, even amongst the poor, that we look at them as equal. Especially among the poor! Looking at them as equal, rather than as people we can give to and look down upon and feel good about ourselves. That's commodifying them for our own spiritual growth, so to speak.

Trinitarian theology is about communion of persons, but we don't use people as means to the end, of individuals in isolation using people for our own individualistic gain, but really a communal reality, where we ourselves become the community of God reflecting what it means to be the people of the Triune God, three persons in communion, giving sacrificially to one another for all eternity. That is the model, and the basis, and the foundation stone, and the inspiration for living life today.

I would go on to say that Jesus Christ incarnate—what greater example could there ever be of...he had everything—he who was rich became poor so that we could become the riches of God [2 Cor. 8:9], and he who knew no sin became sin so that we could become the righteousness of God [2 Cor. 5:21]. Instead of upward mobility and the yuppie dream, it's downward mobility and getting beyond homogeneity, of like attracting like—we move forward toward the “other” to embrace the other in all our distinctiveness to build a community that's truly diverse and a profound example and illustration of what the kingdom of God that is dawning in our midst is all about.

**JMF:** In your book, you talk about “beyond moralism” and “beyond escapism.” What is that referring to?

**PLM:** With the “beyond moralism” aspect, I’m getting at the issue that it has to move beyond simply doing good deeds, because Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 talks about anything not done for love will profit us nothing. So even giving all of our possessions to the poor, surrendering our bodies to the flames, speaking in the tongues of men of angels...but having no love or having no love, it profits us nothing [1 Cor. 13:1-3].

For Paul, in the context of dealing with the Corinthian church (where there wasn’t much love...and we’re talking about the works of the Spirit and the like) he puts it in the context of the moral axle, in a way, and says you can have all these things and do everything right, but if it’s not birthed from God’s love, which according to Paul in Romans 5 comes from the Spirit’s movement in our hearts, that the love of God, as Paul says in Romans 5:5, “The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

That changed heart creates faith, in my view, as I read the Bible, because Paul says, “I’ve been crucified with Christ,” Galatians 2:20, “and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me, who gave himself for me.” Faith itself, I believe, is an empty hand. We don’t bring anything to the table. Luther said, “Faith is an empty hand.” Faith itself is created by God’s Spirit moving in our hearts giving us a new love, creating in us, instead of self-love where we turn inward on ourselves, the selfless love of God poured out from God into our lives, and that gets us from beyond self-concern to concern for others—especially those who can do nothing to elevate our own status—the distressed, the downtrodden.

But we go beyond rights, our own rights, and the like, and that will lead us into issues of getting beyond escapism out of concern for people who have no rights and benefitting them because of God’s compassionate loving overflow of salvation in our lives. The love-transformed heart births ethical action. Otherwise, it can be pharisaical; it can be just a “dutiful” Christianity. It has to be birthed from God’s love. That’s what I mean by living beyond moralism...and the intent, and the heart transformation.

But some would take that to mean, “Okay, so as long as we have this heart transformed and feel different, things are fine, and then we don’t have to do anything about it.” No. If we’re truly converted, I believe...and it’s not that we’re supposed to analyze our spiritual navels and the like, but a true conversion will always lead toward care for the other. I think of Zacchaeus the tax collector...when salvation had come to his house, Jesus said, “Salvation has come to your house Zacchaeus” [Luke 19:9], it’s because he who had usurped people’s significance, had taken money from them, had been a robber, so to speak, as a tax collector, he says, “I’m going to pay you back and then some and give bountifully to those whom I’ve taken from.”

It’s in that context that you see the transformation having fruit. The transformed heart always gives rise toward a life of concern for the other.

That's what I mean by moving beyond escapism. Often our Christianity has been how to show non-Christians that Christians can have fun, too. I think that's a very weak view of what it means to be caring for others. While it's good to have fun, all the more important is to have love, and to concern one's self for the needs of those in our community—especially in a culture so captured with affluenza. I think that the problems are intensifying.

**JMF:** Affluenza?

**PLM:** I think there was a PBS documentary a while back about the problems of affluenza, affluence, and how it's sickening our society. There's not a problem with having money, it's what you do with money that's the issue. Do we distribute our wealth to benefit all, or do we take it to ourselves like the rich fool and say "I'm going to build more and more and more for myself," and God says, "Your life is going to be taken from you this night because you haven't been concerned for the things that are on my heart" [Luke 12:18-20].

If I'm concerned for what's on God's heart, that shows that I love God and have concern for his concerns, and I want to please him just because he loves me so. It's not so I can find my merit or my worth ultimately, it's just because I'm captured with God's love and so therefore I would want to give because he continues to give to me. It's gratitude, not guilt trip. It's not sense of obligation as in guilt, but that sense of obligation that comes from gratitude. I have a debt to pay simply to God's love which I could never repay, nor should I try, but that I would love on others as he has loved on us.

That's what Paul says, "The love of Christ compels us" [2 Cor. 5:14]. Jesus is saying, "Those who are forgiven much, love much" [Luke 7:47]. That's what we need to see in the American church. We've been too concerned for our own image and too concerned, in so many contexts, out of fear for our rights...not having our rights being taken away from us. It's all fear, fear, fear, and it's not missional, it's all insular. That reflects to me a spirit not of God but a spirit that...Paul says, "We have not been giving a spirit of timidity or fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and a sound mind, and discipline" [2 Tim. 1:7]. That's what we've been given, and so it should move us from even beyond seeking our own rights to seeking the rights of others.

As Karl Barth, whom I've written about, once said and once wrote, "A church that is always demanding its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." What Dr. Perkins and I are about is not...somehow with our respective vocations and our partnership together...is not about somehow taking back America from our enemies, but laying down our lives as the church for those who have often been seen as those outcast and shunned by the church that we would have that concern, that compassionate concern of co-existence and of the sacrificial

love of the Savior poured out through the Holy Spirit.

**JMF:** You've also written about Karl Barth in *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the Theology of Karl Barth*, published in '03 by Eerdmans. What does Barth bring to the question of Christ and culture in this context?

**PLM:** Barth is often misunderstood in terms of his engagement and understanding and reflections on culture. He's often looked upon as a despiser of culture. It's an issue, a problem, in Barth studies that hasn't gone away readily. One of the things that I wanted to set out to do is show...and others have done this in certain contexts as well... to show that Barth had a very nuanced, multi-faceted approach to engaging culture. I think there's much there that is advantageous to someone who is seeking to develop a theology of culture.

If I could just say for a minute, part of my work or a key part of my work is on the theology of culture. That's not just systematic theology, which is dealing systematically with the various themes in church doctrine. With theology of culture, it's focused even more so on the matter of "So what does that entail for how we engage in our contemporary cultural context?" and seeing that all theology, every aspect of theology, always arises within a cultural context.

That doesn't mean it's relativized, as some would fear, but it means it's particularized—that these things aren't just coming out of a hat like a rabbit—they're not pulled out willy-nilly in that way. They actually arise, whether people are conscious of it or not, from a cultural context. Every theology is that way, so we need to be aware of it and be attentive to it, so that we can engage thoughtfully and meaningfully the biblical text, and bringing that home to how we engage in contemporary culture.

Just one other point along those lines...I think it was John Stott, the famous Anglican evangelical minister, who said that evangelicals are very good at engaging the Bible, but not so good on engaging culture. Liberals are quite good at engaging culture, but not so good on engaging the Bible. As ministers of God's word, we need to be concerned for both. As Barth would have said, and did say, having one finger in the bold print of the Bible and the other in the bold print of the daily newspaper. We need to be in those two worlds, and bridging those two worlds as ministers of the gospel.

Barth had a multi-faceted approach to culture, and all of his theology arises within various cultural contexts, because it was written over many decades and developed. He was responding in one way or another to the situations that he faced, such as Hitler in Nazi Germany. Barth was one of the key opponents of the Hitler regime.

Barth would often attack "cultural Christianity," but it wasn't that Barth lacked an appreciation for various aspects of culture in its various

manifestations, such as Mozart. He had a great appreciation for the music of Mozart, which is striking to people and puzzling to many, because Mozart was a Mason, was perhaps a nominal Roman Catholic, and Barth was a Protestant theologian, and what might he see in someone like Mozart? But he saw him as the theologian of providence par excellence in terms of his music. So Barth would listen every day to Mozart's music,

Barth was a great student of politics. He would read and study on politics and would speak to issues in and out throughout his theological career, on the issues of the Soviet Union, democracy, what was going on again in Hitler's Germany and beyond...working with the miners in their crisis in his early days as a pastor in Switzerland, where he was from.

So Barth was engaging culture in a variety of ways—not always negatively, sometimes quite constructively and positively. So that was one of the things I wanted to bring out in terms of the book—showing this multi-faceted approach. There's a famous book by H. Richard Niebuhr called *Christ and Culture*, and I think it has merit in terms of certain typologies, but I also think it's lacking. I've written on this with my colleague, Brad Harper, in our new book *Exploring Ecclesiology*, where I deal with Niebuhr's categories and see they have a place, because you can use them to classify.

But Barth's model doesn't quite fit any of Niebuhr's categories. It's not Christ against culture, it's not Christ of culture, it's not even necessarily Christ transforming culture, to use Niebuhr's categories. There is a *sui generis* [one of a kind] quality to Barth's work. It's very multi-faceted, and he was a complex theologian.

Those are some of the things that really intrigued me about Barth, including his opposition to Hitler, because the work of most theologians is not taken seriously in terms of having much say in terms of the broader sphere. Barth's work did have that kind of import for the political issues of his day. I don't think we should politicize the faith, where we use the faith to baptize this or that political party, but if we're talking about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ does impact all kinds of political issues.

When Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" [John 18:36], he wasn't saying, "My kingdom is irrelevant"—he was saying, "I'm not going to be manhandled by you, but my kingdom will intersect, will call into question, will judge your culture and even your reign and rule, Pilate, because I am a king of a different kingdom and that kingdom is coming, and it will be the eschatological reign of God in Christ's person." I appreciate that in Barth's thought—that he had that kind of robust theology that had import for all kinds of issues in his day, and I believe also beyond.

I'd like to talk to that issue of how his theology, in many respects, gives rise to a missional engagement in a post-Christian America. When I talk

about missional Christianity, I don't mean a church with a missions program. You can have a missions program and not be missional, because you're not thinking about how to engage the world around you, you just have a program and everything has to fit inside that mold, if you will. When I talk about being missional, it's getting outside of our doors, trying to think in a way, communicate in a way...not that necessarily people are going to agree with it, but at least they understand.

We don't want Jesus to be the stumbling block, he *is* the stumbling block, and we have to deal with him, too. I don't want to be the stumbling block. I don't want to be an obstacle to faith, but Jesus will be a stumbling block to people, and I don't want to stand in the way of Jesus in one way or another. So when we're talking about missional, it doesn't mean tickling people's ears, it doesn't mean being politically correct, but it does mean presenting the gospel in ways that people around us can understand and can engage meaningfully, constructively.

I think the evangelical movement in the church at large in America, if anyone's reading the newspapers and listening carefully to the airwaves and reading carefully, people are going to see that in our scene, that America's changing rapidly. I think a lot of Christians are threatened by what they see as the rise of secularism in America—things may not be going politically, ethically where many evangelicals would like them to go. It depends on which aspect one's thinking of.

I'm glad, I'm thrilled that we've had the civil rights movement. I think there's been progress there for America. Some Christians don't seem to take all that too seriously and just think everything's getting worse. I think in some ways, things are getting better. But that being said, secularism, nonetheless, is on the rise. There's a lot of talk today about Christianity and religion in general being antagonistic and not good for the common good, and evangelical Christians and Christians more broadly in America...

We've moved from the Simpson-esque version of the evangelical Christian and the Christian as Ned Flanders, if you're familiar with that...you know, nice guy, a bit naïve...to looking more like a fascist. We're actually made to look like Adolf Hitler, that we're antagonistic toward the common good, rather than caring for our society at large. How do we engage in that context? Do we close the doors and retreat and develop even more a fortress mentality, which I hear about? This is a challenge to people, and I would just ask people to keep thinking and keep dialoging.

But all this talk about going back to the religion of our founding fathers... I really struggle with that, because for one, our founding fathers, and this is one of these delicate issues, not all of them were God-fearing biblical Christians. There were many Deists in the American government. Thomas Jefferson was no Bible-believing Christian. I mean, cut and paste, he had a Reader's Digest version of the Bible. He cut out the miracles. We

didn't have just the government and American culture at large filled with Bible-believing, God-fearing Christians. There were some of those, that was a big part, there were a lot of other sectors. So we've always dealt with this.

I also like what John Perkins said, "If we go back to the religion of our founding fathers, I'm still a slave. And I don't want to be that." So it's this funny historiography about what we value and what we think is meritorious and that we want to go back there. I want to live now. I want to engage in biblical Christianity now, and I just feel that there's this fear of losing "our rights," losing our power. I don't see Jesus or Paul and others having that fear factor. I want to, as a Christian, influence my society, and to the extent I can, influence government in the ways that I think honor the society at large.

In the light of that Barth statement, and I think he was reflecting on Scripture when he said, "The church that demands its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." There's that fear of rights, and our rights, and you've got to preserve those rights. We're not caring for the other. We're not caring especially for the dispossessed, like a William Wilberforce, the leader of England's parliament on the race issue—he lost his wealth. His life was threatened numerous times because he was willing to use all of his affluence and influence for the sake of people who could not benefit him—the slaves. And that just speaks volumes to me.

That's the kind of evangelical Christianity we need—not because we're trying to tickle ears, but because God is moving in our midst, and we're willing to lay it down like Esther in the Old Testament where Mordecai says, "Who is to say that you weren't raised up for a very hour like this, Esther? [Esther 4:14] Do not preserve your role as queen to gain more affluence and wealth and influence. Give your life for the people, otherwise God might dispose of you and put someone else in as queen." Esther's response should be all of our responses, "If I die, I die" [v. 16]. She put her life on the line for the sake of her oppressed people with Haman's holocaust ambitions.

That's the kind of sense of urgency we need to have—not taking back the centers of power from the left or the secularist and the atheists. I want righteousness and I want good government. Sometimes I think that there are people who are non-believers who have a better sense of that than we do, though. Our greatest concern should be how can we live compassionately and live of ourselves, because then we should influence as much as we possibly can.

Jesus and Paul and others, they didn't have this "moral majority." They didn't have places of power and affluence. I think that the church most often works best as a missional outpost where we haven't been given power, and we have to depend on the power of the cross. As Paul says, "The cross is foolishness and its weakness to most, but it is the power and



wisdom of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. That excites me, that challenges me, I long for us as the church in America to move into that sphere of engagement. I think Barth’s theology resonates with that and gives a theological platform for cultural engagement along those lines in a post-Christian context.

## 23. CONSUMER CHRISTIANS, AND GOD'S LOVE

**JMF:** I'd like to talk about your book *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*. You edited this book and worked on bringing the authors together. What themes did you see emerge in the preparation of this book?

**PLM:** I'd like to preface that by saying a little bit about what the book did in terms of bringing together these respective contributors and what the aim of the book was. It was to bring together many contributors who shared interest, passion, conviction on the subject of Trinitarian theology and to look at most, if not all, the major doctrines in what is called Systematic Theology from the vantage point of Trinitarian thought.

So, for example, prolegomena, which is first steps in theology, the first foundational guidelines of how you're going to do theology. What does that look like from a Trinitarian perspective? The doctrine of revelation, what does that look like? The doctrine of the image of God or the divine attributes or perfections, the sacraments or ordinances, and on it went...ethics. We dealt with various subjects, sin and grace, all from this vantage point of Trinitarian theology. So that was the aim of the book, and I was really encouraged by the consistency and the integrity of the work as a whole with the different contributors and the themes that appeared and continue to appear.

That brings us to the question you were asking. I think a key thing that would appear at various points would be participation — participation in the triune life of God (and we'll come to that later as we're discussing issues of grace and how that gets us beyond legalism and even burnout in ministry, things of that sort) but that issue of participation in Christ. God does everything through the Son and the Spirit. That is a key aspect of Trinitarian thought.

Colin Gunton (the book was dedicated to his memory as a Trinitarian

theologian) would like to quote Irenaeus, the second-century theologian who said that “God does everything through his two hands, the Son and the Spirit.” That was a key framework, a key aspect that continued to appear — that God works always through the personal mediation of the Son and Spirit. The personal dynamic — the interpersonal nature of God and how that has import for how we live, for issues like revelation, where we look at the Bible relationally. We understand sin and grace...non-relational in the case of sin, from a relational perspective in the case of grace. All those things came into play...and atonement — understanding the atonement from the standpoint of this Trinitarian relational matrix.

Those are some of the themes that appeared and reappeared in the book. Others have said that they felt that it was a fitting tribute to Professor Gunton, who was my theological mentor from my doctrinal studies days and whom I miss dearly... He’s had an impact on multitudes of people across the world. I’m just grateful for the privilege of having worked under his supervision for a time.

**JMF:** I’m sure a lot of people will find that book both encouraging as well as a great resource for understanding Trinitarian theology and its practical impact. Your latest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, which you co-authored with Brad Harper, and it’s subtitled *An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*. Can you tell us about that one?

**PLM:** The book, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, is framed by way of a Trinitarian and eschatological vantage point. Those are the two angles, if you will, from which we approach all the different subjects that you would hope to find in an introductory text on the doctrine of the church, which is ecclesiology, the study of the church. We deal with the sacraments or the ordinances, when we deal with issues of order in ministry, worship, and culture, and mission all from the standpoint, in one way or another, from a Trinitarian and kingdom vantage point.

Dr. Brad Harper did his work on George Ladd from the University of St. Louis for his doctrinal studies. So that Laddian paradigm of the “now and not yet” — that enters into play when we look at the church. In many contexts, especially amongst dispensationalists in America...I have a great respect for Dispensationalism, and I teach at a school that’s historically that, but often those in the Dispensational tradition have not seen the church itself as a kingdom community because [in Dispensational thought] the kingdom is all future and it’s Israel.

So this was unique in that sense, to talk about the gospel of the kingdom, the church is the community, the eschatological community of the Triune God, and that has practical import when you’re talking about such issues as race and the like. I have alluded to this in some of our previous segments — the church must live now in light of what will be. So we use Harper’s words, thus bringing the future into the present. We live

now in light of that eschatological reality in the present context — the now of the not yet, so to speak. The church would be, must be seen, as others have argued, as a concrete manifestation of the eschatological kingdom.

There is also that aspect of Trinitarian thought in that we must see ourselves...this is how the book starts out with the first chapter...as a *being-driven* community. The first chapter is “the church as a Trinitarian community,” the church as a kingdom community, so to speak...and so the church as a Trinitarian community, the being-driven church. While I think that Pastor Warren’s purposes for *Purpose Driven Church* are biblical, I don’t see a problem with them, I think more foundational than purpose and activity is *being*, communion, relationality.

We should all be purposeful, but you can be purposeful in a variety of ways. What about the baby who doesn’t have much purpose in life, or the elderly person who’s not able to function very well? They might not be seen to have much purpose, but they’re still loved, and they’re in relationship, I would hope, in the church. But we so often look at people pragmatically, in a utilitarian way, of what benefit we can gain from them if they attend our church. What are they going to put in the offering plate, or what kind of tools or gifting might they have? Of course, we want people to bring their resources and gifts and talents to the church, but do we care for them as persons in relationship?

We have all these churches that are called “community church,” but, as a friend of mine in London said, “The very thing people want most they find most difficult to give — communion.” We all want it, but it’s costly, and it causes for a lot of consternation, because we usually don’t want to really build the kind of community that’s needed, and that calls for a lot of sacrifice.

Relationality must be at the core. The Trinitarian framework of our churches being the people of God — because that’s what we are biblically, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body and bride of Christ, those things, the household of God. Most of those images, if not all of them, are framed relationally, organically, and not by way of institutional frames of reference.

I would hope that as we’re inviting people to our churches, that they’re coming not because we have the best programs in town, which I think can play into the consumerism — who has the best children’s programs, who has the best latté, you know, who has the best coffee bar, on and on and on it goes. Instead of that kind of frame of reference, it should be “come be the people of God with us,” -- participational, relational. And that’s key to the book.

Yet, as George Hunsberger, a leading figure on missional theology, has said, “So often in America the church is viewed as a vender of religious goods and services...” ...the commodification of human identity [turning people into commodities] and of spirituality and of consumerism. What

we're trying to get at is that the church is the human community, the people of the Triune God, and we must live as that people in the here and now.

I would just like to mention one other point that brings us into the issue of contemporary cultural considerations, and, as you had mentioned in the introduction at a few points in our various talks, that I edit a journal called *Cultural Encounters*, which is a biblically informed Trinitarian engagement of contemporary culture and its various manifestations. I have a real burden for that, and it flows out of an institute I direct called "New Wine, New Wineskins" at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland.

With that cultural framing, and we did a lot of the chapters, follow-up sections, as well as a major chapter in exploring ecclesiology from this cultural vantage point. In America the church is often seen as a voluntary association of religious individuals whose true allegiance lies with the state, the market, or the nuclear family rather than being seen as the people of the Triune God, the kingdom community of the Triune God. I think we need to move beyond that idea of voluntary association of religious individuals where we just pick and choose the churches we want to attend and we find our true identity with the state, the market, or even the soccer family motif, of finding that people are more connected to those after-school or weekend programs than they are to being part of the people of God. There are many reasons why that's a problem — partly the way America is framed from its founding but also a contemporary consumer problem.

These are all themes that emerge and re-emerge in the book. And we're hopeful that it will be of help not only to evangelicalism but to the broader church as well, because it is also an ecumenical book concerned for the church at large. But we're hopeful that it will help the evangelical community become more ecclesiastically framed. With all of our emphasis on individuality, it's very hard for us to see the church as something other than the people of God. We so readily look at it as a means to an end of helping our own individual spirituality, and God's concern is first and foremost for the church. I'm not the bride of Christ, I'm not the body of Christ, I'm *part* of the bride, I'm *part* of the body. So the church's concerns must file away at my own concerns in the church.

**JMF:** What advice would you give pastors who want to shift their focus from legalism to grace, from an inward kind of a theology to a Trinitarian theology?

**PLM:** As it relates to the doctrine of the church and the like? I think for one, when we're talking about the church as the kingdom community of the Triune God and God as a holy lover, we must always see that we have to get beyond this idea of sin management — that we're going to church to manage our sin, to keep it under lock and key and close the doors. In fact, we don't even deal with our sin in the church. There's a lot of dysfunction. It's like with being an alcoholic (I have friends and loved ones who struggle

in that way, so I don't mean this in any demeaning manner) but that don't talk, don't feel, don't think about these things. That pertains to a variety of issues in the church. And we don't have safety, we don't have authenticity, and we have to create a safe environment where people can be authentic and really deal with issues.

One of the things we get at in *Exploring Ecclesiology* is that we need to see the church as not simply a sanctuary of saints but also a hospital for sinners. As Martin Luther made quite clear, we are both unrighteous apart from Christ but also righteous — but only in Christ. So we have to keep that dialectic in mind, if we're to move beyond behavioral Christianity. We have to acknowledge that we're all broken people saved by God's loving grace, and we're on this journey together. We're not finished products, and we need to love on one another and even see truth and holiness relationally.

And so also with truth, instead of having a guard-keeping mentality of gate-keeping, and if anyone doesn't line up theologically, we're just going to oust them, using doctrine as a means of how do we help people grow in the truth of Jesus Christ? To actually have a mindset that we're about relational truth, not truth as some kind of doctrinal position that we simply recite and stick on a wall. No, it's articulating what it is we believe and the reality of God in whom we participate. It's from a relational framework.

I believe that does help us get beyond behaviorism and legalism and to really work with people...disclosing to them first and foremost in preaching and in other ways this idea of who God is revealed in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, as God is a holy lover and is someone who longs to have communion with us. To understand who we are as the church in relationship to that God, I think that's really exciting to me and where I would hope that pastors would increasingly move to invite people to taste and see that the Lord is good in the communion of his saints.

**JMF:** If there was one main thing that you'd like to get across to people about God, what would that be?

**PLM:** I would long for people to know, and not simply to know cognitively, but to know experientially, that God and Christ truly loves them. I look out at the faces of people when I share about God's holy love for us in Christ and the Spirit and that God loves us dearly, and I can see so often in people's eyes a longing, a sense of longing, "If only that were true, I wish that were true, I want that to be true." But I think we live in a culture today where there's so much dysfunction in the family and in society at large, people don't know what it's like to be loved, to be cared for faithfully and for the long term, for the long haul. Show me a child who is secure, and I'll show you a child who is loved. Show me a child who's insecure, and I'll show you a child who has not been loved.

The apostle Paul, when he was Saul, was all about trying to perform, was all about trying to gain merit and worth and security. I think that he

struggled with these Pharisaical teachers about the circumcision laws who were really trying to take people away from security in Christ toward insecurity, and Paul was all about moving beyond that, because he was in that frame of reference for such a long time. Jesus would come on the Damascus road and love him, transform him, make him his own, make him someone who had a calling, a purpose, and life in him. Those who are forgiven much love much.

Myself, I've often had, and still struggle with, insecurities. It's often in my hard times — not the good times, in my hard times, that I have found that God truly loves me and that God comes close. When I'm thinking "If I go through these hard times, how will I ever make it?" I have found time and time again that he is there to sustain and to lift me up and to draw me into a closer relationship with him through his Son. I don't mean this as "pie in the sky" impractical spirituality. This is, to me, the most important thing.

The people I mentor in the internship program with New Wine, New Wineskins, the thing I want for them is what I want for myself too, is that whenever they're ministering, from whatever vantage point, it's not that they're trying to measure up and to make something of their lives, but everything would be not from measuring up, but from the measureless overflow of God's love in Christ. Again, Romans 5:5. I love coming back to that text. It was a key text to Luther, a key text to Jonathan Edwards, and a key text to Saint Augustine. "The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

I believe it's that love that creates faith, because if a child doesn't trust the parent, they're not going to believe in that parent. If they don't think that that parent loves them, they're really not going to trust. It's only when they know that their parent really cares for them and is living it out, that the child really trusts. So I think it's important for ministry, vitally important. How many people are in our chairs, in the pews, in the pulpits, who really don't think God loves them? They're performing in order to try to get at that. I can't wave a magic wand and make that happen for people. I think it comes through the trenches, the difficulties of life experiences, and being loved on by other people in the church. What we need is people who come alongside us and say, just as Christ has accepted us, Romans 15:7, "So I accept you."

I had a very painful past. I was very rebellious as a youth and went through a lot of self-doubt going into the ministry. I remember a pastor, mentor of mine, who said, "I accept you, Paul, and I love you, and I care for you, and I believe God's hand is upon you." He spoke forth the words of Christ to me in the love of Christ and mentored me and secured me in that love because God does use his people to that end. We need one another to confess our sins to one another, as the New Testament talks

about, and also to encourage and exhort one another, but from a relational vantage point of moving forward participating in the triune life of God and his story, and that we're a part of that story. It's amazing to me. That's good news.

**JMF:** Where do you see the church, or where would you like to see the church in general in the U.S. ten years from now?

**PLM:** I would hope that as the church...I would long for this, I would pray for this...that we would be beyond the performance frame of reference of the driven-ness toward success. While I want us to be good stewards, I think a lot of times we're trying to play the role of God in the numbers games that we play, and one church competing with another church.

It's often subtle, sometimes not so subtle, but performance-based spirituality of, you know, pastors go to conferences. The question that's often asked of them I hear is, "So, how big is your church?" If their church is small, they lose value. That's the kind of thing that I think is really problematic. Then that pastor brings that pressure back to their churches, and then they start viewing people as means to an end of growing the church, rather than they themselves are the end as the church — the people of God are.

For an academic like myself, is it publish or perish? Or is the writing I do simply gratitude of just delighting in God's love and just having a burden to express that, and not looking to how I can build my resume? I have the struggles, too, pastors have their own struggles, but then, how does that shape itself in the lives of parishioners in the congregations — that performance of measuring up, measuring up, measuring up, and not making, not making it?

The call to sanctification in the churches should not be, don't be who you *are* — be what you're *supposed* to be. That's not how the apostle Paul spoke. It was, "Be who you are, not what you once were." So we're calling on people to be who they are in Christ, and to be that together with them, and to move into that safety and authenticity bound up with the holy love of God in Christ that secures us in the Spirit poured out in our lives and in our hearts. That's what I would hope for the church to move into and the reconciliation that that entails on subjects as we've talked before in previous sessions on moving beyond racism and classism divisions and the like, and moving toward a unity that's really a reconciled unity in the power of the Spirit to the honor of Jesus for the Father.

**JMF:** What do you see as some of the causes for legalism and behaviorism in Christian churches?

**PLM:** I believe people-pleasing is a really huge problem. I think of the Gospel of John. I'm working on a book on that subject with InterVarsity, and one of the things that keeps coming up is that they love the praise or the glory of man rather than the praise and glory of God, whereas Jesus



loved the Father's praise. He longed for the Father's affirmation. He had it — it wasn't something he had to go and seek after, but that's what concerned him is, was he pleasing his Father. That filial connection, that love relationship of the Father and Son, it kept Jesus immune to people-pleasing in his human state. It kept him from that evil.

Paul says quite strongly in the Galatians epistle, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men or of God? If I am still trying to win the approval of men, I am not a servant of Christ." He says, "You foolish Galatians, having begun in the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" He talks there about how he had to rebuke Peter in that same book because Peter would not associate with the Gentiles in table fellowship but with the Jews, because he was afraid of the Judaizers, so to speak, I believe, or just what his own people might think of him, and that enslaved him to a godless passion.

The word to be enslaved, as Martin Luther and others have talked about, we need to be enslaved to a godly passion controlled by the Spirit. That's not legalism, because those who are controlled by the Spirit, they're not enslaved to the law of sin and death, but they live by the fruit of the Spirit, "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Again, [that comes from] the book of Galatians. People pleasing, I think, it causes us to look inward trying to compensate, trying to cope, because we're trying to win the approval of people who are out to win their own approval. That's not freeing, that's enslaving in a very dysfunctional manner. So I'd say people-pleasing is a huge problem.

I think there's also the legalism that's bound up with performance-based spirituality. One of the things that Trinitarian theology involves is this key theme of participation. We've mentioned that, we've talked about it in different segments, but my own dean, Dr. Robert Redman, has talked about how there's so much ministry burnout...people talking about what they need to do for God, what they must do for God in ministry, instead of what they do *in* God, you know, "Abide in me and my word...abide in you." You know, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." "Apart from me you can do nothing, "Jesus says.

So it's participation. We live in God, not simply live for God. God doesn't even see us simply through Christ, he sees us *in* Christ. Paul's key phrase, "*en Christos*," in Christ. That would be the vantage point that guards us from legalism. It guards us from a performance-based spirituality. I'm really excited about what's going on in your own movement. I believe it's a movement of God's Spirit. I see so seldom a real vibrant concern for Trinitarian theology, and I cannot say enough how encouraged I am by what you're doing, and I would just encourage you and those who work with you, Mike, to keep moving in this direction, because you're an

encouragement to me, you're a good challenge to me and to many others to keep the faith and to press on in terms of Trinitarian thought, because it's not life-taking, it's life-giving.

It's made all the difference in the world to me because it's not a program, it's not a product that we sell to people — this is our God! God is a triune communion of persons — eternal, holy, life-giving, and calls us to participate in God's story for eternity. That is what I'm willing to live and die for. This is good news to me, and you guys are leading the charge by the Spirit of God leading through you to move in this direction. I can only pray God's richest blessings on you in this profound work, so thank you.

## 24. KEEPING CHRIST AT THE CENTER

**J. Michael Feazell:** Paul Molnar is a Catholic theologian and Professor of Systematic Theology at St. John's University in New York. He is author of

- *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*,
- *Incarnation and Resurrection*, and
- *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialog with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*.

Dr. Molnar is also editor of the Karl Barth Society of North America newsletter and president of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship.

It's a pleasure to have you with us today.

**Paul Molnar:** My pleasure.



**JMF:** We wanted to begin by talking about your book, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*. Tell us about how you came to know Thomas Torrance and how you came to write the book.

**PM:** It started in the early 1980s when I read his book *Reality and Evangelical Theology* — that was my first exposure to Torrance’s writing, and I enjoyed it a lot. I was at a theological conference and someone asked me who your favorite theologian was, and most of the people at the conference had Karl Rahner as their favorite theologian, so I said, “Actually, my favorite theologian is Thomas F. Torrance.” I had read that book, and then I had read a couple others besides, when I got that question. The person looked at me like I had three heads, because he had never heard of Thomas F. Torrance.

Subsequently I read most of his writings, and I was quite impressed with his writings. For good reason, Torrance is thought of as the most important British theologian of the 20th century. He taught for many years at the University of Edinburgh. He didn’t formally teach the doctrine of the Trinity for political reasons (because another professor was teaching that course), but he did work the doctrine into all of his lectures in Christology and so on, and he didn’t write his books on the Trinity until after he retired — his two major works on the Trinity.

What impressed me the most about Torrance was his vast knowledge of Patristic theology and his ability to not only demonstrate a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, but to show how the doctrine of the Trinity functions, enlightening us in our knowledge of Christ of the Incarnation, of atonement, of redemption, of ascension, resurrection, of the church, and the sacraments.

The reason I came to write this book was to show that side of Torrance which I was most interested in — his dogmatic theology. Torrance is famous for doing work in theology and science, which is also very important and very good, but my special emphasis in this book was looking at his dogmatic theology, and showing how Trinitarian thinking shaped all of his doctrines. That’s where I went with this book.

**JMF:** And you’ve met him a couple of times.

**PM:** I did. I invited him to St. John’s University in 1997 with the help of his son, Ian, who introduced me to him and enabled me to bring him to St. John’s. So he came to St. John’s to speak on Einstein and God, and he also gave that same lecture at Princeton and Yale in 1997, and while he was there I had lots of time to get to know him. We had dinner together, we had lunch together, we had quiet time together — driving in the car together, we talked theology. It was a great experience for me because by that point, I had been reading him for 15, 16 years, so I held him in awe, to be honest with you, so just to be able to speak with him.

One morning when I went to pick him up at the hotel he said, “Call me Tom,” so my tongue nearly froze in my mouth when he said that. I couldn’t call him Tom — he’s Professor Torrance, the great theologian. When I introduced him to the audience at St. John’s — he had sent me a C.V.

about this thick, and he said just introduce me, I'm just a humble minister of the gospel. That wasn't going to fly for me. Having had this C.V. this thick, I was going to say something. So I went through a long explanation of how important he was and the work he had done and so on. I'm not sure how well that pleased him, but he was quite polite about the whole thing.

He was in his 80s, though at that time he was quite young and we had good exchanges during the lecture and the question and answer session, and we took him to dinner afterwards and he had good exchanges with members of the theology department and the philosophy department. But he did indicate that that would probably be his last trip to the United States and that if I wanted to see him again, I would have to see him in Scotland, which, as it happened, I did get to do, two years later.

When I was lecturing at St. Andrews and at Aberdeen, I did visit him at his house on Braid Farm Road in Edinburgh, and in his study we sat and chatted for at least three or four hours. It was quite an experience. I learned a great deal from him. We had many exchanges of emails and letters, and he would send papers to me that he had written, and I would send papers to him and he would write back to me with comments on them. So I got to know him quite well and I learned a great deal from him.

He's affected my thinking a great deal. One of the major premises of my book, *Divine Freedom*, was that to think accurately about God, we would have to think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. That I learned from Tom Torrance. In my book on *Incarnation and Resurrection*, I learned the main thesis of the book from him, which is that you need to hold the incarnation and the resurrection together if you're going to have a clear understanding of the meaning of the resurrection. What that meant to him was this: If you tried to think about Jesus' resurrection in abstraction from the incarnation, you would have what he called a rather docetic view of the resurrection.

A docetic view of the resurrection in his mind meant that you would undermine the fact that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. It would just be an ideal description of something that may simply describe the disciples' reactions to Jesus, or it may describe some person's idea of life after death, but it wouldn't be an idea dictated by the fact that the resurrection was really the completion of the incarnation, in that it was also the completion of our reconciliation with God, by the fact that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. So his thinking had affected my thinking a great deal.

**JMF:** Many people have a sense that the incarnation ended at the resurrection. In other words, Jesus does not continue to be fully human for us. Even at prayer they're thinking of Jesus as being fully God, but no longer thinking of him as being fully human for us.

**PM:** Yes. Torrance spends a great deal in his life's work undermining that idea. Why would it be important for Torrance to undermine that idea?

It would be important because if Christ is not risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, and continually mediating between us and the Father in his full divinity and full humanity, in his mind we have no human connection with God. That's one way of putting it. Another way of putting it that we're not really saved humanly.

For Torrance, Jesus' continuing high priestly mediation is of the utmost importance, because if he is not the continuing mediator between us and God, then something else or someone else would have to be inserted into his place and would become for us the supposed mediation between us and God. We would be cut off from God by even thinking of such another mediator, because there is no such thing — it would compromise God's oneness and God's three-ness.

God mediates *himself* to us, the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and to even suppose that there could be some intermediary other than Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate who continues to mediate humanly and divinely, would compromise both his divinity and his humanity and the meaning of our salvation. So there's a lot at stake.

**JMF:** What are some examples of other mediators that anyone has proposed?

**PM:** There are theologians (that we spoke about before) who tend to emphasize what they call a theocentric theology, so that they could have the world religions agree about God. In their theocentrism, they would want to avoid the Christocentrism that would see Christ as the exclusive revealer and exclusive Savior of the world. Such theologians might argue that Christians could believe in Jesus as their Savior, but not as the Savior for everyone else, because that would be kind of exclusivism that imposed Christianity on other religions and would undermine a proper pluralism, in their estimation.

But for Torrance, you can't be theocentric at all unless you're Christocentric, because Christ is the one mediator who not only mediates God to us, but us to God, so that by sharing in his human knowledge of God, we have true knowledge of God. For Torrance, that's not something you can have if you construct a theocentrism that bypasses Jesus Christ, because that's essentially Unitarian theology.

**JMF:** That would be the idea that all roads lead to the same God, and that as long as you have a belief in God, then that's the main thing, as opposed to recognizing that Jesus is the revelation of the Father.

**PM:** That's right. People who hold that view, that sort of theocentrism as opposed to Christocentrism, they're basically thinking that Christocentrism is the product of the church's response to Jesus.

**JMF:** Christocentrism meaning Christ at the center?

**PM:** Putting Christ at the center, seeing Christ as the exclusive Savior, for example, or as the exclusive revealer. They argue against the whole

notion of exclusivism because they want to sound more open in a pluralistic society to other religions. But, in my mind, what they've done is they've given up the truth of the Christian faith, because what makes Christ unique and exclusively the revealer and Savior of the world is his eternal being as the only begotten Son of the Father. It's not something that's grounded in the reaction of the community — not the Christian community, not any community.

This is why Torrance rejected what he called Ebionite Christology and Docetic Christology. When he did his Christology, he explicitly stated that he didn't want to begin from below, as in Ebionite Christology, or from above, as in Docetic Christology, and then he defined the terms. For him, Ebionite Christology would be any sort of Christology which saw Jesus as an ordinary human being who became the Son of God at some point in his life history, or perhaps at the resurrection. Or it was a Christology that Jesus was an already existing human being into whom the Word descended at some point in his life.

For Torrance, the miracle of the virgin birth signifies that the eternally begotten Son mysteriously, miraculously became incarnate, took flesh from the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a miracle. It can't be explained, it can only be acknowledged. Therefore, Torrance would say, as he does in his book on the incarnation, that we must begin thinking Christologically with the fact of Jesus Christ. For him, the fact of Jesus Christ cannot be established historically from below, because if you just start with history, in his mind, all of your results theologically or conceptually would be historical results.

We must start in faith, recognizing and acknowledging who Jesus actually is. He opposed that sort of Ebionite Christology which suggested that it was the community's response to Jesus, and that people *thought* of him as a God; that made him unique, as an extraordinary human figure who people thought of as divine, but he wouldn't really be divine.

In Torrance's mind, it's the deity of Christ that gives meaning to his human history because the hypostatic union, the second person of the Trinity, the hypostasis, becoming incarnate, is precisely the one who posits into existence his human history. There is no human history apart from his divine being.

Docetic Christology is the idea that Jesus is just one particular historical embodiment of who God is, but not the *embodiment* of who God is. Torrance would reject both Christology from below and from above, arguing that we must begin by accepting history, humanity, and true divinity from the outset.

**JMF:** That raises the question of...Jesus was perfect and obeyed his Father's commands and so on, and yet, as Torrance argues, he took our fallen nature on himself, that which is not assumed is not redeemed. How

can both be true? How can he be perfect and yet take our fallen nature on himself?

**PM:** Let me give you what may sound like a perplexing answer to that question at first. I think Torrance would say we can't explain how that can be so, because if we could, we wouldn't need to acknowledge it and to begin thinking about the reality in faith. But beyond that, he would say it *can* be so, because in becoming human and assuming our fallen human nature into union with his divine being, God healed our self-will and therefore our sin, beginning with his becoming incarnate and continuing throughout his whole life of obedience through to his death on the cross and completely in the resurrection and ascension.

He would say that God never surrendered his divinity in becoming incarnate (so he could forgive our sins, because he was God incarnate), but he could also, from the human side, live our reconciliation subjectively in his perfect life of obedience. Unless the Word actually assumed our fully human nature, he wouldn't have come all the way to us within our human history. Redemption takes place within the personal being of the mediator, both so that when Jesus suffers God-forsakenness in obeying the Father, he lives out a human life in the midst of sin and temptation, in the midst of stresses and strains that would want to divide the unity that took place in the hypostatic union, but, in the end, did not do so.

**JMF:** Hypostatic union being ...

**PM:** The hypostatic union is the unique union of the divine Word and the human nature of Jesus. We participate in Jesus' humanity through faith in him. Torrance would say that the hypostatic union is utterly unique — there is no analogy for it in experience or in any form of knowing. That's why he would say of Jesus that Jesus himself is an ultimate. He says Jesus is an ultimate, no, Jesus is the ultimate. By *ultimate*, he means that in any science you have to work with certain ultimates, without which the science wouldn't make any sense. Those ultimates cannot be proven or justified on any other grounds other than the fact that they are what they are.

He would say that Jesus is who he is — the word of God incarnate. The hypostatic union is that utterly unique event signifying that Jesus the Word was born of the Virgin Mary and that he was therefore truly divine and truly human throughout his entire life. Because Jesus is the ultimate, there is no ground for verifying who Jesus is outside of Jesus himself. That's why it's so important to recognize that in the resurrection and ascension, Jesus continues to live and interact with us even now.

For Torrance to speak of the Holy Spirit is really to speak of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. If you spoke of the Spirit and weren't speaking of our union with Christ through that Spirit and therefore through faith, you weren't speaking in, and by, and through, and about the Holy Spirit at all. That's crucially important — the fact that Jesus is the ultimate.



What it means to Torrance is: the first [group of] theologians, who try to verify who Jesus is in his uniqueness by a study of history or try to verify who Jesus is by some sort of *a priori* Christology, or what someone like Karl Rahner calls a Searching Christology, that suggests that we can construct an understanding of what humanity is and what humanity is searching for, and in that search discover the true meaning of Jesus. Torrance would reject that sort of thinking because he would say if that's the route that we pursue, then it's our search that becomes determinative of who Jesus is — we no longer are absolutely in need of and rely on Jesus himself, who at present is disclosing to us who he is. That would be seriously problematic.

If I could just give one example: I have it in my book on divine freedom, in chapter 6, where I contrast Torrance and Rahner on their interpretations of the resurrection. Rahner says that he's not going to begin with Jesus Christ, but with a transcendental experience. Rahner argues that wherever anyone has hope for some sort of life beyond death, that person already experiences the meaning of the resurrection, he even says, perhaps anonymously, where Torrance would say you can't have an experience in the resurrection anonymously, because to have an experience of the resurrection is to know that Jesus Christ himself was raised from the dead and as such is the mediator who empowers us to know God conceptually.

He would say to Rahner, "You're holding what I would call a non-conceptual understanding of God." Rahner does indeed hold such an understanding when he argues that we have un-thematic of God, anonymous knowledge of God. Torrance would say there is no such thing as anonymous knowledge of God. Either you know God because your concepts are tied to the events depicted in the gospel story — his incarnation, his resurrection, his preaching, his ascension. Either you know God conceptually, or you don't know God truly at all — what you're describing is your own experience, symbolically interpreted. Torrance was dead against that sort of thing.

**JMF:** What is the right explanation for the idea of a person who doesn't know Christ and yet experiences good things and lives out good things and so on? Since Christ is the only source of what is good, isn't there a sense in which there's a participation in that which one doesn't know what he's participating in yet?

**PM:** In one sense, everybody is in relation with Jesus Christ. But theologically, to understand what that means, one would first have to understand who Jesus Christ was and what he did. Otherwise, the danger in the statement that you made to me is that one could argue that, as long as one is a good person, one is already a Christian.

I don't think we would want to equate simply the idea of being good with being a Christian because in being good, we could then rely on our own goodness with the idea that by being good, God somehow owes us our

righteousness. However, Torrance argues that when Christ died for the sins of the world, he died not just for the bad part of us, but for the good part of us. I think by that he means that just by being good, we're not necessarily thereby Christians.

**JMF:** Yes. We're talking about two different things, in a sense. We're talking about what is the nature of the unbeliever, or the non-believer, or the not-yet-believer (or however we want to say it) in terms of their union with Christ by virtue of his incarnation on behalf of humanity, that on one side, and the nature of the relationship of the believer on the other. Not that the unbeliever is a Christian, but nevertheless, the non-believer is taken up into Christ in his incarnation.

**PM:** That's right. Objectively.

**JMF:** Right. And there is, to that degree, a participation in Christ whether he knows it or not.

**PM:** True.

**JMF:** But the believer then enters into a relationship that is personal and is knowing and is a fellowship, friendship, walking with God, and worshipful personal relationship that transcends the other.

**PM:** Yeah. Let me clarify something that I said a few minutes ago when I was talking about Rahner's statement to the effect that those who have an experience of hope have an experience of the resurrection whether they know it or not. What that tends to mean in his thought is that we can rely on our experiences of hope in order to explain the meaning of Christ's resurrection. The problem that I was pointing out was that for Torrance, you can't even explain the resurrection by exploring people's experiences of hope, because the resurrection is its own explanation. We need to rely on the risen Lord himself to make sense of it to us.

When Rahner argued that you could have an anonymous experience of the resurrection just by having hope for eternal life, I think Torrance would say that is a rather docetic explanation of the resurrection, because it's equating the meaning of the resurrection with our hope for something beyond death. That's the point I was trying to get at with that. Christ died for the sins of the world so that everyone somehow is already included in his resurrection, the difference between Christians and others is that Christians recognize the meaning of that statement.

Any attempt to neutralize that statement by equating an experience of a knowledge of the resurrection with our experiences of hope for life beyond death subverts the need to believe in Christ's bodily resurrection and understand that as the meaning of eternal life itself. It could undermine the reality of eternal life, at least conceptually, because you would be equating it with something that's a universal experience instead of recognizing that it's something that can only be had and understood in faith by an actual union with the risen Lord himself — it loses specificity. Does that make better

sense?

**JMF:** I think so. It would be the difference between recognizing that...to use an analogy, maybe not a very good one, but we all have a shadow if we're standing out in the sun. If you look at the shadow and then try to explain from the shadow what it means to be a human being, you wouldn't be able to get there from there. That doesn't mean that the shadow is not related in a very real and positive sense with a human being who is casting the shadow.

**PM:** I think that makes sense. In that sense, Christ's life to the resurrection casts a shadow over the entire human race, but only those who see the meaning of the events of his life understand the inner meaning.

**JMF:** It's an entry point for evangelism, it would seem, though, to be able to point out to someone that those things that are good in their nature, their love for their children, for example, doesn't come from nowhere — it's a reflection of who Christ is in them and with them as a human being. It isn't something that springs out of them, nor does it just come from nowhere. It's that Christ is already at work in you. Christ already is in you. Why not come, why not acknowledge what the source of this love is, and know that you are loved and accepted, and turn to him? Does that make sense?

**PM:** Well, it does make sense, but the danger in that is that the focus would then be on people's experiences of love and not on the one who empowers it.

**JMF:** What I mean is that to help a person who thinks, which so many do, that I'm worthless, God doesn't love me, how could he? If you knew me like I do, then you wouldn't be telling me that God could actually love me, so I need to get good before we have this discussion. But instead, we're able to say to them, God already loves you and accepts you. Where do you think this came from, or that came from? God has already done everything necessary for you. Why not acknowledge that and turn to him?

**PM:** That makes sense. I'd agree with that.

**JMF:** But that's at the heart of where there's a lot of difficulty people have in trying to comprehend Trinitarian theology, because they will assume that "You're saying that if Christ's union with humanity through the incarnation has actually made a difference already and he had made himself one with humanity in such a way that he will not let it go, and will not be who he is without humanity, then you're saying that everybody, even unbelievers, are saved."

That isn't the point at all. The point is that everyone is in union [with Christ], but not that everyone is a believer and is participating in the relationship in the way that a believer would, in the transformational way. But as an entry point for evangelism, you are able to say not that you have to do something in order to get God to like you, but that he already does.

He's already taken you up and done everything necessary for you.

**PM:** That's right.

**JMF:** But the difficulty people have, again, is that they think, "You're just teaching universalism. You're saying everyone is saved no matter what they do, because they're in union with Christ." But there's a difference between "in union with Christ" as an unbeliever and being in communion with Christ in the way that believers are.

**PM:** Of course. Torrance says that universalism is a form of rationalism. He rejects both universalism and the idea of conditional salvation because he wants to say just what you said — that what God has done by uniting God and humanity in the history of Jesus Christ is, he has objectively unified us, overcome our self-will, our attempts to be independent of him, overcome our alienation, our suffering, and even death itself in the history of Jesus. That is taking place objectively, but also subjectively, in that Jesus actually was faithful to God in our place. That is the objective and subjective justification of the sinner, you might say.

As you said, we don't have to do anything in order for God to love us, and the very idea that we could, would miss the fact that he loves us while we're unlovable, because we're his enemies. But as you say, and Torrance says at one point... (well, you didn't quite say this, but it could be implied in what you say — help me if it's not the right thing! [laughing]) that we, none of us, can say who are saved and who are not saved, because that's God's alone to do. It would be rationalism in the direction of universalism to make that statement. But on the other hand, to say that therefore salvation is contingent on our response to the gospel, we throw salvation back on us and miss the point, the objective point that you were trying to make.

**JMF:** Exactly.

**PM:** He doesn't want to say either of those things, because he's leaving room for the grace of God, for God to act. God does will the salvation of all, and it is (in Torrance's mind) utterly inexplicable that people would reject the Savior, but it happened once on the cross, and even after his death and resurrection, it still can happen, because Christ does not force himself on people. Even though the goodness that people have comes from God through Christ, they may never acknowledge that. It's a possibility. Even when they do acknowledge that, I think Torrance would also say even that's not under their control. That's the work of the Holy Spirit empowering them to see and to live subjectively what is objectively already a reality in the life of Christ.

**JMF:** By grace from beginning to end.

**PM:** Right.

## 25. GOD CHOSE TO ENTER INTO OUR HUMANITY

### Sin and salvation

**JMF:** I'd like to talk about salvation. There are a lot of ideas about salvation. I don't know if everybody wants to be saved, maybe not everyone thinks about it or cares, but those who do care want to be saved. What is the Bible driving at when it speaks of "salvation" and "being saved"? Is it being saved from sin, is it being saved from death, and that's it? Or what is salvation all about?

**PM:** It is being saved from sin *and* from death, because the consequences of sin and death are being cut off from God. I love the way C.S. Lewis puts it in his book *Mere Christianity*. He says, "The human machine was designed to run on God and there is no other possibility." The problem of sin is that we try to run on our own steam.

**JMF:** We're putting diesel in the gasoline engine.

**PM:** Exactly. Or sugar in the gas tank. And so the human machine simply conks, and there's no way to solve that situation on our own, because we've created the problem by relying on ourselves (being in-turned upon ourselves, you might say), by being self-reliant, self-willed. Lewis argues that salvation means that we have to learn to un-train ourselves in what we've trained ourselves into for thousands of years, self-will, because it's self-will that cuts us off from our only source of happiness — God himself. Salvation is the overcoming of sin and death to be sure, but I agree with Torrance and Barth, who both argued that we don't even know the true meaning of sin until we see God's grace, until we see what he looks like in light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Barth once said that there is such a thing as an unprofitable focus on sin.

It can lead you to be morose. But when you see that sin and death mean that we as individuals try to live our lives independently of God, when God did design, as Lewis said, the human machine to run on himself...then it makes a whole lot of sense to realize that salvation is an act of God for us that we cannot accomplish ourselves, and therefore free grace. It's also an act that includes us humanly because Jesus was fully human, and that act of God healed us humanly because the sinful human nature that was assumed in the Incarnation is now healed. Christ lived the life that is sinless. None of us can do that.

**JMF:** What about sin? What's the problem with sin? Why does sin...other than the fact that it's destructive and hurts and ruins relationships...(I guess I'm answering the question myself). Isn't ruined relationships what makes sin, sin?

**PM:** Not necessarily, because you can speak about ruined relationships with psychologists...

**JMF:** But doesn't sin lie at the heart of that?

**PM:** No. Objectively, sin does lie at the heart of disrupted human relationships, but you can't simply equate the fact of disrupted human relationships with sin, because the real essence of sin is human beings self-willed, exercising their choices without trusting in God himself.

**JMF:** Isn't it being out of right relationship with God?

**PM:** Right.

**JMF:** And that results in bad human relationships.

**PM:** That's right. But you can't really discover the meaning of sin by analyzing the human relationships, that's what I'm trying to say.

**JMF:** Right.

**PM:** Let me put it another way... Barth and Torrance both say that we don't know the true meaning of sin except in and through Christ. The essence of sin was disclosed on the cross in that even though we may claim that we want to live by grace, all of us are powerless to live by grace alone. It's only God's grace, the love of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ, that empowers our lives insofar as they're lives lived by God's gracious forgiveness of our sins in Christ. Therefore, seeing the true meaning of sin is not something that we can do for ourselves, it's something that comes to us as a disclosure from God when we see the events of the cross and the resurrection. Does that make sense?

**JMF:** The separation or the alienation that we experience from God...sin lies at the heart of that.

**PM:** That's right.

**JMF:** You're saying God has acted from his side to forgive and...

**PM:** And also from the human side in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** ...to a better way.

**PM:** Right. So that's the possibility of our salvation and the reality of

our salvation.

**JMF:** The result of salvation, though, the product of salvation...maybe we could even say what salvation *is*, is to be back into the right relationship with God...

**PM:** Yes.

**JMF:** Not that we've ever been in the right relationship with God, but it's to become Christ's own relationship God.

**PM:** Through Christ...right. So in Christ, we are.

**JMF:** So salvation is being drawn into his relationship with the Father.

**PM:** Correct. I also like the chapter in C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, "The Perfect Penitent," where he says that nothing in God's nature corresponds to submission, suffering, and death. Because out of free love for us, Jesus here is perfect God; he also becomes the perfect penitent. He doesn't need to repent to believe, because he's already perfect, but out of love for us, he can repent perfectly because he's God, and he does it for us humanly and therefore when we share in his perfect obedience, we live the life that is ours in him. We can only do it because he enables us to do it. That makes sense to me.

**JMF:** And he didn't have to be baptized either, but he does it...

**PM:**...vicariously for us. Right. When he was baptized, it's not because he sinned, but because he assumed our sin for humanity and so his baptism was the beginning of his living a human life of perfect obedience, which culminated on the cross where he said, "Not my will, but thine be done," and then experienced God-forsakenness.

That raises a number of issues among contemporary theologians — can God suffer and die? C.S. Lewis would say that nothing in God's nature corresponds to suffering, submission, and death. We have to live our salvation by submitting to Christ. Christ living for us as the Savior submits to God, right? There's nothing in God's nature that's like that, but he says by becoming incarnate, God can suffer, surrender, submit, and die, and he can do it as God and man. Unlike some of the fathers in the early church who would say that God cannot suffer and die because God is perfect, C.S. Lewis says that God can suffer, surrender, and die both as God and as human in the incarnation.

Torrance is very good on this, too. Torrance insists that God in Christ does atone for our sins, bringing about repentance from within the person of the mediator. He would say that God both does suffer in our suffering, *and* he's not a God who moves from our suffering.

One of the great things that I like about Torrance is that he says that if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, then Christianity would be immoral. When I first read that, I said, "What is he talking about?" When I went further, I realized that he was making sense, because if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, Torrance says, then salvation would be the equivalent of

human sacrifice or some human attempt at self-justification by placating God, and that would be an immoral...

**JMF:** Isn't that exactly how a lot of people look at it? That God was very angry at humanity and...

**PM:** Something had to be done...

**JMF:**...then Jesus comes along, and he's the one who loves humanity, so he says, if you're going to be that angry, then kill me and I'll take it on myself, that kind of thing, that he stands in the gap.

**PM:** Yes. I think that is very common. To use a more popular image, C.S. Lewis's image, he said, "I don't like thinking of atonement in the police court sense" because he thought that concept was immoral himself before he became a Christian. (He had been an atheist and became a Christian.) He said, "Because that would imply that Christ did something wrong and needed to be punished in our stead." Now, he said, "I would rather think of the atonement as a kind friend helping us out of the hole that we've gotten ourselves into by doing something for us that we can't do for ourselves."

Torrance's view comes much closer to that second view. Torrance argues, if you put *God* on the cross, then not only is it *not* immoral, but now you see the depth of the love of God — that God was willing to sacrifice his own Son out of love for us while we were incapable of helping ourselves. God is not only not remote from us (as he could be if Jesus was just a man, an innocent man trying to placate the deity), but he's actually the deity involved in the suffering of Jesus in an act that was geared to, and did in fact, overcome all suffering and death.

So you might ask, if he did overcome all suffering and death, why...? (I probably should have let you ask that, sorry about that.)

**JMF:** Go on...

**PM:** Why is there still suffering and death? The answer is that our history is not *automatically* Christ's history, that Christ gives us the freedom to respond and to live within that history of faith. He gives us that interval between his first coming and his second coming as the time of freedom in which we have that freedom, and we're given that freedom to live that life by faith now, between the time of his first and second coming.

**JMF:** There's probably a lot more that could be said...

**PM:** Pages have been written on that, that's for sure.

## Immanent and immutable

**JMF:** Let's talk about your book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*. What is the fundamental point you're getting across in this? (You alluded to this earlier.) You need to define "immanent Trinity" (it's not spelled imminent, like "just about to happen," but immanent, as "fully present"). [**PM:** Yes, with an A.] I want to read a comment on the back of the book which I think sets a tone. "Paul Molnar sets out a contemporary



doctrine of the immanent Trinity and addresses the issue of how we can know God according to his true nature rather than create him in our own image.”

**PM:** That opens a door to a discussion that I use when I introduce the topic of the doctrine of the God in class at St. John’s. It’s a story told by Colin Gunton, who had just had a conversation with a professor about a book that that professor had read, entitled *The God I Want*. The professor said to Colin Gunton that “I can’t imagine a sillier enterprise than writing a book entitled “*The God I Want*,” because it’s not the God I *want*, but ‘the God you’re damn well going to get!’” I think that covers the point. In other words, God has his own existence in himself, and that is the doctrine of the Immanent Trinity.

It’s a doctrine that recognizes that God is God for us, because we would have no knowledge of God’s eternal life, his immanent existence, his existence within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if it were not for God creating the world first, then revealing himself in history, reconciling us, and redeeming us, which is commonly referred to as the economic trinity — God’s actions outside of himself. The Greek word is *oekonomia*, which literally means household, but was used as a term in the early church to refer to God’s plan of salvation, and then his executing that plan within history as creator, reconciler, and redeemer.

I say in this book, following Barth (and also Torrance, but Barth in this particular instance), that Barth says that God is who he is – eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that we know God through his revelation of himself in the economy, in history, but that we cannot reduce God to his revelation of himself in the economy. We have to make a clear distinction (but not separation, I argue in the book) between the immanent and the economic trinity. If we do not make that distinction, then we would end up in our thinking and in the reality reducing God to what he does for us, so that then all we have is a God who is present in history, but no God existing in himself.

Unfortunately, a number of theologians have in their thinking what is called the purely economic doctrine of the trinity, reducing God to what God does for us. And certainly, writing a book entitled *The God I Want* has done that to the nth degree, you might say, because such thinking supposes that we can invent images of God and really be talking about God. What I argue in this book is that since God has his own life and retains his own life. Even though he is in close union with us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, he retains his own life. We can’t confuse God’s life with our life.

We don’t want to say things like “God is not relational unless and until he relates with us.” Some theologians actually hold that position. We don’t want to say things that suggest that “God becomes the God he’s going to

be precisely by relating with us within history and working out his being within history.” This is common in process theology. I’m not a big fan of process theology, because it just misses the whole point of the doctrine of the Immanent Trinity. The point of the doctrine is that God has his life in himself, but that God is not a prisoner of his freedom. As one who loves, he loves us, but he remains God even as he loves us, so when he works outside of himself as our reconciler and redeemer, he doesn’t abandon his own eternal existence.

I will say things in the book, following Barth and the early church, that God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and would be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit even if he never decided to create, to reconcile, and redeem the world. Barth says something like that in Volume 1, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth never abandoned that thinking throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, not because he believed that God is locked up within himself and had no relations with us, (otherwise he never would have written 1000 plus pages of the *Church Dogmatics* telling us about how God is involved with us in creation), but because unless God has his life in himself, it becomes superfluous for us to talk about his life with us, it becomes projection, it becomes us working up our own images of God, and that’s the huge difficulty that I address in that book.

**JMF:** The word immutable is often used in describing God, and we think of that as being unchangeable, which relates back to what you were talking about before — how some think of God as not doing anything at all in himself until such time as he creates the world and involves himself in the world. We have a couple passages in Scripture, “I change not” in Malachi, and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” but particularly “I change not” in the Old Testament. What is meant by “immutable”? How is God unchangeable? In what way?

**PM:** The simple answer to that question is that in all his changes, God remains the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s the importance of the doctrine of the Immanent Trinity. Let me explain. Torrance makes the statement, and it speaks well to me, that “God is always Father but not always creator. And God was always Son but not always incarnate.” So in those two statements...

**JMF:** We already see that *immutable* does not mean absolutely no change whatsoever in God.

**PM:** Right.

**JMF:** So it means something else.

**PM:** Because if God was the absolute instance of changelessness, he would be a prisoner of his inability to change.

**JMF:** Exactly.

**PM:** He’d be a prisoner of his own freedom. That’s not what Christians mean when they speak of divine freedom.

**JMF:** That's not what Christians *should* mean when they speak of... (laughing).

**PM:** Well, I stand corrected (laughing). Right. Here Torrance and Barth are similar, because they're both saying that God's freedom has to be understood positively as his freedom to love according to his own will. So, not being a prisoner of his own freedom, God can choose to love us as creator. God can choose to become incarnate. Torrance says when God does choose to create us and to love us by becoming incarnate, these are new actions, and he says they're new even for God. If you don't say that, then you've got to embrace some notion of Origen's idea (espoused very early in church history) that there's no distinction between God's internal relations and God's external relations. In other words, you're basically arguing that the world and God are co-eternal.

This was rejected in the early church, and Torrance is explicitly rejecting it in his thinking because Torrance says, and this is the import of the doctrine of the Trinity together with doctrines of Christology, that the Father/Son relation has priority over the creator/creature relationship. If we don't see that, then we will end up collapsing the immanent into the economic trinity, and one of the ways that that could show is with this rigid notion of unchangeability, because we'll be projecting our ideas of immobility, of God as the unmoved mover, into God, but if God is unmoved and in that way he moves creation, then God really doesn't have any active, dynamic, relational freedom in himself. He's, in a sense, a prisoner of being unmoved. That would prohibit God from actually coming into space and time and enabling us to relate with us from within space and time. So there's a lot at stake in that question. Sort of a loaded question.

**JMF:** Even the passage in Malachi speaks to exactly what it's talking about because it says, "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore you sons of Jacob are not destroyed." His unchangeableness is specifically in reference to his covenant faithfulness to love in spite of their rebellion.

**PM:** Exactly.

**JMF:** That's where we can have total confidence. I've heard people say "If you're saying that God can change (after you explain how he became creator, that's a change, he became incarnate, that's a change), if you're saying God can change, then how can I be sure that he will not change his mind about loving me and saving me?" That's the point...that's exactly where there is no changeableness in God, is in that covenant faithfulness, his steadfast love.

**PM:** That's because God is eternally the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God who loves in freedom. He's both loving and free, not one or the other — one *and* the other. That's crucial.

If God were not free in his loving... I think it was in volume 2:1 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth attacked this person named Angelus Silesius who

said, in explaining the doctrine of creation, “I know that without me God cannot for an instant be.” Barth was really upset at that statement because it suggests just what we were talking about before — that God needs us in order to exist. Barth makes a few little remarks on the side saying, “When God creates us, it’s not as though he needed a playmate, it’s not as though he needed to satisfy some need of his. He creates us out of the free love that he is, but nothing compels him to do it. It’s his free will to do it.”

It’s a crucially important insight. We have theologians today that I mention in the book who argue that because in human love we need others to love, therefore it’s better to say that God needs us because otherwise there wouldn’t be true love, if he didn’t need us. They just missed the whole point of the Christian doctrine of God. God loves us with a divine love that’s sovereign and free, that overflows to us without any need, and therefore can effectively overcome our self-love in a way that nothing else would. Does that make sense?

**JMF:** It makes sense to me. And we’re out of time. So if we need to expound on that, we’ll have to do it next time we get together.

## 26. GOD'S WILL AND OUR DECISIONS

**JMF:** A lot of people have the idea that God is unchangeable because he's perfect. In other words, if God were to do something different, or if he were to change his mind or, let's say, answer a prayer from somebody, then that would mean that the way he was before the change wasn't perfect, and he had to become perfect, or he was perfect and if he changed he wasn't perfect before, so therefore, using that kind of logic, God never changes, and he therefore had to decide everything that would ever happen ahead of time, and everything plays itself out that way. If that were true, then how can we expect him to answer prayers and interact with us in a real and present way?

**PM:** We wouldn't.

**JMF:** Exactly. So what's a better way of looking at that?

**PM:** A better way of looking at that is to say that God is free and knows events that will happen precisely as genuinely contingent historical events as he wills them to exist non-deterministically. I think Torrance is quite good on this, pointing out that in Greek thinking, this whole notion of logical necessity and determinism seems to be endemic to the way they think about creation, about reality. That leads to the ideas of fate and so on. Torrance would say, I think rightly, that Christianity Christianized Hellenism rather than the idea that Christianity was Hellenized.

**JMF:** That is Greek thought.

**PM:** Exactly. I suppose you could add to that the epitome of Greek thought, that is, projecting sensual images into the deity, was erroneous.

**JMF:** In other words, thinking of God as having the same kinds of passions and so on that human beings have...

**PM:** Correct. Thinking of God deterministically would be sort of an extension of that sort of fatalistic, necessitarian, logical thinking. Since the

Christian God is a living God and is free and loving, when he acts toward creation as he does act, it's from the overflowing abundance of who he is. It's not out of need, it's not because of imperfection, it's not because he needs to fill something up in himself.

When he creates the world he creates the world out of love according to his own wisdom for his own purpose. Sometimes that purpose may seem unclear to us, but he has a purpose, and it's not an arbitrary sort of purpose, and it's certainly not a deterministic sort of purpose that suggests that he's encumbered by his relation with us. The existence of the world as a distinct entity is not a threat to God's being.

**JMF:** Or to his sovereignty. So that would mean that there are any number of choices a person can make and any number of paths a person's life can take, without God determining that way ahead of time or before all time, and yet that is still under God's control and it's still part of what he is working out for his redemptive purposes.

**PM:** Yes, with one proviso. I would like to remove the word *determined* from that, and say that God knows those events as free events that we will do, but he knows them precisely because he's not encumbered by the past or by the future. He's always the one he is, transcending time and within time, so that he's not losing part of his being when the past goes away and the present goes into the future....and he's not yet because there's a future. He's present to all times because he's God and eternal.

Torrance gets into some of this stuff and so does Barth...that doesn't mean that God doesn't have his own time. He has his own time, but it's his unique time, in which he doesn't pass away, as we do. Our time is marked by its limitations and by the fall, so we don't really have time. We have no control over time. Created time must find its meaning always in God's eternal time. God's eternal time, however, is unique to him.

I think both Barth and Torrance say that God has time, because he has time for us in Jesus Christ. That time is the healing of our time, so that when we share in Christ's eternal humanity because Christ, although he hasn't eternally existed (otherwise he wouldn't be truly human), now exists eternally as the risen and ascended Lord, when we share in that, we have eternal life — life without end, you might say. Since God is not encumbered by the limitations of past, present, and future as we are, he can know things that are future for us, precisely as events that are freely determined, contingently determined, and not necessarily determined, in a deterministic sense.

**JMF:** “Contingently determined” means what?

**PM:** It means that they're totally dependent on God's purpose and will to be what they are. It means that they might not even *be* at all, or they might be differently, depending upon God's will for them.

**JMF:** Sometimes a Christian will get the idea that in a given situation

there's only one right decision they could make, and that they must seek out what God's will would be for them in this situation. They assume that there is only one possibility of what God's will might be for them, and that if they make the wrong choice, that would be a disaster. They want to make sure their decision is God's will, so they enter into whatever regimen that they think might help, whether it be prayer and fasting or seeking counsel or whatever.

Ofentimes they end up, regardless of the counsel they seek, doing what they want anyway. Is there only one right decision, and is God's will always a specific thing that we must do and a specific decision, that there's only one will of God and then everything else would be wrong? How does God work with us, in other words? How does he interact with us on a day-to-day basis?

**PM:** It's not an easy question. I'm thinking back to Barth's ethics that he develops in Volume 2, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics* and then in 3 and 4 where he talks about the divine command. It's been a very long time since I've read that material, but if I remember, what he argues in that, it is that God's command infallibly reaches each person in their particular circumstances and makes itself known to them as his will because it is a permission, it's a freedom to serve him, which enables that person to be what God wants them to be.

One of the marks of actually coming up against the legitimate divine command is the fact that it's a freedom, it's not an enslavement. It never says to the person, "If you do this, this, this, and this, then you will get that, that, and that." Never. It's always a freedom to obey God himself. So there really is only one possibility – but not in a legalistic sense that you have four possibilities there and you choose one, and if you get the right one, then things go well for you and if you choose one of the other three, then you're in trouble. That would be the wrong way to think about this sort of interaction.

We really do interact with God, but we're not set in a position...(Barth would often say, and I think Torrance would follow him in this)...like Hercules at the crossroads, we choose between two possibilities, and if we choose the right one, then everything's good, and if we choose the wrong one, everything's not good – partly because our wills are enslaved to sin and are freed by God in Christ for service of God.

So love of God and love of neighbor in Barth's thinking means that the divine command reaches each individual in different circumstances and at different times in each person's life...that's why prayer is necessary, to discern precisely what that is, and then to obey. It's not, as it were, a test, where if you get this point right then you're okay, and if you don't... It's really a freedom, a freeing of a person from the illusion that they could determine God's will by their choices, because they can't, they can only

obey. So in a particular circumstance, let's say you were called to do a Christian act at a given moment, you either do it or you don't do it. You either obey or you don't. It's not a question of trying to figure out which is the right way to go.

**JMF:** Some people will struggle over whether they should buy this car or that car. They need to get a car for whatever reason, but they need to get the whole church to pray for them to make the right decision. It's as though they think there's only one right choice they can make. Sometimes the pastors of some certain types of churches will enter into that and presume to speak for God and tell them no, you should get the white car because that's... We can bring so much almost-superstition to every decision, assuming that we have to be so careful that we stay within the will of God, but pretending that we know or struggling over the fact that we don't know.

**PM:** That doesn't sound very freeing, does it?

**JMF:** No, it sounds so...

**PM:** It's kind of unnerving, you might say. In such circumstances we can entrust our decisions to the care of God and to God's forgiving grace, so if we made what turns out to be a bad decision, a year from now sell the car, get another one, don't worry about it. I think we can trust in God's loving care and in the fact that he will bring good even out of bad decisions.

**JMF:** More of a lifestyle of trusting God to help us through the decisions we make.

**PM:** Correct. And trust in his forgiving grace when things don't go exactly the way they should.

**JMF:** There are certain principles anybody can use in trying to make a wise decision. You want to weigh the pros and cons. You want to get wise counsel, and you want to listen to good judgment about it and so on. But at some point you have to make a decision.

**PM:** An informed decision. Especially with regard to cars. If I'm going to buy a new car, I want to know every detail about that car, you know?

**JMF:** There are many things we could obsess over. But when it boils down to it, we want to bring our Christian life, our walk with Christ, into whatever circumstance or decision we might make. Sometimes we make poor decisions and we still bring with that our faith that God will help us through. Sometimes we make a good decision, and we still bring with that our faith that God will bless us, help us, help us to use it rightly, not foolishly, and so on.

**PM:** One of the really good things in that is this — that we don't have to worry about whether our decisions in the last analysis were right or wrong, because Christ promises to make good for us. He's responsible for us. We are responsible, of course, to him and to God, but because he has made himself responsible for us, we don't have to make a final judgment about what we're doing, we leave that to him, to his care.



**JMF:** But at the same time we realize that decisions have consequences. We do a foolish thing, then it's going to have consequences.

**PM:** Which we do at least once a day, maybe twice a day.

**JMF:** Perhaps most of the time. Yeah. And that raises opportunities to trust God to have mercy on us.

**PM:** That's the whole point of prayer. Some of the botched decisions that we make point us once again to our utter need to rely on God's forgiving grace. That's not something we can control by plotting and planning every little detail of our lives and getting the whole church to pray for it, you know, that it's not raining on Thursday morning.

**JMF:** When I leave for our vacation.

**PM:** That sort of thing.

**JMF:** These are the kinds of requests that sometimes come in.

**PM:** And people might conclude from that, that since it is raining, therefore God doesn't love me. So that concept of God is all too human a concept.

**JMF:** To what degree does God interact with us on a personal level with our daily life? Is it a matter of how much we bring him in, or is it a matter of that he's always present but he lets us make our own decisions and make mistakes and live with the consequences, or is it hands-off, he's out there watching us, for whatever reason? How does that work?

**PM:** The God that we know in Jesus Christ is not a hands-off deity, because he has loved us while we were still sinners and powerless to love him. He continues to love us in exactly the same way in Jesus Christ. There's no limit to his approach to us. We can only love because God empowers us to love at any given moment. God is deeply involved in each and every moment of our lives, but sometimes we're so busy that we don't see that and we don't pay attention to that, or we look right past it toward our own agenda, which, when put into effect, will enable us to sort of redefine who God is and what revelation is and what salvation should mean, to make ourselves feel comfortable.

God is definitely not a distant deistic deity — that's the dualism that Torrance is always referring to that is so problematic — because the God who meets us in Jesus Christ meets us in a myriad of different forms and a myriad of different experiences. He is never far off but is sometimes hidden to us in our own experience because we're not really paying attention or not really trusting God. We're sort of reinventing the God we want instead of trusting in God as he is.

**JMF:** Isn't another form of reinventing the God we want, to take the approach of... you hear in some conversations, the Lord told me to take this job or the Lord told me that we should move to Kenya and be a missionary. Sometimes the whole church knows it's a foolish decision somebody's making, and yet they're convinced that the Lord told them that,

and in their own mind, they bring God into every decision they make, as though this is what the will of God was for me. It's as though I don't have to take responsibility for my own decisions because God told me to do this. So for you to tell me that this was foolish...

**PM:** That could just as easily be a manipulation of God's will. That's a problem. For example, God told me this morning I should be a chemical engineer. I don't know a thing about chemical engineering, but God told me to do it, so I'm going to go and do that. If you get such a revelation supposedly, you should have to then look at the abilities that you do have, the talents, where your life has been to this point, and ask yourself seriously whether that is something that God is asking you to do. I don't think God is actually telling you to do that at all.

**JMF:** God is telling me that you're supposed to do that.

**PM:** I should be a chemical engineer because I utterly failed at the arts, so I might as well be a chemical engineer. Barth once said, I think to someone who was asking about whether or not they should engage in the business of theology, you have to look at whether or not you have the temperament, the qualities that would lead to someone who would be a good theologian. You might have none of those things. If that's true, then that's a sign of God's interacting with you. You have to be sensible and use common sense.

**JMF:** I think this happens more often than it ought to with people who take up a missionary plan. They will decide or come to the conclusion that God is calling them to some sort of missionary service, and they will pluck their family up without regard to the effect on the children of moving to a new country, a new culture and so on, without really understanding what they're getting into, when they have heard a presentation or they have heard of a need and they feel some sort of a twinge of conscience or something about the needs, and so they assume that that is God moving them to make this huge life-changing decision. Sometimes it becomes a major mistake for the family, but they're so convinced that this is what God wants them to do. I don't know that there's any solution to that, because we all stand prey to that in one way or another.

**PM:** It's true. That's an extremely difficult decision, but the point that you made about that person needing to look at the overall effect on the entire family should weigh very heavily in such a decision.

**JMF:** And getting good counsel from not just the person and people who want them to go, but from people who have been there, done that, and from their pastors, from other counselors, and are listening to the suggestions and ideas from more than one point of view on the topic.

**PM:** No question. I'm thinking of Tom Torrance's own life when he was asked by Barth to follow him in [the University of] Basel, and he stated that was one of the hardest decisions of his life. He decided not to go

because he didn't want to uproot his children from school and bring them into a setting where they would have to speak and learn in German and so on. He was never sorry that he made that decision, but it was a very difficult decision. So he had to weigh all of his family issues and so on, and in retrospect I think it was a good decision.

**JMF:** Just because a thing might seem spiritual or holy in some way doesn't mean that you can't continue to serve God effectively in any other way.

**PM:** Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

**JMF:** But we sometimes substitute going out and doing some kind of a seemingly spiritual thing, trying to make up for all the other problems in our life, to feel better about our walk with God.

**PM:** Very true. We have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves.

**JMF:** Isn't that part of what we learn from Trinitarian theology, in the fact that Christ is already everything for us, and our trust is in him to be everything we need to be?

**PM:** That's why when Barth talked about Christian vocation, he said the Christian preacher and teacher should point vigorously toward Christ as the one who calls us toward his purposes, and not point toward Christian experience as the way forward in these matters. I think he was right.

**JMF:** It's often hard to face the fact that maybe the best place for us is right where we are, being who we should be in Christ, as opposed to finding a new and exciting place somewhere else that promises...

**PM:** But may not deliver. I couldn't agree more.

## 27. THE GIVER AND THE GIFT

**JMF:** You've written about grace being identical with its giver. What is the significance of that?

**PM:** It's extremely significant. Jesus Christ *is* God's grace, present among us. That means that in Jesus Christ, God actively loves us, binds us to himself, reveals himself to us, and that means therefore that you cannot detach that act of God (because God's being and God's act are one) from what God is doing in that particular history.

If you were to do that, you would then think of God's grace, perhaps, as a detachable quality that adheres in human nature, and you might come up with such ideas as creative grace and different types of grace. Your focus then would be off the reality of grace, which is identical with Christ himself and, more importantly, your focus would be on the gifts of the Christian life and the living of the Christian life in abstraction from the one who empowers you to live it.

So it's enormously important not to separate the gifts that we receive in Christ, living as part of the new creation — faith, love, love of God, love of neighbor. It's enormously important that we do not detach those from the giver, because if we do, then we no longer *need* Christ. And to the extent that we don't need Christ, we become self-reliant once again. And we can become self-reliant under the guise of speaking about grace.

Torrance is great in pointing out the subtle dangers of Pelagianism in the human heart — our constant attempt to turn back on ourselves, even using Christian concepts in order to validate such a turn. He is dead against that, rightly so. I think it's a disaster to separate the gift from the giver. If you separate the gift of atonement from the giver, then the atonement becomes something we do.

There are theologians today — I suspect you may be aware of some of

them — who argue that if we reconceived salvation today as us trying to create a better world, then we have to realize that we need more than one savior of the world — we need many hearts, hands, and feet to make the world a better place.

Yes, we need many people working for a better world, that's true. But you can't equate salvation with people working for a better world. That's what happens, though, if you detach grace, the gift, from the giver. Where there is grace, where there is the freedom of love, to love God and to love neighbor by working for a better world, there we are bound to Christ and totally dependent on Christ and not at all on us trying to make a better world and therefore reconstructing a notion of salvation by saying we need more saviors. That's the ultimate proof, that sort of thinking, that we're attempting to save ourselves, then we've missed grace, we've bypassed it.

## God's actions and being

**JMF:** It seems to tie in with the concept of separating God's being from his acts. What does that mean, and how does that relate?

**PM:** Torrance was big on, and so was Barth, stressing that God's being and acts are one. When dealing with the Trinity, Barth used to say that God is one being in three modes of existence — he preferred “modes of existence” to “person” — it did not make him a modalist, as some have suggested.

**JMF:** He's using “mode” in a different method.

**PM:** Right. He's allowing God — the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit — to dictate his meaning of “mode,” so he's not trying to conform the Trinity to a prior idea of “mode.” That's right. He would say that God is eternally one being in his act as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The significance of that is this: When God decides to and then acts as creator — the Father through his word and in the Spirit, and then again as reconciler and redeemer — we actually need God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's act, but you can't separate that act from the being of God, so that as God's act in Jesus Christ, we're actually meeting Jesus Christ.

Barth would then argue that if in your thinking you ignore Jesus Christ or don't begin thinking about God with Jesus Christ, then, in effect, you bypass the one possibility for a knowledge of God that comes to us from God. We can't bypass God and then attempt to know God, because that's a recipe for idolatry. Torrance makes statements such as, “We must think from the center in God and not from a center in ourselves, because God's being and act are one.”

The act of God in Jesus Christ in the incarnation is God coming to us, approaching us, empowering us to know him. You could never say, as some theologians have said, that “Jesus is our historical choice, is our foundational figure for our Christian faith, Christian religion,” because who

he is is utterly dependent upon God's act and thus upon God, because you can't separate God's act from his being.

In a similar way, both Barth and Torrance would want to say that God's act is the Holy Spirit empowering us to believe in Jesus Christ. They both cite 1 Corinthians 12:3, where it says, "No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." They mean that seriously. Barth will make statements such as this, "Knowledge of God is an event enclosed in the mystery of the divine Trinity." What he means is that God himself in the Holy Spirit, uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father, begins, upholds, and completes our knowledge of God.

But such knowledge can never be traced back to anything in our thinking or anything within our experience. Our thinking and experience would be real enough, and they would be real knowledge of God and they would really describe God, because they would be faithful descriptions of God's act and being, but none of that is under our control, and all that is really a miracle, because it goes against the grain of our natural attempts to create God in our own image.

Both theologians take the problem of sin, the problem of our human limitations seriously. Barth was speaking about God's hiddenness, even in revelation. What he means by that is that nothing in history in and of itself can disclose God to us. We need God to act, and God does act in his Holy Spirit and in his word. When we hear his word by the power of the Holy Spirit through God's acting, we're already united to God's being, because you can't separate being and act. The fact that God's being and act are one is crucial. For Barth, they annihilated the whole need for natural theology.

**JMF:** And what is natural theology?

**PM:** A more or less traditional definition of natural theology is that it's the attempt to know God by relying on nature, reason, or conscience, or history. It's the attempt to reason to God's existence without relying on God's act of revelation as attested in Scripture. It's the attempt to know God without biblical faith.

Torrance will say something to this effect — what one of us doesn't have some knowledge of God or some natural goodness in us? The presumption is that we do have *some* knowledge of God, but when we know God in Jesus Christ, we can't rely on *any* of that — to know God with certainty. All of that is called into question, comes under judgment. We must give up any attempt to rely on our natural goodness or on our natural knowledge, and take up our cross and follow him, Torrance would argue. (And I think he's right.) We don't want to take that away from people, because that's the last hope of the person who refuses to hear the word of God in Jesus Christ — that's all they have to cling to, is their attempts to build a knowledge of God on themselves.

Barth has a long, long section in *Dogmatics* Volume 2.1 where he talks

about natural theology, and he doesn't want to disprove it or argue, because in the act of disproving it, he would be engaging in natural theology. He simply wants to say that because of the Fall and because God has approached us in Jesus Christ and made himself known as the reconciler and redeemer, if we bypass those particular activities of God, then we will, in fact, be constructing an image of God that's in variance with who God actually is. That's the problem of sin and the problem of natural theology. When we really know God, Barth will say it's by the miracle of grace and not at all by anything we did. Even when we know God, it's not by means of any twist or turn in our usage of concepts. It's only when our concepts are commandeered, so to speak, by God, that we actually know him.

In both Barth and Torrance, following Hilary of Poitiers (Barth put it more forcefully than Torrance, although Torrance could be pretty forceful), Barth said that "words are subject to realities, not realities to words." And Barth said, "Anybody who does not accept that axiom as their working axiom as a theologian is no theologian and never will be." Torrance adopted that axiom himself and used it as part of his repertoire.

So, natural theology is an attempt to make the reality of God acting in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit subject to our words, our ideas of God, rather than allowing God to define who God is to us. In the one instance, it's understanding seeking faith, which can't really lead anywhere, theologically speaking. In the other instance, it's faith in the word of God being led by the Holy Spirit seeking understanding. But again, faith itself comes from the Holy Spirit; it's not something that we invented. It's grounded in God.

## Law, sin, and repentance

**JMF:** What is the relationship between a believer and what the Bible calls the law of God? How does the believer relate to the law of God in the sense of both the Old Testament and New Testament?

**PM:** Torrance says something to the effect that our entire lives have to be recreated ethically, morally, and legally speaking, because people can use morality and the law to hide behind, both of them, in the sense that they wall themselves up by trying to obey the law and thus not having to obey God — kind of legalism and moralism, you might say. Torrance says when we hear the word of God in Jesus Christ, all of that changes. When we really hear the word of God, God frees us to live in harmony with his will for us. We will then be living according to his law, because the point of the law is to direct us to our total reliance on God — God's love and God's grace.

Nobody ever quite lives that or has lived that, except Christ himself. That's why we were saved outside of and apart from the law. Christ didn't come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. He gave

them their true meaning, put them on a true footing, so to speak. What that means is in Christ we can see that the law is not an end in itself, and neither is morality an end in itself, because we can use both to try to justify ourselves and to try to save ourselves, and we can use both to hide behind them, making it seem as though we're really good and law-abiding when all the while we're not honestly relying on God at all. So there's sort of a suspension Torrance talks about.

Barth will talk about the fact that when we really know God through revelation, the law won't make any difference, it won't matter, because we will simply be trusting in God and doing God's will. We will be obeying the law, but not because we are trying to obey the law, but simply because it's not even a question for us. Trusting in God, we'll really be loving God and loving our neighbor and doing those things that would signify that.

**JMF:** It's like Paul said in Romans 13...I happen to have it marked right here... "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Jump from verse 8 and then to verse 10, "Love does no harm to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." The law gets taken care of when you're walking in the gospel.

**PM:** Right. That's what Barth meant when he said that you won't be worrying about the law and its fulfillment when you love God, because you've been loved by God first and empowered to love God, you will spontaneously love your neighbor ... fulfill the law, in effect.

**JMF:** I've known people who were so focused on the law that they are the opposite. If you think of loving your neighbor, you wouldn't think of them, because they're so austere and they're so judgmental, both against themselves and everybody else, because of their focus on the law (as an end in itself, practically) — they think it's the stepping stone to God, as opposed to a focus on the grace of God in Christ.

**PM:** Dealing with those sorts of people is difficult.

**JMF:** It is. God pity the poor group, nation, church, or whoever might be under the authority of such a person.

**PM:** I agree. I think of C.S. Lewis saying you can tell the people who are behaving in such ways by the haunted look of those whom they are trying to love. Trying to fulfill that law of love can become a legalistic activity as well.

**JMF:** You talk about the love of God being "unconditional." What does that mean?

**PM:** I'm thinking of a quote by Barth where he quotes from John, where it says that "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that those who should believe in him would have eternal life." The love of God is identical with the sending of Jesus Christ to love us while we were enemies of God. I think the gist of that statement is captured in that



response by Barth. It's a crucial statement.

**JMF:** As Paul says plainly in Romans, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners and he demonstrates his love for us in that."

**PM:** That's right; I think that's crucial. What that demonstrates to us is that any attempt to love God without actually recognizing God's love of us first is simply a replication of the predicament of self-will and sin, isolating ourselves more and more from God. That isolation can take place even under the guise of Christian categories, which makes it more difficult, the situation. That's an enormously important point.

**JMF:** It comes home for people, if they could embrace it, the most when they find themselves — I'm talking about believers or Christians who find themselves embroiled in sin. They've failed in some habitual sin or they have done something that is outrageous, and their first response is typically, "How can God still love me after this?" There's a depression that sets in and a sense of being cut off from God and so on. It's so renewing and helpful (and it's not easy to do, because it seems so unreal at the time) to remember that Christ died for you while you're still a sinner and while you were still enemies he did what he did. So he doesn't feel any differently about you right now, today, than he did yesterday, before you did that, or than he will tomorrow, after you have gotten through your emotional grieving and repentance process.

**PM:** That's a great point.

**JMF:** But we have to remember always that this love of God is not something that's going to go away, and it's not something that's going to change, and it's not something we can move beyond its limits.

**PM:** We shouldn't really want to, of course.

**JMF:** Not that we want to, but we can't. So whatever state we find ourselves in, we can go back to the arms of the prodigal father.

**PM:** I was just thinking of the parable of the prodigal son as you were saying what you were saying. It's without conditions. If somebody took the inheritance and I was the father, would I really welcome that person back without conditions or would I say, "You can come back, but I'm controlling all the money from here on out"?

**JMF:** I would have all sorts of conditions.

**PM:** I would have all sorts of conditions, but God has none. The fact that he loves us in Christ actually gives a permission, a freedom, for us to live that new life, so we can trust in God's forgiving grace and truly do so. Torrance (and Barth, too) was vociferous in speaking against any idea of conditional salvation. The whole notion of conditional salvation destroys the unconditionally of God's love, because if salvation is conditional on anything we do, then we're thrown back upon ourselves to try to make good something that we can't possibly make good, and we can't possibly make good, because God loved us while we were still sinners. It turns into a

vicious circle at that point.

**JMF:** I can hardly think of the parable of the prodigal son without thinking of Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, where he takes Rembrandt's painting and then analyzes each part of it in connection with the story of the parable. It's such a moving and reassuring rehearsal of the unconditional love that God has for us.

**PM:** I was thinking as we spoke about that a moment ago of C.S. Lewis, where he talks about repentance and says, "Repentance is not something that God demands of you before he takes you back, it's simply a description of what going back to God is like." We can't go back to God without it, but it's not a condition of God's loving us, it's rather the thing you do when you recognize what God has done on the cross and in the resurrection (and recognizing that is not under our control either). But if you try to say that you're going to turn back to God and you're not submitting to God and therefore repenting, you haven't returned to God; you've just returned to an idea of God and you're once more just trying to save yourself conditionally, you might say.

**JMF:** Don't we sometimes turn repentance into some kind of a work or some kind of a chore or duty? Instead of freely trusting that we can simply return to God who loves us, we kind of project ourselves onto God as being somebody who is going to require a certain amount of penance or a certain number of deeds (or whatever we have in our head) before he's going to accept us back. We think that repentance needs to be tooth-grinding and fist-clenching and begging and sackcloth and ashes.

**PM:** And hair shirts, and so on. I think that's disastrous, personally. That would not be living by grace. Living by grace means that we can trust in Christ and turn to him, as you said.

**JMF:** In the prodigal son, again, this son's repentance was not a great repentance at all, because he really was...

**PM:** He realized that he was feeding pigs.

**JMF:** ...and he just wanted a decent meal among the servants who he knew were living better than he was. He didn't expect the kind of reception that he got.

**PM:** That's right.

**JMF:** All he knew was that that's where I need to go to stay alive. And so he went back.

**PM:** There's a moral in that, right? Those who are searching for the perfect form of repentance before they repent are going to have a problem, because even our repentance is the repentance of unprofitable servants, you might say. Even in our repentance, we're totally dependent on the heavenly Father taking us back.

**JMF:** In one sense we could forget about our repentance and simply trust God to love us and go back to him trusting that he will accept us, love

us, help us.

**PM:** That is the nature of God's unconditional love.

**JMF:** Well, thought of that way, then repentance and trust or faith are the same thing.

**PM:** I think so, yeah.

**JMF:** What's your next book?

**PM:** I'm working on a sequel to my book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, and it's going to come out with InterVarsity Press. I'm working with Gary Deddo on that. I'm going to put some real time into that this summer. I haven't put as much time into it as I should have.

**JMF:** Is there a potential title or a working title?

**PM:** The working title is *Pneumatology and the Trinity*. In the first book I focused on the need to recognize and acknowledge God's freedom in himself so as to recognize the way God was acting within history — it was really God and not just our using theological language to describe ourselves in place of God. So in this book I'm going to focus on Barth and Torrance again, but I'm going to look at the way the Holy Spirit works in connection with reconciliation and redemption as much as I can, and then talk about how God works in the economy empowering us and enabling us to know him and to participate in life, without blurring the distinction between creator and creature, but actually affirming the two and therefore engendering human freedom. I'm going to focus on the work of the Holy Spirit and knowing God through the Holy Spirit and reconciliation and the work of the Holy Spirit in redemption.

**JMF:** There hasn't been a lot of work specifically on the Holy Spirit in regard to Trinitarian theology...

**PM:** No, there hasn't. So that's the direction I would like to move. So, for all of those people who might have thought that I was maintaining the divine freedom in terms of the doctrine of the immanent trinity... (Some people have read my book and interpreted it to mean that I was separating God from his actions, but of course I wasn't, because I wouldn't have written the book if God was separate from us. The only reason I wrote the book was to say that God who is active history is free and acts free in love within history.)

So I would like to clear up some of those misunderstandings by focusing on the Holy Spirit and showing how, when the Spirit unites us to Christ, there are genuine human actions of those who are reconciled, but you can't read off reconciliation from those who are acting, any more than you can read off what it means to be a Christian by looking at what a Christian does, because sometimes there are Christians who behave well and sometimes there Christians who behave badly.

**JMF:** The same Christian.

**PM:** That's right. I would argue against those who say that you can

judge the truth of Christology by the ethical fruits of those who live the Christian life. You can't. The truth of Christology is judged by who Jesus is as God's action among us, actively reconciling us to himself even now. And the only way to know that is through the Holy Spirit.

So that's where I'm hoping to proceed with my next work. It's been a while since I've looked at the chapters as I've sort of fleshed them out, and I might have to make revisions as I go and as I learn different things. But I think it's going to be about nine chapters. Hopefully it will be interesting. I'll deal with questions that are raised about my first book, and then I'll focus on God's acting within history, but all the while making sure that I'm speaking about God acting within history and then human beings being freed by God to know and love him.

**JMF:** Is there a tentative publication date yet?

**PM:** The theoretical publication date is 2012. I might be able to do that, but I teach full time at the moment, and I don't have any research leaves coming up, so I am mainly working during the summers and during the year as well. Next year I'm going to be preparing some lectures to give as well, so hopefully those lectures will work out as chapters within that new book.

**JMF:** We'll look forward to seeing it.

## 28. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

**JMF:** Our guest today is Dr. Cherith Fee Nordling, theologian and ministry leader for church-based theology education and ministry training at Antioch Leadership Network of Grand Rapids, Michigan. An ordained minister, preacher and popular lecturer, Dr. Nordling is author of numerous articles including, “Being Saved as a New Creation,” “Karl Barth and the Pietists,” and “Becoming Who We Are: Incarnation, Identity and Vocation.” Her first book [is *Knowing God by Name: A Conversation between Elizabeth A. Johnson and Karl Barth*, published by Peter Lang Publishing in early 2010].

Thanks for joining us today.

**CFN:** Thank you for having me.



**JMF:**

Would you begin by telling us how you came to be involved with Trinitarian Theology?

**CFN:**

Yes. I would have to say that probably Trinitarian

Theology (without having that name, and especially the fact that those are two words that feel very loaded and very hard to understand), I would say has been part of my way of knowing and loving and thinking about God for my whole life. Having come up through the tradition that I did, the person of the Holy Spirit was very present and clear and active. My understanding of Jesus as God who'd come among us and as Savior was something from my childhood that I've always known and loved, and God as Father.

Being raised in a family where I was really invited into the love of God as my Father through my father and my parents. And that sense of, this was the way that we spoke about God: as Father, Son, and Spirit – was always part of how I knew God. And it was (I would say) much later in my mid-to-late 20s where the real term *Trinitarian* began to take root simply as a way of being part of our worship life in our Presbyterian Church.

And having come into that Reformed tradition later in my 20s and loving being in these sort of creedal traditions where you got to say the Nicene Creed and you got to say the Apostles' Creed like bullet points or shorthand or sort of Powerpoint presentation of the whole gospel – how to do this in bullets. And to affirm these things, would just get deep in my soul.

And then finally having a dear friend over here in one day and worship just praying to God as triune, as the triune one who she exalted and loved and was loved by. The penny just dropped – I thought, oh that's just beautiful term that isn't in the Bible but all of its content is in the Bible – this beautiful way of just speaking about God as the one God who is God this way – as these three persons in communion.

And the theology side (I think I'd always been a little bit nervous about theology) is very ivory tower and very distant from the way that we're trying to just live day-to-day as sort of faithful believers in the market place. Yet I started to recognize that, that term, as a general term to saying, "How do we think about God, and how do we think about everything else in relation to God – to let that word just be this covering, I thought, "There is a lot at stake whether we get this theology thing accurate or not." I don't mean *right*, because I think that theology is deep and rich, and God's way of giving himself to us is very clear, in terms of who he is as Father, Son, and Spirit. But I think that the ways that he lets us reflect on him are many and good. Right and wrong always feels like there is only one way and everything else is wrong and one of the beauties of sort of being in the Trinitarian theology conversation is to go, "And it's sort of like this, and when we think about this..." and there's just so many different angles that we as creatures just can sort of try to glimpse, and just love and just worship out of.

And so I think that all of that sort of lived life in the church made those terms less frightening to me when it came time to actually doing study that I hadn't anticipated falling into but ended up in my 30s, my mid-30s going

back to school and realizing that the deep questions I had about what does it mean to be truly human, what does it mean to be human in relation to God – were only ever going to be answered out of the only true human who has ever pulled it off – which would be Jesus.

**JMF:** So you actually started to pursue some work in psychology at first...

**CFN:** I did, we were noticing just a lot of amazing things happening in the life of our congregation. People were coming in through just radical encounters with the Lord. Lives deeply changed, but they were coming in out of just horrendous situations, and from those situations, lots of brokenness, lots of psychological baggage – sometimes very deeply disordered. And as we had a counseling center as part of the church, and we're in good relationships with counselors up in the San Francisco area – there were just times when actually that counselors would say, "Could we gather to pray?" ... because what we're doing in our therapy session, sometimes I just don't know how we need to discern whether this is something of the Spirit, whether this is something of the evil one, whether this is demonic, whether this is psychological, what is it that we are trying to.... So I wanted to understand what we were doing.

Whatever we are doing, are we caring well, and loving well? So to go back to school in psychology and start a Masters in Psychology and have someone catch me up in the middle of that experience to say, "You know, Cherith, none of your questions ever sound psychological – they always sound theological – they're always of a much bigger picture, of a much bigger arena in which all these things come to matter. And I think that too became a moment where I thought, theology is not so much a frightening word – it's a nice term for the arena in which we get to think as the people of God about the things of God. And so he encouraged me to go, think about doing theology instead of psychology. So that changed course and I've continued on and become what I never thought I would be which is, what people call it *theologian*.

**JMF:** So you started at Regent College?

**CFN:** I started my first Masters at College of Notre Dame in Northern California, did my Masters in Christian Studies and Theology at Regent College, and then we moved to England as a family. I had two sons who are 9 and 11 at the time. So that was a big move for us, and a husband who gave up his ministry and career so that I could go back to school for five years there, and I sort of ended up in London and ended up in St. Andrew's, as my supervisor took a post up there. So that was a wonderful experience for us and we went back in the States for about seven years and I've been trying to do this thing called theology professionally in the academy and then in the church ever since.

**JMF:** I have to ask because I know a lot of people would be wondering,

how did the kids do?, apparently it was a good experience for them.

**CFN:** It was a great experience for them. It was incredibly stretching. They thought that they knew what English was, but discovered that England English and ours is a different, different language, but it was a gift to all of us and one of the most beautiful parts of that experience was actually to live in a little town far away from my school. So I wasn't in a university setting. I wasn't surrounded by fellow students. I was surrounded by people who, by and large had grown up in that little town – walking twice a week to church, a little church that had been there for a thousand years – being part of this Anglican Communion that had this deeply Trinitarian liturgy, and taking the Eucharist and just participating in that kind of communion on a weekly basis with just wonderful people who gathered around and helped me type parts of my dissertation and basically just... we were adopted into this amazing little fellowship of believers in England and they have continued to be very, very much a part of our faithful family ever since, and that radically shaped not just my sons' lives but my husband's and mine.

**JMF:** You're asked to do a lot of lecturing and what sort of topics are people usually looking for when they ask you to come?

**CFN:** Because of my background, my father was born and raised, as was my mother, in the Pentecostal tradition, I lived in this sort of Reformed worlds that are curious about how to have conversations about what does it mean to live the life of... (**JMF:** You should probably mention you father was a...) Sorry... my father is Gordon Fee, and so I grew up as a person who deeply loved the biblical text, watched my father who deeply loved the Lord, and then love the biblical text (and not in the reverse order). And I used to go with my dad when he would teach around, or go on retreats to do these kinds of things. I just couldn't get enough of the story and it never occurred to me that I should be like him, because I just thought, well, this is equipping me to actually get out into the marketplace. So I was a paralegal for 15 years and loved being just a Trinitarian believer in the work that God had called me to do at that time.

But I came from a background that made life in the Holy Spirit very normal or natural to me. I think that I did not see a lot of excess, I did not see a lot of things that were confusing or frightening that I hear a lot of sort of horror stories from people's experiences. So I'm asked to speak about that.

I'm also asked to talk a lot about how and why the life of the Triune God matters to us. And it what it means to actually being a Christian. And I say, "Well, there is only one of Christian and that's the Trinitarian Christian – the only life that you are invited into, is to know this God and this is how he's made himself known to you and this is the impact that it has.

Then, to really talk about Jesus' life, which is a challenge because his life



is of course a mystery that I can't describe any better than I can describe the Trinity. But at the same time to take very seriously at this particular point in my life, the incarnation in the sense that this is God who has really taken on my humanity and restored my humanity permanently and holds in his current and on-going humanity, the life that I will have as Cherith, female human image-bearer of God, and that that is a permanent reality that God has made for me.

And there is no splitting of my body and my soul, and there is no splitting even if my following Jesus has a thing I do with my head, or my heart, and I think part of it is being around college students who are deeply ambivalent or confused or have a million messages about their embodied life and their sexuality, and then watching in my life in the church how those kinds of things that get set in place, either very early or in those later years when they start becoming very aware, whether they feel free to actually let the Lord be the Lord of that part of their life as well, so just trying to think how do we understand ourselves because of Jesus is.

Not just who he was, but who he is and what he's presently doing that helps inform our own understanding of getting up in the morning going, "Well, what are we doing today, Jesus? What are you doing today and what, by the Spirit do I get to participate in that continues to bring glory to the Father, in a way that you take my human life seriously and actually mediate my human life and pray for my human life today and pray and intercede that I would not be led into temptation but to really walk in the way that looks like the kingdom come on earth, so as in heaven. And to pay attention to what that would mean and not just get my belief system locked in, but to function as somebody who actually is supposed to look like Jesus in a way that I'm going to look for."

And that just raises a whole new wonderful dynamic about how to follow the Lord. And so that has become a deeply incarnational conversation that I didn't see coming, but just sort of developed over time over the last ten years.

**JMF:** Let's talk about your first book, with Peter Lang Publishing group. How did that come about, and what led you into that topic?

**CFN:** I was at Regent at that time. I knew in my heart of hearts although I keep taking much Bible as I could instead of theology, because I was afraid that systematic theology would become dry and categorized and compartmentalized and I loved theology emerging from the text. And so it took me a while to actually trust the theology classes that I was taking would reinforce that, and they did beautifully.

But it was later in my time at Regent in doing that, that I had a professor named Stan Grenz, who came to me and said, "Cherith, I know you're really interested in doing something in your final thesis on the Triune Life of God and how that influences our life as a community who participates in

God, so here's this book called *She Who Is*, by this Catholic feminist theologian, who has basically re-constructed the doctrine of God, the Triune doctrine of God, in female form, and she believes that she has permission to do this from her Catholic tradition and her understanding of analogy and that being a way of talking about God. So would you mind reading this book and doing your thesis around this because we are all really curious whether she has a leg to stand on in this argument.

And very naively, I said, "Yes." And suddenly found myself ... (**JMF:** You don't even have to think of the topic.) Exactly, except that I had no idea that I just jumped off the deep end of the swimming pool into say 19th and 20th century liberal theology, which I've never read, feminist theology, which I hadn't read, and Catholic theology, which I hadn't read.

So it just threw me into a variety of new worlds that instead of trying to sort of sit back and observe, was really trying to get in. If I was trained to understand this from the inside out, why do they say things such as "why does she want to write this book, why is this important to her?" And she, very straightforwardly, comes forth and says, "I do this because my tradition, as I have experienced it, feels like God is this solitary male figure, this ego who's unrelated to the world, doesn't care about the world" ... and in a term that she would use, "Classical Theism" this old way of talking about God out there. She'd say...

**JMF:** Which is the way most people actually do think about God.

**CFN:** And think about God singularly... just kind of there's God and us as if there are two subjects, and that's it...

**JMF:** Even the popular movies about God, recently, as good as they are and interesting as they are, they present this solitary picture.

**CFN:** Solitary picture, that's right. And always a male picture. And she was really of the conviction that the people who suffer most, including at the hands of the church, because of the way theology is either spoken or enacted, are women, and usually women of color with children. And so she had spent a lot of years caring for the poor and the oppressed in Central America, in South Africa... and over time, she just felt like, if we could talk about God as a female, then men would not use God as their alter ego and have God function in these ways that she perceived as distant. And if we could have God be female, then it would be very hard to see God that way and then see women and hurt them or harm them in anyway. And I'm not convinced that, that's true – not because it's not really interesting idea, but because we're so broken and no matter how we perceive God we're still going to harm each other, and need to forgive one another.

But I was very curious about why she thought it was important to have to literally come up with a new way of thinking about God in order to get what she thought God was really doing, which was loving people... instead of, "what was it about the gospel that didn't sound like good news to her."

And what was it about Jesus really hurt her life, that wasn't life-giving to her own life, or to the lives of women. And so to try to understand, I think, what drove her and her colleagues who are all kind of dialogue partners in her book – to write what they did, I felt like I needed to sort of sit with some humility there, and at least listen to that, and say, “where has the church not stepped up? Why is it that they thought they need to do what they're doing because they see a big hole, a big empty space where the church should be actually bearing the image of God and being for the other. And especially the other who cannot be for themselves in the current play in the world. And so my challenge in writing that book was to say, “there's a very different thing going on when you call the church to account – and say – who are we really and what are we called to in our obedience and where have we really blown it, than we need to rethink God. And so what does Trinitarian theology as the church has understood its life lived in the presence of the Father because of Jesus by the Spirit – what does that have to say that really is the good news it has been given to us, and where do we go back and reclaim that, I mean, listen to it in a way that calls us to account to change our ways of behaving. And so I have a deep respect for them. But I also have a...challenge...

**JMF:** You're seeking... seeing the same problem, same ways to meet the same roles...

**CFN:** To answer it with, I think, the conversation that God has given us over a very long time without needing to completely change that conversation. But at the same time one of the fascinating things that's come out of writing that book is that this vein of modern theology that her book is part of, really does, in one way, take Jesus' humanity very seriously. They're quite nervous about this sort of divine Jesus who doesn't really touch the human condition and at the same time what you finally end up with, I think in a lot of that theology, is you have a Jesus who never gets to be God made flesh. It's never really the Word who has come present to us. It's God who has sort of adopted this man to be this divinely appointed or anointed or Spirit-filled man in a unique way. And that changes the story completely – because you don't have God being present to us enacting, suffering with, dying, atoning – you don't have the things that actually are the reconciling acts that only God can do.

I have to think, “what does it mean to look at Jesus' humanity that says, ‘the one who is present to me is God as this person, one person, Jesus Christ, God and man. And so how is his life completely unlike mine in a sense that there will never will be and ever would be another incarnation because there is only the Son who has become permanently part of his own creation as the Creator. That is unique to Jesus and to no one else in the world, and yet his having become is to take on everything that belongs to my humanity. And yet to pull it off, to be one who actually walks in

obedience to the Father, who does not sin but who takes all the brokenness that is tempted toward that, and challenge by that, and think, “that means he really does live his life everyday, all day long, having to obey – having to say, “Ok, who gets this moment, in a sense, me or the Father?”

And for him to say, I only do what I hear the Father tell me to do, I only do what I see the Father doing, I enact by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is doing in the world – and that is what a true human being is about – is to bear the image of God for the good creation and for its flourishing, and for its life to be restored and for its healing and for its recreational restoration. So to be faithfully what I am supposed to be and what I am going to be as well as being God who is present to me, is just... I don't have words to explain the mystery and the beauty like that.

And at the same time I've started to take his humanity so, so seriously because without his ongoing life, then it does feel like, he sort of dipped into the human story for 33 years, did a saving kind of thing for three of those years by kind of talking what life by grace is and life in the kingdom is about, and then dying on the cross to make sure that we all get that life someday, and then resurrecting and ascending and popping off the scene and dropping his body somewhere and kind of going back to being the eternal Word or this Son and his pre-existent “whatever.”

**JMF:** In a sense that still leaves us alone.

**CFN:** It does, suddenly there is not God with us. I think what I sort of grew up assuming, is I really did... I think, without ever knowing it, I too thought Jesus dropped his body somewhere and was back to being the Son and was kind of glad that he was done with that. You know, I've read John 17 and I'd hear in that, “oh, I can't wait to get out of this situation,” and I think that the outpouring of the Spirit was my way of thinking, “ok, I really understand that God is still with us, and God is present to us that the Spirit is really Immanuel in this time. Because I didn't understand, fully, that it was not just the Spirit but it is actually Jesus who continues to mediate my presence before God as the firstborn of the new human race, the firstborn from among the dead or the firstborn of the new humanity.

And in Hebrews 2 where it says, I always think like Jesus was having his arms around me – both the one who is holy and the one who makes them holy, have the same Father. So he's not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters because we have the same Father and I think, ‘that's right, he really is in that position – high priesting for me, kind of mediating my life, going, ‘we're in this together,’ you know, we belong and we stand. And so not only that he stands in that place for me before the Father, he really gets my life. Hebrews says he's tempted in every single way except without sin. Well then, that's every way, just weariness trying to pull away, watching through the Gospels – where does Jesus, where do you get this where the sense of the Spirit is going? No, this is what we're doing.

You know, I think of Jesus getting in the boat after just being weary from teaching and healing and going away and it says he looked back and saw these people on the shore and had compassion. He sort of, “Here, turn the boat around,” and he goes and begins to teach the next day and empowered by the Spirit to do this very hard thing. And it’s in that day that he feeds the multitude. But then, did he wake up that morning going, “I know, I’m God, so I think I’ll do a miracle and that will convince them.” Or is he really living a life that is like mine, which would mean that he would have to be listening to the Father and listening to the Spirit. So in what way... I’m more curious as I listen to that story thinking, “When did you have this sense that this is what was going to happen, that is what the Father was inviting you into, that this is what the Spirit was empowering you to do. Was it when you prayed, was it?... I don’t know, he doesn’t tell us that, but to realize that this is not Jesus in his divine brain going, “I think it’s time for a miracle, I’d better do something holy or God-like.” And then when he was tired in the boat, this was his humanness coming out, what does it mean for him to be God who has become like me and relinquishing the privileges that come with acting divine without being human – which is what Philippians 2 says, that he relinquishes these divine prerogatives, to enact them in a way that is a faithful human and image-bearer of the divine.

So I watched his life through the Gospels and think, “how did he do that?” And he said, “by the Spirit, and what if I invited you into, Cherith? Life in the Spirit – so what about your life, do you think I don’t understand? And what about my life, do you think you’re not supposed to be doing?” And realizing, “oh that’s right – that’s Paul’s language in Ephesians 1 and 2 is, “this is the one who’s ascended to this place and sits in this place of power and authority under which everything has been set. But oh, by the way, you too already, in Christ, have been seated in this place of power and authority because that’s what human image bearers are to do, is to manifest the power and authority and the love for the other which is God in the world. So you too should be getting on and being part of what Jesus is doing from that position, and that makes me wake up very differently to go, “then what would you invite me in to today that isn’t what I would do, by myself.”

## 29. WHAT WILL THE RESURRECTED BODY BE LIKE?

**JMF:** You've done work on the need to see Jesus not only in the past as fully God and fully human, but even *now* as fully God and fully human.

**CFN:** Yes, and I think the important thing to remember as we have this conversation is that we do speak about mysteries that we haven't seen, and at the same time that we need to speak about them as loudly and happily, and wonderfully as we can, because blessed are those who haven't seen, but there are plenty who did. And it's remembering that the 40 days of Jesus' resurrection life that sort of shows up as a preview that says, "this is really me. I'm not here as a ghost, I'm not here as sort of this spirit being who can walk through a wall just to kind of say some last things to you before I kick off and leave. This is what it looks like for you to get your life back."

And that is what the gospel is about. That is what your salvation is, is that *you*, who have been beloved before the foundations of the earth, you, who the Father and Son and Spirit never needed (because they are eternally happy in themselves (as Jonathan Edwards says, "Their love for each other is perfect.") And so for us to *be* at all is just this incredible overflow of the love of the triune Persons for one another, saying, "Well, let's let others share in that and participate in that. And we aren't finished in our joy and our extension of that joy until we have Mike, until we have Cherith, precisely because it just delights us that they bear the image of God in and for the world and that they are in relationship to us and to one another."

And for Jesus' life to be so particular to say, this is the life that you have, we have God (one and three) because before the foundations of the earth, [who] predestined that you would become children of God, and once you have been predestined to become that, and you become that, you never

stop being that. And the only way to be children of God is to be human children of God.

And so for Jesus, 40 days of life, new life, new creation life, to say, this is what's coming. This is what you can anticipate. This is what it is like in some sense for you to see a body fit for the age of come which can eat a meal with you and walk through a wall. That is not dimensionally challenged for how time and eternity meet one another as heaven and earth join and creation is restored into the fullness of all that it gets to be. It doesn't mean that "you stop being who you are and have to turn into something else called a soul or an angel or something else, because actually your humanity wasn't really good, it was just sort of good, or it was a good first attempt, but when it comes to eternal life, your eternal life will be you as something else."

That has absolutely really nothing to do with the gospel, but it's the way that (I think) as a child, I heard that. I don't think I ever heard it preached to me except that it's the falling into the language of "when our souls go to heaven." It's falling into the language of our hymns, where we sing "then sings my soul" as if there is sort of a different way of praising God in this deeper spiritual way of being, that if I can just ignore my body and not even have to deal with the shame that comes with being this embodied person, and just get into that spiritual place, then this is what I have to look forward to, is to shed this skin and be in this sort of disembodied new way of being. And I think that the reality is that (I didn't realize this), but it was called Gnosticism.

I remember when I was 21, I was about to get married, and I remember my husband saying something to me that was just very loving and adoring about me, and just, you know, loving me and my body. And I remember just reacting violently, just feeling betrayed by him that somehow he had sort of seen me as this embodied woman without seeing the real me, who I thought he really loved. And I remember just being so confused trying to explain to him why that was hurting me or upsetting me because he was truly confused about what was disturbing me.

And I remember calling my dad to just try to talk to him. I said, "Dad, I'm caught. I can't get Robert to understand why this feels awful, that he sort of focused in on my femaleness and not the real me." And my dad listened to me on the phone very kindly and finally just quietly said, "Cherith, when did you become a Gnostic?" I had to stop and think about what a Gnostic is again. I was like, oh that's right, that's somebody who believes that the material world or anything that's created, or has physicality to it, or a being to it is bad, and that only the soul is good and only the spiritual realm is good.

And so I just stopped and I said, "Am I a Gnostic?" He says, "Well, honey, based on what you just said to me, I think you need to get saved!"

He said, “You seem to think that Jesus saved your soul or something.” And he said, “He’s the incarnate one who celebrates your whole person, and you can’t be you without being you, Cherith, in your female body.” He says, “Who do you think it is that he loves? Just your soul?” And I realized, I am 21, and I was taken aback thinking, I think at some level I knew that mentally I should be able to say what he said to me, but deep in my heart, I did not know that.

And so I started to go, in these last years, just looking at what it was that I was sort of just not seeing over and over and over in the New Testament text, that let me keep splitting out Jesus’ divinity from his humanity, kept splitting out my soul from my embodied life. I remember the day I was coming across the conversation that Jesus gets pulled into between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They’re all good Jews and they’re all well-trained, only the Sadducees are sort of trained a lot more in Greek thought and they have absolutely no time for or belief in the resurrection of the body, because who would ever resurrect a body? It’s no good!

And here are the Pharisees, who are still holding to these sort of Old Testament promises through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and all of these deep new covenant promises that when the new creation is restored, when life comes back, it will be the flourishing of all creation and you will get your life back. So, here are these two groups arguing and pulling Jesus in, and so they set it up with the, you know, the woman marries the husband who dies and then marries the many, many brothers that he has, and so who is she going to be married to in the resurrection? I had been reading this because I had had a few friends of mine, men actually (I don’t know if that matters or not, but my theological studies, they are mostly men) and we were talking about Jesus’ human life and his ongoing embodiment and how that matters, and they said, “You know, I just don’t really understand as you’re doing this work that you’re doing and sort of challenging this feminist theology, etcetera, why these women feel like they need God to look like them when in heaven there will be no male or female, so it really doesn’t matter?”

I remember just looking at them thinking, where do we get that? So they said, “You know, that, that debate that Jesus is in with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. We will be like the angels and there will be no marriage and giving in marriage in heaven.” And I went back to that and I thought, really? Is he going to turn me into something else? I’m really not going to be human for good, and I’m not going to be a soul, I’m going to be an angel or like an angel? This conversation and that text actually came up in the course of two weeks, completely different conversations, absolutely unrelated to one another, and I thought, there is something deeply serious going on here.

In going back and just reading that story, listening to Jesus’ way of



coming into that conversation and saying, oh children of the resurrection, you will be, in the sense, like the angels. It doesn't really matter who she marries, because your question is all about who she will procreate with. Who will she carry the family line along with? Who gets to have her to bear the name? And the fact is, is that you're not going to die, so this whole need to procreate and to create this ongoing lineage, this is a conversation which doesn't fit resurrection life, which is eternal life. And you children of the resurrection have started to shift the plot into a completely different debate than what is authentic, which is that you will get your human life back.

As I began to watch Jesus' life and the promise of his resurrection, which he kept instilling as their only hope (that he too had to trust that the Father would raise him from the dead), because he wasn't going to raise himself and he wasn't saying, I'll be back in three days, I'm just going to die and I'll be back. He agonizes in this place of trusting that actually what he is doing is something that the Father will make an atoning eternity-changing reality and that he would, by the Spirit, bring him back to live in this whole new way that he has never died and hasn't experienced and doesn't know.

So to begin then to listen and watch his 40 days of life and his insistence that his followers do not move until they too receive the Spirit, because there is no way that they are going to be able to begin to participate in the life that he has now guaranteed in his new humanity by the Spirit in the same way that he was already beginning to enact prior to his death and resurrection without the same Spirit that raised him from the dead. Paul uses that term over and over. Peter uses that term. John uses that term, "and the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead," and "this Jesus whom you killed, God raised him from the dead and has seated him at the right hand of the Father, and with the Father has now poured out the Holy Spirit whom you see in here."

And as I just then started reading Acts, I realized every time these apostles are held before the Sanhedrin, before Roman leadership, before Hebrew (Jewish) leadership, what they are professing is that that one who you killed who you thought was just this carpenter from Nazareth and an imposter, was truly God incarnate, and how we know both that this was God present to us and what our future looks like is that he is resurrected. He is the firstborn from among the dead. He is the firstborn of a new humanity. He is, in Paul's words, the new Adam, the progenitor of a new race, of human beings that aren't broken anymore, that are restored to their beauty that God has held before the foundation of the earth and guaranteed by entering into his creation and becoming one with us and actually bearing that image perfectly. Not with a divine credit card. Not with access to secret God powers that make it easy for him so that his humanity isn't really something I should take seriously, but to say, "I will enter into your condition completely, Cherith. I will take on the DNA of a mom. I'll have

the nose of my uncle. I'll do the family business. People will have my furniture in their house. I will have to grow up as a teenage boy and obey in terms of my budding sexuality, my awareness of other people, my obedience to my parents, my trying to hear why it is that I am not getting betrothed when everybody else is," you know, and trying to really understand his story and obey his story both as a true human, but as one who has really submitted to and listening to the Father all the time.

And then to recognize that something in his baptism is unique up to that mold. That however he is functioning and living as a true young man who really knows how to pray for me because he really gets my life because he had literally entered into any kind of experience. A lot of people, you know, push back and they go, maybe he didn't do that or maybe he wasn't this, or maybe no. He doesn't have to experience ever single human experience in particular.

**JMF:** No human does.

**CFN:** Exactly. I haven't experienced many of those things.

**JMF:** He would be abnormal if he did.

**CFN:** Exactly. Which is like doing this crazy thing to his humanity, which we also do to his divinity. But to say no, if what we're just talking about is, does he understand what it means to be tempted, to choose for himself instead of someone else? Does he understand what it means to be tempted to let someone become an object for his gratification instead to let them be a true person who he is for and loves. Does he understand all of the kinds of ways that my life every day is begged to question, Cherith are you going to do this out of your brokenness or are you going to do this in conformity to what God really looks like, which is what you are, is an image bearer of God.

I think he gets it. And then for him to then turn around and say, "So you don't get off the hook and look at my life and go 'yeah, but you were God; it was easy for you to do all that cool stuff.' I want you to see that my baptism is when the Father names me and claims me and says, "This is my son, whom I love and in whom I am well pleased."

But this isn't necessarily divine language that comes down and goes, oh, by the way, that's the pre-existent Son who came to you. That language comes way back from the Exodus. It comes from Deuteronomy. And that's the language that God uses whenever he names his image-bearers, whenever he calls a people for himself. He says, you are my Israel, my true son, the one who bears my image for the world. So look like me, and love the widow and the orphan and extend yourself to the alien and be for the other who does not have anyone to be for them, because that is how I am God for you. So look like me. Listen to what I would do, and speak for me the way that I would speak, enact in power what is rightfully my power to give you because I am the Creator who can do what I would love to do for

the flourishing of creation.

And so the isolating out of a Moses or a Jeremiah or a Jesus is so simple to go, well there is something special about them. I think, well, the only special thing about Moses and Jeremiah is that actually, very begrudgingly, they obeyed and let the Spirit's anointing upon them free, let the Holy Spirit do what he wanted to do, to call the world to attention to Yahweh.

**JMF:** For most of us, in fact for everybody, we look back over our personal history and we look at the things we've been through and the things we do, and we wonder, how can this possibly apply to me? I agree with it in principle and I can see how this is God's will and God's purpose, and I can imagine it being theoretically possible, but it's really not talking about me. I can't identify with it because I know what I'm really like.

**CFN:** And what I'm really like is messed up and with a past that feels like it's never going to leave me.

**JMF:** Yes.

**CFN:** And generally feeling pretty disempowered to change any of that, right?

**JMF:** Exactly. That's where most of us live.

**CFN:** I think so. And I think that the radicality of the gospel is that there is so much more - that it would require, I think, that we don't change our thinking of what the gospel means, but that we just let it *take* at every conceivable level. Because our salvation in Christ is not simply assent to this amazing thing that God has come and done for us that we couldn't possibly do anything about or for on our own to make the possibility of being in a relationship with the triune God happen.

But everything that we are, everything that we are, comes out of response to the fact that this is who God is to us. And he doesn't just show up as an idea of the three Persons in one to invite us into this idea of communal love, but to say, look, right here, in the way that God has chosen to be God, there is now a human being permanently present. So you are never without the ability to say, so what *is* my life about and where is it going? And what have you done with my past?

Because the one who stands in for me is not only this perfect human who I can't relate to because he's perfect, but this human who bears the marks of a deeply broken and imperfect humanity who had entered into every kind of condition that humanity has without falling and breaking in the process, without sinning into that process. But at the same time, you see his life bears the effects of being betrayed by his best friends. His life bears the effects of being isolated and alone. His life bears the effects of being unjustly and horribly, horribly executed. His life bears the effects of systemic sin, of personal sin, hitting him and influencing him all the time.

And so how do I look at his life and say, well, then what is our response within the midst of sin and brokenness that shows me what a real human

being looks like who doesn't live above all of that, who lives bombarded by and in it all the time. And he says well, Cherith, the place where when you see me, who sits on the throne looking like a slain lamb, who really bears the effects of the fact that I know your humanity inside and out as my own, means that there is nothing about your human life that I have not always known, and you are the one I've always loved. There isn't the, oh, if she shapes up and follows me or just believes all that stuff and starts assenting to this right theology or something, then we love her so much better. It's while you were a mess that I came into the mess and said, she is broken and she will never get out of this by herself. But we plan to love her forever. And we plan to have her with us forever and in communion with us forever, which means that we, I, God, will have to enter into the human condition and take what belongs to her and restore it for her, and in the process restore her.

But I think the thing that is so life-changing is to realize there is no human being that the Father, Son, and Spirit see and love apart from me, who is always the healed broken person, who is always the saved guilty person, who is always the restored alienated person, who always has the whole story held together, and the fact that the Father doesn't see me just as a before and after. He *always* sees me in the company of the Son. He always sees me with Jesus of Nazareth, Galilean Jewish male, forever as God's way of taking on humanity and keeping it, so that it doesn't dip down and go, well now I can like you or now I can love you, or now we can relate to you.

How could I possibly be more for you, Cherith, than to become like you as an absolute choice of freedom and love? And to become like you and take that into my way of being God permanently, so that you are never without somebody who is also your permanent advocate. So, you can't make me love you more, you can't make me love you less. Nothing you do, height, depth, powers, principalities, your brokenness, your horrible past, your attempts to try to be good in your own strength. Nothing can separate you from the love that has now been guaranteed to you in Christ Jesus who holds you in that communion with the Father by the Spirit and stands as God for you, having received and accepted and loved you, and stands as the new human who says, Father, when you see her, see her as she will be finished. Because this is what she will look like.

**JMF:** And already do.

**CFN:** And already do. So then, my Christian life is, well actually I need to get on board because the kingdom has already come.

**JMF:** The starting place is the belonging. You already belong. You always will belong, therefore....

**CM:** And out of that relationship then what does it look like to be part of bringing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? If already that life that

Jesus is living has determined where my life is headed, it also determines who I am now, because this is my identity now. So, basically, the invitation is well, Cherith, do you want to start looking like who you're going to permanently be? Do you want to start doing the stuff that looks like a restored human being?

And I don't think you can do that by yourself. You can only do that by the power of the Third Person of the Trinity happily taking up residence in you and saying, this has been how the story was from the beginning, is that the Ruach of the Spirit of the living God would rest upon and dwell within his image-bearer. And *that* has been what we've been about. It's what Jesus' life looks like as this anointing as the new and true image bearer, and now you, Cherith, Mike, beloved image-bearing children of the Father, who is conformed to the image of the Son, your brother, and your Lord, who happens to also be the King over all kings and the one who is reigning.

How do you stand with him and participate with him today by the power of the Spirit to be part of what he's doing? How do you ask him and not feel frustrated by what he invites you into, but to say, well, then actually if I let you, you could empower me to be more of who I actually really am. And then salvation becomes not a getting in or an entry point or just a conversion moment, it becomes this deep, permanent conversion into the person that I will forever be. And so my life becomes the *living into* my savedness, the *living into* my restoration.

**JMF:** The living out the reality of what already is.

**CFN:** The living out the promise that I don't only have in the future, but the fact that the future has dramatically impeded the present and has altered the course of everything from this forward. [JMF: (laughing) "impeded the present"] Which I think is a very different thing that just to say, I believe those things, but now I'm just going to try to, you know, gut it out to the best of my ability.

**JMF:** Muddle on through it.

**CFN:** And I think well, we can do that, but that's not the richest plot...

**JMF:** Yeah.

**CFN:** ...that we're in and it doesn't have the greatest joy and the most amazing possibility. And I think one of the things, that if we can grieve the heart of God, the place in the New Testament that really talks about grieving the heart of God is when we really do inhibit the Holy Spirit. Because, he says, how else could you bear my image in the world? How else can you participate in what I'm doing, when you block me there and say no and sort of stick the stopper into the bottle and say, well, I'm only going to do what I can do instead of finding out what it would look like to do what God would do with me.

He says, it does grieve me because you love me, but you are unempowered to love me well or to love those who I love. You are

disempowered to do the very things that you want to do. And it changes the story. We become people who believe things about God, and then we become religious people. And everybody who believes anything about God is a religious person, but that's very different than being a child of the triune God who is actually been asked to manifest the presence and the power of God in the world.

**JMF:** The good thing is he doesn't give up.

**CFN:** Amen. And it's a good thing because if I muddle or stop this bottle or whatever else, he is still the Lord of the church and the King of all things and well, he'll invite you back again tomorrow when you wake up. Because he's already sealed the deal. He's already doing what he is doing and nothing that I can do can also stop that grace from flowing.

### 30. IMAGE BEARERS FOR GOD

**JMF:** There's an objection we often hear about Trinitarian theology, and the idea that God actually loves everyone, that goes along this line: If God hates one person, then he doesn't love everyone. And the Scripture specifically says that God hated Esau. He loved Jacob and he hated Esau. So how do we respond to that?

**CFN:** The first thing we do is to take the words of Jesus seriously, instead of going to a place where we can't figure out what the Hebrew idiom might mean. If Jesus says that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, then we trust him that *that* is the overriding narrative. When we watch the entire biblical narrative with these moments of tremendous suffering and pain and injustice and oftentimes just horror, it's to trust that overarching reality — that God so loves this world despite the broken image-bearers' attempt to take it down by not knowing how to do anything else, and in our brokenness he will not let us be left to our devices. He loves us too much to let the story turn out the way that it would turn out on our own.

If that is the way that the whole overarching narrative is held, by the way that God is God, and not by the way that we are in response to God or to one another or to anything else, then it's to look at the way that the biblical narrative is structured and given, and what these incredibly important terms and echoes are that come through the Old Testament, so that when Jesus shows up and starts saying these things out of his mouth and attributing them to him, not just divinity but attributing all the back story of humanity in relation to God in his own human life and where human life for everybody is going, then it's to make sure that we're really clear about what those identity markers are, so that we can hear a text like “and God hated Esau” and say what in the world is going on there, besides just probably

one of so many moments where an idiom is used to speak an idea that is not to be taken literally, and then throw everything else out that doesn't agree with that one term.

How do we recognize it? As English-speakers, part of what we suffer from is that we are getting a translation of something that is an ancient language and multi-layered and a beautiful language, so that when a pronouncement like that is made, there is deep meaning to that, that is not just the opposite of love and hate. To go to that deeper meaning, to look at those original echoes, and then to see what then does Jesus' incarnate life mean for us, pulling us into the life of the Trinity. We can't but not go there.

It's worth a little rabbit trail for a minute to just look at how the entire New Testament, which...at the time that it is becoming what it is...at the time that these gospels are being proclaimed, these letters are being written and read aloud to whole communities (so that nobody's picking up the letter to the Ephesians and reading it privately and ever hearing the word "you" and thinking that means me and my privatized Christianity and I need to behave these ways) —these letters were taken and read to everybody in the entire community sitting there next to each other squirming about the reality that they're being called to, because the only way to live this out is corporately, that each one individually matters.

Jesus gives those kinds of parables — that the Father seeks every one of us and adores every one of us and will pursue us until he pulls us into that fellowship. To go after the lamb or to go after the lost coin or to be the son that is longed for...in every one of those parables, they're brought home, they're brought back to something that is bigger than them. The son comes home, the coin is joined, the lamb is brought back to the flock, not set up in a little dyad with a shepherd out there in the middle of nowhere. It's trying to recognize that that salvation... throughout individual life is absolutely priceless to God because we exist out of his pleasure and joy... we are his delight and his image and he will not let anything deter his good outcome for that. But at the same time, our life lived in a way that really reflects God, is lived together.

So as these communities are hearing this, and the New Testament world is trying to sort of reorient itself because of the reality of Jesus having come among them and risen in their midst...the only Scripture they know is the Old Testament. That's the only Bible, as far as they're concerned, because at the time none of them are anticipating that their letters are going to end up in a canon that we are reading thousands of years later. So when these terms, like Paul in Colossians using things like "he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn from the dead." Or the fact that the Father uses the language of Jesus' baptism to say, "You are my Son whom I love and in whom I am well-pleased."



When this community hears those kinds of terms, there are just layers and layers of echoes that sound. It's like hitting a gong and all of this history gets played out, and they're like, "oh my goodness, he's what?" Because they have deep resonant meaning to those things. Starting from the very beginning to think of all of these ancient cultures having a creation narrative, every one of them...and every one of them has a creation narrative that has some kind of battle that usually that takes place over water, and the water is the place of chaos and who knows what danger is lurking there. Creation usually is the sort of fallout or the byproduct of the negative side of some kind of cosmic battle. Once this thing gets played out, then it's like, "well, then so what do we do with this stuff?" If we've got those gods or that god who ended up with all this stuff, how do we relate to that god to keep him appeased, or her making sure that we're fertile, or whatever their relationship to these ancient gods is.

They all have a narrative that has this description of who God is in relation to them, life coming out of water and chaos, a description of life as sort of this temple-palace garden, and then there's this setting up of the image of the God in the temple-palace garden. In all of these, whether it's ancient, ancient Egyptian or later Mesopotamian Babylonian, these ancient cultures would have this period where if they were constructing a new temple palace for the god, they would basically sort of narrate the story of what this God is about with them in the construction of the temple-palace garden, and the priests would come in and they would undergo what they would call a spiration ceremony or a breathing ceremony.

The assumption was, is that once they sort of breathed this ritual over this idol or image of the god, that the god would take up residence there — that the presence of the god was there. It didn't mean that the god was only that statue, but it meant that where that statue was, that god was present. In the midst of that, whether it's probably Egypt and maybe Babylon, but if it's Egypt out of which God's people come, and they begin to tell their own creation narrative in response to the polytheism of Egypt or sort of the way that gods are laid out in Genesis 1. It's like, "In the beginning God created...and the Spirit hovered over the water...and then God said..." And there's only ever one.

Everything that is a god in Egypt is actually just creation to God. After six days of ordering and setting and creating time and purpose and meaning and dimensionality and everything else, it's on the sixth day that God says, you're not going to create an image for me, I am going to create my own image-bearer. I will do my own spiration ceremony. We will create them, male and female, to bear our image. It requires them to be together to be truly human, because we are the Triune God, and there is no such thing as a single image-bearer that can bear the image of God without bearing that image in relation.

The Genesis 2 retelling of what it says in Genesis 1 — that here is God who chooses Adam from the earth and breathes his life into him, breathes his Spirit, *ruach*, into him. Then he becomes the one who literally is for creation. He is to name it, he is to tend it and flourish it, he is to have “the one who completes him as an image-bearer with the other.” She is called the *ezer* to him, God’s strong helper, which is the language that God uses of himself all through the Old Testament. You know, “Woe to Egypt who doesn’t have Yahweh as their *ezer*.” So she’s not his right-hand support system — she, with him, bears the character and image of God in the world.

For Genesis 3, then to turn around and say, here’s what happens when the story goes bust, when the image-bearer fails to be the one who sees with the eyes of God, who sees what God sees, which is good in the world, and who acts in power what God would do, to speak for God and make these things be what they are, and have this divine human communion, not just about humanity in relation to God, but God who loves his world, everything in his cosmos, and who claims the entire creation as his temple-palace garden, who says, the heaven is my canopy and the earth is my footstool...and takes this sort of reigning image of a throne room and says, “It’s all mine. I love it all, and you get to be the one who is for it even as you are for me, and I will be for you, so that I can be for all things.”

For Genesis 3 to say, and when this goes awry is when the image-bearer forgets who he and she are and...and they become ones who try to assume that they’re being like God is something that gives them equality with God, which is not something to be grasped if we take Jesus’ life seriously, but by grasping something that doesn’t belong to them, they literally break and lose the image that they do bear faithfully and well. The Old Testament then becomes this ongoing story of well, then how does God restore them? How does he lead them out of that broken place and into the promise of new life, of new creation? They come out of this Eden and into not just barrenness, but a new Edenic situation.

Noah becomes another story where you have water and God whose Spirit hovers as a dove over the water, which shows up again at Jesus’ baptism. You have God who takes this person and his family out and says, “I again will make a people for my name. They will look like me and bear my name and presence in the world and my power, so that when they are present, nobody wonders if Yahweh is present — that is precisely who they are and what they do.” His judgment, even prior to Noah, is: these were my children, but they don’t look anything like me. They’re abusing and destroying, which has nothing to do with the character of the Triune living God. He says, “That is false. Absolutely false to the core. My image-bearer cannot bear my name falsely in the world, because no one will know who I am. So I’ll call a people for my name again.”

You get it primarily in the Exodus, where God says, “Out of this people

I will call a people for my name again.” He says crazy stuff to Moses. In Exodus 3 and 4 he says things like, When you go before Pharaoh, who happens to think out of the entire planet that he is the only living divine image-bearer of Ra, the sun-god or whoever he’s instantiating, you will go to him and you will be like God to him. You will speak the words of God to him. When I give you Aaron, you will be like a God to Aaron. You will be like God to Aaron, and Aaron will be like God to him as he speaks for you.”

This sort of re-anointing and image-bearing that says, “I will breathe my Spirit into you. You will begin to function again in a way that actually looks like me and not the power and the oppression of Pharaoh and the rulership, but the releasing of humanity to start functioning as what it really is in relation to me.” It’s a crossing through water again and light and all those kinds of images.

You get it with the Jordan, and you get it over and over again, until finally in Ezekiel there comes this just tragic, tragic moment where after so many of these faithful re-gatherings of his people and recalling them and renaming them and reclaiming them, he says, “Look, this is it. You look like the idols you worship. You’ve forgotten who you are, which is (in the technical sense of the term in that day), you are my idol. The reason you’re not allowed to have any idols is because you’re it. People are supposed to look at you to know what Yahweh looks like. And you have started to look like these things that you have constructed. And so you act out of that and you abuse and oppress and defame and hurt and destroy and choose against the other instead of for.”

And he says, “I won’t have it, because it’s unfaithful to what’s true. It’s unfaithful to the heart of love that is what allows everything to be what it is.” So the image that Ezekiel gets is to watch the Spirit of God, basically, hovering over the ark and saying, “am I leaving?” He comes to the threshold and says, “Am I going to stay or are we going to go?” And the tragedy of the image is that the Spirit goes. “And now you will wait.” And so then the promise becomes, “I will take away from them their heart of stone, their law, and I will give to them a heart of flesh and I will breathe my Spirit on them and they will live.”

To look specifically at the Esau question, you think here is God who has not only named himself but the un-nameable Yahweh of the sort of transcendent glory that’s so not his creation, which is them...however the Triune language gets put there. At the same time, this is the God who has no shame, no hesitancy to name himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who are a mess, all three of them. He goes, “Oh, I’m happy to be associated with them. In fact, their storyline has become my storyline. I have called them to myself, I’ve loved them in the midst of their brokenness and the things that they’ve done disobediently. And I am for

them, as I have made them for me.”

For Jacob’s brother, Esau, to be the one who of these twins is the firstborn, the true rightful image-bearer, the true firstborn son who should carry that name forward, that is Isaac, the son who came from nowhere in terms of God’s mercy. When Esau begins to look like the idolatrous people with whom he marries into and begins to...instead of what Yahweh looks like, God says, “No. I refuse to put my name on that. I refuse to say that that is what I look like in the world. And I will stand against that, but I will do that by being for it, by coming back around and restoring these people to myself.”

When you finally have Jesus, who becomes this sort of messianic promise...all through those Major and Minor Prophets it says, “There will finally be one like the son of man, who is going to come, who God will anoint, who will actually be the one true human image-bearer.” “I have finally chosen my last and only son to bear my name and presence in the world, and it all rests on him to get it right, to do it, and to do it like I would have to do it — not dipping in as God, but to take my humanity.”

From the entire human race down to this people of Israel, down to this priesthood, to this king, to these prophets...it just gets smaller and smaller to this funnel where you just finally have it rest on this one person who is God and man. Having his life set the entire thing in order and then just release from that point forward...from the apostolic fellowship of the believers to become this Gentile mission, to become the whole world...which is precisely way back up here when he promised Abraham, is when I call you as a people for my name, this is like the promise to the whole deal...so that Mike and Cherith who are not Jews and they aren’t circumcised will be in on this story thousands of years from now. I will be faithful to this and just release it through my Son.

So all of us who are busy trying to figure out if we are okay in relation to God tend to forget when we get caught, and the enemy would love to cause us to look at our own image as it reflects back upon us, instead of to look at the one in whose image we’ve been made and who stands as the perfect image-bearer for us...is to keep remembering this isn’t about how well I’m bearing the image apart from Jesus.

The only way I get to be in on this story, the only way I get to play and the only way I get to stand well, even with all of the marks of my woes and shame all over me, is to have that washed, because the person who stands in for me as my high priest...who can only be my high priest if he’s like me. He cannot be my high priest if he’s not like me, because the high priest is the one human being who stands in for the entire people before God. So it’s God who becomes his own high priest, in a sense, on behalf of humanity.

If that’s my high priest, that’s also what he’s doing – constantly,

permanently priesting for me, permanently standing in for me and offering perfect sacrifice of his life in the perfect human obedience of his life. I am always, as an image-bearer, joined to him. The Father always holds the two of us — holds me and God’s people — but always holds us with his Son — to participate in something, that isn’t about how well I pull it off, it’s the fact that it’s already been pulled off.

**JMF:** So in Jesus you have the rejected Esau and the accepted Jacob who failed as well...

**CFN:** That’s right.

**JMF:** ...healed and redeemed.

**CFN:** That’s right. God will go to any length to make sure that no matter how far Esau wants to walk away, that God will say absolutely no, so that his character and love for his world is not compromised. But at the same time, to say every time God says ‘no,’ it’s so that his ‘yes’ can be what it is. To say *no* to that about Esau is so that he can say *yes* to what is really true. He’s going to say *yes* finally in his very...

**JMF:** Which is the point and conclusion of Romans 11.

**CFN:** Exactly.

**JMF:** And then Paul brings it up.

**CFN:** And how do you thank God for that?

**JMF:** Yeah.

**CFN:** Which is beyond our comprehension.

**JMF:** Yeah, it’s fascinating.

**CFN:** I think it’s just to always realize that where it’s tempting to kind of say “but what about this? What about that?” Just stand back a little bit and say well, what would that mean in the context of this larger, incredible story that I’m in — that I’m not the primary character in. It’s not my private drama, it’s that I’ve been invited into this amazing story that is God’s story of his unfathomable and irresistible love for that which is not him — that he’s chosen to share it with them. Nothing can stop it, and so how does that thing that I’m reading, that God hated Esau or whatever we might be fixating on...how would that fit into this larger narrative to understand? What is the *yes* of God in Jesus that would say *no* then to these other kinds of things?

And how does this suffering of the world that seems so beyond our comprehension become a “no” precisely by the fact that the story doesn’t end with the crucifixion — that God’s “no” to suffering having the last word has to be passed through in order to have a “yes” of resurrection. There’s always going to be these beautiful mysteries of *yes* and *no* held in tension, but as followers of Jesus we have to be committed to the whole story, and keep seeing where we are in that whole big story, instead of just sort of checking our checklist of beliefs and seeing whether they feel like they contradict each other sometimes.

**JMF:** In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul speaks of looking at a poor reflection in a mirror. In the mirror, we see ourselves, and it's the broken image-bearer we're seeing. But he's saying that there is something better than that, that's already real, that we're not seeing most of the time — we're not seeing Christ as the one who has taken up our cause and made it his own.

**CFN:** Paul is writing a letter to a church he knows really well and loves very much, who are busy trying to dehumanize Jesus and to sort of super-spiritualize themselves in a way that stops taking their own embodied humanities seriously. He won't let them. From the very beginning of the letter, we are going to preach Jesus Christ crucified. For Paul there is no such thing as Jesus Christ crucified, there's only Jesus Christ crucified who is the risen one, which is why we can hold this crazy thing, because Jesus Christ is the risen anointed one who was crucified. Very often we stop at the cross, forgetting that the cross would be very, very bad news if he is not the resurrected and ascended one...

Paul set that up and says, and now let's talk about life in the church. What am I hearing? I'm hearing that there's this division around leadership as if somebody has more value in the community of faith, in the community of the saints over the other, when the one who we're supposed to look like has laid his life down. He, who was entitled to be over us, became one for us and one submitted to whatever the Father would do for us. I'm hearing that you are having incredible sexual distortion between you marrying your stepmother (or whatever it is) and he doesn't even address those people directly. He says, "I hear among you that this has happened and that you're allowing this as a community."

All these people are hearing this together. He's saying, "Not even the pagans do that." "I'm hearing that you're tootling down to some pagan law court because you've got some grievance against your brother, and you want somebody who does not have the power and authority or the presence of the Holy Spirit to usher in true justice in the kingdom of God to settle a dispute for you, when you whose lives are conditioned to be for the other have now been given the power and authority to enact justice, and more than just justice, mercy for the other."

"I hear that there are some of you who aren't sleeping together. I hear there's some of you having sex with temple prostitutes — probably because you're not sleeping together as husband and wife." "What are you doing that thinks that somehow this isn't about your embodied life?" "I hear that some of you are eating food from temples and some of you think that's..." Paul just keeps pressing in, pressing in, pressing in. "I hear you're disrespecting the table and one another at the table."

He finally gets to this point: "It's really all about the fact that you belong to each other, that you are this communal life enjoined to the Triune God together. There's only *allelon* (it's a Greek word that means 'one

anothering?). There's only one another. You love one another, you forgive one another, you care for one another." If the story plot of Corinth was looking at you, you wouldn't know whose image you're being conformed into. He finally says, "It's all about looking like the character of God. It's loving. It's being patient and enduring and suffering long for the other, and believing and hoping and trusting." We can't see where this is all going, but at the same time we can, because we see him.

When he finally calls them to their worship life and he pushes them through their behaviors that they're forgetting even in their worship life, it's all driving to chapter 15, where he's going, "How can I say this to you? Because we serve one who is resurrected and is a new human. And over 500 people saw him, and the apostles saw him, and even I saw him as one...reborn. And because he is who he is, and already holds our new humanity and has this body fit for the age to come, a spiritual body (which is like an oxymoron) but to say he's got that body fit for the new creation.

Because Christ is like that, we already know who we are (you know where this is going) and we know that actually by the power of the Spirit, we're to be enacting our future reality right smack dab here in Corinth in a way that nobody wonders what the image of God looks like in the world, because they see slaves and free people loving each other, who should have nothing to do with each other. They see women preaching who should have no mouths to bear witness or say anything in the fellowship. They see prophetic gifts running all these directions. They see forgiveness where nobody anticipated it. They see something that they can't see anywhere else in the world, by how this odd crazy fellowship of Jews, non-Jews, men, women, slaves, every socioeconomic, racial, gender boundary comes together as a new people of God and says "we are going to live "the life that's coming" right here, because the life that's coming has already become present to us in Jesus, and we are in on it."

It's impossible to do this without the Spirit, but that would be Jesus then going, "Don't leave Jerusalem, because you new image-bearers, new creation, need the *ruach* of the Spirit, which was promised in Ezekiel 37, in Jeremiah. You need that heart of flesh to be anointed by the Spirit to become this new people of this new age, which hasn't yet come to completion but has already begun.

It is that mystery, as you said, of seeing in part, but when I think it's all too hard to figure out, Jesus says, "just look here, Cherith, take my life seriously, look here, the gospel witnesses to me, and you can't over-divinize me, you can't make me too much God and get yourself off the hook that actually I don't understand you or you can't be like me. And I also don't want you to take my humanity so seriously that you somehow separate out that this is God who is present to you, so that everything I do really does restore your life." That's the beautiful tension that we get to walk in.

## 31. WHAT JESUS' HUMANITY MEANS FOR US

**JMF:** You're working on two books in the final stages of production. The second one is with InterVarsity Press. Could you tell us about that one?

**CFN:** Yes. It's less than final as far as InterVarsity is concerned, but I would love to tell you about that. It's a book that has sort of come into being because of the kinds of conversations that I've had with students over these last seven or eight years with some of the concerns that I began to discover were deeply problematic in my own receiving the life of Jesus for me. It was always this "idea" that I kept trying to cling to, instead of someone that I really knew, who I could really see as that person standing for me.

It's a book that I think is really emerging out of some very lively conversations, and maybe that's a good way that books get written. Sometimes I'm wondering why theologians ever write books. It seems like we've already said everything. This book won't be anything new. But it will be a revisiting of why the humanity of Jesus actually matters. I think that has come out of conversations with students where either they have such a deeply held sense of Jesus' divinity, that the idea that he truly is like us (let alone continues to be like us as we will be) is very hard for them to believe and to trust, let alone try to get their heads around.

The opposite extreme is that somehow then his humanity becomes something that they keep trying to generalize so that he just becomes the person that we can kind of retrofit into all of our own experience, instead of his life really being what it is, which is that my life isn't your life, and your life isn't my life, and his life isn't my life either. It really is *his* life that he has lived.

The conversation that started to generate some of this came around the recognition of students realizing that they had a deep ambivalence about



their own humanity. As we would discuss God being one who was really about saving their whole person, they were very quick to discover that they weren't really so sure that they wanted their whole person saved.

**JMF:** And by whole person you mean...

**CFN:** It's like the fun phrase that Karl Barth does when he tries to sort of talk about us as embodied souls. The very next sentence he'll use the term ensouled bodies or souled bodies, because he doesn't want us to see one prioritizing the other. To be a person is somebody who is constituted this way.

There is no way for us to be the deep inner-core soul person that we are, that does not have its physical male or female manifestation. This is what it means to be Cherith. There is no other Cherith who is trapped in this body or currently taking up residence in this body. Embodied Cherith, as her deepest...which is all there is. And yet I'm not just my body. There's something that is deeply *core* that remains in terms of who I am with my new body. We're sort of landing in territory that's almost hard to describe, and so Barth just plays those terms off of one another.

What I discovered is that much like myself when I was younger and then through the course of having to deal with illness in my life and other ways of just not really taking my own body seriously—the limitations that it had, the struggles that I have, the taking my femininity and my femaleness seriously in relation to men and women, realizing that I had spent a lot of my life growing up in the church sort of neutering myself because I grew up in a household of all boys and had a mother who grew up in a household of all boys, so it was just kind of “try to be one of the boys.”

I was in worlds (in my many years in the law firm or in the church or the academy) that are mostly male-dominated worlds. And to not use my femaleness in an inappropriate way, I just always pretended I didn't have any. “This is just my shell, but the real me is this person who you really want to know.” That was very unfaithful to the gospel, let alone very unfaithful to real human relationships, and it forced me to not take responsibility for myself and what my sons were learning about how to honor women and men well, and how to help them talk through some of those kinds of things.

I had relationships with students who were just going, “I'm not sure that I can get past the shame of my embodied life” or, “I'm 20 and I'm a very healthy male and I don't know how to think about women in a way that thinks about them in an embodied sense that doesn't trip me up or get me caught.” And, “I can't wait to get to heaven and not have a body and not have to worry about how to think about stuff like this.”

I started to realize, “Oh my goodness. Instead of people who follow an incarnate Lord in freedom, we are very quietly Gnostic in a way that sort of tries to negate our humanity.” Then we let Jesus be a lot more docetic, or

the Jesus who just sort of shows up in human form, or fills a human body—whatever these ancient heresies are, whether it’s Apollinarianism, or these different kinds of terms that came from people in the church trying to relieve the tension of saying that this one is the God-man, that this one is Yahweh in the flesh.

Because those things were so hard to hold together, these heresies (which always happen inside the community of faith—outside they are just something completely other), but it’s people within the community of faith going, “Let’s make him a little more human and a little less divine, so that we can trust that what he did, he really did as an authentic human being, because otherwise it’s God just taking over his will and his mind.”

Or on this side, people are going “Yeah, but we know that the material world actually isn’t very good and God would never taint himself to really, really be like me, so I think he just sort of used that human form and poured himself into it and then just got rid of it as soon as he could.” Most of us don’t get walked through those kinds of heresies that were really lively debates in the life of the church in the early first centuries. They were always trying to figure out how...we’re trying to say this thing—have we said it faithfully enough without locking it down? Because we can’t lock this thing down and really get our heads around it, but we know that we must say that he is God and that he is truly a man.

As I would sit in class, and watch and sort of study these things, and ask my students and say, “Okay, go back to your church background and tell me which of these heresies is the most common in your youth group, which is the most common that you think happens in the worship life, or your hymnody—where do we tell the story about Jesus in a way that releases the tension and actually causes us to see him as two people—so he’s the divine Son and then he’s Jesus of Nazareth, and somehow they got crazy-glued together (well, that’s another heresy!) ...and all the ways that the church was trying to go “What can we actually say?”

If we give even the slightest bit on either side of those, the story falls apart, we don’t have God present to us, and I can’t really trust that my humanity is redeemed and whole and kept in the very presence of God by somebody who knows my story intimately and is *for me* in that story.

**JMF:** In spite of that story.

**CFN:** In spite of it. And he actually heals that story, you know – becomes the person who enters the human condition and becomes my lived healing by his very life. Lots of “on the ground” questions you deal with, with young adults, and they are trying to sort it out. It’s like, “How do you not fantasize sexually about somebody, as somebody who’s really trying to follow Jesus and who would take a lead from Jesus on this, and to trust him about ‘what does it mean to let this man or woman, whether you’re a man or woman who’s doing this, let them become a *person* again?’ How

would you do that instead of let them be an object, which is what your culture is constantly asking you to do, is to objectify them and to de-personalize them for your gratification or for them to sell you something or whatever else is going on. How do you become one who really is the image-bearer of God...restores their personhood without pretending you're not a man who is aroused by them or a woman who's aroused by that man?" How do you become obedient in your humanity, which is very different than pretending you don't have any.

We would really engage in some of these very deep questions. In the process of doing that, I asked them to begin to hand in things, assignments that became reflections that were not prose, they weren't written papers. They had to be things that showed me in some other form—I don't give any restrictions around what it had to be—both their own body map and a God map. Not that you can completely categorize either, yourself or God, but how, through a tiny little lens, how do you see yourself right now? What is your sense of your embodied person, and how do you see God? These were deeply far apart, because the incarnation wasn't the way that they saw God first. God was the big far-away God, or the wrath of God, or the confusing God, or the God that you hoped liked you most of the time.

I remember one student handing in her God map, and she gave me a bottle of oil and balsamic vinegar. The instructions were to just shake it up as hard as I could, and for that one instant that it looks like these things are held together, she said the oil represents the goodness of God, and the vinegar represents to me the wrath of God. I can't figure out how to hold those things together and trust that he really loves me, because I have this deep sense of his wrath. She says, "I can hold it for just about as long as those things look like they're mixed."

To look at her own way of perceiving herself by the kinds of things that she would draw or paint or construct, I realized that the fact that we have a very poor sense of Jesus' embodied life for us had deep ramifications, for the fact that these students would confess within these works—they would do their addictions, their self-mutilation, their sexual abuse that became part of their past story that they just never felt like they could be released from, all kinds of issues that they felt like they carried with them, and they had no idea how to be that embodied human and trust that that was good news—that God had loved that person, and loves that one, and pulls that person, me, this way—into the divine fellowship.

In the process of doing the very word of acceptance and receiving me, is a word of reconciling and a word of restoring and healing. Already before God, all that that's broken, it's me who bears the effects of my brokenness, who has not yet seen what I look like when I'm finished. But *he* does. The parts that I don't know what to do with in my brokenness, he also sees through his Son, and his Son mediates as my high priest, and the Spirit who

intercedes for me that anguish of being caught still in “the already and the not yet.” Yet the empowerment, and the worship, and the joy that Jesus offers on my behalf and that the Spirit offers on my behalf.

This book is trying to get to the core of why Jesus’ humanity matters every day, so that issues of justice do not become topics of interest. You know, if I happen to be somebody who’s all about social justice or I’m all about creation care, or I’m all about immigrant issues, or I’m about this, or I’m about that, you see? Actually, if you are a human image-bearer who is already being called to enact the future that’s coming, where God’s justice, and reign, and the flourishing of creation is finally just the way it is, where you finally get your life back, and so does everything else (referring to Romans 8), that you are already the person that creation is holding on by its fingertips waiting for the glory of the children of God to be revealed, because once we get our lives back, so does everything else.

When Paul keeps going with that metaphor, he says, “And what is the redemption, what is this glory, what is this thing that you anticipate? It’s the thing that you anticipate. It’s the redemption of your body.” You’re going to get your life back, and you’re going to be whole! We’re not going to be broken and screwed up anymore! Imagine relating to your husband and really loving him the way you want to, instead of the way you do, Cherith. Those are my biggest dreams and joys, to think, I will really love people the way I want to. I will really stop defending and hiding for fear that people will not really love me if they really knew me. There will be a transparency in relationship that I cannot wait for.

Yet at the same time, I think we have been called as a people to begin to practice resurrection...we are people who are called to begin to enact for the sake of the world, the story that we’re in, so that they see both what’s already going on and where this finally ends up as a sort of new beginning in this final restoration of all things. So in a sense it has a very practical aspect, on the other hand it allows the chance to kind of go into some of these very fascinating and wonderful lively church conversations.

These were in academic conversations, these heresies or these creedal constructs. These were...what do people say when they get baptized? What do we mean when we invite people into the life of God and to be followers of Jesus and to this new creation? What are we actually saying? And, you know, one side of the pond would find themselves saying one thing, and somebody else over here is saying another and saying... When we say these things, how are we trying to articulate in short form in a little confession or a creed that somebody will say... I believe this whole big narrative story, and here are the bullet points.

Those became life-and-death conversations. You know, you change that one word by this letter and it means something completely different, and it’s an iota of difference, and you’re saying either Jesus *is* God, or he is just

sort of *like* God but not really God. These were deep conversations with deep ramifications in the everyday life of the community of the saints back then. They still are; we are sort of unpracticed and unlearned at thinking through the implications of who Jesus really is. I speak for myself and my own church traditions—it's very easy to keep going back to the familiar and just seeing what we know without going into the part that's harder to say because we are really able to nail down that, we just know what we need to profess, what we're called to be witness to, what we're called to say in worship.

At this stage I fall into doxology and worship and praise because I can't explain it as a creature-child, I just have to celebrate it, because it defines everything about my life. I look forward to seeing how this book finally comes into its final stages, but it's also then a book about "What does it mean to really walk by the power of the Holy Spirit?" What does it mean to walk as people who are not just to model, which is actually never the word...to somehow look at Jesus as some figure that I'm always supposed to look at and try to copy, which is impossible in my own strength and impossible to understand...but to say "What would it mean to really be joined to what he's doing?" – which is always about justice, always about the restoration of creation, always about the care for the poor and the alien and the stranger, always for the other, always on the side of all these things, because all of these things are already under his reign and his rule.

If they're already all-mattering to him and he would like to actually have something to say and do about them, where would he look but his human image-bearers, where he would say, "This is what I'd like to do about this today, Cherith, would you like to participate with me, would you like to play?" Or he'd say, "You know, Mike, this is what I'd like to do."

And sometimes it will look astounding because healing will break in, new creation will already break through... Anytime where he talks about it, sort of like breaking through the concrete of the old creation comes this grass of new life. It will look like that sometimes. Other times it's that constant sense in Paul and Peter and John where it's the call to be filled with the Spirit in order to actually walk this incredibly challenging witness and to walk in these places where God really wants to go, which is in the place of suffering—to talk into the places that he has claimed as his own, which is to stand with people in their pain and to make their need my need and to endure the suffering that's part of my own life instead of rail against God or run away from it.

He promised that I would participate in the fellowship of his glory, but glory for him, according to John 12, starts when he turns his face to Jerusalem and begins that final week of his life. It says, "And then Jesus was glorified." Well, the glory and participation in his fellowship is suffering...so our participation in the fellowship of his suffering. These things are not one

or the other, and it's not "I want some glory, so I guess I'm going to have to have a little suffering because Jesus suffered."

I think Jesus has been trying to turn this around for me and say, "Cherith, I suffered because you do. I've entered into your situation. I knew what was coming for you. I know the human condition. I knew you would have this. And the only way for your story to turn out with a different ending than having that suffering be the final word, is to enter into your suffering and take it and heal it and redeem it so that when you are in the midst of it, you see it as a participation in the fellowship of mine and you know the outcome and you know that I can empower you to endure that, just as the Father by the Spirit empowered me all the way to and through the cross." So it's become a very earthy conversation in some wonderful ways. I am hoping by getting the book out there, that it will also create a lot more dialogue on some of these issues.

**JMF:** The sense of belonging and of being accepted from the beginning and knowing that that comes before your life in the Spirit and before measuring up to anything (as though we could measure up to anything) seems to give a sense of freedom to be able to enter into this suffering knowing that it isn't a matter of a pass/fail, it's a matter of you're already belonging, you're already accepted, and you're entering into a life that is real and will work out right because it's already been claimed and healed and redeemed. It makes all the difference. Many people fear that, as you said, there's a fear of, "I don't know if I can measure up. I don't want to embark on a journey I know I can't finish or don't believe I can finish."

**CFN:** Or just see failure at the end of every day.

**JMF:** Right.

**CFN:** That's part of the challenge that gets addressed in Romans 7-8. Romans 7 is never Paul's description of the Christian life, ever. Let's talk about three laws...if we're going to use the term *law*, because we get that term, because we all used to be under that law... How about naming sin and death a law, because it always turns out that way? This is just the way it goes. So we have this law of Torah-keeping, we have this law of sin and death that absolutely cannot be...and we have this new law of the Spirit, as Jeremiah called it, or Ezekiel calls it, Isaiah calls it, and he says to walk under this new law is to be set free from this condemnation that comes with... "I thought I would be able to pull it off, and yet again I blew it. And who will deliver me from this?"

Paul's saying, "Nothing from those two laws will ever deliver you from that, but in the Spirit, every day, by continuing to trust and release and invite God." You don't have to *invite* him to be present, it's almost just letting him loose. It's letting him actually have the moment. To say, "Lord, I won't constrict you. I will actually listen to you when you talk to me and stop, and when I've prayed earlier today, "Lead me not into temptation but

deliver me from evil,” when you try to do that for me, I will listen to you and not just go into my default setting or not just go the easiest place of my kind of bent-ness.”

Over time, God begins to take that bent-ness and sort of straighten it into conformity with his Son, which is an obedient submission, which is a “What are we doing today, and how do I be a part of that?” I’ll have things all through every day that need forgiving, but the Lord already knows that before we got started and before I woke up, and he isn’t inviting me or not inviting me in based on how well I’m going to do today, I’m just in, you know?

He says, as my dad used to say, and still does, he says, “God has never been about the business of fitting individuals for heaven. He has been about the business of making a people for his name and presence.” And he has done that. He’s done it through his Son, and nobody can alter that outcome, nobody can alter that current reality. Either we can participate in it more and more and sort of get on board with what the possibilities are by our life in the Spirit for the other...and realize it’s not sort of a triumphalism of, “Oh, I get more and more power to see things look easier or amazing.”

Sometimes what looks amazing and gets easier is actually to just keep loving the person who makes you crazy, to love the person who is the most painful person in your life, to love yourself when you’re that person who is the most unlovable person. And to watch the power of God begin to enter in as a choice of love over and over and over becomes the radical participation in the life of the Holy Spirit that will, sometimes, look like healing and sometimes look like endurance. It will look like suffering long, which is such the character of God for those that he loves no matter what they do, whether they even recognize that.

The beauty of the gospel that comes in Triune form is that when Jesus shows up and says, “I’d like to introduce you to the Father and I’d like to give you the life that we have together by the Spirit.” The minute that offering is laid out there, there is nothing anyone has done or could possibly do to have earned that invitation. When he is able to offer that through his own life, there is also nothing anyone can do to run out the warranty on that offering, you know? There’s nothing where that eternal-life insurance policy gets cancelled. There’s nothing that can stop that from being the way it is, because it’s grounded in God, not me, and at the same time my humanity is absolutely completely grounded in that, because Jesus holds my humanity in his own.

I know how this turns out because he’s right there with me and at the same time he’s saying, “Cherith, you don’t have to wait for the future, would you like to be part of what I am doing today in my reigning, in my standing in as a priest for the sake of the other before the Lord? Would you like to do that? Would you like to be an intercessor on behalf of... Would

you like to go minister to the needs of... Would you like to stand for justice because I am the ruler over all things?" That means you have to stop and take the time to say, "That is not okay" instead of just going well, that's sort of inconvenient for me, or as an American I feel entitled to it, or whatever it is.

He is saying, "I am Prophet, Cherith, which means that if you want to participate in that, then you need to tell the truth, and you need to be the first person who hears the truth as you tell it, which means that your life has to be conformed to the things that I am telling you. You can be a proclaimer of the gospel because that's what I am doing, is giving out the good news. You can be an enactor of justice because that's what I'm doing, is restoring all things for life and for good. I am being your high priest, and if you would like to be among the priesthood of believers, which you are, and actually offer worship through these different ways that I would invite you into this day that looks different than anybody else, and in some ways looks absolutely the same as everybody else every day, then you actually get to be doing what I'm doing until we're finished, and you're lodged in your whole new way of being human with me."



## 32. A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE IN WORSHIP

**Introduction:** This edition of *You're Included* comes to you from the city of St. Andrews, Scotland. The University of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, is the oldest university in Scotland and one of the oldest in the English-speaking world. In its 600-year history, the university has established a reputation as one of Europe's leading centers for teaching and research. St. Mary's College, the university's divinity school, was founded in 1539. The school is still housed in its original 16th-century buildings. Join us now in St. Mary's College Hall as J. Michael Feazell, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Robin Parry. Dr. Parry is Theological Books Editor with Wipf & Stock Publishers. His published works include *Worshiping Trinity*, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, and, most recently, *Lamentations*.



**J. Michael**

**Feazell:**

Thanks for taking time to be with us today.

**Robin**

**Parry:** Thanks for having me.

**JMF:** What was it that led you into your study of Trinitarian theology?

**RP:** It was an experience in my church one Sunday. I must have read something about the Trinity before coming out because it was in my mind, vaguely at the back of my mind, as an issue when I went into the meeting. When the meeting began, the leader at the front said, “Well, everyone, we’ve come here to meet with Jesus.” I thought, “Okay, I’ve actually come to meet with some other people as well, but that’s nice.” They went on and they prayed this prayer, “Dear Lord Jesus, thanks for being with us, come and be with us as we sing to you.” Then we sang a whole lot of songs.

Something right near the beginning made me think, “This is interesting because there’s Jesus talk, but what about the Father or the Holy Spirit?” There was no mention of them. So I listened “up as the meeting went through. Song after song, they were either what I call “Jesus songs” or they were what I call “You, Lord” songs, which are the kind of songs about the Lord or God and it doesn’t say either Father, or Son, or Spirit. In the context of the meeting, it was very clear that the “You, Lord” songs meant Jesus. All the prayers were about Jesus, and then we had a sermon and it was about Jesus, but there was no mention of all of the Father or the Holy Spirit. We had a sinner’s prayer at the end, but it was a sinner’s prayer sort of re-cast in a Jesus version, “Dear Lord Jesus, I’ve sinned against you. I know you love me, you died for me, you rose yourself from the dead, come and live in my heart.” Then we went away.

By this point I was thinking, there’s something really weird about this. The other thing that was weird was that nobody else seemed to think there was anything wrong. It just didn’t click, it didn’t register at all. I thought, now that’s worrying, that you can have a whole meeting completely devoid of any sense of engaging with the Father or the Holy Spirit in a Christian meeting and they won’t notice it.

I thought, “Well, maybe I should go.” I went home and I got out a worship album, probably the best-selling worship album in the world at the time, and thought I’d have a look through the lyrics and see what they’re saying. I read through the lyrics, and all of the songs were good. On their own, there was not a problem with any of them. But as I read each song, what struck me... (it was a recording of a worship event)...and so looking at the whole thing, there was not a single reference to the Father or the Holy Spirit anywhere.

Intriguingly, the story of Jesus was completely collapsed too, so that there were references about God’s transcendence, there were references about the imminence and presence of God, but there was no reference to the Incarnation, the story of Israel, creation, there was no reference to the ministry of Jesus. One song referred to his death and resurrection. There were no references to the Ascension or the giving of the Spirit or the return of Christ. The whole thing was collapsed into “my experience of God now.” I thought, “Now that’s really worrying. As a worship event (which

this was a recording of), it's completely un-Trinitarian.”

So in the subsequent weeks...I mean it's terrible once you're led to this, you start listening out for it... in the subsequent weeks I would listen to the songs and the prayers and so on, and I found regularly the Father and the Spirit either hardly mentioned or not mentioned at all. It was terrible.

I then started looking at, okay, let's look at a Vineyard worship album. So I went through every Vineyard album published over an eight-year period, I think, I can't remember - something like eight years, maybe five to eight. And I just went through the lyrics to see how many of them mentioned the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, how many mentioned two, and if so which two, how many mentioned all three. It was shocking.

When you looked at the whole corpus of songs, all of the songs were fine. I have no problem with any of them in particular, but when you look at them as a whole, there was no sense of Trinitarian balance in the thing. This is what sort of alerted me to the issue of, when we worship, is our worship fully Christian or is it slipping into something that's a bit more almost Unitarian in practice, or what Karl Rahner calls “mere monotheism.” If somehow we discovered that the Trinity wasn't true, would it actually make any difference to the way we did anything? Would anyone even notice?

That was the thing that set off my flags and got me thinking that I really needed to look into this and see if I can try and do something constructive about it, which is then what I tried to do by writing the book [*Worshipping Trinity*] and talking to worship leaders and song writers and so on after.

**JMF:** Now, after you're teaching and you've done a lot of work in it, what is it about Trinitarian theology that you still find the most compelling and exciting?

**RP:** It's hard to put your finger on one thing and say *that's* the thing. In the same way, when I was a kid, I used to have a favorite color. My favorite color was green. Whereas now, I can't abstract a single color. Well, green's beautiful when it's alongside of these other colors, but it's the interplay.

If there was one thing that I keep coming back to about Trinitarian theology, at least as I conceive it, is this sense that in the person of Christ...well I guess it was one of the concerns...it came to me through one of the concerns raised when I started saying we need to be more Trinitarian, and intentionally Trinitarian, in the way that we worship.

Somebody said, “Yeah, but shouldn't our worship be Jesus-focused, because we're Christians and the Gospels are Jesus-focused, shouldn't *we* be Jesus-focused? I thought, “Well that's true, actually. We are Christians and we should be Jesus-focused. Then it dawned on me, to be Jesus-focused is to be Trinitarian because it's precisely in the incarnation of Christ that the Trinity is revealed. By definition if you are focused on the Jesus who is the Jesus revealed in the Gospels, the Jesus that the church believes in, if you're

that kind of Jesus-focused, you will be Trinitarian. So you can be Christocentric Trinitarian – it sort of follows.

The thing that I keep coming back to is this sense that in the person of Christ, God has completed this work of salvation in the Savior, inscribed in his flesh, our humanity is redeemed. In the risen body of Christ, God has done all that needs to be done to save us. Now, through the work of the Spirit, God is working to join people to Christ to sort of participate in that salvation.

This is a thought that I keep coming back to, and it is the thing that keeps inspiring me, because it takes the pressure off. I think, I can have hope because it's God doing this. It's not about me doing this or anyone doing this. I look at the statistics of how churches are doing, and I think gosh, this isn't good. Then I think, God's doing this. God has completed this work in Christ. There's no way he's not going to finish it. There's no way that the Spirit's been caught by surprise.

All analogies of the Trinity have their pros and cons. I rather like Irenaeus' two hands of the Father. It has its downsides, but one of the upsides is it gives a lovely way of thinking about salvation because you have the Father, whose intention is to draw humanity and people to himself, so he does this by stretching out the hand of his Son. Then he reaches out the hand of his Spirit, and through the Spirit he draws us to Christ. Then through Christ, he draws us to himself. We're held in this kind of Trinitarian embrace where the Father, through the Spirit, draws us through the Son to himself.

I love that image and this sense that actually it's God that does this. It doesn't depend on us in the end. God, of course, the Spirit, enables us to participate, and we engage, and it's a subjective engaging with God in our own relationship with God. But it's not something *we* do. It's not earning anything with God or achieving anything with God. It's being enabled by God to participate. Even our response to God is, as Matt Redmond says, a gifted response. A response that God himself enables us to make.

**JMF:** If Christians don't have this, some kind of understanding of the Trinity and the relationships within the Trinity and how we're drawn to that and so on... (and many don't – it's very common to go into a church that really doesn't have a Trinitarian point of worship or even preaching. Even though they believe in the Trinity as a fundamental doctrine, most members would not even begin...they don't think about it and they wouldn't be able to explain it if they were asked.)

What do they lose? We know they're Christian, we know that they have faith, we know they're saved by grace and that they walk in Christ and so on to the degree that they can. But what are they missing? What could they have, if they better understood?

**RP:** That's a good question. What we'd have to say first of all is, that

their experience of God *is* Trinitarian even if they don't realize it, because there's no other way of encountering God because there is no other God to encounter.

When anyone has an encounter with God, it is the Triune God they encounter. But it can enrich their encounter of God, their subjective understanding and experience of that relationship with God, and it can free them up to walk with God in more liberated ways, as it were, to understand better the God who it is they encounter, the God who it is that's at work in their life working out their salvation. It's still the Holy Spirit working in them even if they've never heard of the Spirit or can't conceptualize these things rightly. But it would enrich their relationship with God in many ways.

For instance, it would enrich their engagement with God as a Father to realize that it's not through their effort to try and please the Father or earn status for the Father or somehow, if they misconstrue their Trinitarian theology, somehow placate the Father who's really not very kindly disposed toward them. To realize that you don't have to placate God, God doesn't need placating. God loves us. This is why he sends his Son and this is why he sends his Spirit and draws us.

It just enables us to appreciate more the love and grace of God and to take some of the pressure off that we have to earn stuff with God. But it doesn't change the objective fact that it is still the Father through the Son and the Spirit. That's the only way that they are able to engage with God in any sense at all, even if they can't think of it straight.

**JMF:** Isn't it true that there is no such thing as good in the world or love, mercy, all things good that *don't* come from Christ, they don't come from the Triune God into the world? It's not like people who are not Christian if and when they do good things...it's not like that comes out of some other universe not made by...

**RP:** No. They're living in the same created order which is the good creation that the true God made. They're living as God's creatures in the image of God even if they don't realize they are. I don't think people should understand a doctrine of total depravity, say, to mean that everybody is as depraved as they possibly could be. Personally, I've always found myself reacting against the idea that...the misuse of the scripture that says, even the good things you do are as filthy rags...

What the prophet means, what God means when he says that, is "You guys are so bad, you guys in particular, are so bad that even the good stuff you do is bad." He's not saying *everybody's* such that even their love and kindness, even *that's* filthy and disgusting in my sight. I don't think God is saying anything like that.

We can see genuine aspects of the image of God and the work of God and even the work of the Spirit working in and through people who don't

yet know Christ. Because they're God's creatures in God's world and although the image of God might be broken in us, it's not completely destroyed. We would cease to be human if that was the case.

**JMF:** So the only way to be human is to be human in Christ. That's all there is.

**RP:** Right. In one way of thinking about salvation, salvation is about the restoration of our humanity. It's about being human the way God made us to be human. Sometimes I think of it like this: Imagine our humanity is like a rubber glove. You might wash the dishes with rubber gloves... (They have those in America, too? Just checking.) Christ, or the Logos, is like that on which we are modeled as humans. It's like a rubber glove molded on this hand, but the rubber glove has become torn and ripped and damaged.

So what God does in Christ is the very template, the very one in whose image we are made, he takes on – I don't mean *disguises* himself as a human – but he *becomes* flesh, and on the cross melts down this humanity, our humanity, and re-molds it around himself, remakes it, re-forges humanity in the resurrection. So in the resurrection of Christ, we see it's all about the glory of God in human flesh, in human beings. Salvation is all about all of that, being human as God made us to be, so that the glory of God...because we need a bigger view of what it is to be human.

In Genesis, when God makes us, God makes us in his image. And the word in Hebrew here is *tselem*, which is the word used to describe the image of a deity. In the Ancient Near East you would have a temple and then you would have the statue of the deity in the temple. The statue of the deity was understood to be...they would go through a ritual, and when they went through the ritual, they believed that the spirit of the god would inhabit the statue.

Now, the amazing thing is, Yahweh forbids the use of any statues, any images like that. Because of the kind of God that God is, nothing like that, no statue that can't speak and can't act and do things, can image this God. But God authorizes in the earth his own *tselem*, his own icon, as it were, which is a human being, to be indwelt by the presence of God himself in the earth, mediating God's rule and dominion over creation. It's an astonishingly *high* view of what it is to be human. Amazing. And people say Christians have such a dour view that people are just...humans, they're just scum and worm and all that.

But, in fact, the Bible has an unbelievably high view of humans as God's icons through which God commissions humans that his glory, the very presence of God himself, would be in humans. This is what's being restored. This is a glory lost in sin, and humans fall short of this glory. But in Christ it's a glory that's restored. So being a Christian is all about being changed by the Spirit to share in Christ's real humanity. It's about in Christ, through the Spirit, becoming more human.

**JMF:** Going back to the topic of worship, you've done a lot of work on Christian worship, and I don't know if I can put it in these terms, but could you talk for a few minutes about what we might call the good, the bad, and the ugly of Christian worship?

**RP:** Sure. There's a lot of good, there's a lot of bad, and there's a lot of ugly. I guess it's easier to talk about the bad and the ugly. One of the things that concerns me as a person who sort of thinks theologically and thinks Trinitarianly is all the stuff that *isn't* in worship, particularly in my own tradition.

I'm charismatic evangelical, free church ecclesiology, and the way we do things has plus points and downsides. But one of the changes that's taken place over there recently is there's been a move where you used to have the minister who would lead the whole service and oftentimes it would have a very clear theological shape, a certain kind of terrain that you would cover. You'd always have confession of sins, thanksgiving, you'd have intercessions and so on.

For various reasons, this has changed to a form of worship where you have a worship leader who is basically a singer and guitar player normally, and worship becomes more about singing one song after another, just linking songs, and that would be a worship time. There were sorts of problems with that, but one of the problems is that it is in great danger of cutting out crucial parts of Christian worship, like confession, like intercession. And because the songs tend to come out of the same songwriting stables, you don't tend to get songs that deal with issues like lament, or confession, or the Eucharist, or baptism, or listening to the word of God and so on. Things that are central in Christian spirituality are gone, and very quickly you lose a sense of balance or shape.

In some of the more liturgical worshipping traditions, to me it's like *Lord of the Rings*, you know, you have this vast landscape of terrain that you're covering as you move through it. There's a sense of movement as you go through a meeting or a series of meetings. Over the whole Christian year you have this shape of movement and engaging with different aspects of God and the story of God in Christ.

Sometimes it feels to me like we charismatics are in danger of being like locked in a broom cupboard under the stairs walking in circles, and we're covering such a small terrain there's not really much sense of what holds to link the songs together is often in the key, and that means I can go from one to the other, are they songs that have blessed me recently?

But there isn't much thought often given to, you know, the theological shape and the sense of what are the kind of things that we ought to be engaging with here. This is through no bad intent on the part of worship leaders. In my experience, worship leaders and song writers desperately want to help the people of God to engage with God. This is where their

heart is at, it really is, but they have had no role models in how that can be done. There's very little help given to them through leaders or through training courses. Oftentimes when I see the programs of these training courses for worship leaders, it's like all technical stuff about PAs, or it's about technical stuff about the music or it might be encountering the presence.

Because one of the dangers of contemporary worship, particularly charismatic, is it all becomes about my engagement with God now. Everything becomes collapsed into now. There's no sense of where we come from or where we're going, and this is really bad for our spirituality. Because if you think of it, most of our Christian spirituality and the way we were led to God is something we pick up through engaging in the practices of worship. And the ways we think about God, the language we use to describe God, the kinds of things we think to talk to God about, and the kinds of things that would never cross our minds to talk to God about, are things we learn just through engaging in prayer. We do that, we learn those habits and those things, through doing it communally. And if our spirituality is being shaped in a deformed, not unchristian path, but sub-Christian way, when we meet together to worship, then we are selling short our congregations.

Our people, they are being shaped in ways so that, just to take lament as an instance, if there is never any place for lament in our worship, unlike in Scripture where there clearly is, then when people are confronted with situations where the appropriate response and the honest response, the faithful covenant response to God is like Christ himself on the cross, to lament, if we're not giving people a vocabulary to know how to respond to God in those kind of situations, what they end up doing is feeling bad or feeling like they're somehow unbelieving to have those... 'how could I have those thoughts?' And it's pastorally terrible.

One of my goals is to help charismatics to rediscover a charismatic way of lamenting in the Spirit that actually... Christ himself on the cross stands in our place and laments in our place. He prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22. It's not in a sense of abandoning God – it's, "*My* God, *my* God, why have you forsaken me?" So he's lamenting as a way of holding onto God in this situation. I want to argue: Christ does this, Old Testament saints do this.

In Romans 8... the way I argue in a paper I've written and a book I've done on Lamentations... I think you can draw from this that the Holy Spirit, one of the ways that the Holy Spirit helps us, is that the Holy Spirit, as creation groans and as the church groans, groaning, lamenting the current state, groaning in frustration, groaning looking to the future, and groaning at intercession – the Holy Spirit himself groans with us, groans with creation. As the Holy Spirit groans, I want to argue, the Holy Spirit is



doing the same thing. The Holy Spirit is groaning in frustration at the brokenness of creation, and so lamenting.

The Holy Spirit is looking to the future to bring to birth, like through the travail and the pain of childbirth, to bring forth a new future. The Holy Spirit, through the groaning, is praying by the will of the Father for creation to be liberated. The Holy Spirit can groan through our groaning. In the Holy Spirit, we can lament in the Spirit, as it were, so that our own laments and prayers are taken up by the Holy Spirit and infused with his and become, rather than cries of despair, become transformed into groans that take hold of God and look to the future with hope.

There is a Trinitarian way of understanding what is going on and how lament is really something that God himself through Christ and through the Spirit is engaged with, and through which we ought to, as faithful Christian disciples, be lamenting, groaning with creation and praying it forward into its glorious destiny.

### 33. LAMENT AND THE ROLE OF ISRAEL IN SALVATION HISTORY

#### **Jesus' lament on the cross**

**J. Michael Feazell:** We've been talking about lament in Scripture and about when Jesus was on the cross and he declares, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many times people look at that and they see the despair included, but doesn't that imply the entire Psalm from which it comes, with its conclusion that resolves a sense of despair?

**Robin Parry:** Absolutely. Oftentimes when in the New Testament someone will quote from the Old Testament, they might just quote a verse or even a phrase, but they call to mind... the hearers will know the Scriptures; they were immersed in the Scriptures, and the hearers will call to mind the whole context, the whole story, the whole Psalm or whatever. So when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we need to remember that Jesus would have been well aware of how the Psalm ended, and the Psalm ends with deliverance.

The book of Hebrews in chapter 2 quotes from the salvation part of the Psalm and applies that to Jesus. In the early church, the Christ-followers saw it as very appropriate to take the second part of the Psalm as applying to Christ and the resurrection, and Christ as the one who praises God in the congregation.

But we need to be careful not to collapse or to somehow downgrade the despair or the lament of Christ on the cross as if he knew it was going to come out all happy in the end anyway, so he wasn't really lamenting. Christ isn't just putting on a show. He isn't feigning lament. He really is suffering in our humanity, he really is lamenting on our behalf. He is expressing precisely how he feels. It's the positive part. In Mark and Matthew, this

“why have you forsaken me?” thing comes right near the end. This is something that’s been building up through the whole experience on Calvary. It comes out near the end, “why have you forsaken me?” It’s not just a passing thing and then he gets over it.

We need to beware of somehow collapsing the hope and the despair together — so he’s despairing, but actually he’s happy. He’s lamenting, so we need to take that utterly seriously, but also to recognize that Jesus has not given up on God. He says, “*My God, why have you forsaken me?*” This is lament within a relationship with God where he knows... for the joy set before him, as it says in Hebrews, he endured the shame of the cross.

This is an important tension to hold onto, that we have cross and resurrection. Alan Lewis does this wonderful thing on the theology of Holy Saturday where he says, Holy Saturday is situated between cross and resurrection. In a way, it holds them apart, and it holds them together. On the one hand, Holy Saturday means we can’t have the cross without the resurrection, or the resurrection without the cross. We have to have the two, we have to hold them together, but we don’t want to collapse them into some smudge. So it gives them a bit of distance between the two. We need to hear them, he says, in stereo.

On the one hand, we need to hear the cross almost as it would have sounded, as it would have felt, without looking back in retrospect from the perspective of the resurrection. But on the other hand, if that’s *all* you do, that can’t be a Christian way of looking at the cross. At the same time, you have to hear the cross through the resurrection, seen from that perspective.

This is very instructive for how we should understand lament and lament within the Christian life. On the one hand there’s a space for lament and we don’t want to collapse lament and salvation together, so that the lament isn’t really lament. We need to give it space to be itself. But it never has the last word. In a biblical theology, it never has the last word. We are a people who believe in the cross and the resurrection. If you let lament have the last word, it’s like saying, “Go there, but there’s no empty tomb.”

If you look at the biblical book of Lamentations, this comes out nicely in that, Lamentations ends with the one voice that they’re desperate to hear. The people in the book of Lamentations, they’re saying, “God, come on, save us, rescue us.” The one voice that does not speak by the end is the one voice they want to hear, which is the voice of God. The book ends (in the canonical form, the form in which God has seen fit to preserve it for us) without the salvation. They’re looking, they’re calling, they’re begging, and it hasn’t come. But the book of Lamentations is also preserved for us in a canonical context, and we can’t read it as if it’s not part of these other Scriptures, which proceed and follow it.

The book of Isaiah picks up on Lamentations on numerous occasions. In the book of Isaiah we see God’s speaking, God’s solution. Just to give

one example of this: in chapter 1 of Lamentations, over and over and over again, we see there's no one to comfort her. Jerusalem is desolate and there's no one to stand by her, no one to offer consolation. Isaiah picks this up specifically. Chapter 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people says your God." Over and over again God says, "I am Yahweh, your comforter."

On the one hand you need to hear Lamentations to give it space to be itself, because God preserved it in that form and the Bible doesn't rush in and say, "Oh but don't... quick, quick, quick, let's get to the hope, let's rush to the hope." It leaves the pain, the breathing space. But it can't let it stay there, and it wouldn't be a Christian, it wouldn't be a Jewish, it wouldn't be a faithful hearing or recension of Lamentations to hear it just in its canonical form but not in its canonical context. We need to hear it in stereo.

Lamentations, in a sense, is Israel's reaction to its exile. It's looking back to the exile and it's looking forward to the restoration. It's a bit like Holy Saturday as we look back to the cross and forward to the resurrection. In some ways, as Christians, we can see Lamentations as the Holy Saturday literature of Israel. It's a way of trying to look back at what was, and what's been lost and what's been destroyed...it's looking around at the grave, at this destruction that surrounds them, and it's looking forward to a salvation that is to come but has not yet come.

Jewish worship does this brilliantly, because every year in the Jewish liturgical cycle, on the ninth of Av, the whole book of Lamentations is recited. On that day in the synagogue, people sit on the floor, there is no celebration, there's no readings from the Torah, it's a day of mourning and fasting. The next day it begins with the comfort thing from Isaiah, and it moves forward then, towards the liturgical cycle of Atonement. And so Jewish people have brilliantly captured this insight of saying there's a time to weep and there's a time to rejoice, and we need to give space for the two, but we need to realize that the time to weep is situated within a bigger story, and that story doesn't end with the weeping.

As Christians, we want to say the reason we have hope...we recognize that there's a cross, and we recognize that the creation is marked by brokenness, and we recognize that our own lives are often broken, but we know that it can't end that way. We know that it ends with resurrection, because the tomb is empty. As Stanley Hauerwas says, we can never be hopeless people even if we might despair (maybe despair is the wrong word)...even if we might lament, even if we might feel pain, even if we might cry out. To have an honest and integrated and faithful relationship with God, we need to do that. That's the appropriate human response on certain occasions, but if it's a Christian response, it is never hopeless.

## The imprecatory psalms

**JMF:** In the Psalms, there's such an honesty of a feeling, of expression... Often it comes across as anger toward someone who has hurt the psalmist in some way. It kind of gives the freedom to feel what we actually do feel, knowing that God has already dealt with sin, both ours and others, so there's a freedom to know that he's not going to condemn us for expressing how we actually feel. And yet the freedom to express that isn't an end in itself, and it doesn't leave us alone in our lament.

**RP:** No. The Psalms of lament usually move through that and beyond that. Not always, but there are situations within a bigger context, and in a bigger context we move beyond that. Some of the Psalms are quite troubling — the imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalm 137, smashing the children on the rocks and so on. How could that be an authorized kind of prayer? We could say various things about that, but one of them is, that it is how the psalmist feels, and it is a sense of honesty. Walter Brueggemann brings this up well in his work on lamenting Psalms. There's a brutal honesty in these Psalms — not one we feel comfortable with, but he thinks it's important to have space for that kind of thing even if you can't end with that, if that can't be where you stop.

**JMF:** I've had people ask about that, how is it that in the Bible here...and sometimes it's attributed to David...he's "a man after God's own heart" and yet he's talking like this. How can that be part of the Bible and how can it be okay to feel that way? And I think I've said worse than that. I don't publish it for everyone to read, but sometimes when I'm in the car alone and there's a traffic situation, I can get like that. Sometimes when I think of things that someone has done, not necessarily to me, but outrageous things that have happened of injustice and so on, I feel these things. I'm no David, but at the same time I don't think when we ask a question like that, that we've never felt like that. We've all said things that we would be quite embarrassed if they would be played back to an auditorium full of people.

**RP:** Often when you see in a Psalm the psalmist will say, "Lord, strike my enemies down and destroy them, wipe them from the face of the earth," or something... Often, it's not a sense of personal revenge that they're after. The psalmist is speaking from a place of powerlessness. What the psalmist is *not* doing is they're not saying, "I'm going to take vengeance into my own hands."

**JMF:** Right.

**RP:** In a sense, what's going on in the Psalm is the psalmist is saying, "I am not going to take vengeance into my hands. I'm not in a position to do so, but I'm not going to do so. That is God's role." The Psalm is a sort of stepping back by the psalmist saying, "I cannot do anything about this and I'm not going to. This is God's place to do something about this." That's an

important theological lesson for Christians to learn — that, as Paul says, “Do not seek vengeance, for the Lord says, it’s mine to repay.” So Christians, like the Psalmist, need to learn that, even from those imprecatory Psalms.

The second thing we need to realize is, it’s not personal vengeance. They’re seeking deliverance and salvation. They’ve been persecuted by Assyrians or Babylonians...and when they pray destruction on them, what they’re actually saying is, “Lord, save us.” The political reality is, what salvation would entail would be for our enemies to be removed. It reflects a sense of God’s justice and judgment. These people have acted terribly, and what they have done is inhuman, and it is not inappropriate for God to judge them.

For a Christian to pray this prayer, a Christian couldn’t simply take it up in an unreflective way — we would have to read it through Christ, and we’d have to read it in the light of Christ saying, love your enemies, forgive those who persecute you, and so on. But there are still important lessons that Christians need to draw, even from these Psalms that at first sight seem so outrageous — they’re actually prayers of powerless people who need God to deliver them from people who are treating them inhumanly, and they’re just being realistic about what that might look like.

**JMF:** In many cases historically, the enemies of Israel, didn’t they do some of those kinds of things to the Israelites?

**RP:** Yeah, it would depend when and who, but certainly there were some atrocities, and the Babylonian destruction is one instance. The people are kept pushed in the city and they’re under siege, the famine, they’re dying of starvation, they’re dying of disease, the cities are ravished, people are killed, exiled, it’s devastating — not least psychologically, not least in the way they understood their sense of relationship with God and, “We’re the people you’ve chosen, this is the land that you’ve put us in, this is your city, this is your temple, this is your king and now the king is captured,” and their whole world is falling apart. It’s incredibly traumatizing.

Even aside from the whole issue of people starving to death and there are people being killed here, the Bible tends to be very down on imperialism. This comes out in many ways, but here we see the military, imperialism, imperial power imposing itself on this little nation, and the prophets and the psalmists and so on don’t tend to warm to that. It’s quite a critique of that kind of militarist expansionistic imperial, empire-building thing.

## Israel in salvation history

**JMF:** Let’s switch gears for a moment and talk about Israel in salvation history. Is the church a replacement for Israel in the sense of salvation history?

**RP:** No. Although I have to say that for most of my Christian life, I would have answered yes, and most of my theological life I would have answered yes. I now actually think it's one of the things that has blighted Christian theology and Christian history, is this whole idea that the church somehow replaces Israel — that the people of Israel have been abandoned, they were faithless and now we're the people who are doing it properly, fulfilling their mission and so on.

This is absolutely disastrous not simply for the Jewish people — and it has been disastrous for them, as any study of the history of Jewish/Christian relations will show that Christians have treated Jews despicably over the centuries and often still do — not merely that, but it's been terrible for us, because we have lost the sense of who we are.

I will just give a very brief summary of how I would understand what the church is and so on. Not all Christians agree with this, but the way I think it comes out scripturally is that here you have this story, of God creates the world and his desire in Genesis 1-11 is for humanity as a whole, it's for the nations, but creation has fallen, creation has broken, how is God going to deal with that? The way that God chooses to deal with this is through electing a man, Abraham, and the descendants who come from him — not simply for their own sake, but also for the sake of the world, that through this nation and through what this nation is about and their ministry, it's going to be somehow (and it's not clear how, at the start), God will bring redemption for the whole created order.

So we're set out in Genesis with this way of understanding what Israel's mission is about, and Israel is called in some ways like a new humanity. Abraham is a bit like a new Adam and his descendants living in the land, Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. They are to live God's way in God's land, modeling righteousness and justice, following the laws; this is the calling which they have. As Paul says, "because of the flesh," actually living the Torah doesn't happen. Over and over again they're a stiff-necked people. They can't do it.

Then the covenant curses come into play. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God says if you do not keep the covenant, these curses will come into play. These curses are not the collapse of covenant, they're not the breaking of the relationship, they're taking place within covenant. And God's covenant is irrevocable. Paul says as much with regard to Israel in Romans 11. God's gift and God's calling and the covenant with the patriarchs is in place, it is irrevocable, and nothing Israel does can break that, but what it can do is incur all the sort of curses that take place within that.

So God starts to say, through the prophets, for Israel to play its role in creation, something has got to happen for Israel. Israel itself needs saving. So through Jeremiah, through Ezekiel, we learn of this... a new covenant

that God will make with Israel where he will put his laws within them. Deuteronomy speaks of circumcising the heart. In Deuteronomy 30:6, it talks about after the exile, God will circumcise Israel's hearts and enable them to obey him. This is what Jeremiah speaks of as new covenant, and Ezekiel talks about putting the Spirit within you so that you'll obey my laws.

So we have this solution whereby God will redeem Israel from their exile and then the nations will come on pilgrimage, they will worship the God of Israel, and so on. These Old Testament (or whatever we want to call it) – those prophetic expectations of salvation are the key for understanding what New Testament says of the church and everything we're about.

Tom Wright put this brilliantly: Christ on the cross is standing in the place of Israel. He is like Israel writ small, I think he puts it like that. He is one man, Israel, and he bears Israel's exilic curses upon himself. As such, he is bearing the sins of the whole world upon himself because Israel is a microcosm representative of humanity. And so the sin of the world is focused on him, and in the death and resurrection of Christ we see the exile and restoration of Israel played out and taken to its climax.

In the book of Acts we see this worked out where lots of Jewish people start to come to recognize Jesus as their Messiah and receive the Holy Spirit, which is one of the signs of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit is given and poured out. Here we see Israel being restored in their very midst. Somehow in the midst of time, in the midst of the old age, here is *the end of exile* being played out in the giving in the Spirit.

Then the Gentiles, the nations with Cornelius and so on, come and worship Israel's God. This comes out very clearly in Acts 15 with James and the Jerusalem Council. We have this picture in Acts and through the other New Testament documents – in the church, you have Jew and Gentile united into a single body, but they're not sort of blurred together into some mush. They are both one in Christ, both accepted in Christ and because of the saving work of the Messiah.

But Israel is still Israel with its distinctive calling, and the nations, the Gentiles, are like the pilgrim nations in an eschatological foretaste. So the church is like a prophetic anticipation of the end of the age in which we see the promise realized of Israel restored, in Jews who accept the Messiah, and the pilgrim nations coming in, the Gentiles who accept the Messiah united as one body. But the Jews are still Jews. I think that Jewish believers still should be circumcised and follow food laws and so on, Gentile believers absolutely should not, because the Scriptures are clear that when the end times come, the Gentiles will be accepted as Gentiles, they don't have to convert to Judaism. Paul is emphatic about this. If Christ has brought in the new age, then Gentiles not only they don't have to, they *must* not get circumcised.



We have a vision here of the church in which Jew and Gentile exist as Jew and Gentile side by side in one body, but without saying, as has happened in the history of the church, any Jew who becomes a believer has changed their religion and ceases to be Jewish and has to give up anything that looks distinctively Jewish. I think this is a complete misunderstanding of what the New Testament is about. It's failing to be the kind of church that Jesus aimed to bring about, of restored Israel anticipated — for the end times, when all Israel will be saved, which it says in Romans 11, and all the nations will come and worship, which is anticipated in the church prophetically.

## 34. HOPE FOR ALL HUMANITY

### Universal salvation?

**J. Michael Feazell:** Does the Bible give place to the possibility that God would ultimately be successful in drawing absolutely everybody to faith in Christ?

**Robin Parry:** Most Christians would answer that unequivocally no, but I'm a little unusual in that regard. I think that the Bible does provide good grounds for hope that indeed God will achieve his purpose of saving all people. I'm a little bit out on a limb here, although it is a Christian tradition with a noble heritage even though it's been a minority sport through the years, and it's a Christian tradition rooted in both Scripture and in the gospel itself.

I'm not suggesting it's something that if you're an orthodox Christian you have to believe this, I would never be so bold or arrogant to suggest that, but I do think the idea that God will save all people through Christ is neither heretical, nor dodgy, nor unbiblical. The idea grows out of a deep Christian instinct grounded in fundamental orthodox Christian beliefs. We believe that God created all things, and that God created all things good, and that God purposes good things for his creation. We believe that Christ becomes incarnate as a representative man not just for some people but for humanity. He stands before God as High Priest as a human in our place, as the God-man — that comes out brilliantly in the work of T.F. Torrance.

Most Christians (not all) believe that Christ not only came to represent all people before God in his life, but also in his death, and that when Christ dies, he dies on behalf of all humanity. There are various scriptures that do that, and some Christian traditions would deny it, but it seems clearly the teaching of Scripture, and it is the teaching of the majority of Christians. So already there is a deep orthodox instinct that God has purposes. God takes

no delight in the death of anyone. God's purpose, God wants, God's heart is for the salvation of all, and it's precisely for that purpose that he sends Christ to stand before God on behalf of all to die on behalf of all, and not simply to die but to be raised on behalf of all.

The question is, in one sense, salvation for the whole of humanity and the whole creation is not something that in Scripture we even hope God *might* do, but it is something that in the very person of Christ himself, God has already achieved. In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that is already done in the past, the salvation of all humanity and all creation following from that in our place, in our representative, in our Messiah. What the Holy Spirit is doing is working in creation by uniting people to Christ through faith and baptism and joining our lives to Christ so that we can participate in the salvation that's already achieved in Christ and in the Messiah.

My conviction is that what God intends to do and what God achieves in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, God will do by eventually bringing all people to faith in Christ and with them being united to him. I'm not wanting to suggest...often people say this, "Oh my goodness, you think everyone will be saved. Does that mean all roads lead to God? Or does that mean it doesn't matter what we do because we're going to be saved anyway or we can go and sin because...let's do all those things we want to do that are really bad. We can do them because it doesn't matter, because we're going to go to heaven anyway, so what difference does it make?" I'm not saying any of that. I don't think all roads lead to God. I think the only way to God is through Christ. The only way to salvation is through union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. There isn't another option, so I'm not suggesting something that's not Christ-centered or gospel focused or about the cross and resurrection.

In some senses Calvinists are right and in some senses Arminians are right, the way I try and hold things together. Calvinists have this very strong sense that God is sovereign, God will not fail in achieving his purposes. What God sets out to do, in the end, God will achieve it and God wins. That's absolutely right, and God intends to save humanity, and that's precisely what he's going to do. The Arminian on the other hand says we believe God loves everyone. We believe God wants to save everyone...of course, because of creature's free will, God sadly won't be able to achieve his purposes, but that's what he wants to do and that's what he tries to do through Christ. The Calvinist says, no, if God wanted to do that he could. If God wanted to save everyone he could. If God wanted Jesus to die for everyone he'd have done that, but that's not what happened.

I want to say the Arminians are right — God loves everyone, God wants to save everyone, Christ died for everyone. The Calvinist is right in saying God will get his purposes done, God will achieve his purposes.

Christians have always been forced into this, because we feel that some people have to end up in hell forever — that’s been our unshakeable conviction. If that’s what you start with, you’re going to have to sacrifice something else. You’re going to either have to say, as many Christians do, God could save them but he didn’t want to, or you’re going to have to say, he does want to but he can’t because somehow they throw a spanner [a wrench] in the works or something.

In Romans 5 you have this wonderful text, “As in Adam all will die...” This is 1 Corinthians 15, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” But in Romans 5, Paul has a similar thing comparing Adam and Christ. He’s basically saying everything that goes wrong in Adam gets put right in Christ. “And where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.” There’s nothing that sin can do to deface God’s creation that grace in Christ cannot put right. There’s no depths that sin can go to or human depravity it can go to, but that the grace of God in Christ and the death and burial of Christ can’t go deeper. And there’s no sin that God can’t deal with in Christ. The end of the story is resurrection, it’s the empty tomb, it’s not Golgotha. You know, it’s the triumph of grace.

My worry with some theology is it sounds like people are saying, where sin abounds, grace abounds a little bit. Where sin abounds, what sin does, grace undoes some of it. Paul is much more robust than this. He says, “Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.” There’s nothing that goes wrong in Adam that isn’t restored in Christ and more.

It’s not just about finding proof texts, as so often the discussion degenerates — I mean, look how many texts I’ve got. “I’ve got all these hell texts.” “Oh, I’ve got all these universalist texts.” I think what we need is a way of turning the whole biblical story from creation through the new creation in a way that tries to do justice to the whole, and I want to do justice to the texts about hell. I can say something about it in a minute. There’s justice to the whole story that tells the story in a way where the ending of the story makes sense — where the ending of the story actually gets you where God wants to go and where God’s already gotten in Christ.

I think the universalist end to the story makes sense of this. We see this in Colossians 1 in the lovely Christ hymn where it says, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created.” In case we’re wondering what “all things” are, he says, “All things in heaven and on earth and visible and invisible,” he just covers the ground. Everything.

**JMF:** Why else go that far to say it that way?

**RP:** Exactly. He’s says *everything* was created by him, for him, through him. Then in verse 20 he says, “And through him God has reconciled all things to himself, making peace through the blood shed on the cross.” And you think, what are the “all things,” you know, reconciling all things. We

know what the “all things” are because he just told us “all things” means everything, everything. He said everything in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, everything made through Christ, reconciled in Christ, making peace through the blood shed on the cross. To me that’s about as universalist as you can get, and it’s Christo-centric, it’s gospel-focused, it’s cross-focused, it’s about a work of God already achieved in Christ.

But that doesn’t mean that there’s no need for a response. He says, you too, you were reconciled when you first came to Christ, and so they’re participating in this. I mean, we see it in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” He’s given us the message of reconciliation, so *be reconciled to God*. So there’s this imperative. God’s done this in Christ, he’s reconciled the world to himself and we’ve got a message now, we proclaim what God has done in Christ. There’s a call that people need to participate in that, to be reconciled. Not through doing something themselves, but through coming to throw themselves on the mercy of God, to trust him, to put their trust in the grace of God and through the Spirit be united to join their lives with Christ in faith and in baptism.

So in Colossians we have this thing that runs from creation through the cross to new creation, and it’s a way of telling of this biblical story that the story ends in the way you think that’s right, that’s the way it should end. If you say the story actually ends where some people are suffering forever and ever and there’s no possibility of redemption for them, you think (and this is for me, as I ask this question, I’m not suggesting this is what all Christians think, because it’s not what most Christians think), How is that an ending that makes sense to the story? It just seems out of place. Is God’s love somehow deficient or is his power somehow deficient or is the cross somehow deficient? What’s gone wrong, how has it gone wrong to end up like this?

## Hell

So I want to find a way to say, how can we do justice to this stuff, what the Bible says about hell, given that kind of framework, because the Bible speaks very clearly about it, and Jesus speaks very clearly about it. If we’re going to be those who, rather than say this is what I’d like to think God is like, and make God in our own image, we have to respond to revelation. We have to say these texts are important, and we need to do justice to them in our theology.

Why assume that hell is a place from which there is no redemption? Why is this unwritten rule that if you go to hell, that’s it, there’s no exit, even if you repent, even if you throw yourself on the mercy of God, even if you put your faith in Christ? – that’s it, tough.

There are biblical grounds for seeing that yes, there is an eschatological

judgment and yes, it is something that some people will experience, but it is not a point of no return. I think this comes out nicely in the book of Revelation, where you have the two most ferocious hell texts in the whole Bible. In chapter 14 we have the smoke of their torment ascending forever and ever, and in chapter 21, you've got the lake of fire and sulfur. It's where all the medieval images of what people imagine hell is like comes from, this very graphic imagery, which is drawing on Old Testament imagery.

What's amazing about this is that both of these texts, when you read them in context, are chronologically followed by a picture of the redemption of the very nations who have it's just been said that the smoke of their torment arises or that they're in the lake of fire. In chapter 15 we have this (like an epilogue) where the redeemed are standing on the Lake of Fire. They talk about all "the nations." (In Revelation, the nations are always the baddies. The church are never called the nations, the church are those who are called out *from* the nations, and they're always distinguished from the nations.) But here all the nations will come and worship you, it says [Rev 15:4]. But hold on a minute, they've just been chucked into the lake of fire.

It's even clearer in chapter 21, where we see the kings of the earth (also always baddies in Revelation). The kings of the earth are thrown into the lake of fire, the nations are slain by this Messiah, Jesus. He comes back with a sword from his mouth and they are destroyed [Rev 19:19-21]. That's it, you know? They've had it, this judgment. But then we read in chapter 21, we see this image of the new Jerusalem and the gates are always open and the kings of the earth and the nations are bringing their treasures in [Rev 21:24]. And you're thinking, hold on a minute, they're the guys that have just been there in the lake of fire, what are they doing here?

But the doors are open, and I argue (in a book I wrote) that they're actually coming, being redeemed and washed in the blood of the Lamb and coming out of that into redemption after death, a sort of post-mortem union with Christ. And so in the end, God will "be all in all," as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 [verse 28]. That's the sort of destiny I envisage and which inspires me with hope when I see a lot of the really terrible things that happen in the world, but in Christ God has redeemed. In the end, God will bring about, for the whole creation...what he's already done for creation in Christ.

**JMF:** What about the passage (in Acts chapter 2 I think it is) where in Peter's sermon it's talking about the times of refreshing, times of restitution of all things? A lot of times people will raise the issue of, Does God love Adolf Hitler, does God love Mussolini? They can't comprehend that somebody who was that destructive of other people could possibly be saved, and so the person themselves is sided. But it would seem that once everything is restored, everything that Hitler may have taken away from

anyone is resolved, restored in the way that it would be in the age to come ...the life is back, the ability of the people who were destroyed by someone like Adolf Hitler... (Well, it could be anybody. You have people just go wild and go kill a family, you know?) Their ability to forgive would be resolved as well, and we're redeemed and made immortal and enter the fullness of the kingdom — ability to forgive would be not a question anymore.

**RP:** Yes. People often raise the Hitler thing because Hitler's crimes are so terrible. They become emblematic.

Salvation never trivializes sin. In the cross, God saves us through the cross, and on the cross sin is not trivialized or passed over or ignored. We see the horror of sin for what it is, exposed — and that is our sins as well as Hitler's. But if we're Christians and we understand something of the grace of God...(I sometimes wonder when people raise the Hitler thing, if Christians raise the Hitler thing I think, Do you think *you* deserve to be saved? Hitler doesn't deserve to be saved, it would be wrong for him...but you're okay, it's all right if God saves you, that doesn't require too much grace "because I wasn't really that bad." I think it betrays a failure to understand God's grace, God's love, but also the transforming power of Christ in the Spirit.)

I do think God loved Hitler because Hitler was a human being made in the image of God and terribly broken and warped and evil. But not so broken that he can't be restored in Christ, not so evil that God can't change him by the Holy Spirit. No sin is that deep or that big that it can't be restored in Christ, and no person is that broken that they can't be restored in Christ. The same grace of God that saved you and me is the same grace of God that can save someone like that and enable a reconciliation to take place. Hitler would have to experience remorse and regret and repentance and all of that, but I don't see how it can be a Christian instinct that it would be somehow appropriate for God to save me but not Hitler.

**JMF:** Two things come into play. Some people feel a sense that whatever someone has done, they need to be punished at least enough to experience what they perpetrated on somebody else, and that's their sense of fairness. Others feel that... it's the sense of needing a vengeance and so on, needing a sense of justice or whatever. It has always struck me that we don't appreciate the fact that, at least what I think is a fact, that we all have in us to be exactly like Hitler given the opportunity, given the circumstances, given the power, the authority to wreak some sort of vengeance or justice on people that we don't like, that we feel are in our way, we feel that are a drag on society or whatever, and everybody has their different views of who that might be. I think within our hearts we feel that from time to time.

If we're going to be honest with ourselves, if we had the opportunity and a council around us that said that's the right thing to do, that's what we

need to do to further society or whatever, we all have it in us to react that way. We do react that way for a moment with our own families; with people we care about, we can have a moment of anger that reflects what's in our heart. We all need a redemption from that kind of thing. To single out an individual who is notorious and then say, "I could never be like that," I think is naive and silly on our parts.

**RP:** That's one of the things that's scary about those psychological experiments with the electric shocks. It was set up where somebody pretended to be in the chair receiving electric shocks when, in fact, they were an actor, they weren't [receiving shocks] at all. The psychologist would invite someone to control the levels of electricity. Whenever the person in the chair got an answer to the question wrong, the participant had to administer an electric shock to them. Each time they got it wrong, they turned the shock up. There was no electricity at all, but they didn't know that.

What they found is if the scientist told the person, "It's okay, they might be screaming and make a lot of noise, but they'll be fine, just keep doing it," the number of people who were willing to administer lethal electric shocks was very disturbing. This was research done on the back of "Why was it that apparently decent, good German guards would be prepared to participate in the Holocaust just because they were told to by people they trusted?" It's quite scary to realize some of the things that we might be prepared to do in certain circumstances.

**JMF:** We've never faced the circumstances, so how do we know how we would respond? The point is that we need redemption as much as the next person. It's no surprise that Christ came for all of us. We all need redemption, we're all capable of that. Sin is sin. I've never seen that as a good argument even though you could understand it, especially if you're a victim of someone.

**RP:** Sure, sure. There are arguments against the view that I take, and I sympathize with some of them. It's not the mainstream historic tradition. The most spiritual Christians in our history, most of them have believed in traditional views of hell, and the best theologians in our tradition, most of those have believed in traditional views of hell, and I acknowledge that. I wouldn't for a minute suggest that if you believe in a traditional understanding of hell you're careless or you're corrupt or anything of the sort. I just think the traditional understanding of hell is one that creates tensions within a traditional Christian theology of the doctrine of God that is problematic.

Oftentimes people will go, "Yeah, but you see, Robin, what you need to understand is God is loving, but he's also just." Then they give me that knowing look as if somehow I'm wanting to say God's loving, but he's not just. He's loving but he doesn't punish people. That's so wrong-headed to



me because God hasn't got two sides in there — sometimes I do loving things and sometimes I do just things. *Everything* that God does is motivated by the holy love of God. Everything that God does is just. Everything that God does is loving.

If God could do things that were just but not loving, as is being implied, hell is God being just but it's not God being loving. I think, hold on here, if everything God does is motivated by the holy love of this God who is an integrated God, he's not schizophrenic or something...you need to give an account of hell where you can say this is something that would be done by a holy, loving God — a holy and loving [God]. This action of sending someone to hell is an action that is consistent not just with God's justice but also with God's love.

It's not that I have some sentimental view of love. I seek to have a biblical view of love. I have an understanding of love that is based around how God has revealed his love to us in Christ — what the cross is about and this whole story that's stretching the notion and shaping the notion of what God's love is like around creation and redemption. How can it be the case that God is love, if some of the things he does are just but not loving? It has to be loving. If it's eternal torment with absolutely no hope of redemption, how is that loving? It becomes a problem. How is that an act of God, the holy, loving God?

**JMF:** I guess it depends on one's definition of love. I attended a lecture by a noted American theologian, and it was on this topic of God's justice. Someone asked the question, "How can I enjoy heaven if I'm looking at my loved ones writhing in hell?" He said, "If you understood God's holy love, you would know that God's love is consistent with that. He enjoys the destruction of his enemies, and you will enjoy it as well. That is how God's love is, and you will experience God's love that way, too."

**RP:** That's a very dehumanizing theology. What kind of human being is that shaping you to be?

**JMF:** God has created us with a sense of love that wars against such utter nonsense.

**RP:** Exactly. It's a repulsive notion, I think. I can understand ...it comes out of a desire to submit to revelation, and I can respect that.

**JMF:** Yeah, a desire to uphold the sovereignty of God.

**RP:** Yeah. But you end up where you have a theology which is shaping humans where what it is to be fully human and fully redeemed is that we would be able to look at people suffering in excruciating pain and rejoice in it.

**JMF:** It takes kind of a logical definition of how God must be and then it takes, by logic, in order to safeguard the sovereignty, and discards all sense of love that's actually found in Scripture and turns it on its head to fit that. He went on to say, "You have to understand that God is an infinite

God and that a sin against God therefore is an infinite sin, and infinite sin requires an infinite punishment, and it's only fair and just." I thought a third grader would not reason in such nonsense! How can a human being who is not infinite...how can a sin from a human being be infinite? Nothing about a human being is infinite — so you're going to say a human sin is infinite? That doesn't make sense.

**RP:** You're greatly overestimating human capacities there. Yeah, and I've argued at some length against that argument in my book, *The Evangelical Universalist*. I think that's right. If God is shaping us to be more loving, more sensitive to the pain of others, then you would think that the combination of redemption...when we're fully redeemed and so on, we would see the suffering of others and experience it with sorrow. This is precisely how you see God responding to the suffering, even the suffering that God himself inflicts. In the book of Jeremiah, for instance, God punishes Israel for their sin, and yet several times we see God lamenting over the suffering of the people. You don't see God going, "This is deserved and it's just, and so I rejoice in it."

**JMF:** Precisely.

**RP:** Yes, it might be deserved and yes, it might be just, but God's not rejoicing in it. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, as Ezekiel says. It paints a vision of God, God somehow rejoicing in this and so we should be rejoicing in this. We will be standing there looking at maybe our children who have turned away from the Lord, suffering, and we will praise God, "Yes, this is glorious." Something inside of most people is repelled by that.

**JMF:** Yes.

**RP:** That's because we've got sinful minds. I think that's a deep Christian instinct based on a Christian understanding of what love is and what it is to be a human and what it is for God to be God and God to be loving. It's not just sentimentalism.

**JMF:** Hosea 11, "My heart recoils within me, how can I give you up?" In the face of the punishment, God can't even endure watching it, so he reverses it. And he calls on us to... he says to us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you." And yet, what is this, something he does not, will not, cannot do? It just makes no sense.

**RP:** Which is a problem, you know? This is an argument that an 18th century Baptist preacher called Elhanan Winchester, a revivalist during the latter part of the 18th century who also happened to be a universalist, so he was quite unusual. He employed this argument. He says, "Are we saying that God is calling us to do things that he himself doesn't do? He's calling us to love our enemies, but he doesn't do that. He's calling us to pray for the lost with hope for their salvation, but he doesn't, because he knows they're not going to be saved, so he's got no hope for their salvation. Is

God requiring us to do things that he doesn't do?"

It's problematic. There's all sorts of problems with... What got me into this was reflecting...I read William Lane Craig's book, *Only Wise God*. William Craig is a brilliant evangelical philosopher. He was talking about a way in which it might be possible, it's controversial, as to how God could be sovereign and humans could have free will, understood in this sort of libertarian sense of being able to do something or not do it. I thought, that's amazing. God can allow us freedom, and get his will done. Then almost immediately, this was years ago, I thought, "but then why does anyone end up in hell forever, because if God could get his will done as well as allowing us our freedom, how does that work?"

He [William Craig] has some attempt to argue how it is that God can allow some people to be in hell, and, to my horror (because I really wanted to believe in the traditional view of hell), it didn't work! I thought, "I am not at all persuaded by this." That really unnerved me, because at the time I thought, "I know that the Bible says that some people will be in hell forever." I thought that was a given, and not open for question. That then started me on a search, have I understood the Bible right? Haven't I?

I began searching for a few years trying to think it through, and I came to conclusions which were different from most Christians, but in a sense I want to say, "Look, what I believe is orthodox. It's consistent with everything in the Creeds, it comes out of the evangel, it's gospel-focused, it grows out of a reflection on the cross, it's Christ-centered, it's Trinitarian, it affirms the inspiration of Scripture, and it tries to do justice to a whole load of texts, including hell texts. It is not, in terms of orthodox Christianity, heretical, although it might be fringe. I want to argue this is a view that should be tolerated as a possible expression of orthodox Christianity.

**JMF:** I would just add that even if there are those who do hold out and never do respond to God's love, God's love is no less what it is for them, and the Scripture makes absolutely plain what God's heart is and his desire is, even if he does allow someone to hold out (which I have to struggle with, even though I have to allow it, I guess, because I don't know), but I do know God's heart because he reveals it, and I know that he's awfully good at what he does.

## 35. WHAT ON EARTH IS JESUS DOING?

**Introduction:** Today's guest is Dr. Andrew Purves, Professor of Reformed Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Dr. Purves is author of numerous books, including *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, and *The Resurrection of Ministry*.

**J. Michael Fezell:** Thanks for joining us.

**Andrew Purves:** You're welcome.

**JMF:** We appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule, which is pretty full, to be here with us. You have been a professor of theology for some time, and you've written a number of books that we'll be talking about. Tell us the story of how you became a theologian and how you got into writing such books on the topics that you've chosen.

**AP:** It's a long story, but as quickly as I can, I often get asked, when was



I saved? My smart answer is, "I was elect in Jesus Christ from the foundation of the world." It's not just a smart answer, it's a true answer, because that grounds me in a reality other than my own experiences. I believe that 2000 years ago, my humanity was

borne by the man Jesus and born unto God through his apostolic Sonship.

But when I was 19, I was a high-school dropout wandering through life in Edinburgh, Scotland, and I had an experience that drove me the next Sunday to church. The minister got into the pulpit, said, “Let us worship God,” and instantly I knew that God wanted me to preach the gospel. Then I had to go back to high school and all the rest and so on and so forth, and then discovered I was quite good at this stuff, and started picking up degrees and became, by God’s good providence, a student of Tom Torrance and James Torrance. At times I scratched against them, but at the foundation of my theological formation there was this classical, orthodox, evangelical, catholic theology of the confessional church.

Eventually after all my studies were completed and I came to the United States, I married an American woman and started to preach, and realized that the gospel I was to preach was the classical faith of the church. That’s what began the process of inquiring more and more fully, “What am I to say in the sermon?” Then in due course I was called to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, now over 27 years ago. Then it became, “What do I teach the students who are going to preach the gospel?” That was the concern. And so this classical theology has been with me almost from the beginning.

**JMF:** You’ve done a lot of work with pastors, and about pastoral work, pastoral spirituality, and so on, and you’ve indicated in some of your recent books that pastoral work and social work seem to be overlapping in the church. Is that a good thing, or is that a bad thing?

**AP:** It needn’t be a bad thing, but what defines us in pastoral ministry (that is, essentially of saying the ministry of word and sacrament, and the pastoral work that flows from that), the content of that is defined not by social science, but by Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father and the power of the Spirit. That reality that undergirds, that which defines what it is ultimately that a pastor and the mission of a congregation must be about, is bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That may lead you in social ministry, it may lead you to ministries of care and ministries of therapy, ministries of renewal, economic, health care, whatever, but Jesus Christ is Lord, and there’s no aspect of the existence of the cosmos over which he is not Lord. So, in Christ, one would expect to be taken into all corners. But that which defines the core of who we are and what we are about is not some contingent need to which we give a pragmatic response, but that Jesus Christ is Lord.

If I could put this in a very simple image, and I use this image often in my teaching, you walk into a situation—hospital room, classroom, you are in a conversation at the grocery store with someone, and the primary defining pastoral question is, “Has Jesus showed up?” In the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, I believe he does, because that’s his

choice to be with us.

The pastoral question is, “What is he up to that I can bear witness to, point to...?” essentially...whatever the context, [you want to] proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord at this point of connection or intersection of your life. That that which defines ministry is Jesus Christ, not the present pain, but Jesus Christ, who will address the present pain. A technical image: we begin with a Christological starting point—Jesus Christ, present in the power of the Spirit and in the freedom of his love, and then try to help the people make the connection between their present life experience and the Lord who is with them to be for them.

**JMF:** That brings up something we were talking about earlier, abstract nouns, and thinking of them in that sense as opposed to what they really mean. You mentioned an example of grace as an abstract noun, and others.

**AP:** Abstract nouns are wonderful things insofar as they sum up and gather, encapsulate, concentrate, some aspect of our knowledge and awareness. Words like grace, hospitality, justice, inclusivity, all kind of wonderful abstract nouns. Love, for example. The trouble is when we distance them from the concrete reality of the Lord Jesus who is the ground who gives them the content, and they become free-floating entities. Sometimes then they are used and come around the back, they are used as weapons against the very gospel itself.

So I tell my students, *grace* is a good word, but remember grace has a name, his name is Jesus. Love is a good word, but love has a name, his name is Jesus. Hope is a good word, but his name is Jesus. In other words, my hope is not in *hope*, my trust is not in *grace*. I do not try to live lovingly. What does that mean? What does it mean for me to live in Christ, who is my hope? Hope and love and grace and so on become concrete and specific and not just free-floating entities where content from the culture can tend to overwhelm them.

**JMF:** So in that sense, it isn't just grace that we want, or should want, in the sense of getting off the hook, it's actually being in union with Christ. Can you talk about being in union with Christ?

**AP:** Yeah. Grace doesn't save us. Jesus saves us. Christianity at its core is not a system of ideas, let alone a system of abstract nouns. Christianity at its core is about God choosing for all eternity to have a people of his own desire, a people who would love him, people whom he would cleave to himself and who would cleave to him. Without going through a lot of rigmarole, in the fullness of time in order that that people of his choice would belong to him, in the fullness of time, he sent his Son, who is the incarnation of God's love, and the incarnation of God's providence, and the incarnation of God's compassion, and the incarnation of God's grace, so that all of the abstract nouns have a content and a reality, namely Jesus Christ.

The purpose of all of this is that when we look into the face of Jesus Christ as he is attested to us in the Scriptures and as he is proclaimed in the preaching of the church, we apprehend not an argument or a series of propositions, but we are apprehended by, in the power of the Spirit, the living God. We meet Jesus. As we have this conversation this morning, in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus is the third person in our conversation. To the extent that that's the case, our lives and our conversation, and as this goes out, as it's broadcast, all of this is to the glory of the Father.

I have been professionally criticized for having too big a doctrine of Jesus Christ. Some people have said that Purves is a Christ-mystic, to which my response is, duh. That which makes us Christian is Jesus, a present, living, reigning, acting Lord who is up to God's ministry in every aspect of the life of the cosmos. That's what it means that he's Lord. He's not just Lord back there who has given us a moral code, he is Lord now, a living Lord present in power in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit.

I don't manipulate him to be here. He chooses to be here, not now in the flesh, of course, as he was 2000 years ago, but in his Spirit. The real question of ministry, I think, is a simple question. If he's here, what is he up to? Because that's what our people need in their cancer wards and their divorcing situations, with their teenage children—do we have a Lord who can be present in power to change the human reality, or is he just an idea? I want to claim that he's present in power.

**JMF:** So being a believer is more than assent to a set of facts. We often hear a sinner's prayer, for example, in a simple presentation of the gospel: "Do you believe this, do you believe that, do you believe the things Jesus did?" But it sounds like you're saying that being a believer is a great deal more than just a certain set of facts.

**AP:** My paradigm story here in answer to that question is Acts 9:5, Saul of Tarsus, this brilliant persecutor of the church. He's got the warrant from the court in his pocket, and he's en route to Damascus, and he's going to round them up, and he's going to get them, and we're going to...poof out of existence this nonsense that this Jesus who is dead is somehow raised. And Paul is accosted, encountered by the ascended Lord—the only story we have of the ascended Lord appearing. All the other post-resurrection stories are of the resurrected Lord, but now in his ascended power he comes, and Saul is knocked to the ground and Paul's question is, I think, the core theological question—"Who are you, Lord?"

It's not just "Who are you?" It's not a speculative, dilettante's question, "Who are you?" We often get that—"Who are you?" But it's "Who are you, *Lord?*" In other words, "Who are you, you who have so unilaterally and unconditionally staked a claim on my life and I have to recognize that?" In

other words, I think the boiler-house of faith is that we are encountered by a person who establishes, from his side, our being in relationship with him, and who calls us to live our lives in terms of that claim upon us.

Because we are thinking creatures, we are then called to think about that and to think as rightly and as faithfully as we can about that. That's what theology is. We try to think about the creative act of God claiming us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. There are better ways and less better ways, and even right and wrong ways, to think about this. For example, this is a silly illustration, but not every sentence that has the word "god" in it is an accurate and faithful theological sentence. I could say, "God is a pink banana." Well, that's not a faithful theological sentence. I could say, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." That is a faithful theological sentence.

We bring our minds to these experiences, to these encounters, as they are mediated to us in the Scriptures and as we encounter the living Lord in our own lives. Perhaps at some point, if you wanted, I might tell you some of these encounter stories, because I know he lives and reigns because he met me.

I can't explain it. The Bible is nowhere interested metaphysics. The creation, how did God create? We don't know. *Va'omer Elohim*, in Hebrew, and God said. That's God's choice. The Word became flesh—*Logos sarx egeneto*, the Word became flesh. No metaphysics. On the third day he was raised from the dead. How did God the Father raise the Son from the dead in the powerless world? No metaphysics. He ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. No metaphysics. Deal with it. Deal with it. He's done it. And this Lord meets us along our Damascus roads.

**JMF:** Let's talk about the encounters.

**AP:** My first transforming encounter...there had been intonations. My parents—my mother was an Irish Catholic, my father a Presbyterian of loose form, not practicing. I wasn't brought up in the church in Edinburgh, Scotland, I was a high school dropout at 16. I was sitting in my parent's living room one Sunday evening watching television with my mother, my father (my sister wasn't there).

We were sitting around the coal fire watching television, and this is not an allusion to John Wesley, but it was somewhere after 8:00 in the evening, and I got up to leave the living room for some reason. My mother was in an armchair by the fire, my lapsed Roman Catholic Irish mother. I stopped at her chair and I said, "I'm bored with my life." And my mother looked up, "Oh," she said, "Why don't you go to church next Sunday?"

Where in the name of heaven did that come from? My non-practicing, ex-Roman Catholic mother shattered me. I went to church. I told the story of what happened—the minister came to the pulpit, "Let us worship God," and I got to do that. I went back home, told my mother, she was so upset



with me, this is true, did not speak to me for two weeks. But there are many other stories along the way that I encountered, the Lord encountered me. There is one big story that takes about three or four minutes to tell.

**JMF:** Well, we would need to hear it now.

**AP:** It's a big story, and it's my story, and it's the story that in many ways now defines my work, my life. Seven-and-a-half years ago I was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer. My colleague at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Martha Robbins, who has a Harvard Ph.D. in psychology, ex-Roman Catholic nun, Martha called me up and said, "I want to come and pray with you." Suffice to say that Martha's piety and my piety are a little bit different, but she's a wonderful Christian woman.

It was a Saturday night, just a few days before my surgery. Martha came with a boom box to my house and said, "I need you for an hour." Okay, so we went down to the basement. She had me lie down on the couch. She read from Romans 8, said a prayer with her hands laid over me, put on some music, and said, "Trust me, I want to take you on a prayer journey, an imaginative prayer journey." She did some deep breathing to get relaxed, and then she said, "When you're ready I want you to picture in your mind a great big door. When are ready, walk through that door, and you will come to a flight of stairs."

So I relaxed and eventually I see a big door, and for some reason I saw it as a church door, a double wooden church door came to me. I walked through that door, and to my surprise, saw a flight of stairs going down, and they were stone stairs. Why? Who would have thought it? She said, "At the bottom of the stone stairs, there are a second set of doors, and when you walk through these doors you will be in a safe place."

Now what I'm about to say took an hour, but it will just take a couple of minutes to tell. After a little while, I walked through that second set of doors, and to my astonishment, I was in the Abbey on Iona off the west coast of Scotland, where I had been many times—the spiritual home of Scotland, Saint Columba's Island, where in 563 Columba and some Irish monks had settled and from there began to evangelize the Scots. So this is our holy place, although they rebuilt abbeys 11th century and Roman, nonetheless, this is the place.

I was off at the side, one of the side transepts beside sarcophagi of dead kings or queens or some folks, and I was small, curled up in a fetal position, scared. I became aware that this ancient abbey was filled with the saints of the Scottish Church. This is probably not orthodox Presbyterian theology, but they were praying for me. There were thousands of them, undifferentiated. Gradually, they maneuvered me out of my hiding place and brought me into the center of the abbey to the front of the communion table.

Now what I'm about to tell you is as real as looking you in the eye.

There was a huge green Iona Marble communion table, and I was brought to the front of the communion table, and I recall being low down—don't know if I was kneeling, or lying, or sitting, but I was low down. I looked up, and standing in front of the communion table was the Lord Jesus. Absolutely real. He said to me that my cancer was the attempt of the evil one to destroy me, but I assure you, I have the victory. That was it.

Two days after my surgery, I had a pulmonary embolism and almost died. That night, lying in bed in the hospital trying to process what had happened, all the tubes and stuff from major surgery still in me, and just for a flash, a nanosecond, I realized what these words meant, because it came to me again from the Lord, I'm absolutely convinced, "Whether you live or die, you live or die unto me because I have the victory."

That has shaped the last seven-and-a-half years of my life. I know he lives because he's met me. And I know that the one who has met me has been tested in his meeting me, and my attempt to describe it in terms of the great theological heritage of the church. This is who God is—the Lord who loves us, who claims us, who blesses us, who will not let us go, and who in the dire circumstances upholds us from underneath of the everlasting arms. That's my story.

**JMF:** Did that move you toward one of the books that you wrote subsequently?

**AP:** I was in the middle of my big academic book, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, and the second half of that book was written during the six months of chemotherapy. Some of that is in the academics of the second half of the book. My editor wanted me to take it out, and I said no, I didn't want it taken out because this is the context of the book, writing on the ministry of the grace of God, the ministry of the comfort of God, the ministry of the presence of God, and the ministry of the reign of God. These are, although the book is technical, academic, these are not just words.

These chapters that I wrote during chemotherapy were...this is my life. On this I depend. This is not just writing a book for the academic guild. The two subsequent books, *The Crucifixion of Ministry* and *The Resurrection of Ministry*, were putting into a more accessible form precisely this theology of the living Lord who encounters us.

**JMF:** Is there a favorite book among all this that you've written that you feel the most affinity with?

**AP:** It's like...I have three children. How could I pick? Each book has its own story, its own context, its own reason for being written, and certainly in the editing process, its own particular pain. But *The Crucifixion of Ministry* is in some ways special because over the last three years since its publication I've had hundreds of emails from pastors who I have never met telling me that they've picked it up and it has changed the ministry.

For the want of another image...and I hope this doesn't sound self-

servicing or arrogant, but that book seems to have an anointing that I don't have any control over. It seems to have a life that God has given it for the blessing of busy, tired, middle-aged, underpaid, over-stressed, over-worked, underappreciated, collapsing self-esteem pastors—it seems to have connected. I will just take that for what it is. If it's a blessing, then I am very grateful.

**JMF:** In *The Resurrection of Ministry*, you quote a friend who said, “Why, if Jesus is so big, so powerful, so victorious, am I so unconscious of his presence so much of the time? Why, when I preach and teach the word of the Lord, are the people not bursting forth with the fruits of the Spirit? If Jesus is the reigning Lord of the universe, why are even little pastoral problems so confounding?” Is that what drove you to think about this topic and work on that book?

**AP:** In part. There are intractable problems, intractable theological problems. If God is all loving and God is all powerful, whence evil? And why does somebody like me get cancer and live while somebody with the same diagnosis gets the same cancer and dies? I can't explain these things. They're very troubling.

When I get to heaven, I'm surely going to ask the Father, “Could you not have created a world without cancer?” I'm not sure I have a good answer in terms of a satisfying answer that would be acceptable to the logic of the world other than to make a confession. And that is, I believe that in the end, every tear will be wiped away and that God will gather his people to himself, and there will be joy, and joy will have a name, and his name is Jesus, in whom we will be in communion.

It's not just “whistle a happy tune whenever you feel afraid” or “a pie in the sky when you die”—it's a question of trusting. That's wrong. That puts it upon me. But let me put it this way, I have decided that sometimes experiences and problems to the contrary, that the message of the New Testament is true. And I've decided to live by that and that Jesus reigns, and while there are a ton of things I can't explain, and at 63 there are more things I can't explain than I could when I was 43, and theology is inherently messy with all kinds of loose ends, but I have decided to trust that Jesus is a victorious Lord.

My word to pastors is, don't point to what you can do, point your people to Jesus. Even if they experience things to the contrary, tell them, declare to them, that Jesus in the Spirit is with them. And heaven help us, pray God that the Lord will turn up in their lives. I can't manipulate it or control it, but I'm not without resources.

A story I tell at the end of *The Crucifixion of Ministry* might bear repeating. It's a story of a pastor who gets a call at 4:00 in the morning from Bill. Bill and Mary are a young couple in his congregation. They've been married a number of years, they're in their mid-30s, no children, but Mary's pregnant

and in great excitement. They're a faithful couple, they are good people, and you get this phone call at 4:00 in the morning from Bill, he's in his car en route to the local obstetrics emergency room, Mary's hemorrhaging.

What do you do? You throw on some clothes, you get there, you get to the hospital, 4:30, Bill's in the room waiting. He hears your footsteps, he turns around, there's tears running down his face. "Bill, what's the matter?" "The baby's dead." He looks at his watch. "Oh, it's just coming up for time. The nurse said we'll get in in just a minute to see Mary. Oh, and by the way, we want you to baptize the baby."

You go, "Oh, can I baptize a dead person? Do I have authority to do this?" But 30 seconds to conduct a theological colloquium in your head. The nurse comes, "You can see your wife now," and you walk into the room. There's Mary in a bed with sheets pulled up to her chin. Baby's in the bassinette completely covered in a blanket. The couple meet, and they're tentative and unsure of how to relate. You're standing there. You can't fix it. I'm a pastor and I can't fix it. I can't raise the dead. This child is dead. I can't heal their pain.

Then you realize that Mary's probably never held the baby. So you whisper in her husband's ear, "Give the baby to her mother." He goes, picks up the baby, and there's the three of them, a cameo. "Pastor, we want you to baptize the baby." Oh, what do I do? Then you remember that you had attended my lectures on Calvin's doctrine of the ascension, and this is not kidding, and remember that Calvin taught three things about the ministry of the ascended Lord.

- 1) He prays for us. So this situation of family catastrophe and of ministerial powerlessness is being prayed for by Jesus.
- 2) Second, he sends the Holy Spirit. This is a charismatic environment. The Holy Spirit is here.
- 3) The third thing Calvin says, "And he gives us to the Father."

So you say, "Bill, Mary, let me show you what Jesus is doing right now." You take the dead baby and you lift up the dead baby and you say, "At this very minute, Jesus is giving your daughter to the Father, and for my sake he is cleaving your daughter to his bosom." They won't remember a word you said, but they will remember the action where you bore witness to what Jesus was doing in this tragic situation.

We have resources. We can't fix, but we point people to what we believe the living Lord is doing. Pastors, to do that, you need to know the living Lord. To do that, pastors, you need to know your people, and you then facilitate, as it were, that conversation between the living Lord and the freedom of his love and the power of the Spirit and the lives of your people—you help them to make these connections in your preaching and in your teaching and in your pastoral work. You can't fix it. But Jesus shows up—at least that's what I believe.

## 36. THEOLOGY FOR PASTORAL WORK

**J. Michael Feazell:** In your book, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, on page 128, you wrote, “At its core, pastoral work involves bearing witness to the joining of two stories, the parishioners and God’s. Who is Jesus Christ specifically for this person amid the particularities and the exigencies of his or her current life experience?”

How does a pastor bring those two stories together?

**Andrew Purves:** It really is a fundamental question in this way in two regards. First of all, as a pastor, you have to live in Christ. You have to know the Lord. That doesn’t just mean passing the theology test—that’s important—know the Lord, knowing how to speak appropriately of the Lord. But you must know the Lord as the Lord of your life. That means a life of piety, a life of prayer, ethical attentiveness and so on. It means a life of worship, a life of living in Christ.

Saint Paul used the phrase “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” “in him” in his letters around 164 times. It’s his fundamental statement about what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is someone *in Christ*. I take that to mean an organic connectedness, a relationship...even in rather hackneyed terms, a “personal relationship” with a living, reigning Lord.

That’s something we have to attend to. It’s just like cleaning your teeth. You get up in the morning and you clean your teeth. It’s a fundamental good habit. Just because it’s a habit doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing. Our habit, the *habitus*, the rhythm of our life, is to attend to our life in the Lord. You can’t do ministry unless you have a life in Christ, in him, embedded in him, rooted, growing up in him, so that the flower of your ministry and faith is a result of your roots of faith—life being deeply embedded in the soil of the word of God. That on the one hand.

The other thing—to be a pastor you have to be embedded with your

people. You've got to know your people. One of the sad aspects, I think, of contemporary ministry is that ministers tend to sit in big offices with a sanctuary outside, and people come and visit the minister. In the olden days, the ministers used to go and visit the people. The word parish comes from two Greek words *para, oikos*, beyond the house—and the parish was the walking distance that the minister or priest could cover to get to the houses of the people.

We read in Acts that Paul visited from house to house—all of which is to say the pastor must know his or her people. You've got to be involved in their lives. You're with them in their births and their deaths and their getting jobs and losing jobs and in their hospitals and all of their ups and downs. You're with them. I think that's the genius of a pastoral charism, of a pastoral giftedness—that your joy is to walk with these people.

So you know the Lord, you're embedded in the life of the Lord...when one thinks perhaps of John 15—you're a branch connected to the vine, you're organically connected and you are in Christ, abiding in him. But you're also in the people, you're abiding in them.

As the pastor, then, you are the one who enables that conversation. They know the Lord, too, but you're the one whose special job and appointment is to bear witness. So I tell my students don't use phrases like "pastoral counseling." If somebody needs a therapist, find a good therapist. Your job is rather to help them interpret their context of their life—the vicissitudes, the pains, the tragedies, the joys. Go to the graduation parties as well as the funeral homes. Make the connections, and in the small things you often don't even have to say words. You are making connections between Jesus and them. It feeds into the sermons.

For example, I preach all over the country and I come in on a parachute. You know, here I am. I preach, I don't know the people, I don't know the context. I preach, people say how wonderful it is and all the rest. But at the end of the day, that's not effective preaching.

Effective preaching arises out of a preacher or pastor, a man or a woman who is embedded with the people and preaches into the context of their pain, preaches into the context of the silence of their cry to God—"where are you, God?", and they hear nothing back. They preach into these terrible cosmic silences and these ambiguities and these confusions that are the normal part of ongoing life. So I think there's that dual embedded-ness.

One other thought that I've played with through the years is that I think all ministry has a "from-to" character. That is, you move from your place as the pastor, from your life in Christ, from your safe place, *to* where the people are. That may be not be a comfortable place.

Although I'm well acquainted (sadly) with hospitals because of my own cancer, I don't like hospitals. I have a daughter-in-law who is a physician. She's very comfortable in hospitals. I will never be comfortable in hospitals.

But, you know, hospitals are not my “to” place. And yet as pastors we have to go into these uncomfortable “to” places. But we can only do what we do in these, as it were, “to” places because we have a deep grounded-ness in our “from” place, and that’s our anchor.

So I would encourage pastors really, really seriously in this regard. If you have no life in Christ, you have no ministry, because we read in John 15:5, “Apart from me, you can do nothing. Unless you are connected into me, the vine, you can do nothing.”

So, the most practical, pertinent question I can put to a working pastor is, “What’s going on in your life in Jesus?” Because if you don’t have a life in Christ, you don’t have a ministry. No matter how technically proficient you are in the skills of ministry, no matter how many committee meetings you go to, your life in Christ means that you can go into these situations and you know who Jesus is, what he is up to in all of these contexts, and you can point to that, bear witness to that.

**JMF:** It might seem like a trite question, but what, how does a pastor do that? How does a pastor remain?

**AP:** It’s not a trite question. It’s a critical question. Most seminaries in the United States—this is a non-scientific poll, but I have the sense—do not have enough attention paid to the spiritual formation of the pastor, or in different terms, to the pastor’s own formation in Jesus Christ, the pastor’s own relationship with Jesus Christ.

I’ve often been struck, when the disciples saw Jesus praying, they asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Some form of God’s history with Israel had been around 1100, 1200 years. They knew how to pray. And yet something was going on here, because what was the Lord praying? Surely he was praying out of his own Sonship in the Spirit with the Father.

I think he was praying, “My Father” because he alone is the only begotten Son. “My Father who art in heaven.” The disciples discern that something profound in its spiritual connectedness and power is going on between Jesus and the Father. So they’re not saying “teach us the techniques of prayer,” they’re not asking, “teach us how to do deep breathing when we pray” (I don’t know if that’s bad), but they’re saying, “How do we get in on your Sonly communion with the Father in the power of the Spirit?”

That’s the point of prayer, is that we are in on the Son’s...the technical word might be *perichoretic*...communion of love with the Father. So Jesus teaches them the Lord’s prayer. But back of that, theologically, is that Jesus is teaching them, “pray in me, pray through *me*,” so that our prayers are through Jesus Christ our Lord. Our prayers are accepted not because Andrew Purves is pious—God knows he’s not—but because they are given to the Lord, who takes what is ours—broken, muddled, irregular, incoherent, distracted—our broken prayers...takes them in himself, heals

them, and gives them to the Father in his name.

He takes what is his own communion with the Father, his life of love, discipleship, obedience, worship, and says, “Here, this is yours.” Not just “here, take it”—“it’s yours! It’s yours! It’s yours!” Not just a possibility. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian—it’s an actuality. It’s the actuality that we are in Christ, participating in his life, that makes it possible for me to pray, makes it possible for me to write books, teach my classes, engage in ministry.

The question is for me, for pastors: “Will I pay attention to that life in Christ? Will I seek to grow more deeply in Christ?” Someone...this is glib...Psalm 1 is Psalm 1 because of Psalm 1. Psalm 1 is Psalm 1 because Psalm 1 is doing something that no other Psalm can do. Psalm 2 can’t do what Psalm 1 is doing. What is Psalm 1 doing? Psalm 1 is the gateway, the threshold, the entrance into the book of Israel’s response to the Lord, or rather the five books of Israel’s response to the Lord. Realize you have the Pentateuch, five books...the five books of the response, five books of the Psalms.

Psalm 1 is setting up this whole response. It’s a two-way Psalm. Will you abide in the way of the wicked, or will you abide in the way of the Lord? I think that’s the challenge for any Christian disciple. What does it mean more deeply, more convertedly, more faithfully to live into that reality that has already claimed them—to find me. To abide in the Lord and to make my home there.

The Psalm uses an image about a tree being planted by a stream of running water. It’s Psalm of the exile. It’s all desert—emotionally, spiritually desert, but also physically it’s desert. And yet the Psalmist used, “In the Lord you will be like a tree planted by a stream of running water.” And out of that planted-ness, a plant of faith grows, and the plant of ministry grows. So in the education of ministers, clergy for ministry, we need to help people know what it means to have a deeper, more abiding life in the Lord. I’ve gone on too long with that question in answer to it, but it’s really important.

**JMF:** I don’t think you’ve gone on too long. It also raises the question of the meaning of grace in terms of one’s devotion to the God of grace without there becoming a legalistic framework or an attempt to be something that we aren’t. How do those work together? How do we bring a complete faithfulness to God in his grace toward us without bringing our own so-called righteousness and yet living in Christ, in union with Christ?

**AP:** To answer your question, let me refer to a Bible verse, if I may, in order to be quite precise, because your question is terribly important. Colossians 2:6...and this picks up the Psalm 1:3 image too, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...” That’s the piety, that’s the formation.

“...Strengthened in the faith you were taught.” This is the faith of the



apostles; this is the faith of the church. Get the theology wrong, and you will get life and ministry wrong. And then at the end, and this comes directly to your question, "...overflowing with thankfulness." In other words, the response that comes out, the life that comes out of this rootedness in Christ, is not a life of guilt or obligation or of duty. It's not "I ought, I should, I must, I have to." It's a life overflowing with thankfulness.

The Greek word for overflowing here sometimes in other translations it's translated "abounding." Abounding is an old funny word. I don't abound (especially as we get older) much anymore. The word, this is the better translation. The word literally means overflowing. It's...Paul uses it in Romans 5 to talk about grace. Overflowing. Three times he says, "Grace overflows." Again he says grace overflows, and the third time he puts it in the superlative—grace super-overflows—it's Niagara Falls of grace, not just a little trickle-down effect. It's this huge grace so that sin has no chance.

He uses the same word here, "Now out of this life in Christ, growing up in the faith and every way into him who is the head, we abound [or we overflow] in thankfulness." *Eucharistia* in Greek. What a wonderful energy system—gratitude, thankfulness, not obligation and duty. Not *musts* and *should* and *don't* and *have to-s*, but a heart filled with gratitude.

I think this is the...I don't know the right word to use...the genius of the Christian gospel. The point where we are called into practice, into ministry, into service, it is not at the point of our "Oh dear, I've got to go to another meeting, oh dear I am exhausted, oh dear I've got to go and work harder." Guys, I tell my students this, I get to get up in the morning to come and talk to you about Jesus Christ.

Or you say, "Folks, I get up in the morning to preach...11:00 on Sunday morning that Jesus is Lord." And when that has taken hold of your life, and gratitude and thankfulness abounds within you, your preaching will not be dull, because a thankful person is not a dull person. A thankful person is a person full of the joy and the energy of the gospel.

**JMF:** We're only told we love him because he first loved us.

**AP:** That's right.

**JMF:** It reminds me, as you're describing that, in Titus as well, that grace, "It is grace that teaches us to say no to ungodliness," and so on. It begins with the grace of God. He moves for us first, and we can move ahead in that.

**AP:** Again, a terrific question because so often our own sense of guilt or need or obligation begins to take over. There's another verse from Paul in Philippians 3. Through the chapter he is saying that nothing can compare with the fact that—"I've lost everything for the fact of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is my Lord." And at verse 12 in Philippians 3 he writes, "Not that I have already obtained this, the fullness of Christian life, the perfection of life, or have already arrived at the goal. But I press on to take hold of it."

Sometimes you hear preachers say we've got to press on, we've got to work harder, go to more committee meetings, give more money, press on, press on. You know, "I guilt you, I guilt you, I guilt you," and I'm tired of guilt. But if they've read the whole verse, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." What is the first thing? It's not that I press on to attain the prize of Jesus Christ. I press on because Jesus Christ has already taken hold of me and I am his prize.

The Greek word here literally means "seized hold of." It's not just that Jesus Christ has taken hold of me, it's Jesus Christ has *seized* hold of me. It's an intensive. "I seize hold of the Christian life because Jesus Christ has already seized hold of me." I've preached on this verse, and I think of it as we're grabbed by the scruff of our spiritual necks. We're seized hold of intensively.

And when Jesus Christ has us by the scruff of our spiritual necks, we can buck and we even try to get out of it, but he has got us by the scruff of the neck. And because we are seized hold of, with thankfulness I am going to live this life the way he wants me to live it, and give it my best shot, knowing that no matter what, he has seized hold of me, and on that I will depend.

**JMF:** And your success or failure is not what determines his grip.

**AP:** No.

**JMF:** His grip is the reality.

**AP:** Remember Peter walking on the water. I'm thankful, so thankful for silly Peter. I mean, Peter the doofus, because he's walking toward the Lord on the water, his faith deserts him, he begins to sink. And what stops Peter from drowning is not that he's reached up and grabbed Jesus' hand, but that Jesus has reached down and grabbed his hand.

There is a place for us to seize hold, but it's lower down the theological food chain. What saves me is not my decision for Jesus, but Jesus' decision for me. He has seized hold of me, and my response is: In gratitude I say, "Yes Lord, yes Lord. Show me what you want me to do."

**JMF:** In that story, the word immediately is used. Immediately.

**AP:** That's right.

**JMF:** There's not a lot of time when you're sinking.

**AP:** That's right, and that's so comforting because as pastors, we can't throw people back upon their own strength and resources. My teacher Tom Torrance used to say this all the time, "Don't cast people back upon themselves, upon their own faith, their own ethics, their own piety, because we break, we will give out. Cast them back upon Jesus Christ. And held by Jesus Christ, they will discover the resources of their piety and their ethics and their service, but again, out of gratitude and thankfulness, not out of guilt or fear."

**JMF:** Ephesians 2 is a long number of verses about the grace, the riches

of kindness and so on that has come to us. And it concludes in verse 10 with, “We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”

**AP:** That’s right.

**JMF:** Not that you do good works to be...

**AP:** That’s right. Put it in the terms of what high school English teachers used to teach us, using indicative and imperative language: The imperative is prior to and conditions the indicative. The imperative is the statement of fact, of reality. You *are* in Christ. You are loved cosmically from the foundation of the world. You have been seized hold of by Jesus Christ. Now therefore, this is how...

**JMF:** Now therefore, yeah.

**AP:** But the imperative, how you are to live, is the *consequence*, and is conditioned by the prior reality that we are in Christ by God’s choice and act. That to me is the gospel.

**JMF:** In so much preaching, though, it makes people feel it’s the other direction... that they need to do something in order for God to feel this way toward them.

**AP:** Right.

**JMF:** So they’re looking over their shoulder for what they’ve done wrong, for where the weak link in the chain lies.

**AP:** And scratch... Most of us scratch a little bit theologically and spiritually, and we say oh, you know, I deserved this from God. I deserved this punishment, this cancer, this divorce or what have you. And that is tragic.

It was the great Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, who, in the 1950s, published the message that said that God had decided from all eternity that God would no longer be God without a people to love—that God is the God of love. That doesn’t mean to say that he’s not the God of justice, of judgment, but I can say to you, “I forgive you,” and implied within that “I forgive you” is...you’ve done wrong. I wouldn’t “forgive” you if you hadn’t done wrong. But it’s the “I forgive you” that is the larger reality under which the judgment is subsumed.

So there is judgment, and we need to preach that. But we preach it within the context that there is something bigger than the judgment, more that overwhelms the judgment, in fact, the “I forgive you, I love you, you are mine, you belong to me, I will not let you go.” That is grace. That is why the Word became flesh—that we may know God is a God of love.

To put it differently, the relations within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not relations of law or obligation. The Trinity is a communion of love—three persons, one being. The heart of God, if we can speak, the being of God, who God is, is God is love. And God gives us law in order to help us live life in an appropriate way. But the heart of things, the center of things is not law, but love. Not condemnation, but

forgiveness. And that's freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free [Galatians 5:1], not for guilt. For freedom Christ has set us free. Thanks be to God.

**JMF:** The gospel really is good news.

**AP:** That's right. It's called gospel.

**JMF:** What skills then...what does a pastor need? What skills should a pastor have? What knowledge and experience should he or she have, expect to have, or strive to have, to be an effective pastor?

**AP:** That's actually a very complex question. Let me work my way into it, because I have no slick packaged answer to your question. The first thing I would say: To be a pastor, you need to be well-apprenticed to a theological heritage. There are good theological heritages out there, and to be apprenticed to them means that you put yourself, as it were, under the authority of a tradition that the church has said "This is faithful."

If you're in a Pietistic tradition, under the Wesleys perhaps, my Reformed tradition under Calvin... And who was Wesley apprenticed to? The Greek fathers. Who was Calvin apprenticed to? The Greek fathers. You apprentice yourself as a pastor to the men and women who have framed and converted the mind of the church, so that the pastor, as the teaching elder, is a man or a woman who has the mind of Christ and who can teach the people that they may grow and have the mind of Christ.

Being a theologian is not just something that strange people do...get a technical education and so forth. Being a theologian is a requirement for everyone who would be a pastor—anyone who would teach Sunday School, even if it's just the tiny tots. My wife this week in her church is doing Vacation Bible School, and there are little tiny tots running around. But those who teach these little children, they need to be theologians. They need to know who is the Lord, who is God, the God whom we name, the God who we trust has claimed us, and to be able to express that in cogent and accurate and careful terms.

I think too, to be a pastor you need to be apprenticed to a tradition of ministry. Too much modern ministry is gimmicky. I don't mean to be offensive in saying this, but too much modern ministry is enthralled into passing psychological fads or sociological fads.

In the fall at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, I will be teaching a course on classical texts for pastoral theology. I think there's a copy in your pile of books. We'll be reading old dead guys:

- Gregory of Nazianzus, 380s, the first systematic text in pastoral ministry in the history of the church.
- John Chrysostom, the Greek father from Antioch. Gregory the Great, 590, became pope. His book of pastoral rule was the book of pastoral care for the next 1000 years in the Western church.
- Martin Bucer, the most important pastoral writer of the

Reformation age, his pastoral theology just being published in English for the first time.

- Richard Baxter, [who wrote] *The Reformed Pastor*...it doesn't mean the Calvinist pastor; it means the renewed pastor, the pastor in Christ.
- And the reminisces of my favorite, John McLeod Campbell of Scotland.

All of these texts are available. They are old texts, but including them...I'm sorry there are no women in them, I wish that were the case, but this is what we have. This is the great wisdom, the depository of pastoral knowledge in the history of the ecumenical church. And I teach this stuff, and the students catch fire. They are staggered at this stuff, this wisdom.

We've got to apprentice our students to the wisdom of the pastoral heritage that has been passed down. People knew how to do pastoral ministry before Sigmund Freud came along. They knew how to do pastoral ministry before we got into all this modern psychology and sociology. None of that's wrong, but it's not what defines our work. Read the great texts, study the great theologians.

The third thing I would say is: Read the great spiritual saints. Read the Augustines and the Gregory of Nazianzuses, read Calvin's chapter on prayer in his *Institutes*, and read Luther on Galatians. And read some of the great Roman women—Teresa of Avila. You may not agree—that doesn't matter! But these are books that have been around for a long, long time for a reason.

C.S. Lewis, in an introduction a few years ago to a translation of Athanasius's book on the incarnation, a famous little introduction...Lewis said, "For every new book we should read two old books, because the old books have been around and are tested." Read the old theologians, read the old ministers, read the old teachers on prayer and be guided in your formation. Read contemporary books, too, but they probably won't be around as long as these old books.

### 37. WE ARE NOT GENERIC

**JMF:** In your work over many years, you've undoubtedly had some ah-ha moments. Can you tell us about one or two of those?

**AP:** Interesting question. You mean in the classroom or...

**JMF:** In the classroom, or in general study on your own, or walking down the street one day.

**AP:** Let me see where I go with this. One that immediately comes to mind... (I haven't thought about this in a long time because it was painful.) I was in pastoral ministry for four and a half years in the United States, and there was a middle-aged elderly woman in my congregation who was challenging. I was on the job a week, and I was told in no uncertain terms I had to pay a pastoral call on this woman, and I was told she was difficult, so I was brand-new and very nervous and went to pay my pastoral call on her. We chatted a little while and then I got up and I said goodbye, and I got out of there and, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, I had made my pastoral call and took the rest of the afternoon off on order to get my self-respect back.

That night my clerk of session in the Presbyterian church, that's the senior lay person, clerk of our board of management, called me up and said, "Andrew, I received a call from so-and-so. It was appreciated that you made the pastoral call, but you did not pray at the end of the pastoral call." I said, "Did I not? I was so terrified I just ran away." And, "Well, she is very upset that you didn't pray."

That was a tremendous learning, because all kinds of people no doubt visit this person and do good work. But one of the things I was to do as the pastor that hadn't entered my head...I was to be the person, at least, if nothing else, I would pray for that person. That was a major learning.

The second event that comes to mind is also somewhat painful. I was about a year and a half into pastoral ministry... I don't recall the

circumstances, going back 30 years now...I realized I had no spiritual life. I had studied in four major European universities, around the world and in Europe and in the United States. Nobody taught me to pray. I began to realize that this was a problem. I started casting around who would teach me to pray, and I couldn't find anybody to teach me to pray.

Eventually I discovered a group in Washington, D.C., called the Church of the Savior, an intentional formational community of discipleship led by a wonderful man, Gordon Cosby and his wife, Mary Cosby, and I went off to do a retreat. I was there four days, in D.C., the first 26 hours of which were in silence. Absolutely devastated me. I had never been silent that long in my life. We went through a program, and I came back to my little country congregation in western Pennsylvania and got up on the Sunday morning after I arrived back and said, "Folks, I've had a major experience. I think I've just been converted, and I think I realize that I've got to have a relationship with Jesus and I've got to become a man of prayer. I'm just being really candid with you."

A group of older women from my congregation came up to me after the service and said (they called me Dr. Andrew), "Dr. Andrew, we knew something was going to happen to you, because we've been praying for you." That was a real learning. I tell my students, "May you be blessed with a group of older women who sit on the back pew who will pray you into conversion as their minister." That's some really serious learning for me.

As a seminary professor, it's been less dramatic perhaps. But one learning I think I want to share...it's not dramatic, but it's very serious, and that is, make sure you don't fake it. Be honest with the people with whom you're dealing. They will suss out a fake. Even as half-professor, don't be afraid to be vulnerable. Don't be afraid to say, "You know, I don't know."

I find more and more as I get older that I hit more and more walls I can't explain, I hit a wall. When I hit a theological wall, I tell my students...I get a question in class and I will wander around and I will think out loud, and I will say, "I've gone so far, I need to think some more about this. But I'll tell you what I'm thinking at the moment is, I may be hitting a theological wall that I cannot get over. But you know what I do when I hit a theological wall? I get down on my knees and I thank God for the mystery of the gospel."

Our theology ought to drive us to our knees. It took me a while to learn that and to be comfortable with vulnerability in the classroom. That's important in ministry in general. I'm not a person who knows all the answers, I'm not really that bright. I don't know everything. As I mentioned in another talk, I was a high-school dropout, I haven't had a classical education, I don't read Latin — I wish I did and then I could intimidate my students, but I don't, and so on and so forth. What's the point in pretending? I've had a very good education and I'm good at what I do. But

there's no point in pretending.

Be honest, be vulnerable. That doesn't mean be sappy, that doesn't mean use vulnerability as a manipulative tool to earn the sympathy of your audience, that's just co-dependency and manipulation...but genuine vulnerability, because I am a person speaking to people. I have read more books than my students, but nonetheless I don't know everything, and it's all right to be vulnerable, and it's even all right, in appropriate ways with appropriate boundaries, to be intense and to be emotional.

A student who is a friend came to me and said so-and-so is wanting to take your class on such-and-such and wanted to know what you were like as a teacher. The student, a middle-aged woman, said to me, "I was candid, and I thought you might be interested to know. I said, with Dr. Purves you take notes for half the class and then he starts to preach. Once he gets really worked up, he starts to preach and then you put your notes down and listen to the sermon because he's moved from the classroom into the sanctuary."

I praise God for that because the borderline between theology and proclamation ought not to be that far apart. Because theology and exegesis, the interpretation of Scripture, they are for the proclamation of the gospel. Exegesis without proclamation is aborted process. As Calvin knew, theology is for the proclamation of the gospel. We ought to get to messing a little bit and into preaching, I think.

**JMF:** Tell us about some of your mentors — the key people, formative people in your life.

**AP:** My first book, *The Search for Compassion*, I dedicated to my father, an unlettered man, a barber, left school at 14, but he taught me a number of lessons that are very dear. He taught me to love his wife. A man must love his wife. He loved my mother. He taught me about the love for one's wife. He taught me about honesty in one's dealings, and he taught me about humor. My father died two days before my first child was born. I was in the United States, pastor at the time, my father was in Edinburgh in Scotland, and my mother called me the night of his death and said, "Don't come home for the funeral, you need to be with Cathy" (my wife) because she was due two days later on her due date. Brendan was born two days later, on his due date — our oldest of the three children, and Brendan's birth was announced to my family at my father's funeral.

This is a very personal story, if I may. I've never worked out the emotions of my father's death and my first child's birth. But I know, and this is a metaphor, that my father and Brendan and Jesus and I will sit down together in the kingdom of God. I can't explain that. It's more than a metaphor; it's a statement of expectation — that those who we have lost and loved the while, we would be with. My father...my wife Cathy.

During my cancer seven and a half years ago, I was off for eight months. She was staggering. I was in the hospital for 14 days, she was to come in the



morning, and we'd read the daily office of the Episcopal Church. Why do we do that? It's structured, we like it. So come 8:00 in the morning, we'd pray the daily office, she'd chant the canticles...nurses, doctors coming and going in there, she's singing it to them. At the end of the day, she would sing, pray, even in prayer, and these wonderful blessings at the end of the day. I came to see that my rhythm in hospital was morning and evening prayer, and her strength and her love and her support have been... Nothing in my life and career would have happened without her.

Professionally and academically, James and Tom Torrance have been tremendously important to me. Their theology and more than just their published works, them personally, have been a great influence on me and have undoubtedly been the primary influences in shaping my own thinking and my own work. I'm so grateful, so grateful for the two of them.

I must mention my now-retired colleague at Pittsburgh Seminary, Charles Partee...a magnificent Calvin scholar, but for nearly 30 years we've been colleagues and friends, and he has been an amazing encourager, scolds sometimes when he told me I could do better than I, at times, believed that I could do, but I would honor him by saying that I love Charles Partee, he was a wonderful Calvin scholar and dear friend. Although he is retired now, I will be teaching a course in the fall with him on the theology of H.R. Mackintosh, the wonderful Scottish theologian who taught Tom Torrance. There are many others, of course, along the way, but these would have been the principal mentors.

**JMF:** You mentioned a story about the last time you saw Tom Torrance. Do you mind sharing that?

**AP:** It's a lovely story and it's dear to me. I was in Edinburgh, this was six months before my cancer, and wasn't feeling well. I knew something was up but was a little un-brave, shall we say, cowardly, about dealing with it. I called Tom and said I was in town, and he said come round to his house the next morning. So I went round at 10:00, rang the doorbell, his wife answered the door and said, "Andrew, Tom is upstairs in his study waiting to see you." I walked up the stairs and was just about to knock on the door, and he must have heard me coming, and he opened the door and greeted me with the words, "Andrew, how lovely to see you again. I pray for you every day." I walked through the door and entered his study, an extraordinary study, and he said, "Sit down in that armchair. Karl Barth sat in that chair." I thought, "Wow, sitting in the chair Karl Barth sat on." We chatted for a while and after midday we went out for lunch and I remember it was a chicken sandwich. Tom got up to pay for lunch at the end of the sandwich in the bar and dropped a huge wad of pound notes, and there was the great Tom Torrance, the most important English-speaking theologian of the second half of the 20th century on his knees in a bar picking up pound notes.

Then we went back to his study for a while and chatted furthermore. About 3:00 in the afternoon I said I had to go, and he said, “Well, what of my books don’t you have?” and I mentioned there was one that I didn’t have. He pulled it off the shelf and signed it, and then he said, “Before you go I need to pray for you.” His study was lined with stacks like in the library, not books against the wall, but stacks coming out at right angles from the wall, and round the back was a little prayer desk, way back in the corner. He took me by the arm, brought me down there, and had me kneel at the prayer desk, and laid hands on me, and prayed for me.

I felt like Elijah — that the work that he had done was being carried on — that I was charged with the theological task, part of a theological heritage that goes back through Irenaeus, through Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, through Luther and Calvin, through John McLeod Campbell, William Miller, H.R. Mackintosh, Tom Torrance...this is my heritage. These are my teachers, and my commitment has been I will not just read what Tom Torrance says about these people, but I realized a while back I had to make them my teachers too, and to go back and to read these primary texts again as being transformational for my teaching.

And now I discover my students love these people! They get so excited by Gregory of Nazianzus and Macrina, and Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea, and Irenaeus, and on it goes. “Why weren’t we taught this?” I teach Doctor of Ministry students, old guys, “Why did nobody teach us this stuff?” They come alive in the great theological heritage of the church.

**JMF:** You do a lot of teaching about pastoral work and your wife is a pastor. How does that work in the family dynamics?

**AP:** Graciously. It’s complex...there are boundary issues. You can only do so much theology in pastoral work without going kind of nuts sometimes, you know? There are times when we’ve got to watch World Cup Soccer or go out to dinner as a couple going out to dinner after 35 years of marriage and we just want to talk about our three children and not what she’s preaching on Sunday or what book I’m writing. We are a normal couple that does normal things and enjoys doing the things that a couple of 35 years marriage enjoy — companionship and affection and gentleness.

But we also talk theology. We read books in common. I should say this quietly...I’m not sure if she reads my books anymore. Sometimes I put this to her and say, “Have you read what I said?” “Oh,” she said, “I don’t so much read them, I live them when you’re writing them,” so maybe that’s the case.

I am a pastoral associate in her congregation. It’s a small urban congregation in Pittsburgh. So she’s my boss. That functionally means that when she’s not in the pulpit for one reason or another, I get to preach without being paid. The congregation really loves it when we’re in the pulpit together...seems to (I don’t know) indicate something...that we are

together pulling in the same direction. She's a Calvin scholar by trade more than I am, and she's a good theologian. Sometimes it can get intense. Can I tell you one time when it got intense?

**JMF:** Sure.

**AP:** It's a curious story. I am a convert to the need to recover the doctrine of the ascension. I'm big on the ascension because the ascension means that Jesus is in the present tense, not in the past tense. Without the ascension, he's not present in power. So I'm a big advocate for the recovery of the ascension — it ripples through a lot of my recent books. This past spring I finally asked Cathy, "Are you going to have a special service on Ascension Day Thursday?" "No, we're going to do ascension on the Sunday before." "Well, you can't do ascension on the Sunday before. You need to do it Ascension Day! We need to have ascension day parties and give ascension day presents as we have Christmas parties and Christmas presents and special services at Christmas, and celebrate communion on ascension day, because as the Lord descended incarnation day, so the Lord ascended ascension day. This is counterbalanced, equally important."

She said, "I can tell you're a seminary professor and don't have to deal with real people with busy lives. I wouldn't get away with having an Ascension Day party." "Oh, you've got to have an Ascension Day party!" We got kind of testy at each other. Maybe next year she'll have an Ascension Day service, I don't know. But when we push the ascension off to the edges of our pastoral and liturgical consciousness, something really gets lost. That is, Jesus not just as a past Lord, but as a present Lord, so that we speak of him in the present tense.

Now and then we'll get into a... she'll say, "What did you think of that sermon?" and I only comment on the good ones. They're mostly good. But now and then I won't make a comment. She'll say, "Why didn't you like it?" I'll say, "You used 'ought' too many times" or, "You talked about the gospel as an offer. It's more than offer — it's here, it's yours!" She said, "But I was..." So sometimes we can get into little tussles.

**JMF:** God does not deal with everyone in the same way.

**AP:** Right, we're free.

**JMF:** Why is that important to know?

**AP:** Because we are not generic. We are not particular instances of the genus human kind. There's you and me. We are specific, particular, actual, real human beings with real autobiographies and histories, and we are complex people. We are people, and people's lives are different. Our histories are complex. There are things we share in common, and much that's different. I speak of God with a Scottish accent (I hope I still do), and my sense of things is actually European...31 years I lived my life in Edinburgh in Scotland. I'm not American, I'm different...so, different heritages and different family dynamics.

It seems to me that one person needs (thinking biblically here) a demon cast out. Another needs to be told, “You’re forgiven.” Another needs to be said, “Get off your pallet and walk.” Another needs to be told, “Sell what you have and give it to the poor.” Another needs to be told, “Climb down from the tree because I’m going to come and eat dinner at your house today.” The knack, the trick, the discernment in pastoral work is to know which aspect of the Lord’s work is the word of gospel grace for a particular person on a particular day. A parishioner with whom one might speak is not a generic person for whom is a cookie-cutter response, but that it’s personal and particular, it’s situationally connected. I’m not arguing for situational ethics, that’s all relative. What I am arguing is that it’s particular and personal.

I learned this lesson when I wrote my book *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* and I read the great classical texts of the church. At the end of Gregory the Great’s *Book of Pastoral Rule*, he has, I think it is 72 case studies, each a paragraph. Pastoral care of a tall person may be different from pastoral care of smaller person. Pastoral care of a man may be different from pastoral care of a woman. Pastoral care of a poor man may be different from pastoral care of a...just instances, all kind of instances about pastoral work...the gospel is brought to you in your context specifically, not generically. That’s both the challenge but what makes pastoral work interesting, because you never know what you’re going to confront with the myriad of interruptions that makes the pastor’s day, because pastoral work is about being interrupted.

As I’ve often said, you know the Lord, you know your people, and you must know your people. We cannot sit in an office all day. We cannot just run the shop all day. My friend Judy Peterson is great in this. We’re not shopkeepers. You’ve got to know your people. You’ve got to know them in their workplaces, in their family places, in their play places, and the grocery store. You know your people and you make these connections. Absolutely critical. The good pastor, the faithful pastor is the person with a heart for that kind of dual connectedness.

**JMF:** As we come to a close here, let me ask, if there was one thing that you want people to know about God, what would that be?

**AP:** You belong to him because he loves you, because in Jesus Christ he has elected you to be his son, his daughter, and that nothing in this world, not even your foolishness and your silliness, can separate you from what God has chosen for you. You belong to God, and you are unilaterally and unconditionally loved. Now therefore, live in terms of that freedom. Live in terms of that good news. Honor what it means that you are loved and will remain loved because...I’m going to put it very specifically...in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus knows you by name. You by name.

### 38. LET THE LORD BE THE LORD

**Michael Morrison:** I wanted to talk to you today a little bit about one of your recent books, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*. Now, that's an intriguing title. Why should I want to crucify my ministry?

**AP:** Because it means putting to death our messianic pretensions — our pretensions that lead us to think that we are the messiah, that we can raise the dead, forgive the sins, fix the divorce, un-diagnose the cancer, do all these things that really is the Lord's job to do. The book is about letting the Lord be the Lord, and we are not the Lord. As I thought this through, I thought sometimes we are so fixed on my ministry, my church, that we forget it's not my ministry, it's not my church. It's the Lord's church. He is the one who is messianic, who will raise the dead and forgive the sins and eschatologically at the end of times will dry every tear and everything will be made whole in him.

The book is about what it means to have our ministries displaced, so that we are not in the center of things, but he is in the center of things, and then through our union with him, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, joined to him...kind of a John 15:1-11 image, that we are the branches, he is the vine, and we are joined into the vine, the work of the Spirit, abiding in him. Through sharing in his ministry, we get in on *his* ministries — not he who gets in on *our* ministry, we get in on his, because it is his ministry that is the healing and saving, redeeming ministry, not ours.

I play with the image. It's just a metaphor, but it's an image in that sometimes we become so wedded to our own ministry that God needs to get us out of the way and gives us a great shove to get us out of the way. That shove might have to be strong enough that it feels like a death, because I'm no longer on the throne of the universe, and I want to be on the throne of the universe!

**MM:** It hurts my pride.

**AP:** It hurts my pride, my ego, my self-esteem. It's really a book about the lordship of Jesus Christ, thought through at the point of the nature of ministry — his ministries. What is his ministry, and how do I get in on his ministry?

**MM:** That's a great question. I was just going to ask you that. How do I see what his ministry *is*? How do I join?

**AP:** Who is he? I think the great theological question is essentially a *who* question, not how did you do that, or what did you do, or can I do what you did? The essential question is, "Who are you, Lord?" — Saul's question on the Damascus Road, "Who are you, Lord?" When we ask that *who* question, we discover that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that because he had a ministry in the past, in history, and we have the gospel attestation of that, we have the records of the early church, we have some fairly strong idea about what he was, what he was up to, the kind of things he did, what he stood for.

And he's raised. The interesting thing about him being raised...let me put it in a shock way, because sometimes as a teacher you like to shock, say shocking things, keeps students awake. The New Testament isn't interested in *the resurrection*. The New Testament is interested in *the resurrected Jesus*. The issue is not the metaphysics of resurrection — "How did you do that?" The interesting thing is, "Who are you, Lord, now that you are raised and ascended?"

If Jesus, as we confess, is indeed raised — and not just raised, ascended, so not just locked into the past but now ascended and so Lord of all time and space, Lord now of the present tense and not just of the past tense, it becomes a question then of, "What are you up to?"

With the resurrection of Jesus, we also have the resurrection of his ministry. His ministry is not just a past ministry, because if it remains a past ministry, Jesus just becomes a dead moral influence — you ought to do this, you ought to do the next thing and so on...and I'm not messianic, and so that becomes a recipe for guilt and burnout, for depression. The mental health professionals tell us that the highest mental health insurance cost for any professional group in the United States are professional clergy.

Part of the issue, I think, is that we're trying to be Messiah. We're trying to do what is not within our constitution or capacity to do. But Jesus does it. And so the existential question is, when I walk into a hospital room, a cancer ward, what am I going to do there? I can't un-diagnose the cancer. I can't raise the dead. But I am going to trust that Jesus is going to show up, if not in merely historical terms, then certainly at the end of time terms, he will have the complete victory. My job as a pastor is to bear witness to what he is doing.

**MM:** In some ways, it's that we admit our incompetence. And yet we go

to a seminary to become more competent, don't we?

**AP:** There's nothing wrong with good skills for ministry. Put it on this level — we're dealing with people. You've got to know how people tick. You've got to know things...family systems and some of the sociology and when you bump into various forms of mental dysfunction, you've got to be able to recognize that and not get hooked into it, and to be able to refer your parishioners to appropriate professional contacts.

But our primary job is not to be psychological fixers. Our primary job, put in conventional terms, is to declare the gospel that Jesus lives, that Jesus died for their sins, in Jesus Christ they are forgiven, and to help them in the process of going into that reality so that they may grow up into Christ into him in every way who is the head, and that they may live lives of holiness, of sanctification. We need to recover our core job description of ministers of word and sacrament — that is to bear witness to Jesus and to help our people grow up every way into him who is the Lord. And to have the people skills, but these don't define our job. The theology of our life in Christ defines our job.

**MM:** So the role of a pastor and the members themselves, too, is to stop looking to ourselves and look to joining Jesus.

**AP:** Yes, and by the Holy Spirit we are bonded to Christ. In my own tradition John Calvin is our theological father, and at the beginning of Book 3 of his *Institutes*, very famous theological four-volume work, he says that by the Holy Spirit we are bonded into Jesus Christ — bonded, as it were, cosmically glued into Jesus Christ! It's almost like we're covered head to toe, inside and out, spirit and body, by super glue. And we're bonded to Jesus Christ. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, so that our being, our identity is in Christ. That's Paul's teaching, who is a Christian in Christ.

**MM:** Right. And in your book you use the phrase union...

**AP:** Union with Christ.

**MM:** Is that what people are getting at with the phrase “relationship with Christ”? Or is that somewhat different?

**AP:** It's on the way. The problem with the word “relationship with Jesus” is you can think of yourself, “Here am I, independent, self-actualizing person, here is Jesus, and we're going to come to some sort of neutral little arrangement here.” It's more radical than that. Because in union with Christ, his life becomes my life, his being becomes my being, so that even I have the mind of Christ. I am in Christ. He is the second Adam, and so in Christ is the second Adam. My whole humanity is remade, reconstituted. I'm a new person, a new creation. It's not just that the old Andrew Purves is having a nice little relationship with this guy called Jesus, it's that Andrew Purves is turned inside out, converted in a fuller sense of my being so that I'm a new person.

The old Catholic monastic habit, when you become a monk or a nun,

you get a new name. I kind of like that. When you're in Christ, you're a new person. Have a new name to identify...I'm a new person! The old baptismal theology...in baptism the old Adam died and in Christ, through the waters of baptism, I'm bonded to Jesus Christ in a new person.

Union with Christ to me carries something more of that profound personal transformation. The question is, will I live it? The question is, do I believe it? Martin Luther says somewhere that "I thought that the old Adam drowned in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim." Until we rise again at the end of the age with Jesus, there's a kind of a "yes, but"... also, "but not yet" kind of a tension in the Christian life, that here we have the power and blessing of the Spirit, but yet this mortal body will die, yet to be raised. All things are not complete. In this life, and in ministry, it's strange to say the old Adam still creeps around, thinking that I can save my congregation, I can renew my congregation, I can be the savior of my people.

**MM:** That's what they pay me for!

**AP:** That's right, but you're not a messiah. So *The Crucifixion of Ministry* is about putting to death our messianic pretensions. Crucifixion is a good word. It's a saving word, it's a redeeming word, it's a death word, and it's a deadly death word. I see the crucifixion of ministry as God saying, "I'm not done with you yet. I am reclaiming your ministry even in mid-career, and bonded to Jesus Christ, we will do great things with you."

**MM:** What does the congregation do, though, when their minister that they knew is crucified and stops doing the approach that the ministry used to have?

**AP:** Good question. I don't have a slick packaged answer for you, other than to say this. I think we ought to take a far bigger responsibility for teaching the people. Teach the people about who Jesus is and what the church is in him, and what the job of the pastor is in the church.

Let me give you an example. I often hear pastors tell me, "I serve the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church." I will say to the pastor, no, you don't serve the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church. You serve Jesus Christ as Lord, and Jesus serves the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church, because he's their Lord. You serve the Lord. When that focus is in place, it redirects ministry, because then the attention is "what is the Lord doing...what has the Lord called me to do? What about his ministry am I called to bear witness to for the sake of the people?" — because what they need is him. They don't need me as the pastor.

**MM:** Then the pastor is just a facilitator in some ways. Is that what you're saying?

**AP:** No...you're a New Testament scholar. The word for martyr, *martyres*, bearing witness, I think our primary task is to bear witness. Here's the issue. Do you think Jesus is up to anything, or is he just back there as a



dead moral influence? That's the critical question.

**MM:** Or is he unemployed up in the sky?

**AP:** Or unemployed up in the sky, that's right. Is he, in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, an actor in history? The New Testament is saying yes, I believe the church at its best is saying yes, and so I think the issue is fundamentally Christian — do we believe Jesus lives? And if he's living, he's up to something. The issue is, how do we as a congregation, how do I as your pastor help us as a congregation get in on this?

**MM:** And the pastor is to be a witness for that.

**AP:** Be a witness to what Jesus is doing. That's right.

**MM:** And the other members of the congregation...

**AP:** Get in on it.

**MM:** They all have a ministry.

**AP:** Two things will happen. When we are in Christ, bonded to Jesus Christ, two things will inevitably happen. You'll become a person, you'll become a congregation that worships in Christ. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, all of our prayers and our worship go to the Father and the Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord. But also bonded to him, we share in his continuing mission from the Father. So we're thrust out into the world. We become dialectically a people of worship and a people of ministry and mission — both/ and. The trouble is, we have a lot of ministry and mission stuff going without a lot of worship stuff going. Sometimes we forget to see that in Christ we share in his communion with the Father and in his ministry from the Father.

**MM:** As people join in the ministry of Jesus, pastors or members, how do they know what he's up to? They know who he is. What difference is it going to make on the street in the way they actually interact with one another or with the world?

**AP:** As I said earlier, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We have the Bible. But we're students of the Bible not just to know what the Bible said. We're students of the Bible to know what God is up to. That's one radical statement. It's one thing to know Bible verses, it's something else to be...as it were, to go through the Scriptures and apprehend and be apprehended by the living God.

**MM:** So we need to be reading not just the words but read *through* them...

**AP:** Read through the words to a reality that can't be contained within the words, but that the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, use these words in a unique and authoritative way — that we go through them to a reality... These are just words on a page. I don't worship words on a page, I worship the living God. But through this, we know the Lord, and then we have the doctrines of the church. We have the great

confessions of the church. So we have structures, lenses as it were, like my glasses, by which we can interpret the Scriptures in way that the church has said, “This is faithful.”

There is some degree of caution I want to say — we also have the Lord in our lives. It’s not just left brain or cognitive, but everybody in your congregation has been met by the Lord — small ways, big ways, quiet ways, loud ways, he still meets us on the Damascus Road. He still meets us in the hospital room. He still meets us wherever we are, because he’s a living Lord. Helping the people then not just to know the Scripture, not just to know the traditions, the great traditions of the church, but how does the Lord work in your life? Where has the Lord met you in your life? And get people telling these stories.

**MM:** Aren’t people often oblivious? Unaware of his presence, of what he’s doing? And the pastor’s role is to help them see a different perspective on what’s already happening?

**AP:** Sure, and maybe stop talking and being a little quiet and learning to name and own your story, your story with the Lord. How has the Lord dealt with you? How did the Lord deal with you when you met your spouse and you fell in love? How did the Lord deal with you when your first child was born? How did the Lord deal with you when your first parent died? Etcetera, etcetera.

**MM:** Aren’t people a little reluctant?

**AP:** Yes.

**MM:** Why is that? Why would people be so reluctant to think that the Lord is working with them?

**AP:** It’s very personal, it makes you very vulnerable when you speak this stuff out loud. So the pastor, with appropriate respect for boundaries (because you don’t say all things), you begin to model, you begin to show by your life an openness, a vulnerability, a sensitivity to, an awareness that God is a God who gets involved in the lives of people, even my life. I would trust, I really would trust that slowly a congregation would begin to be aware, yeah, this is a living Lord — not just giving assent to propositions, but to a living Lord who is involved in my life.

**MM:** I was thinking some people might prefer that God stayed at a distance and stayed out of their lives — that he’s good for fire insurance, but they don’t want him crucifying their life.

**AP:** Yeah...Augustine famously said in his confessions, “Make me chaste Lord, but not yet,” “Make me holy, Lord, but not yet, there’s still a few things I want to mess with here.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German martyr, Lutheran theologian killed at the end of World War II in a concentration camp, wonderful theologian, Bonhoeffer in one of his books says, “When we are encountered by the living Word, one of two things must happen. Either the Word must kill us, with us being born again, or we

must kill the Word.” This Word is not tame. This Word, who confronts us with an unconditional claim on our life...

**MM:** It meddles...

**AP:** It meddles.... And that may mean there are some things in my life I have to put to death. Paul is full of this stuff — put away, put away, be done with...lists all over the place in the second half of all of these letters...put away all of that, but on the other hand, this is how you are to live. Yes, there is a moral inventory involved.

While we are not perfect, and as a Calvinist, I am pretty skeptical that I will be perfect this side of eternity, nonetheless, I’m in process. There are issues I struggle with and try to deal seriously with, and do so under grace and not under law, do so because I am loved and I want to respond with gratitude, not because I am fearful and want to respond with fear and terror of a God who is out to get me. I believe, rather, I am dealing with a God who has unilaterally and unconditionally said, “I know your name and I love you, and my name is Jesus.”

**MM:** In the end he can be trusted.

**AP:** Yes, he can be trusted.

**MM:** What happens when a congregation...the pastor is transformed, has a revised ministry, and the congregation catches some of this vision? How would the congregational life be transformed by a renewed understanding of who Jesus is?

**AP:** That’s absolutely contextual, because each local community has its own issues and its own life and ministries in response. So I don’t want to slap on a grid and say this is always what will happen. But there are some things surely will happen...the preaching will not be dull, the worship will not be dull, and the people will be caught up in the ministry of Jesus in some regard. As grandparents, as parents, as schoolteachers, plumbers, guys that fix roofs, guys that dig holes in the road, as doctors, as lawyers, as businesspeople, whatever they do...

Let me put it this way: the criterion of holiness, it seems to me, is not “how do we live for the Lord on Sunday morning” but “because we live for the Lord on Sunday morning (and that’s not a throwaway, that’s real), how then am I going to live for the Lord on Monday morning?” The criterion of holiness is what I do the rest of the week. That reality is taken into business, the marketplace, where consciously and intentionally I am saying the bottom line is my faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Where is he in this bank? Where is he in this business?

I’m not a great lover of dentistry, but it’s a necessary reality. My dentist gets the list every morning of the patients, and before a patient has come through the door, he prays for every patient. That’s a Christian dentist — that even drilling teeth and scraping plaque is done for the glory of the Lord. Paul says do all things in Christ — not just Sunday morning or pious

things — so drive your car in Christ, make love and have babies in Christ, grade papers, teach a class in Christ, pay your taxes in Christ. What does it mean to live in Christ in all things, so that we concretize this reality that has personally claimed us, and whose name is Jesus and who is at work doing what he is always doing — bringing in the reign of God.

**MM:** This is going to transform people's understanding of who they are.

**AP:** Surely.

**MM:** But for some people this is a little stretch.

**AP:** Yeah. I think we've made it too tame, on the whole. We're too much of "Jesus at home in our culture." I'm not advocating an angry Jesus, but even in Palestine 2000 years ago Jesus wasn't always at home in his culture — challenging, provoking, particularly the religious...

**MM:** And his culture rejected him.

**AP:** That's right. What does it mean to have a Jesus who might be a provocateur in our culture... I'm a Scot, I'm not an American. Just to say something that's deliberately provocative, what would it mean for our thinking and acting if we were to say that I trust that Jesus is Lord, what therefore does that mean for defense policy? What does that mean for economic policy? If he's Lord of all, not just of a little religious parcel of my life, but Lord of all — and I'm a Christian and I'm a defense contractor — nothing wrong with being a defense contractor — what does that mean for the ethics of my defense contracting? Or I'm in the military — what does that mean for my ethics as a soldier?

I think we are called into these difficult, difficult places of life to bear witness that Jesus is Lord and to expect...how do the Acts of the Apostles put it? These people are turning the world upside down. When you turn something upside down, that's called a revolution. The revolution of the reign of God. A new heaven and a new earth. I kind of get excited about that. That's worth getting up for in the morning. That's going to get me into a pulpit or into a lecture room with some excitement! The Lord is doing something, let's get on and pray the power of the Spirit to bond us to what he's doing and let's get on with the work.

**MM:** You say it's upside down, but in a way, the world we have now is what's out of kilt.

**AP:** That's right. It's not Jesus who is upside down, it's *we* who are upside down.

**MM:** But it's hard...I've heard the story of the glasses that will change a person's vision so they actually see upside down... they'll adjust to it. But then when they take them off, they have to go through the adjustment process again.

**AP:** Is this not Romans 12:2, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind"? Our minds have to be rewired. We have to learn how to think out

of a center in Jesus Christ, not out of a center in ourselves, not out of a center in our culture, not out of a center in given values, but out of a center in Jesus Christ.

Because we live in a culture, I can never be in Christ apart from being a Scot. There's always a tension here between Christ and culture. It's not one or the other, it's Christ in culture, Christ transforming culture, not Christ apart from culture. I'm not going off to some desert to play monk; I'm in a culture. I speak of God in Scottish accent. But how can I do that more faithfully and more converted-ly and more consciously and more critically, rather than less so. That seems to me the challenge. Only at the end of the age when I am raised with Jesus, will I then see face-to-face. But for now I am in an inevitable tension between Jesus is Lord, and I live in a culture. That's part of the missiological frame within which we go in the world.

**MM:** Jesus himself was in a culture, and he spoke with Galilean accent.

**AP:** Right.

**MM:** Romans 12 tells us, "Don't be conformed to the world," yet in some ways there are aspects of the world, that we need to discern the difference.

**AP:** That's right. I have to pay taxes, I have to drive under the speed limit. Laws and rules are given, mostly, for our good and for the well-being of the commonwealth. There need to be politicians. Praise God sometimes when there are Christian politicians. I don't think any aspect of the world's life is intrinsically evil. Every aspect of the life of the world, Jesus is present there. In hidden ways, perhaps, and that's our job, to make that visible. But there is no part of the world's life over which Jesus is not Lord.

**MM:** There's a common saying of "what would Jesus do," but it seems you would want to change that to say, "what is Jesus doing now in my life?"

**AP:** What is Jesus doing now? That's right. And in the life of my community. It's not just what would Jesus do, that's appealing to a past moral influence. It's naïve. We think our children will look down at their bracelet... I was a 16-year-old male once, and I've seen some mischief I can get up to, and I look down at my bracelet and think, "WWJD, oh, I'm going to stand up and fly right." That's naïve.

I think the power question is to ask, now what would Jesus do? It's not a bad question, I just don't think it's the most powerful question, but what is Jesus doing now? That's a living Lord.

## 39. RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH MINISTRY

**J. Michael Feazell:** Our guest today is Dr. Andrew Root. Thanks for joining us today.

**AR:** It's a pleasure to be here.

**JMF:** We have a lot to talk about. Youth ministry is a dynamic area, and you have some challenging things to say that are significant for facing what the church is up against in today's world. I wanted to read from page 15 of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, your first book: "Ministry, then, is not about 'using' relationships to get individuals to accept a 'third thing,' whether that be conservative politics, moral behaviors, or even the gospel message. Rather, ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives." What are you driving at here?

**AR:** The whole book, as you mentioned, revolves around that point. That point was born in my own experience. It was right around this area, in a church here in southern California that I was invited to be part of a youth



ministry. It was at a large Presbyterian church, kind of a classic youth ministry.

One Wednesday night, for no particular reason, some kids from the neighborhood that surrounded the church showed up on the church steps. The church saw this as serendipitous and a wonderful opportunity. So not knowing what to do or how to do ministry with these young people, they decided to throw money at the problem, which probably happens too often in churches, and I was the benefactor of that. It became my job.

I was hired to bridge these two worlds, between the kind of classic youth ministry and the church kids, and then the kids in the neighborhood. I was invited to be part of this and to take this job because I had worked for Young Life and supposedly knew what I was doing when it came to building relationships with young people. It took myself and the team of people that I worked with about two or three weeks to realize we had no idea what we were doing.

We had been taught, and we had read all sorts of youth ministry literature, and we had done a lot of youth ministry, and we were some of the best, smartest, good-looking youth workers that we knew about. It took us, again, like two weeks to realize we had no clue what we were doing.

We had been taught that all you had to do was try to be friends with these kids and that kids wanted relationships with adults, and that through your relationship with a young person, you could lead them into the church or to accept Jesus or to avoid immoral behavior, or that there would be a way that you could use your relationship to get young people somewhere positive, somewhere good.

The kids we were working with that showed up on the church steps this night were not so easy to influence. They had this incredibly genius way (that was slightly diabolical) of keeping adults at a distance. We would get close to them, and they had a way of either questioning our sexuality or questioning our motives or assuming that we would make a scene, that we were going to do something to them.

It became difficult to figure out “how do you do ministry?” We had been told that all you had to do was build a relationship with kids and they would come, and these kids were pushing us away. I would go and visit these kids at their public school campus, and kids that I had known for months and they had spent time at our church, I would come up to them and they would say, “Get the F away from me,” and swear in our face. This was not the kind of youth ministry I was taught was supposed to happen. These kids were supposed to *want* to be with me.

So I started to question, “How do you actually go about doing this?” You take a kid out for a Coke and a burger and you drive them home into their neighborhood and the fog has condensed on your window and right before you drop them off, they write rival gang signs on it so when you turn

around and drive back through their neighborhood, your life is put in danger. How are you supposed to do ministry with a group of kids like this? How are you supposed to do it when they seem to refuse your ministry, but nevertheless continue to ask for it by showing up every week? And showing up at 4:00 for something that starts at 7:00, and stay till 11:30 or 12:00.

It was in the middle of a fight with my wife that I realized that I had problems. I realized I had problems in more ways than one, but particularly I had problems in my conception of ministry. We were newly married, and my wife was going through a crisis in her family of origin. That was difficult for her as she tried to kind of figure out what was going on and who she was, in the midst of this family chaos.

We had spent a lot of nights just talking about issues. She would talk about how hard this was as her family was in the midst of transition. I always had this great way of reframing her problem for her. She would say things like, "This is really hard." I would say, "Don't think about it like that. What if we think about it like this?" Or she would say, "I hate when this happens and I feel that it just grieves me that this is all changed..." I would say, "There are futures before us. We don't have to worry about this. Let's just move on, let's think about something better than this."

Finally, after me reframing all of her issues, she finally stopped me and said, "Would you just seriously, just stop." She said these words. In her frustration she said, "Don't you know that relationships are not about fixing things? Would you stop trying to fix me and just be with me? And if you can't be with me, nothing will get better anyhow. So stop trying to fix my problems and just *be* with me." I realized when she said that, not only did I have a lot to learn about being a young husband, but I also realized that that's exactly what I was doing in my ministry.

These kids who lacked the middle-class decorum that the kids had when I worked in suburban Saint Paul, Minnesota, they lacked that, so they could simply say, "get away from me." They knew that I had an agenda for the relationship. Maybe it was a good agenda, maybe it was good for them, but my ministry wasn't essentially about *them*. It was about where I could take them. Maybe some of the things were really good. Keeping them in church, helping them to understand who Jesus Christ is, those are all great things, but they had the sense that it was happening outside of our actual relationship.

So you mentioned "the third thing." That's something that I've taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*, he has this beautiful phrase where he says, "When we encounter the neighbor, God is there." He says, "There's not a third thing. There's no third thing. There's just me and you or I and thou, and Jesus Christ becomes present *there*, not outside of that."

Often in youth ministry the objective has been to use our relationship



with young people to get to some third thing. So what I try to do in the book is just re-imagine what it would be to think about ministry (and it's really all ministry, and not just youth ministry), to think about ministry in this idea that there's no third thing. That somewhere in the midst of really encountering another person, God becomes concretely present with them then.

**JMF:** Isn't that true in any relationship? As a church, isn't that how we tend to think about almost all of our relationships outside of the church? That it's a means to an end. We get to know people, we draw them into the sphere of the church in some way, through some project or whatever, but we really have a hidden agenda.

We have an ulterior motive. A good motive, perhaps, of presenting the gospel to them, but nonetheless, it's an ulterior motive. The friendship is for that sake. Almost like an insurance-salesman approach or something, rather than friendship, relationship being an end in itself. Is there something to be said for that in terms of who Christ is in us and in them?

**AR:** I think that is true. When I go around the world and the country talking about this, you'll have people say, "We always have agendas." You can't strip yourself from an agenda. That's true. We are kind of socially located, and we have our own hermeneutical location that we take into relationships. But there is a difference, and I think you're hitting on it.

This reminds me of what American sociologist Peter Berger talks about. Peter Berger talks about that somewhere after industrialization and into modernization, we as people started to take what he calls "technical rationality" into the way we formulated and constructed our day-to-day relationships. We spent so much time working in institutions that tend to make decisions on people through their bureaucracy and in very technical forms.

For instance, I grew up in a community that a lot of employees from 3M lived in. (3M, the people who make your post-it notes and your tape.) One year, 3M decided that they could save a lot of money if they laid people off who were over 55 and hired people at entry level, that they would lose very little productivity but gain a lot of money. So a lot of people in the little suburb that I grew up in, they were laid off during this period. A lot of my friends' parents were. 3M is making that decision, they don't necessarily care about the people, but they make that decision technically. In a realm of technical rationality, it makes sense for them, for their ultimate goal, which is the bottom line of making money, to lay people off who are over 55.

Berger's point is that we live in those realities for so long that they start to filter into how we organize the rest of our relationships. We start to say things like, "Honey, I still really do love you, but for the bottom line of my happiness, this marriage really isn't working out." Or we look at our friendships and say, "I really do care about this person, we share this

history, but I just can't do this relationship anymore because it's not letting me become this self-fulfilled person."

I think that's filtered into the church as well, that we tend to make decisions about ministry in the technical realm. We tend to use technical rationality to make decisions about how we go about doing ministry, how we think about the ministry of God. I think that there's a different logic, than this technical rationality that we often fall into when we think about ministry.

**JMF:** That's exactly the opposite of what real Christian life, Christian ministry is all about, isn't it?

**AR:** I think so. The core theological element that I'm working from in the book is this Trinitarian element that God the Father and Jesus the Son are in eternal relationship with each other. That relationship isn't built around this kind of technical rationality, but it's built in a whole desire to be with and for each other.

If you look at Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics II*, he will talk about the Spirit as the very essence, the very reality of the Father and the Son's relationship. Too often in the church, we use our relationships as the means to another end, as opposed to seeing our relationships as a way of living into this inner reality of a relationship that's going on between God the Father and God the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

That's the element that I'm trying to work out in that sense of "What if our relationships in ministry (in a broken metaphor) reflect this eternal relationship that's going on between the Father and the Son?"

**JMF:** You've use the term "real relational, relational youth ministry," and is that what you're...

**AR:** There was an article that was written probably five or six years ago, that was trying to talk about a post-relational youth ministry. It was a fair article that was trying to show some of the pitfalls of relational ministry, but I tried to reframe that and make the argument that we hadn't really talked about a truly relational "relational youth ministry," that our relationships in "relational ministry" had tended to be means to another end. They had been for influence, to influence kids in some direction, and they have yet to reflect (maybe in this broken way, but in a real way) the inner life of God that we're called into, this eternal relationship that goes on between the Father and the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

**JMF:** There are a couple of ways I want to go right now. One is to take a different gear and talk about your assessment of the TV show *Lost*, but let's save that for the moment and get back to these young people you were working with. You saw that you had to do things differently, so what started to happen then?

**AR:** We tried to live this out, but as you mentioned, it's hard in a congregation, and you run into all these conflicts. It was very interesting to

watch this church wrestle with this issue. To the church's credit, they had raised money, they had seen this opportunity to do ministry with these young people from their neighborhood, they had hired me, and we worked hard at it. They started this ministry in full blessing of the church, that we want to reach out to these kids. We really want to build relationships with them.

But what happened is: it started to become costly, and it became costly in ways that a lot of churches experience, but in very profound ways when you're experiencing them. Like your building being tagged, like mothers who are waiting to pick up their daughters from church are noticing kids from the neighborhood doing things behind the church building that would make anyone uncomfortable, when drugs are being sold before Wednesday night program.

Quickly the church's mantra changed from "We want to do ministry to these kids" to "These kids need to act better. They don't deserve to be here until they can show that they can act better." We worked at that for a while, but it became very difficult, and I lacked a lot of power to bring any change in the midst of that system.

My wife and I had an opportunity to travel, and when we came back, I had a school year before I was going to start my doctoral work, so I took a job at a non-profit organization very close to here doing gang prevention counseling. It was my job to go into four public schools a week (this was before the California economy had imploded and there was money available and they were giving grants to these non-profits to go in and do gang prevention). It was my job to go into these four schools and to meet with kids who either were in a gang, a family member was in a gang, or had just been manifesting gang-like behavior. They had been caught tagging their school, or they had threatened their teacher with a pencil, or they had done something that was at risk.

I would go into these schools, and often it was either the principal or the guidance counselor who would give me the folder to one of these kids. It would often come with something like, "Here's Jacob, and Jacob just came to us. He was in an orphanage for a while because he watched his father beat his mother with a wrench on their front lawn." Or, "Here's Sally, and Sally's dad just got out of jail and from as far as we know, he comes back every other week to do his laundry and to beat them up." These horrific stories of loss and pain. And that was just what the school counselor could tell me.

So I would meet with this student, and we'd sit in some little dusty back corner of a public school, some little book storage area where the school could find a place to put a table and two chairs. I realized quickly, as they would tell me these stories, that there was nothing I could do. The story that the school counselor or principal would tell me that was horrific in and

of itself was just the tip of the iceberg. After a while they would tell me these stories, and they were just heart-wrenching.

I knew that there was nothing I could do. There were certain actions I could take, make people aware of certain things, but I couldn't change the fact that this was the family they grew up in, that this was the situation that had happened to them. I realized quickly that all I could do was for one hour, once a week, when I would meet with them, was to share in their hell with them. So I did that. I did that from reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and reading some of the Trinitarian elements of Karl Barth, and even some of the early Jurgen Moltmann, and I decided that what I would do was for one hour once a week, I would share in their hell with them.

An interesting thing happened. I would haul in this bag of "Connect Four" and checkers and these board games, and I would set them on the table. The kids loved it, because they would get to leave class to play checkers with me or play some board game with me. But we started to share our stories together, and they would share their story with me, and I would share mine with them, and for one hour once a week we would share deeply in each other's life.

There was transformation that actually happened in them. There wasn't this radical transformation that they didn't have all these issues that had been nipping at their heels for their whole life, that didn't go away. But there was this real way that something powerful happened where we would share in each other's lives, that God was present in the midst of that. I was allowed to speak deeply into their lives.

But instead of saying things like, "You can't do that because God wouldn't like that, or because that would make you a bad boy or a bad girl," I could start speaking into their lives in a much more powerful way. I could say, "You can't do that because that will hurt you, and if that hurts you, that will hurt me, because I'm your friend, and you can't do that because I'm your friend." Or, "When I see that attitude that you have, I wonder about that, not because I want you to be better, but because I want to be in relationship with you, and that could be problematic to multiple relationships that you have."

The light bulb that went on for me is that there is something in the midst of just sharing each other's suffering and joy that there's a concrete way that God is present in the midst of that, that I've tried to theologically develop through these two books.

**JMF:** You never had any other opportunity to be with those kids or any other influence in their lives other than these one-hour meetings?

**AR:** That's correct. Maybe I would see them once in a while in the hallways, but for the most part it was that one hour once a week. I was constrained by the school, and I was constrained by the job that I worked

in, but there was something that powerfully happened when we were able to share our suffering with each other.

I tried to make that mutual. I would try...keeping a boundary...that I think is important, that hopefully we can talk about as we go on, but I also shared my own story with them. There was something powerful for them to hear my story and to participate in my story.

**JMF:** Did you have any way of knowing what kind of impact your time together was having on them?

**AR:** That's a great question, and there's two kind of rationalities that I think can operate in that. In the rationality of influence, there was no way I could know. In many ways I was a failure, because these kids went back to their same situation, and I'm sure some of them are in jail now. The kids we worked with in the congregation, we don't know what happened to many of them. A lot of them were in eighth grade and they went into ninth grade and got jumped into gangs. From the rationality of influence, it was a failure. We don't have any trophies to show for it.

But in the rationality of place-sharing, of trying to do relational ministry as being with and being for, as God is with and for us, I don't know if it was successful, but I believe it was *faithful*, in that we were faithful to their humanity. In being a gang prevention counselor, I felt like I was faithful to their humanity.

Was there radical change in their lives? I don't know. I don't know if I can see that, but I do trust that something powerful happened in that one hour a week, that they knew that they were not alone. If in the dark universe that they existed in, at least there was someone for one hour once a week who was with them. That reflects the fullness of the gospel and the fullness of a God who becomes incarnate to share our place in its full brokenness and its full darkness, to share with us so deeply that we're never alone again. Though we still often live in darkness, we're never alone.

So I don't know if it was successful, but I know that it was faithful. In youth ministry particularly, we fall into this trap of looking at success too often. It's a vocational hazard, because you have young people who are, 12, 13,14,15, and they're making these jumps in our societal structures to go to college or to decide for careers or to fall in love and get married, so there does seem to be this trajectory of progress that's going on.

But too often youth ministry has fallen into the trap that believes that our job is to make kids successful or help kids be successful, and then we judge our ministries by how many trophies we have. I don't know if that's a true reflection of God's own ministry in the world as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected in the person of Jesus Christ. We would do better to think of ourselves and think of our relationships as "How can we be faithful both to the young person before us as well as to this God who has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ?" How can we be faithful to that, as opposed to

how can we be successful?

**JMF:** All of that is compelling, because there's got to be a way to measure success in this in order for us to know whether this project is worthwhile or accomplishing anything. It's like the need to ask that question, and find an assessment tool of some kind, is so overpowering that we lose the gospel itself, because when it comes to our Christian lives, don't we do the same thing? We're looking for God to fix things. We think answered prayer means getting me out of whatever situation is a problem for me or what I perceive as a problem.

But isn't that how Christ meets us, just the sense of knowing we're not alone? Meeting us in our loneliness, in our void, in our darkness, and bringing light, because we're operating with faith (which is evidence of things not seen, according to Hebrews), we're looking for a restoration that isn't going to take place in this lifetime. It takes place only in the sense of place-sharing, Christ sharing our place, not in the sense of our circumstances necessarily changing, which can be, in itself, a source of frustration, because we're expecting or looking for something different.

Don't we look for that, because in our preaching and teaching we often build a sense of expecting that? It carries over into youth ministry in the sense you're describing so well of "We want to see kids be more moral. We want them not to make the same mistakes we made, or not to pursue things that are going to cause them trouble." The whole sense across our Christian lives of just being there, like your wife told you, as opposed to trying to make everybody be good and not make mistakes...it seems like you're talking about something that's a big iceberg that needs exploring.

**AR:** One of the things that your questioning points to that's helpful for me is maybe to boil it down. The thing that we haven't dwelled in enough is this question "Where is God? Where do we encounter God?" Which is one of the central elements of a Trinitarian theology, is that God encounters us, and God reveals God's self. As God reveals God's self in Jesus Christ, we're taken into this Trinitarian reality.

So I'll tell you this story, which I think is the trap that we often fall into in ministry. My son is four, moving toward five, and he's a great little existential philosopher and theologian, probably because I've terribly warped him. One night I was putting him to bed, it's my job to put him to bed, and it's right before I go and watch TV when I put him to bed, so I'm always trying to hustle him off to bed so I can go and relax in front of the TV.

One night I was putting him to bed and he said he was scared, and he was scared that there was a nightmare in his closet. I had told him, "You don't need to be afraid of this. There's no nightmare in your closet. Jesus is with you. You don't need to be scared, because Jesus is with you." And he said, "No, no no no no no there's a nightmare in my closet. I'm scared of

this.”

I said, “Owen, you don’t have to be scared, there’s no nightmare in your closet.” I opened the door and turned on the light, and he was satisfied that there was no nightmare in his closet, but as soon as I turned out the lights and shut the door, he says, “It’s back! The nightmare’s back in my closet.”

I said, “You can pray to Jesus and it will be okay. Jesus will be here with you and you don’t have to be afraid.” So we prayed for a little bit, and he said, “But where is Jesus?” I said, “Jesus is here. If you pray, Jesus will be here.” “But I don’t see Jesus. Where is Jesus?” I said, “He’s here with you.” “But I’m scared. There’s a nightmare in my closet, and where is Jesus?”

Now I’m starting to say, “If you pray, Jesus will be here and you don’t have to be afraid and Jesus will keep you from bad things happening.” I’m starting to doubt myself as I’m saying this. But then, in earnest desire to comprehend something, he says, “But I don’t see Jesus and I’m scared. Where is Jesus?” Then in the profundity of a four-year-old he says, “Jesus is not here. Jesus is not here.” I said some prayer and left, and I kind of satisfied him so he wasn’t crying anymore, but that is really the question: “Where is Jesus?”

Kids often live with nightmares in their closet. We all do. Often we want to say “Jesus is here, and if you pray to Jesus then the nightmare will go away.” One of the theological elements that I’m trying to develop more and more is: How do we answer this question, where is Jesus? Or, where is God? There’s something in this story of this God who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ that reflects to us the full life of God as Trinitarian. That God becomes present next to darkness, next to brokenness, next to pain.

Too often in youth ministry, we see shiny happy kids as the sign that our ministries are going well. They become the sign of authentic adolescent faith, kids for whom things are going pretty well. I don’t want to belittle those kids, but often it perpetuates this idea that to be a Christian means that you have it together. It leads us away from this question of where is God?

Where is this God of the cross found? Where is this God who cries out to his Father on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and hears nothing. Where is this God? If our models of great adolescent faith are just the shiny happy kids, then what about all those kids who know that question deep in their being? But the church never helps them articulate it.

Christian Smith has done this study, the National Study on Youth and Religion, that *Soul-Searching* came out of. This book has been quite famous about teenage religiosity and faith. One of the overwhelming findings of that book was simply that kids don’t know anything about their faith. They know very little about any of the theological elements of their faith. They can barely articulate what it means to find Jesus.

I wonder if the reason is because it doesn't matter to those kids? Those kids often are the shiny happy kids that things are going well for, and we point to them as the models of good adolescent faith, but they don't need to, as Anselm would say, really dig into "faith-seeking understanding" because things are unfolding okay for them.

**JMF:** For now.

**AR:** Exactly. Which is the real disservice we do to them, because they go to college, they go into young adulthood, and then things don't go right for them.

**JMF:** [And they become] totally disillusioned.

**AR:** They don't have a theological lens to see their reality where God is present in it. So one of the theological elements I'm trying to work out for youth ministry and ministry for the church in general is: how do we answer this question, where is God? I think there's a deeply Trinitarian element about that. But it's also this assertion that God encounters us in darkness, in brokenness, in yearning, because God is reflected to us in Jesus Christ on the cross.



## 40. REAL RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH MINISTRY

**J. Michael Fezell:** Last time we were together, we were talking about place-sharing versus influence in terms of how we relate to young people. What is the difference?

**Andrew Root:** That's the point of both books, is to try to draw that contrast. Last time I tried to argue that we've tended to see youth ministry as for *influence*, to try to influence kids toward some end. The reimagining of it is to think of it as place-sharing, which is a concept that I stole from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer wanted to make this argument that the way we really experience God is as our place-sharer, and he said in his *Ethics*, "Just as a good politician is for her people, a good teacher is for his students, and a good father is for his children, so Jesus Christ is for us. Jesus Christ shares our place."

I think we've tended to see youth ministry as trying to influence kids toward some end, as opposed to sharing their place. When we think of influence, we get the whole understanding of the Incarnation all mixed up. We tend to think the incarnation happened to influence us toward some end, as opposed to sharing our place.

The story I often tell is... every Christmas Eve we go to my grandmother's house, and as soon as dinner is done, and the coffee is brewing, and the Christmas cookies come out, we all move from the table to the couches. Often, my grandma will leave the party and she'll come back with the folded piece of newspaper. It's the story that I'm sure many have heard. It's the Paul Harvey story about the birds.

The story goes that there's this man who refuses to go to church on

Christmas Eve. He's basically done with his faith, he doesn't believe it anymore, and it's a cold, cold, bitter cold night. He's not doing it. He is going to stay home. He's going to actually enjoy his Christmas Eve. So he sees his family all off to church and he lays down on the couch to have this wonderful Christmas Eve. He kind of laughs to himself thinking how much smarter he is as he looks out his window and it's so cold.

About halfway through his night, he looks outside some window and he sees there are some birds. He gets very concerned that if he doesn't do something for these birds, they're going to die. I mean, it is a cold, bitter cold night, and they won't make it through the night if he doesn't do something. So he gets his hat, and his gloves, and his boots on, and he goes outside and he opens his barn door and tries to shoo these birds into the barn.

But he's too big, and he's too scary, and the birds don't understand him, so they jump away. He tries again to shoo them in, but they just won't go. So he gets some birdseed and tries to make a trail, but it just isn't happening. He's frustrated because he knows if he doesn't get these birds into the barn, that they're not going to make it through the night, that they're going to die. He tries one more time to shoo them in, but it just isn't working.

In pure frustration he says, "If only, if only I could become a bird, then they wouldn't be scared of me and I could lead them into the barn, and they would be safe." Just as he says that, the church bells ring, he falls on his knees, and for the first time he understands the meaning of Christmas.

Every year my grandma will fold that newspaper up, and wipe a tear from her eye, and lean back in satisfaction. I always think it, but I never say it. I always think, "Grandma, that's a great story. I can see why you love that so much, but it's not the incarnation."

I think the church has developed an understanding that the Incarnation isn't for simply getting us in the barn, but actually sharing our place. We need a God who doesn't just come close to us, to lead us into some place so we're okay, but we need a God who actually shares our hell with us, who bears the cold night with us.

So what I'm after is trying to develop a theology for youth ministry that can bear the dark night with kids. One that can enter into their lives at its most frigid points and be with and for them in the confession that Jesus Christ is with and for us, born from that eternal relationship of the Father being for the Son as the Son is for the Father. That's what I'm after when we talk about place-sharing, of trying to do ministry that's faithful to this theological assertion that God is with and for us in Jesus Christ sharing our place all the way to hell for the sake of life.

**JMF:** It's significant, it seems, as you were telling that story, when Jesus says, "I am the way" and "I am the life," that's different from saying

“follow me and I’ll take you to a new place that’s better than this.”

**AR:** That’s a key element that I’m hoping to push forward in these books, is that it’s something about persons, and Jesus calls us to his person to find life inside of his person, which is a reflection in our relationship with Jesus. As he calls us he says, “Come to me,” or “I am the life,” or “I am the vine and you are the branches.” It is a manifestation of the relationship he has with the Father, and he calls us then to live near his person.

So my argument is that when we live in relationships that are human-person-to-human-person, where we actually share in each other’s lives, that that is a reflection and a way of living into the inner reality of God’s own life and God’s own love from the Father to the Son. I think there is something about human-person-to-human-person.

Usually, we tend to think about our ministries as pastor or youth worker to kids or to other people, and we tend to find ourselves in that specialized role, “I’m the youth pastor.” I think that adolescents don’t need youth pastors in their lives. They don’t need youth workers. They need human beings. They need people who will have a relationship with them. They don’t need a specialized someone who knows all this information — that can actually keep them at a distance from their life.

What young people need is human beings to be in relationship with. Too often we get stuck in these specialized forms of action that keep us from being human with them. What we’re really after is being human alongside and with young people as Jesus Christ is human with and for us.

**JMF:** How does that look? What is the difference between having a relationship with someone and sharing-place with them and being there with them in sharing the humanity? What does that look like?

**AR:** It plays out in a couple different ways. One of the interesting elements of doing a relational ministry of influence, if we get stuck in that rut, is that influence really can’t *suffer* with young people. It’s either got another agenda that it needs to go to, so it so quickly wipes away adolescent suffering, or tells adolescents, “Don’t worry about that,” or, “If you pray about that, that will all go away,” or else, even more diabolical, it uses suffering as another carrot that says, “Look, I can suffer with you, so you should listen to me and let me lead you to where you need to go.” But it can’t really suffer with and for young people.

I was at a conference a few years back. It was a unique conference because it brought together some academics, it brought together some paid professional youth workers, some publishers, as well as a number of volunteers, were in this room. It was a conference where they were laying out the findings to a study that they had done. I don’t know if it was number four...one of the points was that relationships really mattered, that relationships were really important.

After the presenter said this, a man, probably in his early 30s, raised his

hand and he invited him to talk. He was a volunteer at his church and he said, “I get it. I get that relationships are really important, but relationships can be really hurtful, too.”

He went on to explain: “When I was in high school, my parents were going through a really messy divorce and it was really difficult for me. I don’t know if it was in the midst of the chaos or what have you, but I found myself attracted to some Buddhist literature. It was something about the meditation that calmed all the chaos that was going on in my life. I started to read it, and I was just interested in it, but I started to read it.”

“My youth worker came up to me and said, ‘You know what? You better not read that stuff. That’s a false religion, that stuff is corrupt. It’s my job as your youth worker to make sure you make the right choices and stay faithful to Jesus Christ, so you better not do that anymore.’”

So he said, “I heard him, and we were close, but there was something about it that I kept reading. My life was so chaotic, I just kept reading. He warned me one more time, ‘You better not do that.’ Sure enough, after two or three months, he stopped calling me. I didn’t talk to him for most of the rest of my high school years.”

His point was, he said, “I see that relationships can be really powerful, but relationships can be really hurtful as well.” In that story what happens is you have a youth worker who confuses their ministry. It isn’t about sharing in a young person’s life, but influencing them toward some end. When a young person can’t conform to the agenda that the youth worker wants them to go, they feel justified in cutting the relationship loose, where I think imagining our relational ministry as place-sharing calls to be faithful to the young person in the situation.

So the depressed girl that we have in our youth group, if we’re trying to influence her, the objective of our ministry is to get her over her depression. But if the objective is to share her place, then we confess that only God can heal her. Only God can come near to her and heal her broken humanity, and we’re called to join her in her suffering. Often part of the problem with seeing our ministries as influence is, it can’t suffer, and therefore it lacks some reflection of who God is for us in Jesus Christ, which is to take on our suffering, to take on death in its fullest, and then break that by being overtaken by death in the resurrection.

**JMF:** Isn’t it hard to de-link, or unhook, from the sense of need to influence and fix?

**AR:** It is really hard. It’s incredibly difficult. That’s the whole specialization that we fall into. It’s common in our culture. If you drop your computer, usually you’ll have to go to a specialist to fix it. Or if something’s not working on your computer, there’s a different specialist that runs the software and another one that works with the hardware. We’re used to specialization, and I think youth ministry has fallen into that.

We hear this all the time when we invite other adults in the congregation to volunteer, to participate in the youth group or to participate in confirmation or something, and I hear them say, “I did that ten years ago,” or, “I don’t know what I’m doing,” and sometimes you’ll even hear them say, “That’s what we paid you to do.” What that means is “You’re the one who’s specialized. You received the specialized training to do this.”

Often the real problem of youth ministry is that it tends to let the church off the hook. We hire someone who does ministry with our children, therefore *we* don’t have to. A better way of looking at the youth worker or even the paid youth pastor is not as the one who does the ministry, but someone who *equips* and is trained to equip the rest of the congregation to do ministry with their own children.

That’s where we get hooked, is that we think, “It’s my job as a specialist to influence kids, therefore when I have my end-of-the-year evaluation, what will I point to as having done a good job?” It is a full paradigm shift in how we think about ministry. My point is to try to embed that in our theological commitments more than simply pragmatism of, “what will work and how do we get it to work and try to really drive toward.” What does it mean to be faithful to who God is?

**JMF:** Don’t we do the same thing with our children? Isn’t our goal usually to influence them? We feel like we have a duty to influence them. How does that affect relationship when you are continually looking for getting the kids fixed and getting them to do the right thing in a direct way that we’ll always approach it as parents? I suppose it’s somewhat rhetorical, but don’t we accomplish more when we try to share their place as opposed to just the right-handed force of forced compliance?

**AR:** I think so. We all can probably point to people in our lives who have been meaningful to us and that we really changed in relationship with them, and it’s often been because they shared our place, more than they demanded that we conform to something. All relationships do influence. So it isn’t to say that influence isn’t found anywhere, even in authentic real relationships, but the question is, what’s the driving force?

My wife and I didn’t decide to have our son because I thought, “You know what? I hate having to go find the remote. It would be great to have a little kid that I could get to go find the remote for me.” Or, “I’m sick of unloading the dishwasher, so what I need is a child to unload the dishwasher for me.” Or even maybe more close to home for some of us, “What I need is to have a son that can do all the things that I didn’t do. I need to make him into what I wasn’t. I need to get him to an Ivy League school, I need to...” That becomes diabolical parenting.

This reflects to our Trinitarian commitments that God chooses to create out of God’s own inner love. It’s out of desire to be with and for father-to-son that God creates something. Barth beautifully says that the Trinity

exists in a relationship before creation even exists. God creates out of the place-sharing, in many ways, of the Trinity itself. That the Trinity desires to be with and for itself and out of the abundance of that love, it creates.

In the same way, in the best of marriages, we have children out of the reality of our love for one another. Once our children exist, we put certain demands on them. We say things like “We need you to do this.” But even those rules function best within the relationship, when we say, “You can’t act that way because you are my boy. You belong to me. You’re mine and I love you,” as opposed to, “If you want to belong, if you want to have a place here, then you better get on board or else you need to find somewhere else to be.”

We all have experiences where we’ve heard similar things, but there is something about place-sharing that we often fall into the trap of this kind of individualized competitive culture where we think that our job is to influence our young people instead of being with and for them.

**JMF:** Let me ask you this from what you’ve experienced in youth ministry: Studies have shown that parents have far less influence on their kids than they think they do, that it’s peers who actually have the influence on one another. Is that, in part, or largely perhaps, because peers are, by nature, place-sharing with one another?

**AR:** That’s a great question. I’m going to take a step back and try to answer it sociologically a little bit. There’s been some great work done by a British sociologist named Anthony Giddens. One of Anthony Giddens’s essential arguments for what’s happened in late modernity in our time is he argues that all relationships have become what he calls *pure*. He calls it the pure relationship. I’ve kind of redefined that a little bit and called it *the self-chosen relationship*.

His argument is that sometime in the mid-century and moving on into our own time into late modernity, that all of our relationships are really self-chosen, that for most of human history you were *given* these people, whether it was in a village or in a religious group. You lived with these people, like it or hate it, because you were bound to these people, and if you wanted to survive, you needed these people.

Because of the operations of modernization moving into globalization, we’re free. You know, at 15, 16, 17... You see this in Los Angeles all the time, a 15-year-old from the Midwest decides, “I hate my family. I’m moving to LA, and I’m going to be an actor.” The idea that you can choose to do that, is a new cultural phenomenon. Couple that with the high school, the creation of the high school, where young people are spending most of their meaningful hours in a day with their peers, as opposed to working in a business or working the land with their uncles and their parents. Now they’re in a peer-government institution.

The argument that I try to make in the first half of *Revisiting Relational*

*Youth Ministry* is that the task of the adolescent becomes formulating relationships in this self-chosen manner, and they're free to choose those however they want to choose them, there's no tradition or family expectations anymore, for the most part. You're completely up to *you* to formulate your needed intimate relationships.

Young people's whole lives are organized around trying to construct meaningful relationships with themselves. Their friends, some of their closest friends maybe do become place-sharers. There's also this incredibly rich tapestry of power going on in a high school campus where they're defining each other as cool or un-cool and all these things are happening.

It makes great sense that we would talk about relational ministry and youth ministry because young people, their whole lives, are trying to seek out relationships in these self-chosen arenas where all the relationships they have to choose for themselves. That is a driving force for them — they're always trying to figure out “who are these people? Should I love these people? Should I hate these people?”

Parents do influence young people, their own children, in a great manner. But what young people will self-report, whether it's true...and I think there's always debate between sociologists of how much parents actually do influence their young people or how much they do impact them. But if you ask young people to self-report what's the most important thing in their life, they will say their friends. That's because they're trying to work out who they are and where they belong in the midst of this realm of self-chosen relationships.

**JMF:** Is that good or bad? {laughing}

**AR:** It is. {laughing} It just is. There's no way to change that. If we see it as the way it is, what it does mean is, we can't just simply wipe relational ministry off the map. Hence the titles of my books, *Relationships Unfiltered* or *Revisiting Relational Ministry*. I think there's good reason for us to say we can't do away with relational ministry. Because of the way the culture is constructed, young people are all about relationships.

But it does mean that we have to be intentional, and I would add intentional theologically, in asking what is a relationship and what is a relationship for? That is the task of those of us who are thinking about youth ministry. What do we mean when we say relationship? That's one of the things that we've talked about earlier. My assertion would be that it just is, and that we need to enter into that reality.

**JMF:** Getting back to the difference between place-sharing and influencing, and we were talking about what it looks like to place-share with a young person or even with others who are adults, how does that look from the perspective of...let's say you're not a youth worker, but you're a member of the church and you want to have a decent relationship with young people in church, what do you do?

**AR:** We tend to over-think it. We're talking about the core of our humanity in many eyes, and it's almost too bad that we have to think, "How can we have authentic real relationships with our young people?"

**JMF:** From the time I was a teenager, the big word then was generation gap. It was clear that there was a barrier between the adult world and the teen world, and no one knew quite how to bridge that.

**AR:** We do over-think it. You ask the question, if you're just a member of a congregation and you want to be in relationship with young people, what does that look like, what does that mean? This may sound over simplistic, but it's being yourself with them. That means inviting them into our lives.

Usually what we think the objective of our relational ministry is, we usually think our goal is to get the young person to open up to us. So often we carpet-bomb them with questions. "So, tell me, how's school? How's home? How's reading your Bible going? Who are you dating?" We keep asking these questions. If you've spent any time with a 15-year-old boy, you know you get one answer, maybe two, which is a yes or no and a grunt. That's about the best you can get.

I think it's the other way around. I think the objective for us is not to get them to open up to us and therefore we can say, "I'm good at getting 16-year-olds to open up to me; therefore I'm good at youth ministry." The objective is the other way. I think the goal is to get for *us* to open our lives up to them, to invite them to come near to us and watch as we live our lives. Watch as we struggle with having to bury one of our parents or raising our own children. I hope we can talk a little bit about...

There are boundaries within that, and I don't mean being radically open so you have no freedom in the midst of that, but it's saying, "Come close to me, live near to me, hear my story and let me hear yours." Usually we think it's the other way around. Your job as the volunteer or as a paid youth worker is to get the kids to open up and to share something. I think there's real power when we'll open our lives up to young people.

It's no wonder we see so many young people leaving the church after high school graduation and not coming back ever, or coming back in their late 30s, because they've never really experienced an adult living out their faith. They've never experienced a faith community living out its faith. They've experienced a youth ministry and they've experienced volunteers who are trying to be volunteers, trying to be youth ministry people and not human beings in their frailty and their suffering and their joy seeking God within great doubt and great hope.

**JMF:** With my own children that's exactly the complaint. As teenagers they would say, "Why do those people have to pry about everything? Why do they have to come up and be so pushy and won't leave you alone?" It makes them not want to come back, and they don't want to have to keep



putting up with that. So you do your best to try to make excuses for people who behave that way and don't know any other way to approach a kid. But it's a problem, because it does turn them off to church, not just my kids, but their friends, too, experienced the same kind of thing at church.

We have a minute or two left, let's talk about the boundaries for a second.

**AR:** The element we often miss when we formulate relationships, especially in the context of ministry, is that relationships (to be a relationship) have to be, as Bonhoeffer has said, both open and closed. We usually think that a good youth worker or a good relational minister is someone who is radically open. But it's just as important that we learn how to be closed and be able to say things like, "I've just had enough," or, "I'm on vacation," or, "How about you call me when the sun's up. I know you just broke up with your boyfriend and you were dating for a whole two days and this is really hard for you, but can you call me when the sun's up?"

Maybe a story would help if we have time for it. When I was new in ministry, I was invited over to this ministry partner's house. This person that I was going to be in ministry with invited me over for dinner, and I went over and was sitting in the kitchen waiting for the meal to be ready and watching his wife hurry the meal ready and get their kids ready for dinner, and all of a sudden the doorbell rang.

My ministry partner went to the door and then he shut the door behind him and he was gone. I stood there for a few minutes and I was too young and too stupid to ask his wife if she needed any help, so I just stood there with my Coke in my hand and just watched her. Finally dinner was ready and we sat down, and we ate pasta and had a salad, and he still hadn't returned. He went to the door and just disappeared. Ice cream was being put on the table for dessert when he finally came back in.

I thought something must be terribly wrong. So about halfway through the meal I asked his wife, "Where's your husband? What's happened?" She said, "I'm sure the guys stopped by." I thought, the guys? Maybe he's got a gambling problem, the mob stopped by.

She says, "Oh, the guys from his Bible study." She mentioned that this happens quite often. When he came back in the door, having missed the whole meal, I asked him (assuming that one of the kids must have been suicidal for him to be gone with a guest over for the whole meal), "Is everything okay?"

He said, "Yeah, everything's fine," and he gave me this look, like he was trying to teach me something, and he said, "That's relational ministry for you. It just isn't nine to five." As he said that, I looked at his wife and his kids who were ravaged and tired, and I thought, this is relational ministry? That you leave your guest, you leave your family? He had mentioned that this happens a few times a week that these kids stop by.

The more I thought about it, I realized that I don't think that's relational ministry. What was happening is when he went to the door and spent most of his evenings outside with these kids, he wasn't a human being to those kids, he was a jungle gym. They would come over, and he would hang out with them, and they'd have something to do.

But if he would have just even once in a while went to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, glad you stopped by, but I'm having dinner with my family right now." Or, "It's story time and I'm reading my kids a story," he all of a sudden becomes more than a youth worker. Now he's a human being who calls them into their own authentic humanity to be in relationship with. He becomes somebody really interesting to be in a relationship with.

But when he spends every night outside with them neglecting his own family where he's radically open to them without being closed, well then, he's just a commodity that they can consume. I don't think young people need youth worker commodities. I don't even think they need youth ministries. I think they need people who will be in relationship with them. If he would have gone to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, but I'll catch up with you tomorrow at school, I've got some other things going on," he becomes a person to be in relationship with. I think that's what young people need.

## 41. ENTERING INTO THE FULL HUMANITY OF ADOLESCENTS

**J. Michael Fezell:** Thanks for being with us. You wrote an article called “A Call to See and Be Near,” and in it you said, “Too often, relational youth ministry avoids suffering and therefore lacks the boldness and bravery to enter into the full humanity of adolescents.” What does it look like “to enter into the full humanity of adolescents”?

**Andrew Root:** That article is an excerpt from this book, *Relationships Unfiltered* (that’s the shameless plug). I think it has two broad forms that exist. I’m often asked, “What will this look like, how do I do this?” I’m always very uncomfortable to say too much because I want to remind everyone that *context* always matters. Your contextual location will set the tones for how you do things. I’m no expert to tell anyone in their own context, which they know much better than I do, how to do something. I see my job as only presenting some ideas that might help people think about what they’re doing.

I think there are two broad points that give some of this some shape. One is...I think our objective is to correspond to reality with young people. Another way to say that is to take Luther’s statement in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, where he says one of the points of the Christian, one of the objectives of the Christian, is “to call a thing what it is.” Relational ministry has this element to it, that part of the heart of it is “to call a thing what it is” — to see a young person’s reality and be able to speak and call it what it is — to say “this is incredibly difficult,” or “you’re really good at this.”

Maybe the best analogy or story that goes along with this comes from the British comedy *About a Boy*. It’s this movie about two individuals, Will, who is this young adult, maybe in his late 30s, who is played by Hugh

Grant, and there's this junior-high-aged boy named Marcus. Marcus is this odd eccentric kid who's been raised by his British hippie mother. Will, played by Hugh Grant, is this incredibly self-centered dude. His whole life is really about pleasing himself. He meets Marcus when he is out on a date with one of Marcus's mother's friends because Marcus's mother is feeling blue.

When they return to Marcus's flat, they realize that his mother has attempted to commit suicide. She's lying on the floor and had vomited. Luckily, she doesn't die, they get her to the hospital. But for some reason, Marcus decides that he's going to start showing up at Will's apartment. So he shows up the first day, and Will is not happy to see Marcus, but Marcus wants to come in. Slowly, day after day, Marcus starts showing up at Will's apartment. They spend about a half an hour, 45 minutes together watching a British game show, and then Marcus leaves. But he keeps showing up.

The scene starts where Will is very reluctant to have Marcus come into his house, until days later, in this kind of montage way they're telling the story, he's opening the door and expecting Marcus to show up. As the scene unfolds, you hear inside of Marcus's head. He says, "After a while, Will felt like he had to ask me serious questions. I know all he wanted to do was watch Zena Princess Warrior, but he decided he had to ask me a serious question."

So Will turns to Marcus and says, "So how are things going at home then?" Marcus kind of stoically says, "Oh, fine. Thanks for asking." Then he says, "Well, is that still bothering you then?" (Referring to his mother). Then we hear inside Marcus's head, and Marcus says, "It's still bothering me. That's why I come here every day after school instead of going home." Then we hear outside of his head, audibly, he says, "A bit when I think about it."

Will turns to him, this self-centered guy who has invited this kid into his life, turns to him and in this great compassion and empathy he looks at him and then shakes his head and swears. He says the F word and just shakes his head. Then you hear again as Marcus is leaving the flat, you hear him say inside his head, he says, "I don't know why Will swore like that, but it made me feel good. It made me feel like I wasn't so pathetic for getting so scared."

I think part of faithful relational ministry, that's place-sharing, is being able to be close enough to kids to say, that's a terrible thing. And being able to call a thing what it is. I think it's a way that we really join in relationship, is to be able to call a thing what it is.

But there's a second element to it as well: we not only have to call a thing what it is and be able to say, bleeping hell this is hard, but also be able to say nevertheless, even in the dark shadow of this reality, the tomb is empty.

A couple of springs back, my wife's grandfather had passed away. It was right on a Sunday morning when my wife was getting ready to go to church. We had known that he was fading and that he would die soon, but we got a call on Sunday morning that he had passed away. My wife knew about that, so she was fairly stoic about it, so she grabbed our son and got him in the car, and we headed off to church.

But about halfway to church it hit her that he was gone and that she wouldn't see her grandfather again. She started to tear up and cry in the front seat. Our son was behind her in his car seat. After a while she noticed in the rearview mirror that he was looking at her. She said, "Owen, I'm sorry that I'm crying. I'm sad." He said, "Why?" He was about 2, maybe 3 years old, probably 3 years old. "Why?" would just spill from his lips upon any question he would ask. But this "why" seemed to have significance to it.

She said, "I'm sad because my grandpa died, and I'm not going to be able to see him again." We kept on driving, and as I got off the freeway, he was very quiet and pensive, kind of looking out the window. As we got to the first light, he said, "But mommy, I have a secret." She said, "What's the secret?" "The secret is that someday Jesus is coming back and you and your grandpa will be together again. Jesus is coming back and death will be no more."

There's something between these two things, of being able to say bleeping hell, and I have a secret — it's where we live out the faithfulness of relational ministry. We're in connection with young people. We call a thing what it is. This must be incredibly hard to have to deal with not having any friends, or feeling like these rumors are destroying your life, or to wonder if your parent's marriage is going to make it. Or to have your dreams about what you want for yourself, to find them implode when your test scores come back, or when you get cut from a team. To be able to say this is incredibly difficult.

But also to whisper, and whisper it as a secret...I don't mean it's a secret where we want to keep it from people, but it's a secret in the sense that it's so beautiful and so profound and so rich — this idea that God is overcoming death with life — it's so wonderful that it shakes the very foundations of the universe. We have to whisper it because it connects with the core of our humanity so much.

It's living between these two things. Being able to call a thing what it is, and I have a secret — nevertheless the tomb is empty. Living out of those two inclinations, those two stances, is a way that we faithfully live with and for young people, and really live with and for each other.

**JMF:** What is it about us as adults that makes us feel such an urge to attempt to control what an adolescent thinks by what we say and how we say it? It's as though we want to give an impression of invulnerability on

our part... We think we can control what a child or a kid will think, or be, by telling them the thing that we want them to do, or the thing we want them to think, from some kind of imperial bench looking down on them to tell them how it really is.

**AR:** Right. I think it's out of fear. We fear that if we're not in control, then we don't make a good case for the gospel, which is counter to the biblical picture we received from Jesus, particularly about what the gospel is... It always comes in weak, broken forms. It's like a mustard seed, or it's like a woman who sweeps her whole house looking for a coin, or it's like a father who sees his son on the horizon and rushes out and throws off his cloak to embrace his lost son. It's about all these broken forms.

We tend to think that if...and this is just the lens we've been given in our cultural context, that "might makes right" or powerfulness is what sells; maybe it's part of the consumer culture that we exist in, the material culture we exist in. But there's something counter to that in the gospel, which is that God comes to us in frail and weak ways. In a baby born in a manger to a 15-year-old girl who's existing under the thumb of Roman rule, and then this God chooses, in the person of Jesus Christ, to show us the full picture of who this God is by going to a cross outside the city to be neglected and destroyed by death.

We tend to want to control young people because we fear that if we show weakness, then what will become of them? They'll surely deny the faith or not have a place for the church in their lives unless we give it a nice spin and we make it look shiny and good as opposed to talking about the fact that Christianity is this commitment to a God who comes to us in the frail humanity of Jesus Christ, that goes through death for the sake of life. There's something unique about that narrative in Christianity that should change the way we interact with the world and engage the world.

The reason we have such a hard time doing it is that we fear that weakness will lead them away from where we desire for them to go. But at the very core of who we are, what we want more than anything is to be with them — that's what we want from our children. That's what we're all yearning for — is to be with and have someone be for us. I think we get stuck in thinking that we all have to make something of ourselves. How can young people make something of themselves if we show ourselves as vulnerable?

**JMF:** It seems like in our desire to push them, that we actually harm the relationship. Our efforts to influence drive them away from us instead of drawing them in. We lose the influence we want through the effort to exercise the influence.

**AR:** Yeah, I tell my students all the time, "You cannot get a relationship through judgment." There are very few people who will ever have a friendship when someone comes up and says, "I just wanted to tell you, you

are a very ugly person” or, “You dress like you’re from three decades earlier” or, “Your whole disposition repulses me.” Usually a relationship does not start very well that way.

But once you *have* a relationship, it does demand judgment, or it does demand certain assertions. My wife wouldn’t love me unless she said things to me like, “Because I love you, I have to tell you, do you know you talk more than you listen?” Or, “When you say things like that, it is belittling to me.” The fabric of our relationship is contingent on her saying those things to me. It deepens our relationship.

But too often adults (maybe it’s this generation gap that you’ve mentioned in an earlier session) we come into this relationship saying, these kids need to be made right. Instead of seeing them for who they are in their humanity and then joining in relationship... And there are things that *need* to be said, like “You can’t do these things” or “These thing will hurt you.”

We tend to lead off with the judgment. We may not intend to, but it’s often interpreted that way. I don’t want to say that we never say anything to kids like, “You know what? You need to finish high school.” Or, “You need to think about showering before you go to a job interview.” Those are all valuable things that we would want our friends to say to us, but the key is, are they our friend, or is there a relationship there of love and mutuality and connection that invites us to share things and to share life this way?

The way relationships function, at least in my own experience, is that there has to be kind of an equal pace at going at depths. This happened to me in college all the time, it’s why my dating record in college was so poor, because I would go out on a date with a young woman and then I would want to take the relationship deeper than she would want to, and all of a sudden the relationship was over, because I had forced a level of intimacy or connection that she wasn’t ready for, and no relationship can live under those strictures. But when relationships function the best is where people go at a level, and it’s mutual.

Often in youth ministry we meet kids and then we try to get them “deep” right away, instead of sharing their lives and trusting that in being together and being with each other and sharing the importance of the gospel in my own life, that there’s a level of shared life that will bring us to a deeper level. But too often we think it’s our job to get them here, and then drive the relationship deeper. There’s many kids who say, “These people are weird” Or, “This is just uncomfortable.” Or, “They don’t see *me*, they see where I need to go.” That’s an important element.

**JMF:** Isn’t that partly a function of having a number of kids assigned to you, as it were? The kids become a job, a project, and you have to get through so many, and you’ve got a place where you want them to be, as it were. You want them to be moral and you want them to make a commitment. It isn’t like you’ve got the patience or the time to invest in

letting each one develop into the relationship that will, in effect, bring them where they need to be.

**AR:** Yeah. This gets back to the specialization thing we talked about earlier — I don't think that one paid youth worker and her two or three volunteers can be place-sharers with 35 kids in their youth group. It's impossible. If we are about sharing in the yearning and brokenness, the joy and the suffering of young people...then if it's going to be both open and closed, then you can't do this with 20 kids, if it's just you or maybe one other person.

This is a congregational approach. You're right that one of the reasons we tend to default toward influencing them toward some end is because we think, "I have 15 kids here and they all seem to need more time." It's even worse, because once one class graduates, there's another class going in, and it can feel like this incredible burden. That's why I don't think there's such a thing as an incarnational or a fully relational youth worker, but there are *communities* that are incarnational. There may be a few people who do some of that action, but it takes a congregation.

We can only be place-sharers with three or four kids at the most. The truth is that one paid youth worker cannot be a place-sharer with...unless your youth group is three or four kids. But every congregation has the resources in its own life to have adults be place-sharers with the young people that they have, and even more young people they have in their community. It becomes about a congregation and not a youth ministry, or even worse, a youth worker.

That does mean that the paid youth worker has to change the way she thinks about herself. It's no longer your job to be the pastor to these kids, but you are pastor to this whole congregation that advocates for these kids. That means you have to do certain work to accrue relational capital with the young people in the youth group, but also in the adults. Usually when we interview youth workers, we want to know, do the kids like him or her, do they like this person? That's important. But it's just as important that other adults in the congregation are willing to be led by this person or to enter into a partnership of ministry with this person.

If this person is good with the younger populations of people but the other people in the congregation, the older people, don't trust this person, then their ministry becomes only about them, and we'll always default then into patterns of influence instead of patterns of place-sharing, and we'll tend to live out of more of our knee-jerk need, than out of this theological commitment to a God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and this Trinitarian element that we've been trying to point to.

**JMF:** Isn't that true across the board in any ministry of the church that it becomes real in its context within the whole congregation, as opposed to a segmented narrow approach to just "meet the needs" as it were, the



perceived needs, of seniors ministry, or a young adults ministry, or a singles ministry? When everyone can be part of everything, it works a lot better.

**AR:** Yeah. This always makes my students uncomfortable, but youth ministry doesn't really exist in the sense that it's not a biblical theme, it's not a theological commitment, it's a reality that's determined by the way our society is structured. As soon as the high school doesn't exist anymore, MTV doesn't exist, there's really no reason for youth ministry. Youth ministry exists because we put over 90 percent of people in their teen years in a government institution and have them spend most of their days in a peer-driven institution, and then there's a whole marketing infrastructure that sells things to them in these niche markets.

You know, 150, 200 years ago, there was no such thing as youth ministry. Your young people were near you. Youth ministry exists because of the way culture has constructed itself. It doesn't exist as a thing. Too often we've fallen into the trap of seeing it as this thing, and then we perpetuate certain activities and actions that we think a youth worker would do or a youth ministry should do. But the truth is, it isn't a thing. Ministry is human-person-to-human-person, through the humanity of God in Jesus Christ.

We fall into that trap that youth ministry is this particular thing, and then we give all sorts of different "bubbles" of this — like you said, there's a senior ministry and there's a young adult ministry, and there's the "mothers with three kids who like bubble gum" ministry or something. You can segment this into all sorts of different groups. I think it does tend to be problematic and lead us away from this core commitment ... This is about a community of faith who seeks God in the frailty of our humanity.

**JMF:** In your article, "A New Generation Demands New Categories for Theology and Ministry," you wrote, "As it has been documented, most don't hate or despise the church, they just don't care. And they don't care because the categories that they use to make meaning are not the categories we are using to do theology and ministry. Our categories no longer match their reality, no longer have congruence with their habits. We must do theology and ministry in new categories if we hope it will mean anything to a younger generation." What are these categories that they have, that we're not sharing?

**AR:** In that article you can find online, I look at this pop artist, Lily Allen, and this song she has called *The Fear*. She says some interesting things in it where she discards these categories that the church and theology have tended to live in, which is right and wrong, and connected to that saint and sinner. She has this very provocative line in the song where she says, "I'm not a saint and I'm not a sinner, but all is cool as long as I'm getting thinner," which shows — at least the way I interpreted it — she's not going to live in these old categories, but that there's something else she's trying to

find meaning and purpose in.

My argument, as you read, is that these categories have changed, in that instead of young people trying to figure out “am I good or am I bad?” that they recognize, especially in a post-modern context, that that’s really a hard thing to define — that you can exist in one of those things. But the new category that we haven’t yet dwelt enough on, and she enters into this in her chorus, is that she asks this question, “Am I real? Is there anything real here?” It’s a question of ontology. Do I have any being, and is there anything solid that I exist in? Her fear isn’t that she’s bad or that she’s a sinner, it’s that she doesn’t exist at all.

There’s this element of the early Reformation theology that goes back to Luther, which is dwelling on these questions of the ontological significance of Jesus Christ for us. It’s asked these huge questions of where does God encounter us, and how does God encounter us?

For Luther — and Calvin picks this up in his own way — but it’s really the God on the cross — that’s where God encounters us. Luther would always love to use this phrase that Moltmann picked up for his book in the late ‘60s/early ‘70s called *The Crucified God*. Luther wanted us to recognize that it’s God on the cross who is being crucified — that God, in God’s self, is going through death. Moltmann would push this in his work to talk about how the Trinity goes through death on the cross — that the Father, that the Son is overtaken and experiences negation and the Father understands what it’s like to have the Father’s heart ripped out from the Father as he loses the one he loves, to the abyss of death.

My argument in this article is that the church hasn’t dwelt enough and formulated practices of ministry that reflect on this question of “Am I real?” “How do I navigate life in a way that makes my existence feel like it stands on anything solid at all, because I feel like things are slipping away?”

Part of my argument is that it’s not that young people don’t like the church or don’t think there’s any value in it, they just don’t think it has anything meaningful to say. It’s still talking about being right or being wrong, it’s still talking about *saint* and *sinner* categories instead of talking about them through this ontological framework, which is when the saint and sinner dynamic becomes much more significant — that we’re both saint and sinner simultaneously, but we’re caught between these two realities. God, in Jesus Christ, enters into despair and death so that we’re never alone in it again, and so that turns it, so that from death comes life.

**JMF:** What does that mean for a congregation’s approach for young people in the church and those they want to reach?

**AR:** It means, ultimately, being people who are willing to confront and articulate those places in our lives that we find to be places of yearning and brokenness — our preaching and our teaching and our life together should mean something, and it should mean something up against those raw places

of our life.

Part of the issue why young people have these benign relationships with the church is because they don't think it means anything. It doesn't matter to them. So the place for us to start is to be willing to dwell in our own lives at those places of yearning and of brokenness and try to construct theology around those.

**JMF:** So that gets back to what we were talking about earlier — that of sharing the place and learning how to listen to the story and to share stories, our story, with young people.

## 42. GOD TURNS DEATH INTO LIFE

**JMF:** I wanted to begin with something from the back of your book *Relationships Unfiltered*: “For more than 50 years relational or incarnational ministry has been a major focus in youth ministry, but for too long those relationships have been used as tools, as means to an end, where adults try to influence students to accept, know, trust, believe or participate in something. Andrew Root challenges us to reconsider our motives and begin to consider simply being with and doing life alongside teenagers with no agenda other than to love them right where they are, by place-sharing.” How does that kind of relationship with teenagers play out?

**AR:** The objective of it, and the desire, is that we would start with living authentically with young people and living authentically from our own places of rawness and brokenness and sharing each other’s lives from that location. That’s been one of the main problems with the church in the last few decades, something that it’s been striving for, is to say something authentic and meaningful — something that is located in the messiness of our lives.

There’s a great scene from the movie *Walk the Line* where Joaquin Phoenix plays Johnny Cash... it’s a movie about Johnny Cash’s life...and there’s this powerful scene that I think relates to this, where Johnny Cash is going to have his first audition with his band, and he confronts the owner of this recording studio and asks for an audition, and he gets one, reluctantly, by the owner. He gets there with his band and they’re wearing black shirts because that’s the only color they all have of the same shirt, and he starts to play a gospel tune.

You can tell in the first few notes that the record company guy is unhappy with this, as he doesn’t find it very interesting. After a while he stops him and says, “Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to

just sing this same song we've heard over and over again? This Jesus By and By? Is this what you're going to tell me again?" Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash says, "What are you saying? That I don't believe in Jesus?" He said, "No, I'm not saying you don't believe in Jesus, I'm saying that this doesn't mean anything. There's nothing here."

"Well, what do you mean?" Johnny Cash asks him, and he says, "What I mean... is this the song you would sing if this is the last song you had, you were lying in the gutter and you were going to die and you had one last song to sing to God before you were dirt — this is the song you'd sing? By and By Jesus is with me?" He says, "It doesn't mean anything unless you sing it from your heart," unless it comes from your own broken experience, is essentially what he's saying.

Johnny Cash says, "Well, you got a problem with the Air Force?" And he says, "No." Johnny says, "Well, I do." Then he sings this song that he had written (I think it's the Folsom Prison song), but then it has this incredible human pathos to it, this incredible significance that's born from Johnny Cash's own broken experience and his own yearning.

Often I will show that clip in classes and say, "How come our sermons aren't like that?" Replace "song" with "sermon." Many people in our congregations hear a sermon or another Sunday School lesson and they're thinking, "Really? You're going to give me this same 'Jesus is with me by and by?'" Why don't you say something that means something, that comes from this place of loneliness and this place of deep yearning? The objective of being a place-sharer is to do ministry from our broken humanity that yearns for God and seeks to confess and worship a God who meets us from the gutter of the cross and seeks for God to find us taking on death for the sake of life.

**JMF:** Don't we, as youth ministers and as pastors and associate pastors and otherwise, gospel workers, feel like we have to give an image of strength, some kind of façade of righteousness and faithfulness and all that? And in doing that, we think that somehow we're setting an example or conveying a proper image, and yet there really is no such beast as a person who is the façade we're trying to put forward.

**AR:** Exactly. I think the objective is to be and to do ministry from the location of our own barrenness or our own broken situation. There's a great story about my kids. My son is almost five now and my daughter is two. But when my daughter was younger, she was probably eight months, we made the terrible parenting mistake of having her sleeping upstairs in our house and having the baby monitor switched to the wrong channel so we couldn't hear her. After an hour or so we thought, "Wow, this is a really long nap for her."

I walked by the stairs and she was howling, she was crying, she was very upset. So I yelled for my wife and we raced up the stairs, and our three-

year-old at the time followed us up the stairs as we went to her. We picked her up and she was as mad as heck. She was angry. We don't know how long she had been crying, but it had been a while. We picked her up and we tried to comfort her, and as we did that, my son climbed up on our bed and we were saying, "Oh Maisy, it's okay, it's okay," and he, in his great three-year-old way, crawled up next to her, patted her head, and said, "Maisy, it's okay. You just had hotus."

We looked at him and said "hotus?" This made-up three-year-old word. We said, "Hotus? Owen, what is hotus?" He looked kind of matter of factly, like everyone should know this, and he said, "Hotus is when you're all alone and crying and no one is there to be with you."

It was this beautiful, beautiful assertion, but I think that is the human condition. In many ways, if we're not now, we know of times when we've been all alone and crying and need someone to be near to us. Too often we do ministry out of "I have the answer" or "I can get you somewhere" instead of this mutuality of trying to dwell in God's word and contemplate who God is amidst and alongside our shared hotus. At some point in our life, we're all alone and crying.

I think the beauty of the gospel is that we have a God who encounters us not outside, around, but within our moments of hotus, of being all alone and needing someone to be with us. God desires to be with us, and with us to such an extent that God goes to death. Not only death but, as our creeds say, all the way to hell, so that we'll never again be alone or without God, even when we still feel overwhelmed by our experiences of hotus, as my three-year-old, now moving toward five-year-old, son would say.

**JMF:** We usually present the gospel as being a way to become moral and righteous and to solve our problems. But that's not what it's about, is it?

**AR:** I always worry because we've tried to frame things for my son not about what's right or wrong, but what serves death or what serves life. I fear that we've warped him, because he'll always package things in death. Once we were on a walk and he fell and he skinned his knee, and so we raced over to him and said, "Owen, are you okay?" He said, "Yeah, I'm fine," and he pointed to his knee, which was a little bloody, and he said, "But death made me bleed."

He has this concept of life and death, which I think biblically there is something about right and wrong that's there, but there's also another foundation which that rests on, which is, do you serve life, or do you serve death? The God of Israel is a God that is about life. We have all these odd biblical texts about "the right thing to do is to hide spies in your house and to tell a lie when someone comes to your door," because it's not really about what's right or wrong, but what serves life or what serves death. What serves the God of life or death?

Too often we fall into moralism with young people. We tend to judge how well we're doing in our ministries with "our kid's getting better." And how many conversions and how many virgins do you have? That seems to determine if you're a good youth worker, instead of trying to live with young people next to their death, so that they might be people who seek for God and death for the sake of life.... It gives us an ethic, but it's a much more robust theological perspective that leads us into contemplating our own broken humanity and a God who encounters us within it. It's grander in the sense of, in the way it encompasses us and claims us. That is much more beautiful, at least to me.

**JMF:** You have a couple of new books that came out in 2010. *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*, from Abingdon, and *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*, from Brazos Press. Can you give us a little preview of those two books?

**AR:** *The Promise of Despair* is my attempt to write at least a little bit of a theology for the church ...in the church's location in our context now. I fear it's not an upbeat Hallmark kind of piece. The basic assertion is that [we need] many of the new kind of paradigms for church that have been around from emerging church folks, to others talking about the church needing to take new form and think differently about its theology and its very life in our cultural context. I affirm that very strongly in this book, but also add to the conversation that I don't know that in those conversations we've dealt enough with the reality of death.

So I try to articulate that and tell some of my own experiences with that. It hinges around this argument that comes from Luther in his Heidelberg Disputation, where Luther is writing his, really a major document of his theological breakthrough that would bring forth the Reformation, and Luther has this very interesting comment in there where he says "a theologian of the cross." If there's anywhere forward for a theologian of the cross to escape all the legalism of the Christendom of his day, that person, that theologian must *despair* — that you have to despair.

I've tried to look into that and to ask, what would it mean — is there a promise in despair, and what do we believe about this God who brings life out of death from the location of the cross? It's a theology of the cross for our contemporary church in our context. In the second half of the book I try to develop a Trinitarian theology, drawing from Eberhard Jungel as well as the early Moltmann, trying to make an argument using some of their sources that God takes death into the Trinity itself.

The ramifications of that, which are quite beautiful, is that now anyone who experiences any element of death — whether that's legitimate death being put in a grave, or severe depression, or just experiences of death, that we can be confident that now we exist within the life of God — that because death has been placed within the inner life of God, that death

destroys the Trinity, and then the Trinity is put back together after resurrection, and that now, anytime we experience death, we can be confident and confess that we find ourselves taken up and swept up into the life of God in the Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son that the Spirit ushers us into.

That's a mouthful for that book, but it gives a cultural analysis and then takes a turn on the theology of the cross and looks at how we might do church next to death, and a lot like the Johnny Cash story — how might we actually practice our faith in a way that honors the realness and messiness of our existence.

The second book, *The Children of Divorce*, touches on some of these themes, but in a much more specific way. It argues that we haven't quite culturally grasped the significance of divorce as it relates to young people. One of the issues that we haven't necessarily dealt with is that divorce may be... (before it's an *epistemological* issue [a question of what we know], in the sense that we usually think as long as kids know that the divorce wasn't their fault, and if we can get some structures in place, like after-school programs and grandparents to be invested, then it's not a big deal, it's a minor disturbance).

My argument is that maybe some of that stuff helps, but that primarily divorce is an ontological issue [a question of being]. What I mean by that is: that what's thrust upon a young person when their parents divorce is the very question if they can exist at all, after the fact that they realize that this relationship of mother and father is responsible for them existing at all. What does it mean for them, that this relationship that is the very elements of their being in the world, is taken apart?

From my own experience of my parents divorcing, as well as the young people I've worked with, I try to make an argument that we need to look at the experience of young people in divorce differently — that it may be an issue of questioning “do I exist at all?” or “How can I be, now that these people who are responsible for my being are no longer in the world?” That's the point of that book — two kind of heavy topics. But ones that would be interesting reads for people.

**JMF:** You've written an article that I read and found very interesting. I don't watch the TV show *Lost* because I watched it a couple of times and I haven't gotten into it because I found it so abysmally difficult to understand and know what's going on. I know a couple people who are great fans of it, a couple of relatives who never miss it. I ask them, “Well, give me a little... so I can at least have enough to go on to watch it.” They look at me for a second thinking, and then they say, “You really have to watch it from the beginning. I wouldn't know where to start. There's too much to just say easily.” So I don't watch it. But then I read your article and I thought it gave some good insight into what was going on in the show, and you brought in



some theological perspective that the show triggered for you. I thought it would be interesting for everyone to hear that.

**AR:** The first thing I'll say is, for real *Lost* fans out there, I fear saying anything, because you don't want to make avid *Lost* fans angry at you. So I will just say this for myself. I'll say two things before getting into the theological dialogue that I do with the show. The real interesting thing to me is that it is an incredibly dense, and I don't want to say intellectual, necessarily, but there's so much rich mystery and theory that's embedded with it...so much with philosophy and mythology, and it's fascinating to me...

A question the church has to confront is, why does J.J. Abrams, the producer of this show as well as other movies, why does he get all the best stories? What I mean is, how come we have this incredible story of a crucified God, of... this incredibly beautiful story, and we can so easily make the story of the gospel benign or uninteresting or just plain lame. A show like *Lost*, I think, reminds us that the public is yearning for good narrative. Not narrative that is clean and easily finished after 22 minutes in a laugh track, but is really wanting to dwell in a difficult narrative. At least there's a number of people who are fans of that show who don't want it to be neat and tidy but want to really focus on a very mystical, very transcendent, very raw narrative. I would say that first.

My argument in that article, which was written several seasons ago, so things have changed. But one of the things that was true that I was pointing to in that article that I hadn't verified yet was that the life on the island and the life in the regular world, that they were existing on two timelines — that time was unfolding at a different pace on the island than it was in the regular world.

What was interesting to me about that reality is that essentially, Jurgen Moltmann, in *The Theology of Hope* and in some of his other works, his whole eschatology is built on that perception — that God is encountering us not from the past but from the future. That God's bringing forth God's future. In a sense, God exists on another timeline. That timeline overlaps with ours, but God is ushering all of time and all of creation into God's very future.

It got me thinking about certain things, and *Lost* was doing this — it was living between these timelines. In many ways I think that the vocation of the Christian is to live between times, in the sense that we're stuck in this time. Our lives unfold from life to death, but a future is breaking in where death, from death comes life, where the complete opposite happens. There's a certain way of even reading some of the gospel texts to see it as this reality of a new timeline coming in. For instance, after the crucifixion, people from the graves come out and start walking around Jerusalem. It's a sense where the time has been split open.

Then when Jesus returns after the resurrection, some of the disciples and some of his followers don't even recognize him — not because he isn't human anymore, but because he is the person of the future, he's the man of the future. As many theologians, particularly Karl Barth has argued, that Jesus Christ's resurrection is our promise. The only one that has been resurrected is Jesus Christ, and because of Jesus' own resurrection, we're promised a resurrection as well. Jesus Christ now exists in God's future.

So I tried with the show, in these multiple timelines going on in the show, to make this argument that the church awaits, yearns, desires for God's future to come while we live in this time. It's interesting to think, for instance, about prayer and healing in that situation. There are times in our congregations and in our lives where we pray for somebody to be healed, and they are. In the church, we rejoice in that and see in it a gift. But it's not the norm. It's abnormal. It's God's future breaking in for some reason into our now. But the unfolding of the timeline we exist in, is that if you get cancer, you die. Or if you get hit in a head-on collision, you probably die. There are times when God's future breaks in and we're healed, or we taste God's future, but that's more abnormal than normal. I tried to develop that element of timelines and eschatology through the TV show *Lost*.

**JMF:** It makes me want to watch it, but I don't know if I would invest the time it takes to get caught up to speed.

**AR:** It will make you a fanatic, too. You have to have the time for that.

**JMF:** I'm glad that some of the shows that I was having to never miss have finally come to an end. It gives me a break in having to be addicted to a certain TV show.

As we conclude, I wanted to ask you something we often ask, we try to ask everyone at some point, and that is, if there's one thing that you would really like people to know about God, what would that be?

**AR:** The one thing that I would want people to know about God is that God comes near to us in those moments where we don't know what to do or when we feel lost. There are certain moments in our life that are utterly God-forsaken and are irredeemable. But often in those moments, someone else will share in our lives with us. I think, in those moments, God becomes concretely present.

The one thing that I would want us to know about God is that God comes near to us, in our yearning simply to be human, and that the Christian life is a basic life of trying to grab hold of what it means to be human in the midst of a lot of questions and doubt, and doubt is a way of faith in many ways — that if we'll yearn to know God up against our deepest questions, we'll encounter God, and in a beautiful way encounter God in a community of people who are believing while they're doubting, who are yearning for God in the midst of broken and thin places in their life. I think that's the thing that captivates me the most lately, is how to

think about our encounter with God in those places of deep yearning and brokenness.

**JMF:** Interesting you bring up doubt, because typically we're afraid to admit our doubt. There's no Christian who doesn't doubt, and yet we don't want to admit it to anyone else, and we don't even like to admit it to ourselves. Yet this is where Jesus meets us, in the midst of our doubt.

**AR:** One of the ways potentially forward as we think about passing on our faith to young people (whether that happens through confirmation or some other form of catechesis or Sunday School or some other educational form) ... I wonder often if we wouldn't do well to build those conversations around our doubt, and how powerful it would be to get a handful of high school students and a couple of adults and to say, "In this hour and a half, we're going to talk, and we're going to doubt our faith together."

I don't mean doubt it, in this kind of nihilistic tone that we're just going to wipe it all off the table and find it's all meaningless. But to enter into the kind of doubt that says, "We're going to wrestle with this" is to take faith and to take the Christian tradition with utmost seriousness — that we're going to really delve into this, but we're going to do it not through our place of power, of having it together, but from our place of wondering, what does this mean?

Young people are searching for a church that will doubt with them, and we continue to give them a church that has certainty. Certainty is the demonic element. Certainty doesn't need to see neighbors. Certainty doesn't need to listen. But doubt listens intently. So I think there's a way that we doubt our faith while confessing Christ. We hold those things together. I doubt while I yearn for God. There's something really beautiful about that.

It would be an incredible witness to the world if the church was this group of people, maybe a little weird people, but these people who deeply searched for God through their doubt and through their brokenness — never claimed to have it all together, but simply yearned for God as they articulated to the world their own shortcomings and their own doubt. We would have a generation of young people that would know their faith better, that would live their faith, and we would have a witness to the world that would be much richer. There would be a community in the world that calls a thing what it is. We have a culture that desires for the church to call a thing what it is.

**JMF:** Often when somebody approaches us (young person or otherwise) with doubts and has the courage to express those, we respond with defensiveness and with authoritarianism, with "You better not doubt your faith," "You're in danger of something," of losing your faith, or whatever. So we don't listen, and we ourselves become fearful and defensive, perhaps because we have the same doubts and don't know what

to do with them. A dialog where there's freedom to live with and express out doubts, share them, deal with them, confront them, look at them, consider them, would be a nice healthy environment.

**AR:** Yeah. We often are afraid of doubt because, well, because we're afraid. Our fear really is fear of death. It will feel like death if our kids aren't good kids or if they deny their faith. But what's so interesting and paradoxical and maybe disobedient about such a stance is that the Christian commitment is a God who meets us in death...and there's a freedom in that. There's a freedom, that we need not be afraid of death, because God has overcome death with life. So we don't have to fear our children doubting our faith. Their doubt of our faith is an invitation to share deeply in their lives and to share deeply in the activity of God in a certain way — to yearn for God, to seek God. But we fear death, and because we fear death, we fear them doubting, instead of recognizing that God has overcome death.

There's great freedom in discipleship to not fear death. There's a great line in *The Cost of Discipleship* when Bonhoeffer opens it up in the first few pages when he says, "When Jesus Christ calls a person, he calls a person to come and die." We usually think of that like a football coach on the Friday night high school football game, where the football coach says, "We're going to go out there and we're going to kill those guys this week." The players know that the coach doesn't mean that they're literally going to go out and kill them. They don't take guns out onto the field. It's rhetoric that's supposed to motivate certain action.

We think that when Bonhoeffer says that or when Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me," that it's a pep rally, that's just to get us motivated to live the Christian life. But in a real way that that's the call — that if you are going to follow Jesus, that you have to come and die, that you have to come and face the death inside you, the death inside the world, and seek for God in that death.

We often want to keep our young people from doubting because we're scared to death that they will start smelling like death instead of saying, if I can hold them and if we can together look at and face death, whatever that might be — either doubting of their faith, or their certain struggles, or their depression — that we can in faith and hope trust in God in the midst of this, for our God is a God who brings life out of death. Our God is a God who enters deeply into death. There will be a great way forward if we would choose to doubt our faith together. Again, not as a nihilistic way, but as a way of actual obedience of following God to the cross.

**JMF:** I can't help but think of a passage, Colossians 3, verse 3, "For you have died, and your life is now hidden in Christ with God." We're dead and alive at the same time, yet the life is hidden and yet the death is real. It also reminds me of the doubt you mentioned [in an earlier interview], the story

with your son saying, “Jesus isn’t here. There’s a nightmare in the closet, and Jesus isn’t here.”

**AR:** The objective of the church is to say, “You’re right — Jesus isn’t here. So together let’s search for God...” and this is the paradox — “let’s search for God in the utter feeling of God-forsakenness, of God not being here,” which is this Christological element that opens up, that Moltmann beautifully does, to the Trinity — that God knows death, that God knows what it’s like. Jesus essentially says “God is not here” on the cross. The Father knows what it’s like to lose the Son to the abyss of separation and death. There’s something very Trinitarian about being willing to say “God is not here,” but not as a nihilistic assertion but as a confession of faith.

“God is not here” as a confession of faith that says “I will now search for God in this place where God cannot be found” because this God who cannot be found, this God who I can’t find now, is a God who is often not found, in certain places like in the barren womb of Sarah or in a people under years and years of oppression in Egypt, in the virgin womb of a 15-year-old girl in a God-forsaken place called Galilee...that in those places where “God is not here” is the place where God becomes found.

It would be really interesting for the church to be this place that is willing to say “you’re right, God is not here, and we will serve this God and worship this God,” because when we say God is not here, God becomes here, in our shared community of suffering.

### 43. GRACE LEADS TO GODLY LIVING

**Introduction:** Welcome to a special edition of *You're Included*, recorded in the ancient Scottish city of St. Andrews. St. Andrews is the home of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland's oldest university, founded in 1413. St. Andrews enjoys a reputation as one of the finest institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom. It is the home of St. Mary's College, the university's renowned divinity school. In St. Mary's nearly-500-year-old college hall, *You're Included* host J. Michael Fezell, Vice President of Grace Communion International, interviews Professor Alan J. Torrance.

Dr. Torrance is a Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of St. Andrews and a widely respected teacher and author. As the son of James B. Torrance and nephew of Thomas F. Torrance, he carries on their theological tradition. Professor Torrance's work includes *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation*.



**J. Michael Fezell:**  
Professor Torrance, thank you for agreeing to meet with us.

**Alan Torrance:** It's a pleasure to be here, Mike. Thanks for coming.

**JMF:** We would like to

begin just asking about a word that I'm sure my grandmother would not know what it means, but she knows what it's about. Could you talk about the Incarnation, and why it's important for Christians.

**AT:** The Incarnation concerns the very heart of Christian faith. If I didn't believe the Incarnation, I'd pack up my bags, resign my job, and go and do something useful. The Incarnation basically affirms that God is with us as the person of Jesus Christ. It's absolutely fundamental to the knowledge of God. In the person of Christ we have God disclosing God's own very being to us. But it's not just that in Christ God comes to us as God. God comes to us as *man*, and taking to himself a human-knowing of the Father.

So when we affirm the Incarnation, we also immediately affirm the Trinity. Because the knowledge that's given to us in Christ is a human knowledge of the Father, and Jesus knows the Father in the Spirit. We are taken by that same Spirit to share in Jesus' knowledge of the Father. But that's not just a human knowledge of the Father, we've been taken into the knowledge of a Father that belongs to the eternal Son, in and through the incarnate Jesus.

So without the Incarnation, we don't have anything that begins to resemble a full and final and adequate knowledge of God. But it's not just the knowledge of God that the Incarnation's vitally important. The doctrine of salvation is contingent, is dependent, upon the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Very quickly, what is the Christian doctrine of salvation? The key to understanding what salvation's about is the Greek words that Paul uses. Paul uses the word *apolutrosis*, meaning redemption, and the key to that is three Hebrew concepts which that Greek word translates in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The first is *pada*, meaning God delivers us from bondage. It's a word that is used of God's deliverance in Israel from Egypt. So in salvation, God is delivering us from bondage, the bondage of sin, the tyranny of sin, the disease that we cannot overcome in and of ourselves. God does that in the Incarnation. God comes in Christ to deliver us from bondage. That's the first key metaphor.

The second: God comes to us and deals with the *costliness* of sin. There's another Hebrew word, *kipper* or *kofer*, that is also translated by a form of the word Paul uses for redemption, and that concerns the sacrificial offerings. On the Day of Atonement, the priest would take a lamb, declare...and he would have [the names of] all the tribes of Israel along his coat...he'd lay his hands on the lamb, declare the sin of Israel—in other words, all of Israel's sin is being laid on that lamb, in effect. Then the life of the lamb would be taken and Israel would see the life of that lamb, the costliness of its sin being taken from them. Or, a scapegoat. He'd lay his hands on a goat

and declare the sins of Israel, hit it on the backside, and all of Israel in the celebration of worship would watch the goat run off into the wilderness carrying away its sin. So, the second metaphor, in the Incarnation, God comes as human to deal with the costliness of sin and carry our sin away from us.

The third metaphor is *go'el*, the kinsman redeemer. This is perhaps the most important in some ways. There's a provision under the covenant where if a family lost its father, say, or a woman lost her husband, then a kinsman, a relative, would come and marry that woman and restore that woman to an inheritance that she would otherwise lose. Or, if a farmer falls into debt and loses his farm, the kinsman member...perhaps that man's brother... of that family would come and restore that person to the inheritance that was lost. Again, the Incarnation concerns God coming as a human to restore us the inheritance that was lost in Adam.

All three metaphors are kind of intertwined. So in the Incarnation, we have God coming to deliver us from sin and from guilt, most importantly. People think of guilt as a good thing. Well, guilt oppresses. It can make us ashamed of being in the presence of God. Guilt eclipses God. It can become a barrier between us and God. In the Incarnation, God comes to deliver us from guilt, and he comes as our kinsman redeemer, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, to restore us to an inheritance that was lost. What was Adam's inheritance? Communion with God.

All of this takes place in the Spirit. What we have is not just the doctrine of the Incarnation. The doctrine of the Incarnation unfolds properly when we understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Because everything Christ does is in the Spirit. Bringing humanity by the Spirit, through the Spirit, into communion with the Father. To share in that eternal communion which is constitutive of the being of God, which defines the being of God. God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That communion of love is shared with the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Sinful, alienated, diseased humanity is taken and re-created and given to participate in that eternal communion of love.

A lot of people think of God as kind of individual voyeur God, who kind of sits in a rocking chair at some distance watching the world and condemning all that goes on. A lot of liberal theology is exactly like that. That's why very often liberal theology is full of exhortations and condemnations, you know, bullying us into social action of some kind or another. That is a pauper's understanding of God.

The God of the heart of the Christian faith is a God whose being is eternally one of love and communion. A self-contained individual isn't capable of love. Without doctrine of the Trinity, it wouldn't make sense to talk about the love of God. 1 John suggests God is love. That actually is required to be understood in Trinitarian terms because there's an eternal



triune communion of loving.

So I mentioned knowledge of God. The Incarnation opens out knowledge of God by getting us to share in Christ's human knowing of the Father, which at the same time is the eternal Son's knowledge of the Father. No one knows the Father save the Son and those to whom...?...and salvation.

It's also incredibly important for worship. When you turn up on a Sunday morning...I'm sure you're a lot more holy man than I am. But sometimes on Sunday morning I turn up in church and I don't feel in the mood to worship. I feel that's a terrible confession. I ought to, but for whatever reason, maybe I'm worried about my work or worried about my family, I've got concerns and so on. And you go into church and you're going to try and find the energy to pray and to sing hymns and to worship and so on. And very often, in charismatic churches, they poof up the energy with lots of choruses and so on.

One of the great answers to this problem is to remember what worship is. Worship is the gift of participating in the incarnate Son's eternal communion with the Father. So before we ever go into the church, the worship's already going on. The Son is adoring the Father. The Priest, the sole Priest of our confession, is providing that everlasting worship in our place and on our behalf in the Spirit. And when we enter into the church... (well of course it doesn't just happen at church, it happens at home)...when we worship, we're not starting something that wasn't previously going on. We've been taken by the Spirit to share in what is going on and to participate in the prayer that the High Priest is offering for me and for my family, concerning my work-related problems, et cetera. The praise and the rejoicing that goes on in the mind of Christ I've been given to participate in by the Spirit.

**JMF:** The fact that it is in the Spirit would seem to indicate that we don't see it. There's not evidence to us that it's going on, except that the word of God says so. Is that where faith comes in to believe the word of God that it's true for us, regardless of the fact that we may not see it or feel it?

**AT:** Precisely. Faith is a form of sight. It's a form of healing as well. Remember when Simon made that confession about the Christ? Jesus said, "Flesh and blood hasn't revealed that to you, but your Father who is in heaven." Faith is about being given the eyes to see and the ears to hear, to recognize what we otherwise simply wouldn't see. Sometimes I face struggles because sometimes we begin to doubt when we trust our own physical hearing and seeing. The Spirit gives us the conviction, the recognition of what's going on.

Two years ago my wife died of cancer, and she was ill for three and a half years until she died. It was a very difficult time. I've got four boys; it

was a difficult time for the family. During that period, sometimes it was difficult to understand and see purpose in all of this. We prayed for her to be healed, and she wasn't healed, so on and so forth. There were times when it was quite a challenge not to give up and find oneself disoriented.

But one of the...again, just a return to the Incarnation, because this is so pertinent to faith. The heart of the Incarnation is the doctrine that Christ knows our weaknesses, takes our questions, our doubts to himself, ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") and identifies with us in our suffering. By the Spirit we are united with that. We don't float free of the cares of this world. We are given to recognize the One who stands with us in the concerns of this world, who knows our weaknesses, our doubting, our blindness, who in every respect is as tempted as we are and knows our struggles. He knows even our sense of god-forsakenness at times, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

One of the most moving things that I've experienced when Jane was dying in the final weeks of that awful period was the Spirit's giving one the sense that God's solidarity with one, was present with us in and through this grief, that God is Immanuel, God with us.

A lot of people ask the *why* questions. If you're Christians, why is God not healing Jane? Even if they didn't ask it verbally, you tended to feel that people were thinking that. But far more important than the why question is the *where* question. I don't know *why* God allowed Jane to die of cancer, but I do know the answer to the *where* question. Where was God in and through that process? He was right with us in that grief, in sustaining myself and my family and giving us the eyes to see and recognize his presence in and through that misery.

So when we're talking about faith, we are simultaneously talking about the Spirit. It's so easy for us to make faith become a work. Suddenly Alan Torrance does, like in a heroic way, he has faith. No, faith is about the work of the Spirit, taking Alan Torrance in all his frailty, confusion, doubting, and loneliness and suffering, and giving him the eyes to see and hear the grace of God in the context of doubt and suffering and so on. So I think that's the answer one ought to give. Faith is a form of discernment. It's through the *hypostasis*, the substance, in Hebrews 11:1, of things hoped for. It's where we see and discern that which is the object of our hope.

**JMF:** Is our faith a participation in Christ's own faith?

**AT:** That's exactly what faith is. Faith is the gift of sharing by the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father. In the incarnate Son's communion with the Father, his human communion with the Father, *his* faith. There's a big debate in New Testament circles which is incredibly important. Since Reformation times, we've always tended to emphasis in the Protestant churches justification by faith, as if Alan Torrance is justified by *his* faith, I don't think that's Paul's argument.

There's a grammatical issue. Paul says we are justified, and then the question is whether he says by faith *in* Christ or by the faithfulness *of* Jesus Christ. It depends whether the genitive there is objective or subjective. There's a very strong case, when Paul says it in two or three places that we are made righteous or justified through the faith of Jesus Christ, he means precisely that; we were made righteous through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ rather than through our faith in Jesus Christ. So the point you just made couldn't be more important. Our righteousness, our justification does not lie first and foremost in our faith—it lies in the faith and faithfulness of our incarnate Lord.

**JMF:** That would mean that when we're experiencing doubt, which is not uncommon for us to be full of doubt from time to time, we don't need to fear that God has left us because we don't have good enough faith, because our trust really is in Christ himself to have faith for us.

**AT:** You couldn't put it better. I completely agree with that. And that is gospel. That is good news. You see, it wouldn't be good news if God comes to me and says, "Alan, if you have faith, and if you somehow manage to sustain that faith to the point you die, then you'll go to heaven, you'll be saved, and so on and so forth." Because I don't have the confidence in my ability to sustain that.

But what the good news of the gospel is, is that God comes and provides that faith, and that faithfulness, for us and on our behalf.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of my favorite parables. It's often told as a story of confession. The prodigal son comes home because he's repented, and because he's repented, the father accepts him home. That's just nonsense. That's not the story. He comes home for one reason and one reason only, and it couldn't be more plain—because of the quality of the pig food!

He wants to use his father still further. The whole point of the story is that the father, who is a wealthy dignified nobleman, *run*—that means he grabbed his robes up around his waist—humiliated himself in order to run and embrace his son—before he had heard any statement.

It's a great parable of the love of the father. But the gospel goes further. There's a non-parallelism between this parable of the prodigal son and the gospel. The whole time that the son was in the far county, the father was at home. In the gospel, we have the Father going (in the person of the Son) and setting up home in the far country to be with the son and to be where the son is. And, just to continue the non-parallelism, in the person of the Son, God completes all that was required of the prodigal. He offers the faith, the worship, the worth-ship... all that is required is fulfilled in him, in the place of the son. So that by the Spirit, the son might be given to recognize the meaning of grace; that all, as John Calvin put it, all parts of our salvation are complete in Christ, the head of the human race.

Wonderful good news. Remarkable.

**JMF:** Some people, upon hearing that and hearing that explicated, get uncomfortable and say well, if that's true, then that would just give me the freedom to behave improperly. It would give me freedom to sin and not worry because I know that God has forgiven me and loves me despite my sins, so there has to be something wrong with that, because it would promote...especially among our teenagers...why if they heard something like that, they would go out and sin all the more.

**AT:** That's invariably the response that one gets. Let's just think about that for a minute. Great question. Let's think up an analogy.

I was blessed with a very devoted, faithful, loving wife. There's one period in my life when I was involved in theological conversations in Holland, in the Netherlands. I was quite regularly going off to Amsterdam. Lots of non-theological things go on in Amsterdam, and it's sometimes known as sin city. (I used to pull Jane's leg about this.) Let's just imagine that my wife had come to worry as to whether I was actually engaged in illegitimate activities on my travels, wherever those travels were.

Two responses she might have given. She might have said, "Alan, I just want you to know that if you even contemplate involving yourself in any illicit activities while you're away in your travels, I get the kids and I get the car and you're going to pay for this the rest of your days. She could have just spelled out the ramifications and implications, the costliness of any sinning I got up to.

Or she might have said this: As she waved me goodbye from the front door of my house, "Alan, I just want you to know that if ever you find yourself in trouble, no matter what comes your way, I'll always be there for you. You'll always be welcome home. I'll always love you, I'll always be there for you." That sounds a little bit Mills and Boonish. [Mills & Boon publishes romance novels in the U.K.]

But ask yourself...which is most likely to lead me to engage in un-theological activities on my trips to Amsterdam? There is absolutely no question in my mind that I'd be much more likely to go my own way in the first situation, because the first response basically said, well, there's no real unconditional love between us, it's a contractual deal. If you play the game, then I'll play my part, etc. That's not love.

The second was genuine, unconditional, costly love, and that is what converts us, and that's what makes us faithful. I don't think antinomianism (the repudiation of law) is a consequence of discovering God's grace, seeing the extent of God's grace for what it is. I think it's exactly the opposite. When we are brought by the Spirit, we are given the eyes to see the lengths to which God goes out of unconditional love for you as a particular person, as an individual. When you see that and are given to live in the light of that, you're liberated from sin. It doesn't encourage us to go and sin, thinking it's

not going to matter. It has exactly the opposite effect.

That's the difference between what's called legal repentance and evangelical repentance. When we're presented with a *law*, I don't think repentance is anything sincere. It's when we're presented with the gospel, the *euangelion*, the unconditional love and forgiveness of God, when we see that, believe it, given our eyes to recognize it and to affirm it, that sets us free from sin. It actually liberates us from sin. It's an evangelical *metanoia*. A *metanoia* is the word for conversion. It just means the transformation of our minds. When we're presented with unconditional love, it transforms our minds.

So the church is often trying to prop up the gospel either by dangling people over the pit or setting up conditions: if you commit this sin, you're beyond the pale. No. We should have the courage to trust in the grace of God and the work of the Spirit getting people let in, liberating people by giving them eyes to see the meaning of the unconditional freeness of grace.

**JMF:** It reminds me of Paul's letter to Titus [2:12] where he says, "For it is grace that teaches you to say no to ungodliness."

**AT:** Precisely. I like that. Why did I take five minutes to say what you said in a sentence? Exactly.

**JMF:** It's like when people ask that question, it doesn't work like that. Christians who receive the grace of God don't think like that.

**AT:** There's no question at all: good, devout Christians sin. I don't mean to claim that I'm a good Christian, but I sin all the time. *Why* do I sin? Why do I sin when I believe so strongly in the unconditional freeness? I am absolutely convinced when I look at a moment that I'm sinning, it's because for that moment, I've lost my faith. I'm not actually believing in the grace of God.

When to believe in the grace of God is to believe that the risen, crucified Jesus, the sole Priest of our confession, is before us now saying, "Alan, there is nothing you can do that will separate you from my love," and when I believe that, when I'm presented with that and have the eyes to see that and hear it, I'm not tempted to sin. It's when I look away from that, that sin becomes a temptation. So the answer to sin, I think, is for the church to continue to remind people of the unconditional, costly freeness of grace in Jesus Christ. It's when we're living out of that reality that we're liberated. Not just liberated from sin but, more importantly, from the desire to sin.

**JMF:** So it's fair to say that the gospel is not about rules and law-keeping. The gospel is about the positive relationship that we're brought into with God and with one another. In other words, the gospel is a gospel of relationship, not behavior.

**AT:** Precisely. And that's not just the New Testament. That's the heart of the Old Testament. Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments, the laws, where do they start? The first one, "I am the Lord thy God who has

brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” When people talk of the Ten Commandments, they immediately want to start with the “thou shalt” and the “thou shalt not.” But it only makes sense in the context of that first verse, which spells out the nature of God’s unconditional covenant commitment to Israel. He loves Israel and has delivered them from bondage in that love.

It should read...I am the Lord thy God which has delivered you from Egypt...therefore, as I am unconditionally faithful to you, Have no other God’s before me. And as I am unconditionally faithful to all of Israel, so be faithful to each other. Don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie, don’t steal, etc.

In other words, the Torah, the Jewish law, the commandments, are simply spelling out the structure, the logic of a relationship of love and faithfulness. The key concept in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, is God’s *hesed*, God’s covenant faithfulness, or *berith*—that’s the word for covenant. In other words, it’s about relationship. The whole of the Pentateuch is a relational gospel.

So when Jesus summed up the law, in love God and your neighbor as yourself, he wasn’t introducing some new formula, he was being a good Jew. He was simply summarizing the heart of the Ten Commandments. So I couldn’t agree more with what you just said.

## 44. GOD'S WRATH, HELL, AND THE ROLE OF SCIENCE

**J. Michael Fezell:** Let's talk about a subject that is sometimes misunderstood, perhaps, or frightening to people. What is the wrath of God?

**Alan Torrance:** The wrath, or "wroth," as we say in this country... When we speak about the wrath of God, we are speaking about the *love* of God. We mustn't forget that. There are two kind of anger, or wrath, that we know in the human context. There's wrath which can emerge when someone's will is frustrated. Someone's football team doesn't win the game, right? Or the referee makes a decision that you think wasn't the one that you wanted to see made.

**JMF:** Yes.

**AT:** And people get angry, right? A lot of people think of God's wrath as the kind of...the wrath of a largely voyeuristic individual up there, when his will is frustrated. But that is an un-biblical definition of the wrath of God. The wrath of God is the wrath of the jealous God.

What is meant by the jealous God? It does not mean that jealousy of the kind that would mean a breach of the commandments, you know, thou shall not covet. But rather God's wrath, God's jealousy, is God's love for his people. When God loves a people, he hates to see that people taken apart by sin or by disease or whatever. The wrath of God is God's anger at the costliness of sin to a people that he loves, when he sees the destruction of a people. So the best kind of human analogy is when a father adores a daughter or indeed a son, and they are used and abused in some relationship where someone just takes advantage of the one they love. Then there will be a wrath and anger that is a righteous anger grounded in love

for their well-being.

God's wrath doesn't mean that he just loves the victim and hates the victimizer. God loves the victimizer as well as the victim. But God is angry with those responsible for all that destroys and destructs the *shalom*, the peace and communion and *koinonia* of his people. You can't have a proper understanding of the love of God without an equally robust doctrine of the wrath of God. It's imperative that we don't forget that to speak of the love and grace of God is to take radically seriously the biblical affirmations of the wrath of God.

God's love isn't any kind of mamby-pamby sentimental fuzzy love. It's a real valuing of the dignity of people. When that dignity is destroyed or betrayed by sin, God is angry — as angry as he is loving. But the important thing is...when we talk about the wrath of God, we're not talking about something that is arbitrary. The Christian life should never be based in fear. Christian life is lived from the love of God. When we see the wrath of God, we see beyond it the love of God. The wrath reposes in the love of God. So we should rejoice in the wrath of God because, if we're going to do this right, it's the wrath of God that values persons, but loves...and not just the exploited, but the exploiter, the sinner and the sinned against.

**JMF:** There's a passage about how mercy triumphs over judgment. Is that applicable to the wrath of God or the love of God in this way?

**AT:** Absolutely yes. This talk of mercy is there because of the wrath of God. God forgives those with whom he's angry. He forgives me although I give him endless cause to be more than angry. We've got to say this as Christians — we rejoice in the fact that he's angry. I can rejoice in the fact that God is angry with me, because God is only angry with me because of the extent of his love for me and for those against whom I sin. So when we're talking about the wrath of God, we are talking about the good news, odd though that may seem.

**JMF:** We tend to think of God's anger being just like ours.

**AT:** Exactly.

**JMF:** And usually ours is irrational.

**AT:** Exactly.

**JMF:** Even if it's somewhat justified, it still is not under control so well, and it's irrational, and it usually forms poor conclusions while we're in that state of mind.

**AT:** Precisely. Not so with God. What we must not do is project those conceptions of human anger and wrath and frustration of will onto God, because if we do that, we don't have the biblical understanding of wrath. The single theological mistake we make more than any other...it's when we take human concepts, interpret them in the human context, and then project them onto God.

There's a great example of Jesus dealing with that problem. After Peter's



confession about the Christ, Jesus says that the Son of Man is going to suffer and so on and so forth, and Peter becomes very angry. Remember he says, “No, no, no, there’s no way we’re going to allow this to happen,” and so on, because Peter had a concept of messiah — the word messiah, concept of messiah, which he understood, and in the light of that concept, that prior concept he had in his mind, he was going to make sure that Jesus fitted that concept.

How did Jesus respond? The hardest comment that Jesus ever made was to Peter when he was doing that. “Get thee behind me, Satan.” In other words, it is demonic to take a prior concept from human order and try and fit God into that prior human understanding. Why is it demonic? Because it’s reversing revelation. It’s actually turning revelation on its head. Revelation takes our human terms and fills them with new meaning — the meaning that is given them by the gospel and by God’s involvement with us in the person of Christ. We must do that with love, we must do that with wrath. If we do the opposite, then we are not just impeding revelation, we’re inverting it. To do that is demonic.

There’s another remarkable example that...in some ways that feminist theology ... wanted to grasp but failed to think through. Jesus is very concerned about our using concepts, terms and concepts, that are not reconceived in the light of the gospel. So, for example, he doesn’t like us using status symbols, “I’m a professor.” Jesus would have been very skeptical about my using the term professor, right? And we’re not to call anybody Rabbi. There’s only one Rabbi, there’s only one Teacher, “Call no man teacher,” there’s only one teacher, namely God.

What Jesus saw was the way human beings used the terminology of hierarchy to oppress or control and exert power over people. What does Jesus do? Okay, we’re not allowed to use the term *teacher*. I’m not allowing you to use any term that people are going to use to oppress others and to control and so on. Then he goes on and says, “And call no man father,” because there’s only one father.

In other words, if we’re going to use the same term for God and humanity, then as Jesus saw, there’s a potential for abuse. For male fathers, plainly a term that’s appropriately used of God, and then, as it were, taking that divine authority to themselves in some sense. So if we’re going to use a term “Father” of God, we’re to call no man father. That is a dominical injunction. How many Christians do you know stopped using the term *father* of their male parent? Christian churches ignored that for 2000 years.

Had we obeyed Jesus, there would never have been any feminist charges that it’s oppressive to call God Father. The feminists are right, but there is a risk. If we call God Father and males father, then we, by association, give male parents a kind of authority, a superiority in the world order. We open the door to sexism. Jesus anticipated that. We’re not to call anybody father,

technically. I think what he means is this: We have got to be really careful that every time we use terms of God they are radically commandeered and disentangled from any continuity with the human context, that is potentially oppressive.

So, back to the original question from *wrath*. If we use the term wrath of God, we must make sure that it is understood in the life and the totality of God's orientation to the world and to his people.

**JMF:** His redemptive purpose.

**AT:** Exactly. His redemptive purpose. Every term that is used of God and God's purposes must be reconceived in the life of the gospel. The great theologian who was rigorous about this was John Calvin. Karl Barth, I think, perhaps even more consistently than John Calvin. But Calvin really did set about doing that in his great work with the *Institutio*. Every term he sought to reconceive in light of biblical statements.

**JMF:** In that context, then let's talk about hell for a moment. What is hell? How should a Christian view hell?

**AT:** Well, hell is a place of separation from God. It's this place of godlessness.

**JMF:** Do you mean separation in the sense of alienation or in the sense of actual space?

**AT:** No, I think alienation. People standing against God, trying to live without God. There's so much that needs to be said here. First of all, what I want to say is this. When Jesus used the term kingdom, we often thought about the kingdom of God in terms of heaven. One day the kingdom will be fully realized. But the kingdom's not at hand.

Just as the kingdom will be fully realized on one occasion, and yet is at hand at the moment, I think we have to say the same thing about hell. There's a sense...to the extent that we seek to live without God, we stand against God. And hell is already realized in some sense. Of course, the Bible seems to suggest that one day it will be fully realized for people who seek to stand against God. But that raises the question as to what we can say about the population of hell and how populated hell is. We get into very controversial territory. And can I speak to that for just one moment?

Several things I think have got to be said, but they can be said very quickly. First, to the extent that hell is populated, it's populated by people who are loved by God. God is love. God loves all of his creation unconditionally, and that never ends. Secondly, to the extent that hell is populated, it's populated by people for whom Christ died and whom Christ has *forgiven*.

People find that very difficult to conceive. But just as we are to forgive 70 times 7, unconditionally, with no exception, so does Jesus. Jesus, as fellow human, wouldn't tell us to do something he wouldn't do himself. Remember, Jesus is God come as human. If God was telling us to do things

that he wouldn't do himself, then there's no integrity in the gospel. Hell is populated by people who are loved and forgiven by God.

What can we say? I think the most one can say is this. To the extent that it's populated, it's populated by people whom God has allowed to opt to live against his purpose or live in isolation from him. If that happens and to the extent that that does happen, God is utterly distraught for eternity.

Finally, it is not possible to be a Christian and *want* hell to be populated. It's just not possible. Why? Because we are to love our enemies. That means all our enemies. We're to love Hitler, right?

**JMF:** That's the first question that we actually hear. Well, what about Adolf Hitler?

**AT:** We're somehow to love Hitler. That may be humanly impossible, but I believe that God loves Hitler, and one day, when we have that mind which was in Christ Jesus fully in us, we will be set free to love even Hitler.

**JMF:** In that day we would also have seen and taken part in everything that Hitler had taken away having been restored through Christ though, wouldn't we?

**AT:** Yes. That's right. It will be a lot easier. Obviously, we don't love what Hitler did. To love an evil person is not to love their evil. A final comment: I often have students come up to me and say that they had a grandparent that they loved who has just died, and they sadly weren't Christians, and they fear for their salvation. They find it a puzzling thing — how could they...could it be the case that God doesn't love the grandparent as much as *they* loved their grandparent? The only answer for that, is God loves the grandparent even though she or he wasn't a Christian, and infinitely more than they possibly could.

**JMF:** Right.

**AT:** When it comes to questions of the future destination of people, very often the people whom we've loved and who have died, I think we just say this — that the only God we know is a God who is all loving and who is all just and all forgiving, who would never do anything that is contrary to his love, to his justice, and to his forgiveness. Therefore we can joyfully commit those people to God and trust those people with God, given that God loves them more even than we do.

I think there's good news even despite the biblical warning about hell. In the dominical warnings, Jesus speaks about hell. Although it does raise a question sometimes whether Jesus in some sense speaks to that in and through the cross and resurrection, whether we need to go back to what Jesus said and interpret it in the light of what he has done, because he descended to hell for us.

**JMF:** Yes. That's the very reason he came, was because of the reality of the consequences of separation and hell.

Let's switch gears for a moment and ask about science. Is science a

hindrance or a help to Christian faith?

**AT:** Good science is a wonderful gift of God. It's helping us to understand God's creation, simple as that. So, to the extent that scientists are being genuinely scientific, interpreting the contingent order, creation out of itself in its own light, and are doing so truthfully and faithfully, it's a wonderful gift. Science can only function because of the intelligibility of the contingent order, and that intelligibility is given by God. It stems from the intelligence of the Creator.

The existence of science...it's existence in God...I think it's an extremely strong argument from science for the existence of God, if you're wanting to engage in arguments for the existence of God. But there are problems in the scientific community, because there's a philosophy that's sometimes *confused* for science, called Naturalism.

Naturalism is as old as the hills...well, not quite as the hills... but it's as old as civilization. It is the view, it goes right back to the creation. It is a view that the world is basically a closed causal system that just operates in indifference to questions of value, fairness, and so on. Certain forms of science, sometimes in the biological sciences this is more common, science wants to presuppose naturalism, the view that God does not exist.

We see that illustrated in Richard Dawkins's thought, for example. He believes that to be scientific, and to repudiate the existence of God is to be an atheist. I am emphatically of the view that that is *not* to be scientific. Scientists, I think, should not be in the business of making theological claims – that is to go beyond the boundaries of scientific investigation.

How compatible, therefore, is the affirming of the existence of God with science? It's quite remarkable what's taken place in the last 30 years. We've seen in the last 30 years the most significant developments in philosophy and Christian philosophy since Thomas Aquinas.

In 1974 I started a four-year philosophy degree. In those days, there was a man called G.L. Mackey who was of the view that it was logically incoherent to be a Christian theist. You could count the number of Christian philosophers on the fingers on a mutilated hand, to be frank. The vast majority of analytic philosophers repudiated theism.

In the space of only 30 years, that situation has changed profoundly. It is now the case that at least one in four analytic philosophers in North America, which of course is where analytic philosophy is at its finest, one in four is a theist; the vast majority are Christian theists.

In 2001, one of the world's leading atheist philosophers, Quentin Smith, wrote an article (and this is going back to the science issue) in the journal he edited, which was called *Philo*...that is a journal of the Humanist Philosopher's Association, with every leading atheist philosopher on its board — all the brains behind Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and so on. His article was a 10,000-word article called "The Meta-Philosophy of

Naturalism” — a look at the philosophical underpinnings of naturalism — that’s the atheistic philosophy of Dawkins and his book.

In that article he establishes that the Christian philosophers, this new breed of Christian philosophers, led really by Alvin Plantinga, who is the greatest living Christian philosopher, one of the greatest philosophers. The Christian philosophers, he says, have beaten the atheists, the naturalist philosophers. At every key point, their writings are more logically rigorous, more cognizant. His article was really a clarion call to atheists to get their act together if they’re not going to be absolutely swamped by the quality of Christian philosophy.

So one of the things that’s emerged out of the Christian philosophers, was the number of arguments that stem from contemporary science for the existence of God. One of the factors that the Christian philosophers have been writing about recently is the fine-tuning of the universe. The chances of carbon emerging are infinitesimally small. Other factors, ranging to Planck time and so on.

I won’t go into the details right now, but the factors, the chances of this universe occurring in the way it is, coming about from the way that it’s come about, in such that there can be life on this planet, is just an unthinkable small number. We’re talking about factors such as 1 in 10 to the power of 60 in one of the fine tunings — in another fine tuning, 1 in 10 to the power of 43. But the difference between 1 in 10 to the power of 43 and 1 in 10 to the power of 42, we’re talking about massive, massively small chances. And 10 to the 43, let’s see, 10 to 43 zeroes after it.

Similar is the chances of there being a planet in which you and I can sit here being filmed and having intelligent, hopefully, engaging in intelligent conversation are unthinkable small. Science has no explanation for that. Science can’t explain the intelligibility of the contingent order. It can’t explain why there’s something rather than nothing.

One of the attempts to explain fine tuning on the part of atheists is called the “multi-verse theory,” which suggests that there’s a new infinite or infinite number of random universe occurrences, one of which just happens to look like it’s been designed. But then there would need to be a mechanism to produce all these random potential universe occurrences. And where would that come from? That still wouldn’t explain why there’s something rather than nothing.

There’s a vast number of absolutely fundamental questions which are beyond the bounds of science, that science will not be able to answer, in which theism answers very straightforward. In other words, theism has spectacular and unparalleled explanatory power. That’s something to bear in mind when we get media from everywhere bombarding us with the atheism of people like the Dennetts and the Dawkins’s of this world, and Sam Harris, and so on. The quality of our arguments and the final answer don’t

even begin to touch the quality of the arguments that are being offered right now by the world's leading Christian philosophers.

**JMF:** Do you have a suggestion for a lay person who might want to read, say, one book that would help them along those lines? What would it be?

**AT:** I think John Polkinghorne has written some very useful books, and David Wilkinson of Durham has written some very successful books. The person that I would encourage everyone to try and engage with is Alvin Plantinga. A great many of the articles he has written on God and science are on the internet, so you don't need to fork out for a book to become familiar with the issues. Scotsmen will never fork out if we don't have to.

## 45. BEING IN CHRIST

**J. Michael Feazell:** Paul wrote to the Colossians that God was in Christ reconciling *all things* to himself. What are the implications of that for how human beings live together?

**Alan Torrance:** The word that Paul uses is *apokatallasso*, and that is the word for “to reconcile,” and it means, technically, “exchange.” It re-summarizes what you were saying earlier about redemption. You can summarize the whole of redemption and salvation in that verse...God was in Christ bringing about an exchange — taking what is ours, our alienated, sinful, fallen humanity — and healing it and transforming it. God is in Christ taking what is ours in order to give us what is his. What is his? It’s a life of communion characterized by unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness and so on. When we are given by the Spirit to participate in Christ...the phrase “in Christ” appears in Paul 154 times. That’s the heart of Christian life, is being *en Christo* in Greek, participating in Christ.

Now, to come to your question...what are the implications of this for how we live in society? To be a Christian is to be given the eyes to see and the ears to hear every facet of life in that light. To be a Christian is to think out of Christ in every situation. It’s never possible to bracket our Christian life out as something that happens on Sundays, or concerns our private piety. To be a Christian is to think about science, politics, every facet of our lives in the light of what it is to be *en Christo*. If we are re-created to be *en Christo*, if our being is defined by our participation in the body of Christ, then every facet of our lives has to re-thought in that light.

I had the enormous privilege to spend two years in a research group, North American based, with Miroslav Wolf, Nicholas Wolterstorff and two others, thinking about the implications, the ramifications, of reconciliation — of this reconciliation — for our political engagement. I think it means

this: We shouldn't advocate anything, not least in politics, that doesn't reflect what it is to be *en Christo*, to be in Christ. Therefore, you don't pray one thing and vote another thing. There's got to be integrity and consistence, in that. That means that Christians (and this is what it means to be the salt of the earth) should work for reconciliation at the horizontal level everywhere they find themselves.

That means, for example, if you're a Christian in politics and you're seeking to engage with terrorists or situations of conflict and war and so on. You have got to allow the truth of that verse to infuse and inform and direct your thinking in every respect. Does that mean that reconciliation means ignoring terrorism or absolute aggression? No, emphatically not. But it does mean seeking to find...instead of simply enacting revenge or retribution, we should have an eye to thinking what is it that we can do, what is it we can (if we are politicians) inspire in our voters that will lead to genuine reconciliation, because that's what God desires. What can we do that will generate healing and a restoration of good relationships?

To be a human being is to be created in the image of God, in the *imago dei*, as we often hear. What does that mean? It means that we are to image, to reflect, to correspond, to who God is in all that we are. That's in the Torah, in the Jewish law, in the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord thy God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Therefore, as I am unconditionally faithful to you and have been, so must you be faithful to me, have no other gods before me, and to each other." That is to image God, to be in the image of God, that's what the *imago dei* is talking about. It's not talking about some innate human capacity. It's talking about the form of human existence corresponding to God's relationship to us.

Jesus summed up the laws, "To love God, and our neighbors as ourselves." He was talking about something that should impact every facet of our existences. To be lights in this world, to be the salt of the earth, is for Christians to have the courage, sometimes against the stream of popular opinion, to work for reconciliation, restoration, healing. And to think radically and creatively as to what is going to bring that about.

If every Christian in the West were radically to think out of the Christian faith, just imagine the political priorities that would be manifest in our political decision making. This is very controversial — we like to keep religion and politics separate. I don't see any Christian endorsement of that.

If every politician in the West who was voted into their office by Christians were to seek to enact those insights, the world would be a massively happier place, and the West could be seen as committed to reconciliation, to healing, to being concerned for the poor, for prioritizing, liberating two-thirds of the world from the extreme financial hardship and the disease and so on that causes so much grief. If that was what the eyes of



our critics, our enemies saw when they looked to the West, a group of nations committed to making, to creating a reconciled world characterized by mutual care and concern, we'd be far more influential, there would be much more peace in this world.

There's still always going to be evil. We're still left with situations where there's always going to be, I'm afraid, terrorism, there's always going to be hostility, there's always going to be greed, and sometimes (I'm not a pacifist, I'd love to be) we've got to take actions to try and ensure the best possible outcome for all concerned. And though (as Stanley Hauerwas suggests), we've got to respect pacifists, because they have a very strong doctrine of divine providence.

What's unambiguously clear in everything we do and however we do it, the aim, the goal, must be *shalom*. Not just our own peace and well-being, the peace and well-being of our enemies, right? Make no bones about it, the gospel is radical. The incarnation has radical implications. It should impact every facet of the way we live, and vote, and think, and spend our money, and behave. Nothing would be more exciting than if the church had the courage, and it does take courage, to be that radical...

**JMF:** The question that springs to mind is that Christians don't ever seem to even come close in making that happen as a worldwide body. There are so many denominations and so many sects and splits. They don't get along with each other; they're divided even against each other. How do we account for such division among Christians when we're called to such radical living together as the body of Christ?

**AT:** You've put your finger on the tragedy of contemporary Christian existence. It's a terrible witness that the body of Christ...we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. That's an article of faith to believe, that there's one church, because there's one body just as there's one Christ, there's one body of Christ. To the extent that we are Christians, we are one, and we must be conceived as being one. Does the world see one body of Christ? One united communion of the body of Christ? I'm afraid it doesn't. It sees a lot of Christian individuals driven by pride, very often—sometimes at war with each other. Look at the tragedy of events in Northern Ireland; look at what we've seen in South Africa. The German Christians—Hitler couldn't have come to power without the support, I'm afraid, of the *Deutsche* Christians, the German Christians.

You question why things are the way they are? A one word answer — sin, or pride (which is the other side of the same coin). A lot of people want to go for a kind of ecumenism, which means that we form big bodies and we form federations — where the churches talk to each other and they've got good relationships with each other. Let's be clear about this. What would our Lord want to see? He'd want to see one body of Christ characterized by radical communion and a coherent collective witness

which has real integrity. He'd want to see love and forgiveness and mutual understanding.

The church is divided because it doesn't have the mind of Christ. Remember, Christ only has one mind (unless we're going to delve into dramatic debates). The mind of Christ which is in Christ Jesus should characterize the body of Christ, and therefore to be an evangelical, to be a Christian, is to strive for that.

Look right and left, look at the people who belong to churches with whom you disagree, and you've got to say to yourself, "that is a tragedy, and what can we do together to find ways of not just being or possessing the mind of Christ, but embodying it within the world, because the divisions in the church are a terrible witness." When I used to involve myself in missions (I remember Howard Marshall and I used to run missions together at one stage) I remember going around doors and the continual complaint was, "How can you Christians offer good news to the world? You can't even agree amongst yourselves."

**JMF:** Isn't it interesting that where we do see communion and union in the body of Christ is among individuals and among even pastors of various denominations who come together for working together, and they bypass what amounts to the institutionalism, the entrenched structures of churches and so on, and they work around that in ways that reflect the body of Christ in individual ways. This is where we see what needs to be seen.

**AT:** I couldn't agree more. That is what it is to be true to the gospel. But it also means that we also have to work within our own churches to bring about change — so we can find constructive ways forward together with other churches and have high aims. I think denominational division of the kind we have at the moment is a real handicap. To be evangelical is to be ecumenical. The stupid sad thing is, ecumenism and evangelicalism have often been polarized.

**JMF:** They originate at the heads of or in the context of institutionalism, which itself is not Christianity but institutionalism.

**AT:** Precisely. We've got to move, to get beyond institutionalism.

**JMF:** It does happen with people on the ground who are living out their faith...

**AT:** Usually the problem is establishment religion or civil religion. For example, in Scotland...very often, to be a Scot is to belong to the Church of Scotland, as I do, and to be part of that establishment. Establishment religion is not participation in the body of Christ. I don't think there's any place for establishment religion, and I think we're called beyond that, and we must do all we can to liberate the gospel from those forms of civil religion at least.

**JMF:** One quick thing it brings to mind when we're talking about reconciliation is in the micro context of a family, where perhaps a husband

is abusing a wife — this is not uncommon — and sometimes the church tells her that she needs to reconcile with this man who abuses her, and so ...do we sometimes confuse the forgiveness and the reconciliation of the spirit with some kind of requirement to go back under the authority of this person who is bound to abuse her again?

**AT:** We should never advocate in the name of reconciliation a situation of sustained abuse. That is to turn reconciliation on its head, and as I am trying to explain, reconciliation is about being given to participate in what is Christ's. You're right, abuse within a family context is very widespread; it's a massive problem. And not least within the Christian church.

We've got to be clear, that when there's abuse going on, the church has a categorical absolute obligation (apodictic obligation) to stop that, to put an end to that abuse. How could we possibly give and communicate good news to a woman who is being abused by a husband by telling her to acknowledge his authority or anything of that kind? That is not the gospel. The gospel is to affirm the dignity and humanity of that woman, and do everything in our power to liberate her from the powers that would oppress and exploit, in this case, perhaps a violent or abusive husband.

I often think that the church should be much, much more outspoken, it's emphatically my view, about the problems of abuse within family life. One of the tragedies, sometimes, is this aligning of God's fatherhood with human fatherhood and suggesting that fathers are somehow superior. And then they can talk about the divine wrath! I know one Calvinist theologian who genuinely thinks he's got grounds for what I think is fairly abusive discipline of his children, because he's got to enact, as the image of the Father, "godly discipline." He takes the belt from around his trousers and belts his children. That is precisely what Jesus was opposing. Every facet of Jesus' ministry was opposing that.

Family life and marriages should be contexts of *shalom* where people should be liberated to be free to be themselves, to know what it is to be loved. A family is not being a family in truth unless it's being the body of Christ in truth. The body of Christ is a radically inclusive, affirming, liberative communion. We've got to take these issues very seriously. It is not surprising that feminist thinkers have been so concerned about abuses that have gone on within (let's face it) often very patriarchal forms of Christianity. These have only emerged because we've failed to be true to the gospel, as to Jesus' clear injunctions. We've got to work continually to oppose those forms of sin.

**JMF:** In the time we have left, would you mind sharing some personal reflections about your father, J.B. Torrance, and your uncle, T.F. Torrance?

**AT:** I was incredibly privileged. I was brought up in a wonderful home. I remember my father once said to me, "In the light of Matthew 23 (that statement about calling no man father) and in the light of the gospel," he

once said to me, “Alan, biologically I’m your father, but Christianly speaking, you and I are brothers.” As I was growing up, there was discipline, I’d get into trouble and he’d discipline me, but never in a way that it wasn’t – and didn’t make his love for me unambiguously clear.

From my later teens on, my father always treated me like a brother. Because he believed, if we’re going to think out of Christ, *en Christo*, in Christ, that is who we were. We had the most wonderful relationship. Even when I was 16 or 17, he’d discuss all sorts of family decisions with my sisters and myself — which is quite unusual to do in Scotland, which is a very traditional culture. If we were going to buy a house or the way we’d spend money, we’d all talk about it as a family, and my parents would involve us in major family decisions. It was a radically inclusive relationship. But for dad, what was always transparent was the fact that it was his Christian conviction that was informing every facet of his treatment of us.

There are some remarkable memories. I’ll just take one that stands out, for this is just a wonderful incidence. I remember Christmas was always a very formal time in our family because we used to get together, all the aunts and uncles and so on, and we all dressed up in our Sunday best. Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, was fun, very often, because all the same food was there and we’d have...

**JMF:** Can you tell us what Boxing Day is?

**AT:** Boxing Day is the day after Christmas — the 26th of December in the U.K. We’d have all the same food, but then we’d just be there together as a family and relaxed, and it was a great fun day. On one occasion, one particular Boxing Day, we all sat down to lunch and there was a turkey and all the trimmings, and all the remains of the Christmas provision was distributed amongst all the family, we sat down, and dad had just said prayers, and there was a ring at the front doorbell. I thought, “Who comes to the front door at 1:00 on...”

Dad and I went to the front door, and he opened the door, and there was a tramp. It was freezing cold out there. He said to my father, “I’m terribly sorry to bother you at this time, but I was just wondering if you could just provide me with some bread...it’s a very difficult time to get food over Christmas.” Do you know what dad did? Ushered him into the house right straight through to the dining room and put him at his place in front of his food. All the Christmas food had been distributed.

Dad went through to the kitchen and got some bean and egg together...so that was dad’s lunch. That tramp ate dad’s feast. He made that tramp feel as if he belonged in the family. My dad lived his life, and with that mind which is in Christ Jesus, and my mother was a great partner in that. It was a privilege.

My uncle Tom, T.F. Torrance, he is a wonderful, wonderful uncle. I lived with him for a year. When I was at university my parents moved, thus

I lived with uncle Tom. It was a year of enormous intellectual stimulation, we had fabulous discussions. He had a spectacular sense of humor, I mean we laughed till tears came down. He would pray for me. I remember one occasion I had broke up with a girlfriend and I was very distraught, and he took me into his study and he prayed with me. So I was very privileged.

These are both men who are theologians, totally committed churchmen that had a vision of what it was to share by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. They sought to see every facet of their lives in that light. You talked earlier a little bit about, you mentioned ethics. Ethics, like worship, is a gift of participation by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. It's interesting that *worship*, and worth-ship, *ethics*, really, are the same word. There should be no dichotomy between them. In other words, to cut to the chase, every facet of our human life is a gift by the Spirit of sharing in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father.

## 46. THE GRACE OF THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST

**Michael Morrison:** David, it's a pleasure to have you here.

**David Torrance:** Thank you. It's a privilege to be here.

**MM:** I'd like to begin a little bit by finding out who you are. I associate the name Torrance with Thomas and James, and you're the third brother?

**DT:** The third brother. Yes. The youngest.

**MM:** Right. And you have all studied theology and written on theology.

**DT:** Well, my brothers have. I...rather more modestly, I'll put it that way.

**MM:** You've helped in writing some of the books, haven't you?

**DT:** Tom and I edited 12 volumes of John Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries* from Latin to English. That was quite a big effort. That's still in print. That was quite a while ago. Various other articles and so on and various journals.

**MM:** But you didn't go into an academic teaching role like your two brothers did.

**DT:** No. I embarked on the same course at university...went through classics... honors philosophy...Bachelor of Divinity, specialized in Dogmatics and Christology, as they did. I also went on and studied on under Karl Barth and Oscar Cullman as they did. Then I began to question what I called an academic career, to the parish ministry. I thought I was called to parish ministry, and I believe that's so. I've enjoyed it immensely.

### **The joy of parish ministry**

**MM:** Your experience in the parish ministry...you've enjoyed it. What's been the most enjoyable part of your work with the parishes?

**DT:** When you find people have been converted, they discover the reality of salvation and new life in Christ—it's a tremendous joy. It's a tremendous privilege to be allowed to be present when someone comes to Christ, or again, when people's faith is deepened and they come to a new sense of freedom in Christ. I don't think there's any job that's more satisfying than ministry. I didn't believe that at one time. It was quite a struggle for me to enter the ministry, but having entered it now, it was a marvelous calling.

**MM:** A lot of pastors, in the U.S. at least, drop out. There's a high turnover rate because of the demands of the job. You've obviously had a different experience as a parish minister. What's the key to your role in leading a parish? Why do you see so much joy in it, whereas they might see a burden?

**DT:** I think the key to the ministry is to keep your eye on Jesus Christ—Jesus the Son of God, Jesus who became man, who lived, who died, who rose again, ascended. If Christ the living God...and here we are face to face with God the Father, God the mighty Creator and our Redeemer. If he is central in our ministry, then our ministry should grow more exciting and fresher as the years go by. Take your eyes off that, and we could try and carry though the responsibilities of ministry on our own strength, and people fail.

Put it a different way: I feel quite strongly that (I think this to myself) if you look at ministry today, probably 90 percent of all our preaching is telling people what to do. We lay tremendous burdens on the congregation. Our congregations get weary and tired, and many slip away. The ministers themselves, they get frustrated and they leave. They're trying to go ahead in ministry, but under their own steam, using their own efforts, their own resources.

I believe quite strongly that in the ministry we are called here to proclaim Christ, the person of Christ. We can't separate the person of Christ from his work and the atonement. That's what we are here to proclaim, so that predominately, I think, our preaching should be the person of Christ and the atonement. If we keep our eye on Christ and seek to present Christ to the world...this is something very exciting, something very living and alive...we see people coming face-to-face with God in Jesus Christ. That is a very exciting thing. I thoroughly enjoyed the ministry. I still do.

**MM:** The lights go on and they suddenly come to a new understanding of...

**DT:** That's right.

## Christ has done everything for us

**MM:** In a word, how would you describe what Christ has done for us? I mean, why are people so excited about it? I could have my word for it, what's yours?

**DT:** He's done *everything* for us. When Christ came into the world, we read in John's Gospel, he said, "I have come that you may have life, life more abundant, life to the absolute full." When we come to Christ, we are coming face-to-face with God, we're entering into the family of God, but we're discovering life itself, and that's a good thing.

**MM:** Does that mean I don't need to do anything?

**DT:** No. I wouldn't say that. God has done everything for us in Christ. Christ has come, Christ has redeemed us. When Christ on the cross said, "It is finished," that was a triumphant call, the triumphant shout of a victor. He's done everything for our salvation. All we can do is accept it.

Many years ago (I mentioned that I was involved in mission) when Billy Graham carried out an "All Scotland Crusade" a long time ago in Edinburgh in 1955, some 2000 people went forward in his crusade in Edinburgh district. I was very heavily involved in the follow-up. We had classes for them for 12 weeks. We took away, we think, 800 or 900 in three residential conferences.

I became involved in conversation with a man who was an office-bearing elder in the church, a very fine man. He said, "I've done everything that Billy Graham has asked. I came forward, repented, prayed, asked Christ into my life." In his own words, he said, "I never seemed to have got there." As I listened to him, I said, "You know what you've got to learn? Nothing at all."

He was very startled. I said, "You've got to learn to do absolutely nothing, because when Christ said on the cross, 'It is finished,' he's done everything for your salvation, and there's nothing left for you to do except to say *thank you*, and to go on and on and on saying *thank you*. Your thanksgiving is your acceptance." I still see that man in my mind's eye as it broke home to him. You could see his face relax, and he laughed. The whole burden had departed. He was set free to live. He was set free to share the gospel with other people.

**MM:** He had been trying too hard.

**DT:** I think one of the disasters of the Christian church today...I love the church, I grew up in it...is that we tend to say, God has done his part in Jesus Christ. Christ has come, he's died, he's redeemed—now it's over to us. And we call on our people to do their part. We say come, repent, believe, pray, worship, read the Bible. But we're really throwing a tremendous responsibility back on the people.

**MM:** You do this, you do that.

**DT:** ...so that their salvation, to put it rather crudely, we're really saying



that salvation is partly what God does and partly what you do. That's totally wrong. It's entirely of God, and all we've got to do is simply to thank him, and that must be a wholehearted thanksgiving. It's a total letting go. A total surrender.

**MM:** If we really realize what a gift it is, then we are thankful.

**DT:** Absolutely. But it is a total thanksgiving where we thank God with our whole being. The Psalmist said that in Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless, praise, his holy name." It's that thanksgiving where we're letting go...that we accept the whole wonder of what God has done in Christ. We're receiving new life. In that freedom, there's joy.

**MM:** If he's done everything and he gives that to us, theologically, that's grace. People misunderstand grace, though.

**DT:** Grace is a tremendous outpouring of the love of God in Jesus Christ. God, our Creator, came in incredible love to give himself to us in Jesus Christ—to give himself in his love, in his forgiveness, in his continuing redemption. If we were to stand under a waterfall, now, we'd be drenched, we'd be soaked. You and I stand under the waterfall, as it were, the outpouring of God's love and grace, of his forgiveness, of his redemption. And that's grace, the sheer outpouring of the love of God, because we don't deserve anything.

We deserve nothing. But God as love comes, gives himself to us, forgives us, redeems us, gives us life, through the Holy Spirit brings us in, we are adopted into the family of God, able to call God Father. Know that we are in Christ, sons and daughters of God, heirs of the everlasting kingdom. That all is a free, an abundant gift. That's grace.

**MM:** I noticed earlier that you said not just that he gives us forgiveness, but he gives us *himself*.

**DT:** We can never separate the grace of God from the person of Christ. One of the great, dare I say, sins of the church through the ages is to separate the person of Christ and the work of Christ and separate Christ from grace. The medieval church was tempted to believe that grace is something that the church possesses, something that the church can dispense. That's nonsense. We can be possessed by Christ, but we can't possess Christ. Grace is wrapped up with the person of Christ and across the work of Christ, because we can't separate them.

## The covenant of grace

**MM:** You talk about grace as God giving himself to us. But he also gives us forgiveness, and he gives us a kind of a promise of what he's done, of what he will be for us. That's kind of a covenant that he makes with us, this covenant of grace. In Reformed traditions, a covenant of grace is a key term. Maybe you could explain a little more about what it means.

**DT:** Covenant grace is exceedingly important. Ultimately God made a covenant of grace with all mankind, and that covenant embraced all creation. But within that covenant, God made an inner covenant with Israel when he called his people of Israel into partnership with himself for the redemption of the world.

In Jeremiah 13, we have this astonishing statement where God says that as a man would bind a belt around his waist, I have taken my people Israel and bound them onto me around my waist. He will never let them go for the working out of his salvation. In a wider sense, God has come and made a covenant of grace with all humankind in order that he might redeem humankind, in order that he might work out his salvation. That covenant of grace is where God, who is absolutely holy, comes in love in tremendous condescension and binds to himself a sinful people. Israel was a sinful people, a representative people of all of us.

In a wider sense, God has bound all of us to himself—an eternal bond of grace so that we can't escape the grace of God. We can't escape the embrace of God. This is a great mystery. The fact that God in all his holiness bound a sinful people to himself meant that Israel suffered, because in their sin they rebelled, and yet God in his love would not let them go, because he's determined to strip away their sin and redeem them. In that extraordinary painful situation, Israel passed through a situation when she had shattered herself on the rock of God's love.

Ultimately, that's what we're faced with on the cross because that is gathered up in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has bound the whole world to himself so that when Jesus is a particular man, he's a representative man linked to all creation in an everlasting bond. He's taken hold of all humankind so that when Jesus died, we all died. It's one of the things I've often pondered. In 2 Corinthians 5, when Christ died, we died. What does that really mean? It surely means that our natural death...well, there's no such thing as a natural death. We die because Christ died. We're joined to Christ in his incredible bond of grace. The fact that Christ rose again means that all of us will rise again in the resurrection.

Here's the mystery—that sin has interposed between us and God so that, as Jesus says in John 5, whereas we are all resurrected, “some will be resurrected unto righteousness, some unto condemnation.” Grace is where God comes in love giving himself to us. Not only giving himself to us, but becoming us and remaining himself holy and yet at one and the same time becoming *us* in order to redeem us, to cleanse away our sin, and to give us new life, that we might enter into the fellowship of God in Jesus Christ.

There are many, many aspects of creation, of grace. For us to accept us it, it must be whole-hearted...it's an all or nothing. It's a letting go in thankfulness, and then we accept all that God has done, all his love, we accept life, and joy, and salvation.

## The importance of forgiveness

It equally means that our lives must be transformed, if we forgive one another. If we don't forgive one another, we're not able to receive the grace of God. That I find very important, because in the ordinary practical ministry, you meet that again, and again, and again. There are divisions in the church. Church people, Christian people, find that they cannot forgive their neighbor. That lack of forgiveness means that there is a barrier between them and God. It will hinder their faith. It's the spirit of evil. So the grace means that we receive the love, the forgiveness of God, but in receiving it, we must allow the grace of God to flow through us, and we forgive one another.

An interesting case of that: Some years ago I had a meeting in our headquarters of our church in Central Edinburgh. It was a morning meeting, and I agreed to meet my wife afterwards for lunch. Our meeting ended early, and I was standing on the pavement [sidewalk] just outside the church offices waiting for my wife. I suppose I was idly dreaming, my mind was far away, and I suddenly heard a voice accosting me and saying, "Are you a holy man?"

I had never been called a holy man before, and my first attempt was to laugh. But he was a man, an Indian, looking at me, very serious. Instead of laughing, I said, "Well, I try to be a holy man." He told me a story. He had come over to study engineering. He had come from a strong Hindu background; I think he had been Brahman. He had been converted in Scotland, and he said for a while he was absolutely full of the joy of the Lord, and in a week's time was due to be baptized. But something had happened, and all the joy had departed. He said to me, "What's wrong with me?" Quite a challenge.

I said, "Well, only God knows. I can make a few suggestions. You alone will know whether any of these suggestions ring a bell and are true for you. Maybe you stopped praying, maybe you stopped reading the Bible, stopped going to church, perhaps you've been disobedient to God and done some things wrong, perhaps you can't forgive someone who you feel has hurt you."

He suddenly said, "That's it. That's it." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "That's it. Forgiveness." Someone had done something or said something or just hurt him very badly, and he couldn't forgive.

I didn't ask him what the situation was, but I said to him, "Well, if that's the case, you can forgive. That has come in between you and the Lord, and you've got to allow God to work through you and give you the grace to forgive. Forgiveness is not a human quality. You can't, out of your own resources, forgive someone who's hurt you. Forgiveness is a gift of God. All you can do is to tell the Lord the situation and ask God to give you the gift to forgive. But if you do that, you'll find peace with God."

So I said, “Shall we pray?” We stood there on the pavement and we prayed together, and off he went. About three days later I got a lovely letter from him. He said he’d gone off, found this person, and been reconciled. He said all the joy of the Lord was back, and that’s very important.

**MM:** It reminds me of the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus said if you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven.

**DT:** Absolutely.

**MM:** You’re saying that our relationship with other people...even though God does everything for us, our relationship with others somehow is clogging the pipeline or something or God’s gifts don’t reach us...

**DT:** Very much so. That is a very common factor in the ordinary parish ministry. I remember standing in my last parish talking to one of my people out on the pavement, and she told me that she had never talked to her daughter for 12 years. I said, “You know, you can’t say the Lord’s prayer, you know?” “Oh, but you don’t know my daughter.” I said, “No.” She lives in a different part of the country. I said, “No. I don’t. But at the end of the day, I don’t really know you, do I?”

I said, “Whatever the situation, God has forgiven us for everything, and we don’t deserve it. It’s a free gift. He loves us. He’s forgiven us. That means that he’s asking you to show that forgiveness to your daughter, whatever the situation. You’re commanded by God to go and phone your daughter and to tell her you love her and forgive her.” I said that rather frank. Two days later she called me over and told me, “I talked to my daughter the first time in 12 years, and things are put right.” Yes, it lies at the very heart of the Lord’s Prayer and is very basic... It’s a practical thing in the ministry.

The other very important thing about grace, forgiveness, is that forgiveness is prior to repentance. God forgives, and we are called to receive that forgiveness, but he doesn’t forgive on condition that we repent. Conditional repentance has crept into, I suppose, all the churches. Sadly, it’s crept into my own church in Scotland.

Very clearly the Reformation...we have Calvin, we have Knox, our Scottish reformer. They followed the teaching in Scripture that God comes, and he’s forgiven us in Christ, and we are summoned to repent. We are summoned to receive.

But because of sinful human nature, we have turned it around that God forgives *if* we repent—on condition. So in the church in Scotland we have what we call a *Book of Common Order*, and that is an outline of suggested services for various usages and forms of worship. We have another *Book of Common Order* for use in what we call the courts of the church. The minister is ordained, inducted to a parish, and so forth. In those services, say for an ordination of a minister or induction to a charge, there is what we call a preamble, a statement of what’s happening, and we have the words that

“God offers forgiveness upon repentance.” Every time I hear that, I squirm. Forgiveness upon repentance. Forgiveness if you repent. It’s conditional. No.

In my own personal experience, I joined up as a soldier in 1942, a long time ago. Before going abroad, I served for a period in England and used to join a small group, about 12 or 15 other soldiers, simply for friendship, for Bible study, for prayer, and despite my Reformed upbringing, I was somewhat influenced at the time by this presentation of the gospel, which is conditional repentance. If you repent, God will forgive you.

That troubled me, so I found myself praying and trying to confess all the sins that I could remember, to receive forgiveness of God. In this process, I was quite aware that my prayers got longer and longer as I tried to remember and confess all the sins. I found myself probably confessing sins I hadn’t really committed because otherwise if I don’t repent, how do I get forgiveness? Then the question came, but what about the sins you don’t remember? I tried to answer that by saying, “All right. Lord, have mercy on me. I am a sinner.” That covers a lot.

But then the question: How do you know you’re repenting? I had no answer to that, and that really troubled me, because if I didn’t repent, I would have no forgiveness. How can I be sure? Sometime after that I was reading Romans 6 in Greek (I studied Greek in school) and it hit me very powerfully. If you take verses 2-6, the aorist tense, that’s a past tense, that when Christ died, something very decisive in repentance happened: I died with him. And when he rose, I rose with him. That happened a long time ago, before I was born, 2000 years ago.

It hit me then so powerfully that Christ had died, he had risen, he had forgiven me before I sinned, before I was born. It was all done and completed. All I was asked to do was to receive it in thanksgiving. If I didn’t receive it, I was lost. We’re not compelled to receive it. Hell can be very real and is real. But the fact that all I was called to do was the thanksgiving, was a tremendous relief to me. You are just full of joy, the assurance, and never again did I doubt it.

**MM:** You accepted that *you* had come to the point where you see in parishioners that was so exciting, whenever they come to that realization that God has done it for them, for all of us...already.

**DT:** That’s right. Last April I was preaching on the subject of grace and the fact that God has done everything for us and all we have to do is thanksgiving. I was preaching in the morning with a lay preacher, what we call a reader, taking the evening service. Shaking hands at the door after the service, this man, all he could do was laugh. He said, “You know, I’ve been set free. I’ve been set free. I’ve been set free.” He just kept repeating it. He said, “Set free after 30 years.” He didn’t explain, there wasn’t time to explain, people were going out shaking hands with him.

We had a coffee after the service, and I went into the church hall and again he said, "I've been set free." He said for 30 years he had had with him the fact of a lack of assurance. He said, "I came to the point that I felt I had to give up. How could I preach? How could I try and help other people when I'm not certain myself?" But he said, "I've been set free." He was full of joy. He said, "This woman, you speak to her, she's been set free as well." I find that moving. It's where we in the church have failed to present Christ and the finished work of Christ. I feel it very strongly... I found it in my own life, and I try to preach it.

## 47. NOT I, BUT CHRIST

### The faith of Christ

**MM:** You've been a parish minister for many years, and you've seen God's grace being given to people in the parish, and you see how people respond to that with faith. And I'd like to ask you a little bit about what faith is?

**DT:** Faith is very important. I hesitate to use the word, a theological term – faith is really bipolar. Are we justified by Christ's faith or by my faith? Clearly we're not justified, I'm not justified by my faith. My faith can go up and down and sometimes be almost nonexistent, sadly. I'm justified by Christ's faith, the faith of Christ. My faith is very important, but my faith is really a response to the faith of Christ. The primary thing is Christ's faith. I find that a very important thing.

When we look at the New Testament, Galatians 2:20, I am crucified with Christ, but the life that I now live I live by the faith *of* Jesus Christ...*of* the Son of God. I don't know of any modern translation of Scripture that uses that translation. Every modern translation of Scripture that I know of says "faith *in* Christ." That means to me that the translators have altered the Greek to make faith *in* Christ. If it's faith *in* Christ in Greek, you'd have a preposition, *de*, and then the dative, *de Cristo*, in Christ. But the Greek is not that at all. It's the genitive: *of* Christ. So...the life I live, I live by the faith *of* the Son of God.

That comes out many times in the New Testament. In Romans 3, Paul has been talking about the righteousness of God apart from the law, which is by the faith *of* Jesus Christ. Modern translations say faith *in* Jesus Christ. But am I justified by *my* faith in Christ? Never. I'm justified by Christ's faith. My faith is a response to that. So if you say "the faith of Christ," that's the Authorized Version, we're laying the whole weight of our salvation

upon Jesus Christ.

If you think back to the Old Testament, the great lesson of the Old Testament, which Israel found so hard to learn, was that salvation is entirely an act of God. God delivered Israel out of Egypt. They couldn't deliver themselves out of Egypt. That was entirely an act of God.

Such is human sin that very shortly after that, Moses went up on the Mt. Sinai, he was away for 40 days...they prevailed on Aaron to make them a golden calf. We have these words, "Here are the gods which brought you out of Egypt." That golden calf, you might say, they were paying lip service to the fact that their deliverance was an act of God, but it was an act of their own human ingenuity and strength. That's a great sin — that by their own strength they could deliver themselves. The great lesson they had to learn was no, they'd been saved entirely by an act of God.

When God gave his word that was revealed through Moses, he gave them the laws of worship. All those laws of worship which accompanied the word were to teach Israel they could only worship God in God's way, and therefore these laws of worship are given quite meticulously. The tent, in every detail, the furniture of the building, every detail of worship, in the sacrifices and the great feasts were given to them. They could not worship in their own way, they had to worship only in God's way because each of these forms of worship and sacrifices are symbolic, representing God breaking through to make atonement for the people.

They are given circumcision. They were a sinful people, and yet a reminder that despite their sin, God, the Holy God, had entered into a covenant of grace binding them to himself. That circumcision, that perpetual reminder that they were sinful, a perpetual reminder that despite their sin God had bound himself to them in a bond of love, and it was a symbol anticipating the day when God would, himself, come and break through himself, be cut off, circumcised for his people.

The great lesson all through the Old Testament was: salvation is entirely of God, and not of us. That's the great lesson that's picked up in the New Testament, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, encapsulated, if you like, in that phrase, "The life I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God."

Take the two parables in Luke 15 — the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. If we ask ourselves who suffers by the loss...there's no indication the sheep was the least bothered by being lost, and certainly the coin wasn't bothered because it couldn't feel a thing. It was the owner who felt the loss. It was the owner who suffered. It was the owner who took the initiative, who came in search of the lost, and who searched and went on searching until he finds, and then rejoices.

We have in those two parables, you might say, a gathering up of the whole story of the gospel. It is encapsulated in those two parables. Here is God who feels the loss of this world, of humankind who are lost to God —



not lost in the geographical sense, but lost in the sense that men and women are no longer living in fellowship with God. God feels that loss. He suffers. God takes initiative. God comes and he searches and searches and searches, and that search takes him to the cross and to the resurrection, and God rejoices. So those two parables, to me, set up the whole story of the gospel.

Equally, it shows that the gospel is totally different from every other religion in the world. Every other religion in the world is concerned with man, and with man seeking to obey certain rules and certain regulations in order to achieve salvation. It's a man — what man can do, how man can work out his salvation. The gospel is entirely different. It's a joyful announcement that God has come in Jesus Christ. God has searched, in the cross and resurrection, here God finds and restores and God rejoices. That's a glorious thing.

So that little phrase in Galatians 2:20 rounds out several...I could pick out quite a number of passages in the New Testament. We are saved by Christ, by Christ's faithfulness. And yet we've got to respond, we've got to receive. And that is a wholehearted receiving. It's a wholehearted surrender.

**MM:** And that's our faith that comes in?

**DT:** That's our faith, but our faith is a response to his faith. Jesus' faith is prior.

**MM:** But if we are saved by his faith, don't we have to do anything, or has he done it all for us?

**DT:** He's done it all for us. Absolutely everything. There's nothing left for us to do but simply to accept in thanks. If you could come and give me a present, a gift, what can I do? I can answer, "No, I don't want that" and turn away, or I could say, "Thank you" and simply accept. God comes to us and he offers himself to us, he offers his forgiveness, his gift of life. All we can do is accept it or reject it. As we say thank you, that's our acceptance.

**MM:** Doesn't the New Testament say that we *should* have faith in Christ?

**DT:** Yes indeed. We are called to believe. But what does that mean? Faith isn't something that we produce out of ourselves out of our own resources. It's a response to his faith, and it's the gift of God.

**MM:** So I can't take credit for it.

**DT:** Paul says that "by grace are you saved through faith, and not in yourselves, it is a gift in God so that no one can boast." I don't believe that as a church, and again I take this personally as a minister, that we have really clearly got that across in our preaching and proclamation. Far too often we present what Christ has done, we say Christ has died for you, forgiven you, now it's over to you to accept. You pray, you repent, you read the Bible, you pray, and so on. And we're laying a burden on man to do something. Salvation in that context is partly what God does and partly what we do.

We cooperate — and that is totally wrong. No, we can do nothing at all except accept it in thanksgiving.

**MM:** If Jesus has done it all for us, would we say that he has prayed for us? Has he done our response for us?

**DT:** Everything for us. Absolutely everything. Many evangelicals limit Christ's salvation to the death of Christ. They say that Christ died for us and that is something apart from us and because of his death, we can be forgiven and receive salvation. As my brother James used to say, that if you're sick a doctor can come, he can diagnose your problem, this is your illness, write out a prescription, give it to you, go away. You take that medicine, you get well. Far too often, that's the kind of gospel that we preach. Christ has died, Christ has risen, and there you are, you get on with it.

**MM:** Like the forgiveness is some commodity that's handed over to us.

**DT:** It's not like that. Christ has done absolutely everything — he's given himself, and his very life for us. That's what we're asked to receive. We can't separate the work of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, for the whole ministry or for the resurrection, but sadly, many Christians do. And in a great deal of preaching we often do.

## The life of Christ

**MM:** It just occurred to me that the Gospels have a lot more information in them than just a story of the death of Christ — they've got a lot about his life as well. What are those stories there for us? What are they showing us about Jesus' life for us?

**DT:** We can't separate the person of Christ from his teaching and from his work. The whole thing belongs together. Calvin used to use a phrase that we're not presented with a naked Christ. He comes to us clothed in his life and his death and resurrection. It's all important. He lived out his life for us, and we're asked to receive him in all his fullness.

Put it this way — that when God became man, we're faced with an incredible miracle where God broke into this world. It's a staggering fact that he came right down to our level in Jesus Christ, and he took our flesh and blood. He remained God and at one and the same time, he became man. Not only an individual man, which he was, but a representative man, where he identified himself with each one of us — with you, with me, with all of us.

And in identifying himself with us, you might like to say he did two things — that he took our sinful life with all its faults, with all its failings, with all its sins and all its sicknesses, and he brought on the condemnation, died, and took it all away. But at one and the same time, in becoming man, he sanctified our human life and he turned our human life around, living out a life of perfect obedience or righteousness. In the resurrection, he

gives us himself, he gives us that new life, his life and our life. It's a total thing. We are totally letting go of our old life with a total receiving of this new life. There's no half measures. Paul says, "Be clothed with Christ in his righteousness."

**MM:** And it's not just his life before the crucifixion and resurrection but his life afterwards as well.

**DT:** He rose as man, and he ascended as man, and he reigns as man, and he's our high priest as man, and that's very important. The whole of our life, it is not I, but Christ. In every situation, in every area of life, we've got to learn to live that out in such a way that in every situation, it's not I but Christ.

## New life in Christ

**MM:** Once we realize that and we respond to that, how does life change for us? What difference is it going to make in our life? Can we just live a rotten life until we die and just before we die then say oh yes, I'd like to sign onto the program?

**DT:** Three times in the epistle to the Romans, Paul is answering questions obviously that were put to him — can I sin that grace may abound? He goes on and says this type of question you raise. He says no, that's impossible. To receive Christ means that we've shared in his death — death to our own life, death to all our sins, that we might share in the resurrection. We can only enter the kingdom of God through death and resurrection, and that's a total thing. It's a death to our old way of life, it's a death to our sin.

If we have received Christ, sadly, we'll go on sinning, but death is no longer the power that reigns over us. We can't go on sinning. John brings that out in his epistles, "We can't go on sinning and yet believe in Christ," in other words, we don't really, in a deeper sense, believe in Christ. We're not really followers of Christ.

**MM:** Is that what the Bible is talking about when it uses the word *salvation* — that it's not just a ticket into heaven but it's this entire package of taking on Christ, of dying, of rising — is all that encapsulated?

**DT:** Yes. It's a receiving of a totally new life in Christ. We receive Christ once and for all, and we go on and on receiving Christ as a continuous process. It is a total thing. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. You can only serve one or the other." If we seek to receive Christ as our Lord, he is the one we serve. There's no half measures. As I said, sadly, we will go on sinning. As long as we are here on this earth, none of us are perfect, we go on sinning. But the Lord is our Lord and king. He is dominant. So he picks us up, cleanses us, renews us — day by day we start afresh.

**MM:** Some days I just don't feel very fresh or new. It just feels like the old person is still there. How do these go side by side?

**DT:** Well, that's true. But we don't go by our feelings. We go by what is real. When Christ gave himself to us, he gives himself to us. That's something very real. We've got to keep looking away from ourselves to Christ. If I look inward upon myself, it's only darkness. There's no certainty. We're full of doubt. It's when I look away to Christ and say yes, he is life, he is light, he is salvation, there is joy, there is assurance. Life is a constantly looking unto Christ. It has to be. As long as we look onto Christ we are able to share in the victory of the cross and the resurrection. As we look onto Christ we are able to manifest something of the real life and the power of the Holy Spirit.

**MM:** You talked about the resurrection of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in us. Is that the way in which we are sharing in the resurrection of Jesus now?

**DT:** Yes, it's through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, you might say, is Jesus' other self, although the Holy Spirit is distinct from Jesus, and yet the Holy Spirit is Jesus' other person. The Holy Spirit comes to live within us, to reign over us. That's Christ living in us. As the Holy Spirit comes, he seals within us the finished work of Christ, the new life of Christ, so that Christ is there, and Paul says, "It's not I who live, it's Christ who lives within me." He lives within...by God, the Holy Spirit.

## **Forgiveness**

**MM:** When you say that the forgiveness that we give others, it is really the forgiveness of Jesus working through us.

**DT:** Absolutely. It has to be. If we're not forgiving other people, then there's a blockage. The Holy Spirit isn't able, isn't working, isn't flowing through us. He demands it, to receive that love and forgiveness that we show Christ's forgiveness one to another and forgive one another.

I remember that question of forgiveness. I was chaplain to a fairly large hospital in my last parish, and they had a certain wing when people had a nervous breakdown ...and I would go in and chat to them all. I went in this day, into the sitting room, and doctors and nurses used to sit together with patients. There was a woman, maybe about mid-30s, sitting on a couch looking at family photographs. I sat down and she showed me her photographs — son and daughter about 12 and 14.

I kept wondering why she was in the hospital, and I looked at these photographs, and I said, "You love them." She said, "Oh, very much so," absolutely she loved her son and daughter. She showed me a photograph of her husband, and I looked at them and gently said, "You love your husband." She said, "Oh, very much. He's a marvelous man and it's a great privilege to be married to him."

When we were finished, I looked at her, and I said, "Why are you here in hospital?" She said, "I don't want to live." I said, "You don't want to live? You've just shown me the family photographs, your son and daughter

and husband, you tell me you love them.” She said, “Yes, I certainly do. I have a marvelous husband.” “Why don’t you want to live?” She said, “I have no idea, but I’m terrified to be alone. If I’m alone, I’m going to do something violent, and that’s why I’m here in hospital.”

I asked her the question which I often ask as a minister, “Have you had a happy childhood?” She said, “No, not at all.” She told me one of these sad, very dreadful stories, that her parents were both alcoholic and separated when she was 5. Her mother had married an alcoholic who physically and sexually abused her. Out came this terrible, ghastly story, so I felt pain as this woman told me this story. I said, “I’m terribly sorry.”

I said, “Could you ever forgive your parents?” She said, “No, never.” And I said, “Have you ever thought that there is a relationship between the fact that you can’t forgive your parents and you don’t want to live?” She said, “No, I’ve never thought. No one has ever suggested it and no doctor has ever suggested it.” I said, “Well, I’m suggesting there’s a very real relationship.” I said, “You’ve been sinned against. I’m pained by your story, you’ve suffered, you’ve been wronged, and what can I say? I’m horrified and sad. But God has forgiven us everything, and we deserve nothing. But to receive God’s forgiveness, it does mean that we have to share God’s forgiveness with other people and forgive them.”

Now I said, “You can’t forgive them. You’ve been sinned against, you’ve been hurt dreadfully. All you can do is to ask God to give you a gift which you haven’t got, and none of us have, but a gift to forgive these parents of yours.” So we talked away — she was a nominal member of the church, not in my parish but in another parish. At the end of the day I said, “Would you like to pray?” She said yes. So I prayed with her, committed her to the Lord, and this sad story, and asked God to give her the gift that she might forgive her parents. The result was quite dramatic, and the hospital discharged her within the week. To forgive is healing. It allows the Holy Spirit to flow through us, giving us life, the very life of Christ. That’s the important thing.

**MM:** And the forgiveness doesn’t mean that the initial act was somehow okay.

**DT:** No — it was an evil thing, a ghastly thing for the parents — their whole behavior, the treatment of this daughter, for her to be sexually abused. It was wrong, totally wrong. But from her point of view, it was a real grace to be able to give in that situation. That’s what God demands.

**MM:** The gift wasn’t so much for her parents as it was for her.

**DT:** It had a profound effect on her, in healing. But she had to forgive her parents. Hopefully, that will bring a sense of healing to them where they might be able to turn to God.

## 48. NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS

**J. Michael Feazell:** It's such a special treat to have you with us, Reverend Torrance.

**David Torrance:** It's a privilege to be asked.

### **Missionary life in China**

**JMF:** I wanted to ask you about your childhood, your story, how you came to be interested in ministry, how that came about, and what it was like to be in the Torrance household.

**DT:** I was born into a very privileged home in the sense it was a very committed Christian home; both parents that were missionaries. My grandfather was a farmer, small-dairy farmer. But father, as it were, broke away. He went into the ministry. He went out to China, and he there was a minister evangelist for 40 years. Mother went out also as a young missionary, and they met in China and they married in China. So my family, six of us, were all born in China. I'm the youngest of six.

On the one hand, it was very turbulent days in China. West China was really ruled by warlords. One might also almost call them brigand chiefs, because each had their own army, they fought, they plundered, they killed. Life was rather turbulent. But in that context of missionary serving, father served, his base was Chengdu, 1500 miles upriver from Shanghai, and from there he worked right up into the mountains toward Tibet.

It was very much a life of faith, tremendous commitment to Christ, and we always had family worship. I never remembered a time in my life when we didn't have family worship — when the family came together, they were reading from the Bible, they prayed, and that carried us on right through our childhood, right through our student days, until finally we married and went our separate ways. And...which we still continue, when we come

together, but there's only two of us left in my family now. We still would meet and pray together.

Prayer was a very important thing in our household. We always had it. I don't suppose our family would have survived, literally, without prayer, because, as I mentioned, these were very turbulent years when the family was in China. When the family left, there was severe rioting. A missionary friend of my mother was beheaded in the street very near the home...they rioted, wanting to break into our home. But we were wonderfully protected...there was a tremendous faith in God.

The Bible was very central in our family life. I remember as a boy when I had reached my sixth birthday, Mother showed me the calendar and said there's seven days a week, there's 52 weeks in the year. If you read three chapters of the Bible every day, five on Sunday, you'll read it through in a year short of a week, you'll read it by Christmas. She said that when you take the Bible, always pray and ask God to speak to you through it. When you hear God speaking to you through it, you'll know that this is the word of God.

She said, form that habit, because when you grow up you'll find that many people will say all sorts of things and terrible things about the Bible and dismiss it, but when you have heard God speaking to you through the Bible, you'll know that that is God's word. Nothing will shake it. So the Bible played a very important party in our whole upbringing. I was never given any doctrine of Scripture, I was simply told it was the word of God, and if we prayed and asked God to speak, he would speak.

In addition to our family prayers, books played a very big part of our family life. My youngest brother, Tom, always called my father the evangelist of the family, and he called my mother the theologian of the family. They guided us in our reading so that they introduced us to a lot of Christian works in our school days and discussed the Scripture, discussed, if you like, doctrine, theology, in a simple way. It was very much part of our whole upbringing and family life.

**JMF:** What was it like for you as a child and with your siblings living in China? Under the circumstances of the dangerous conditions politically, what sort of freedom did you have to go far from the house or just to be in the city alone, or what was it like?

**DT:** I was too young when I came home from China, I was three. The older members of the family, they remember it very vividly because they went to school there. Apart from all the turbulence, it was really a marvelous country in which to grow up. There was a freedom which people didn't enjoy here. Father had a mule and also a horse, and that was part of the family, so that the family went to school on horseback. Father used to complain. He said that once Tom got on that mule, he would no longer walk – that mule insisted on galloping. Now, not many children go to

school on the back of a mule and a horse.

**JMF:** Especially a galloping mule.

**DT:** Tom was very mischievous. He actually was called by the Chinese a mischief. It had its dangers, but it had its freedom and its excitement.

**JMF:** There must have been a number of people who were glad you were there ... You mentioned that there were riots later on. Where did the animosity come from?

**DT:** They made, on the one hand, as people came to Christ...They were very friendly and very loyal. Dad, for the last 25 years of his ministry, he was joint agent for the American and British Bible Society. Not that he looked after printing or anything of that sort — the Chinese did it, but he was superintendent (when he retired there were many tributes to father...written in Chinese...I have some at home on the wall) ...and one of the things that means a lot to me is that in his last year, he and his co-laborers distributed over a million portions of Scripture in West China. When he retired, the church said that no one had done more to forward the gospel in West China, which means a lot to me.

On the other hand, what happened...you had these brigand chiefs, and they were there for, I don't know, it was indigenous, their way of life. But after 1917, the Communist revolution on China, the Communists began pouring in rifles, weapons, and communistic, atheistic literature. The weapons came into the hands of these brigand armies, and also the literature. That certainly aroused a tremendous or increased an antipathy to foreigners and to the Christian faith. That's what led up to the final rise when the family came home.

They took a very difficult decision. Father was very fluent in Chinese. He had quite a knowledge. After he came home, Father and I were invited by a Chinese tutor [?], an emperor, if we would have a meal at his home. His parents had come over and fled from Communist China. The mother had no interest, and the father very little, so this tutor wanted them to meet my father. He said to me he could not get over my father. He said when his back was turned you would not know that he was not Chinese. He had quite a remarkable knowledge.

He went back alone, for seven years, that was quite a sacrifice for the family. We remembered him and he kept very much in touch...we wrote every week. Mother insisted that each one of us write to him, and he wrote to us, so that despite the gap, it was still, you might say a remarkably close family, and once again great answers to prayer.

For example, just after father went back, the family settled for a short period near Glasgow in the west of Scotland and then moved to Edinburgh. Mother went to the local church, attended a local prayer meeting of about 27 led by one of the elders. She said she didn't know anyone there, but the elder said, are there any subjects for prayer tonight, any people you would



like us to pray for? Mother said yes, her husband was a missionary in West China and she just had a deep feeling that he needed prayer at that moment. She said it was very lovely that one after another in that room prayed for my father though they didn't know him.

Mother wrote to father and told him, and he wrote back and said could you tell me the day of that prayer meeting and the time of day? It so happened on that particular day and the very time of day, his life was spared, in the sense that a communist army...(I say Communist; I don't know how much communism they really do, but they were influenced by their atheistic literature and nationalism)...came up to this mountain village to search for my father and a fellow missionary, and they searched every house in that village bar one. They walked past the door at the same time as that prayer meeting by Glasgow. I think remarkable answers to prayer. The family saw many answers to prayer like that. Prayer was very much part of the family life of all of us.

**JMF:** How long was he separated from the family during that period?

**DT:** Seven years. It was difficult because... Father opened up the Christian work in West China up among the tributaries of the Yangtze River, the Min was one of the main ones, and among people called the Qiang [Sichuan province, west of Chengdu]. I suppose he would be the first Western missionary ever to enter those parts. He had the language, he had the dialect, there was no one else to take over. He felt that God wanted him to continue this work and to establish it, so he went back. The church there was smaller perhaps than in other parts of China, but it nonetheless became deep-rooted.

Shortly after he came back, I remember him receiving a parcel. He opened it, and I was there in the room with him, and he was a bit astonished at first. It was a Chinese Bible, but he had several Chinese Bibles. When he opened it and he looked at what we would say the back cover...but that is the beginning — they start in what we would say is the back and work forward — there was a story of that Bible. What had happened was that this Communist had come up to this mountain village, it was a Christian village, they would take the grain, the food, and they'd burn it, you know? Tragic things...which to try and wipe them out. They would burn every Bible. So they had forewarning, the Christians, and they took the Bibles and they buried them in a cave, and when the Communists passed over, they dug it up again and sent one of the Bibles to my father, and the story was inside the cover with the words that just as this Bible has been resurrected, the church in China will be resurrected, which I found rather moving.

I had that Bible in my possession for a number of years, but when my brother Tom went back on one of his visits to West China and up to those villages where my father worked, he took it with him because of the

shortage of Bibles, and he gave it to the son of the man who sent it to my father. I was sorry to part with the Bible, but they needed the Bibles and that was the right thing to happen.

## **Moving into ministry**

**JMF:** How did you then begin to or become oriented toward ministry after your father came back?

**DT:** I believed in the Lord all the days of my life. A living presence of Christ was very real to all of us in the family. Prayer was very real. Yes, I read the Bible. I read the Bible every year, but nowadays I read it three times a year. I grew up, the faith was very real to all of us. The Christian life was very real. The turning point for me was the army. I did a year at university, did classics for a year, and then went off to the army and joined the army in the end of 1942. I felt I would say yes, I would enter the ministry, but I didn't want to be a minister.

I moved through different units in the army, being transferred. In wartime you're shifted around according to where you were needed. So I was sent here, to one unit.... I went down and was part of special assault troops doing beach landings. We did a lot of rock climbing, explosives, and on and off boats. It was Americans. We were the British Army and they were American. We were due at that point to go to the Channel Islands, because that was the only part of Britain that was occupied by Germany. I remember saying to myself... we were on standby so either we knew that it tomorrow, next week...we may be sent over...

I remember saying to myself, many people were not going to come back, and I hope I don't come back, because if I come back, God will put me in the ministry. Quite mad, absolutely mad when I was young, and I felt no, I'd rather not come back than be put to the ministry. I had a deep feeling underneath that by hook, by crook, God would make sure I came back, because he was determined to put me in the ministry. That hung over me as a tremendous cloud.

**JMF:** Why did you not want to go into ministry?

**DT:** I suppose it was an anomalous situation, because the Lord meant a lot to me. I continued to read the Bible; I carried a Bible in my pocket in my army uniform and had it with me all through the army life. A passage which really troubled me was Acts 2, that here the disciples, Peter and the others, were preaching, and some in the multitude thought they were drunk and laughed and scorned at them. Somehow or other that horrified me. I didn't want to be up there on a platform and be mocked. Perhaps I was strange. I lived in this anomalous situation where I read the Bible, I prayed every day, the Lord meant a lot to me, but I was afraid to let go.

There was a number of incidents that happened that spoke very powerfully to me...we were in a training scheme up in the hills north of

England. I was in a tent with another three lads. In that type of army exercise, you don't get into pajamas, you lay down in your uniform, your coat, you're allowed to take off your pack. When I thought they were asleep, I pulled out my Bible and started reading it, and one of the lads who wasn't asleep he said, "Dave, are you reading a Bible?" I said yes. "Why not read it to us all?"

I knew God was speaking to me. They weren't Christian folk, they didn't go to church, one of them was a hard swearer, if I could put. They listened very attentively, and I felt very humble. I felt God saying, you are called to speak the gospel.

In this assault brigade where I had said I'd rather not come back than go into ministry, there was a church three miles away. I walked down there, came back, and I had a letter to my parents, and I hunted around for a postbox. I asked another soldier where there was a postbox. He said, "I'll show you." He took me off, and we got chatting, and he asked, "You want a cup of tea?" So we had a cup of tea. He said, "What have you been doing?" I said, "I've been to church." I didn't say anything more. We were in the same assault brigade but in a different unit. He had done about two years at university and we got chatting away. We finally agreed that we both had a Saturday afternoon off, next Saturday, so we would meet and we went out sailing.

When we came in, he said to me, "When I saw you last week you had been to church. Are you going to church tomorrow?" I said yes. He said, "Can I come with you?" That happened for three weeks. We went out on Saturday afternoon sailing, went to church, and when we were coming back the three miles, he suddenly turned to me, he said, "Dave, you're a Christian." I said yes. He said, "You've never talked to me about Christ."

That really shook me. I felt God was saying I put you here, this is what you've got to do. That spoke very heavily to me. He was one of those remarkable men who you shared the faith and he simply accepted...he believed. Yes he was a university man. I had to give him a Bible. I don't think he had ever in his life been to church before. Yet he just, you shared the faith and he believed, and he entered the Christian faith in the mildest way. I felt very much the hand of God in me.

There was a third incident...I went out to India and met on the boat a man I was very attracted to. He had been at university for four years. He was an atheist, or I should say an agnostic. We had many vigorous discussions on his humanism, which I felt was wrong. Apart from his humanism, we got on well together and we actually shared a tent together when we arrived in India. In the tropics it's very noisy — all sorts of insects and creatures, and I was lying in my bunk in the tent and he came in. He saw me, and I knew he took a swipe at me and he said, "Oh this marvelous world we're in."

I was a bit, to use an army term, browned off. He disturbed the peace of my evening, and I said, “Shut up.” I said, “You’re talking dunces and you know it. And you sit down.” Very blunt, very rude. So he sat down and was quiet. Then he suddenly said, “I’d like to become a Christian.” That absolutely shook me. For weeks we had discussed and not a single suggestion that he wanted to, was open to the faith. We knelt down and we prayed. He committed his life to Christ.

I felt that God’s hand was on my shoulder and said this is what you’re called to do, and you’ll do it. It should have filled me with joy. It troubled me. There were other experiences. At the end of the war I had a marvelous leave climbing up in the Himalayas, came back, picked up smallpox, which wasn’t very helpful.

**JMF:** In the Himalayas?

**DT:** On the way back. I survived, most people don’t survive. In smallpox, your temperature goes up, it dips down, and it goes up a second time. The second time is mostly fatal. It’s a rather interesting experience. I was in the jungle division, and so I was put in a little hut by myself, so it made you feel like a leper, you’re all isolated, no one came to you. It didn’t bother me in the slightest, and I wasn’t downhearted in the slightest. I never thought I would die, although I knew I was pretty ill. I had the most incredible experience of the presence of Christ — the sheer joy and thanksgiving. Maybe I was delirious, but I knew the closeness of Christ. I was filled with a sense of thanksgiving that I’d never had before.

I recovered, went back to my unit, because although the war was over, this was maybe October ‘45, the east was in a very turbulent state so the armistice, if you call it that, didn’t mean a great deal to some of us. India was in uproar after...to split India/Pakistan, two million people perished in those riots, never reported. Malaysia, Indonesia, the east was very much in turmoil.

I began to think, by the end of the year, the time is going to come down when I’ll leave the army. What am I going to do? I knew God was saying the ministry, and I said no. I’ll be a medical missionary. Didn’t want to be a doctor – anything rather than a minister. I was quite happy to go out. I’d seen enough of the poor and the destitute to spend my life with the poor and the destitute. For three days I was in total turmoil. I don’t think I could talk civilly to someone. I might punch someone in the nose, which I didn’t do, you’d be court-marshaled in the army if you tried that.

I had a tent to myself. I approached that tent, I can’t put it into words, I knew God was there physically. As I entered that tent, I knew God was saying the ministry, and I said no. Hard to put into words, I felt physically that God had caught me by the scruff of the neck and said all right, you’ll never again have any peace of mind, and no joy. I knelt down on the ground and said, “All right Lord, I’ll be a minister, it’s your look out.” That

was my words. The most disgruntled prayer I've ever prayed.

Something incredible happened. That whole cloud that hung over me vanished. It was like the birds were singing and the ministry, I couldn't get over this, became very attractive. I can still look back on those days, I was staggered that whereas I had hated the thought of the ministry, I now really looked forward to ministry and wanted to be a minister.

When I left the army I came back to university. I did four years of philosophy degree then on to theology. I just felt that God was with me in the ministry. I've often looked back to that because there are times in the ministry I don't think there's anything more rewarding than the life in the ministry. What could be more rewarding than to see people come to faith in Christ and be converted, to see people helped, comforted, filled with the joy and the freedom of the Lord? It's been a marvelous life, a marvelous calling. It's a tremendous privilege, but at times difficult. Many a time I've said to the Lord, you made me a minister, and it's up to you to do something about it.

## 49. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER IN PASTORAL WORK

**JMF:** I'd like to get into some interesting things about your early ministry. When you first became a pastor and then through the course of your ministry, what are some of the experiences that stand out? What kinds of things did you find that churches need, that individuals need, and what did you have to have, and be as a pastor to serve in that day?

**DT:** In the Bible, in Acts chapter 6, when a dispute arose about the expressing of some of the supplies to the poor, the needy, of the church, the apostles said, well, it's not right for us simply to give ourselves over to the practical affairs of distributing the poor, and they appointed seven deacons and he said (which I think is very important), we will give ourselves to prayer and ministry of the word, to prayer and the ministry of the word...

Looking back at my college days, although I had a very fine teacher, in college days we were each divided up. We each had a pastor. About 12 of us were given to Professor James S. Stewart, who is well known, a very godly man, professor of the New Testament...and we had a Bible study. He met with us individually, he met with us in a group, and meeting with me individually, he said, "Well David..." he was a very, very shy man, but he got there, he said, "What did you read from the Bible before you came to college today?" I can still remember, I was reading Exodus, I told him. He asked us, if you like, did we say our prayers? I don't think that's done today. I admired the man immensely.

We are called, as ministers, to be ministers of the word in a ministry of prayer. Sadly, in the ministry, we pass over that question of prayer, but it's there. The apostles, they said, we appoint the deacons to look after the

ministerial side so that we can devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. I find that very important. I had three parish churches. I had a period of evangelism, and then three parish churches...certainly my second parish, although there were great rewards — I saw people converted — nonetheless there were very great difficulties in that parish, and I found myself having to pray an hour every morning before breakfast for that parish. When our prayer life flags, our ministry flags. We can do all the right things...

I came home to it very early in the ministry. I remember preaching a sermon on the atonement. People were moved and stirred. I was what called a probational minister at that time. I didn't have my own parish and I was called to preach in another church...and went entirely in the wrong way, and I preached the sermon without prayer, and it fell flat. I felt very rebuked, that this is God's word, there's nothing automatic about it. It's so important that at each fresh occasion that we give ourselves to the Lord and we pray for the Holy Spirit to work.

That came home to me very powerfully when I was still probationary, I was a post-graduate student and I was invited to preach in July in a glorious summer weekend over in the west of Scotland, the west Highlands. They said they'd put me up in a hotel, and I'd do services. I went entirely in the wrong way, a lesson I never forgot. I put six sermons in my bag and went off. I thought well, I'll get in...I went early after lunch, I arrived at the hotel, and I thought I'll have a quick look at my sermon and go for a long, five, eight mile walk in the sunshine in the west highlands — it's a lovely country. So I prayed, opened my bag, pulled out six sermons, read them, and I couldn't preach them at all. I felt very frustrated, so I knelt down again — my parents always knelt when they said their prayers at home — I knelt down and prayed and asked what God wanted to say. It came to me very clearly — the resurrection. That bothered me.

I read through my six sermons again, and they were further away than ever. So I knelt down a third time and prayed, and this time it was absolutely clear — the resurrection. I thought no, no, I've got to have one of these sermons. I read through these six sermons, and I couldn't preach them at all. The one thing that really kept, the resurrection...so I said, all right then, it will have to be resurrection. I felt very frustrated, because now I would have to sit down on a glorious sunny afternoon and write a brand new sermon on the resurrection.

But in my state of frustration, nothing would come. I sat there in my frustration thinking of this sunshine, the warmth, the west Highlands vanishing away. Here I was, how would I prepare this sermon? At 10:00 at night, I had one sentence on the paper, and I said, "All right Lord, if it's the resurrection, you have to speak to these people. I have nothing to say." I went to bed, slept, got up in the morning, my mind was still a blank. I said

to the Lord, “Lord, if it’s the resurrection, you have to do something about it.” I went off to church early and met the session clerk, who greeted me and said, “Could you make the intonations?” Because last night, their very beloved senior elder died, and he wanted to break the news to the congregation. In some astonishing way, that sermon just flowed. I felt very, very rebuked.

A few years later, I happened to be up in Oban, again this time in the west Highlands. I was sitting in the car in Oban. We were going to go over to an island, Lismore, but my wife was shopping. As I was waiting, the session clerk came out on the pavement and so I rolled down the window and said hello, and we greeted one another. He said, “Yes, I remember you. You’re the minister who came all prepared on the occasion that our senior elder died.”

I said, “Would you like a coffee?” So he and I went for a coffee. I said, “Could I correct... I’m afraid I went to your church entirely in the wrong way. I did not go prepared. But by the miraculous hand of God, he took over that situation because I did not go the right way.” I’ve never forgot that lesson. We cannot, in the ministry...it’s not like a normal job. We can’t just write a sermon. It may be doctrinally, theologically, correct, a good sermon. But we have to go with the Spirit of the Lord, and we have to pray. I take very seriously those words that the apostles said, “We will not handle the administration. We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

I believe that the key to the ministry, well, the focal point of the ministry which I’ve always tried to keep before me, is preaching, the proclaiming of the word, teaching of the word, and the pastoral work — meeting people face-to-face. I’m not very good at the administration. I’ll do it, but I don’t particularly enjoy it, and often I have let it go, because people are what matters. Your preaching and your pastoral work go hand-in-hand. When you’re meeting people... I always, as a minister, had a reading and prayer. I’d visit the homes, visit people in hospital...I always felt it was right to read something of the word of God and to pray.

Again and again, I’ve found that the real pastoral work opened up after you prayed with someone. You can meet a family, you can greet them, you can ask about their welfare and about their children, their holidays, but once you’ve had a prayer, then they open up and the real pastoral work begins. We are here to share the gospel, to help people come to Jesus Christ. As we meet face-to-face, we are there to help people to come and to meet the Lord. That’s the key of our ministry.

## **The vicarious humanity of Christ**

**JMF:** Let’s shift gears then and get into pastoral ministry a bit. The same principle seems to apply to the Christian life itself. In other words...



Let's talk about what we call vicarious humanity of Christ and how that works in a person's life and how it is that God deals with sin and with righteousness in the life of a believer.

**DT:** You used the word *vicarious*, which is a Latin word and perhaps a word used by theologians...it's a word that simply means, in the Latin, someone acting, speaking on behalf of someone else, for their benefit. This is precisely what God came to do in Jesus Christ — that he came to take our place, to act on our behalf, and to work out a great salvation.

Many Christians, unfortunately, many evangelicals, tend to restrict the atonement to the death of Christ, and therefore interpret it in a legal or judicial way. They're quite correct to do so. There is a real judicial element there, that Christ died for us and he rose again, and the virtue of that...our guilt is removed, we are set free. But if we restrict the atonement to the death of Christ, then many problems arise. We are really saying that the death of Christ is not part of the whole ministry of Christ and is separate from the resurrection. We are also, if we restrict it to the death of Christ, we are throwing people back on themselves, their own resources, and almost inevitably, they become legalistic.

**JMF:** So for just an average person listening to what you're saying, let me try to recap and you tell me if I'm saying it correctly. It's common for Christians to think, and many times they're taught, that the key element of Christian faith is that "Christ died for your sins, therefore believe in him and your sins will be taken away — now go your way and do the best you can to be a good person." In other words, the focus is so much on the death of Christ paying the penalty for your sins and therefore removing your sins, and then it kind of stops there, as though that's all there is to it, but there's far more to it than that. Is that somewhat what you're saying?

**DT:** Yes indeed. If we do restrict the atonement to the death of Christ, it creates a multiplicity of problems. Very often the great tendency there is to want the blessings of Christ rather than the person of Christ. That is a problem which we see in the liberal world, like Bultmann. It's equally a problem in the evangelical world — a tendency to want the blessings of Christ and not the person of Christ. A key phrase in the New Testament is the little phrase, "in Christ," the Greek, *en Christou*, in Christ. Now that phrase, "in Christ," in Jesus Christ, in the Lord, occurs something like 132 times in the New Testament. So if you ask me what is salvation, how are we saved? Yes, we are saved by the work of Christ, but by union with Christ. We can't separate union with Christ and the work of Christ any more than we can separate the work of Christ and the person of Christ.

**JMF:** So you're saying that most of us tend to want to receive the blessing of having our sins forgiven, but what we don't want is for Christ to be there as part of our life, in fact *being* our life, we want, we want the pain of sin taken away, but we'd rather...now that you're done would you please

just stay next door?

**DT:** I'm sure that's very common and runs right through all the churches. That is quite unbiblical. If you were to ask me, "How would you sum up Paul's doctrine in his epistles?" I would have to say that we are saved by grace and union with Christ. We're not simply saved by grace, we're not simply saved by union with Christ, it's the two together — union with Christ and salvation by grace — because God came down — an incredible, staggering fact — that God came down to this earth and took flesh and blood in the man Jesus, although remaining God.

As man, he entered into our humanity. He was a particular man, and yet also a representative man at one and the same time. As he entered into our humanity, yes, he took all our sins, all our weaknesses, all our sufferings, and he died bearing the connotation. But he did more than that. In taking our humanity, your humanity, mine, he became you, he became me. He sanctified our humanity, he turned it roundabout. He perfectly obeyed God on our behalf. He perfectly obeyed the Father on our behalf. He prayed to the Father on our behalf. In the resurrection he offers himself to us. He offers us this new life, his life for our life, your life, my life, renewed, sanctified, so that to receive salvation is to receive Christ, to receive the new life of Christ. It's a total thing.

So to receive Christ is to receive the fullness of God that Paul talks about — the fullness of the Spirit. It also means on our part a total surrender, a total letting go. There's tremendous joy in that because it means that in so far as Christ has done everything for us — he is for us in every situation in life, on every event in life, in every occasion. There's no situation in life that we face but Christ is there, and it's always "not I but Christ." Not I but Christ when I have a great decision to make, not I but Christ when I worship, because worship means that as Christ is alone the one who worships the Father, he alone enters the presence of the Father...when we are united with Christ, Christ is with us, in us, we are in him. In Christ we enter the Father. So it's in Christ we can worship, in Christ we pray. We don't know how to pray. We try to pray in our own efforts, and prayer is then a frustration. We try to pray and set aside times we pray, we know how we fail. But Christ prays. If we keep our eyes on Christ and remember that all through life, every step of life it's not I but Christ, we're on the victory side.

Many years ago I had a friend, he became a minister, who in turn had a very close friend who was a very keen professional footballer. His friend, a footballer, was a Christian. But he thought of the Christian life in terms of football. He said one day, he said, you know, it was like my trying to play football. Jesus was standing at the touch line watching, and every time I came near the goal, I missed it. It was so frustrating. But something marvelous happened. Jesus and I changed places. I now stand at the touch

line. I watch Jesus playing, and he scores the goal every time, and all I can do is stand and cheer.

It may be a simple story of a man who was a professional footballer — that to me is the Christian life. The whole of the Christian life is centered on Christ, it's in Christ, it's a union with Christ where Christ takes over because he's accomplished everything for us — for our forgiveness, for our redemption, for our reconciliation with our Father, our entry to the Father's presence, our entry to the kingdom of heaven.

**JMF:** So in speaking of faith then, faith is in Christ himself, not in specific things or actions per se, but in him. It isn't even a matter of our faith, we are actually entering into *his* faith.

**DT:** Absolutely. Faith is a way of being related to Jesus Christ. Faith, our faith is important. Without faith we are lost. You can come and give me a gift, and if I say no, I don't want it, I go without it. God comes to us with his gift, and we can say no, we don't want it, and we're lost.

What means a lot to me is a story of the announcement to Mary of the birth of Christ. Now here was this young maiden, and the Lord came and announced to her God's will for her life. He announced that she would have a child. That child would be born of God and would be the Son of God. Now Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." She responded, saying, "Yes Lord, let it all happen just as you want it." Mary had the freedom to say yes, and she said yes. She had the freedom to say no, in which case God would no doubt have gone away and chosen some other young woman. The marvelous thing is that Mary said yes. But when she said yes, that's all she could do. She couldn't create that child in her womb — that was a miraculous happening from God.

When you and I first come to Christ, God comes, he confronts us, he says, "I love you, I've forgiven you, I'll give you all the fullness of God, I bring you into the fellowship of the Father." All you and I can do, like Mary, is say, "Yes Lord," or "No Lord," "Thank you Lord." Our thanksgiving is our response to God's glorious announcement of his love and forgiveness and salvation. Very important. But what matters is that our faith is a response to Christ, to his faithfulness, but it's not a work. Far, far too often we throw back the responsibility to men and women. That's utterly frustration. And we get weary. Ministers, I'm afraid, approach the same way. They throw themselves into the ministry — I speak as a minister — it could be very easy to let our devotional life, our time with the Lord, slip into the background. We try to go on under our own steam and our own effort and we utterly fail.

**JMF:** What often is asked is something along this line, "You're telling me that Christ has done everything necessary for my salvation and that everything that I experience he is doing for me and through me, and that sounds like I don't have to do anything, and Christ does it all. I don't see

how that's consistent with the Scripture. It just sounds like some kind of universalism idea." How do we respond to that?

**DT:** It depends what people mean by the use of that word, universalism. On the one hand it might mean, and rightly mean, that God loves the whole world and that when he came in Jesus Christ and he redeemed the world — the salvation, the offer of salvation, is for the whole world. In that sense, I'm a universalist. It does not mean, however, that all people accept the salvation of Christ, that all people are saved. Sadly, no. The Bible never, ever says that — that we are free to accept or reject. God doesn't, to me, send anyone to hell. He weeps over this world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He loved the people of Jerusalem and was sad that they were rejecting him. And because they're rejecting him they would suffer, and suffer terribly.

If we reject Christ, we reject his salvation, we reject life, we're lost. And that's the horrors of hell. And so I believe in hell. If we talk about the wrath of God, the wrath of God is really the wrath of the Lamb. God doesn't want us to perish. He doesn't want any sinner to perish. He loves everyone. The glorious thing is to be able to go to anyone and say that God loves you and God has forgiven you and he wants you. But we have to respond, and if we don't, we're lost.

## Responding to Christ

**JMF:** And what is the nature of our response?

**DT:** Our response is, really, as I have said, a response of thanksgiving. It's an acknowledgement. As a pastor, I have often asked people to read certain portions of Scripture. Very interesting...and when I've asked them to read a passage of Scripture and I've gone back to that home, they told me they read it. There are certain passages I use a great deal — Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession where David, a man of God, really in a remarkable way, called a friend of God, nonetheless sinned. The Bible doesn't gloss over the fact of his sin and that he committed adultery and murder in the sense that he was responsible for the death of Uriah the Hittite.

I've talked to people and we've got so far, and I've said, "Look, will you read Psalm 51," and I've found that they're converted on that Psalm — that God has spoken to them through it. I've generally said when I've given them Psalm 51, to read another Psalm, one of the Psalms of thanksgiving, maybe Psalm 103 or like that. I remember being on mission and stopping and speaking to a couple of young people, aged about 21, on the street, inviting them to our meeting. I thought he was very, very aggressive, and if I had mentioned the name of Christ again I think he would have physically assaulted me. So I said, "Well, look. Can I come invite you to a cup of tea?" And she came. Yes, he was a young person that I don't suppose had ever

been to church. But I tried to share the faith over the cup of tea, and I said, “Look, can I ask you to read Psalm 51?” She woke me up at 7:00 in the morning. I was still in my pajamas, I confess. She was on her way to work. And she asked me about this Psalm, and that was her conversion. She was given words to pray. People come in different ways — some impressed by the love of Christ, a great deal by an acceptance of the reality of sin.

Many years ago I met a very brilliant student. He’d been done with school and was embarked on an honors course at university and said that after that, he hoped to go on to ministry and added the words, “But I’d like to go to a liberal college.” That bothered me. Something didn’t quite ring true. I felt compelled to pray for him. The more I prayed for him, the more I felt an extraordinary compulsion to pray for him. I found myself praying continually for this chap. Finally it came to the point that for a fortnight I saw him every day either for a coffee, an occasional meal.

Then I asked him to read 1 John chapter 1, and he told me he read it and as a result he could no longer pray. That really bothered me. I prayed a lot of about that. Then I phoned him up, and I said, “I asked you to read 1 John chapter 1, and you told me you did it. Having read it, you told me you could no longer pray.” He said, “Yes.” Now I don’t find it easy to talk to a person — absolutely frankly, my knees shook. I felt I had to. I said, “You know the reason why, is because you’re a sinner, and you won’t acknowledge it. You want to gloss over it. It says quite clearly if we say that we have no sin, we’re a liar. The truth is not in us. It equally says that if we confess our sins, he is just and willing to forgive us our sins.” So I said, “Your problem is that you’re a sinner, and you have to confess it.”

I thought we parted company. The next three days if he saw me he’d cross the street. He wouldn’t come near me. I thought, “Oh dear, that’s the end of that relationship.” Then he phoned me up, and he said, “Who’s been talking about me?” “No one’s been talking about you.” And he said, “Yes, why did you say what you did? You’ve been talking.” I said, “I haven’t mentioned you to a single mortal soul. I never mentioned you to a member of the family.” He said, “Then why did you say that?” I said, “I’d been praying for you. I felt God wanted me to say it.”

He said, “Can I come round and see you?” So he came around and he told me his story. He had got into bad company and asked if I would pray for him. I said, “No, not unless you’re prepared to confess your sins.” He says, “Yes I am.” So we prayed, I prayed, he prayed. I can still see his face — the sheer joy of the Lord. He said, “You know, I feel all the joy of my childhood is back.”

Some people come that way. Others come in a different way — they’ve had problems, they feel the love of God has helped them, very often an illness. They’ve been comforted, they’ve been helped, or miraculously healed, and they see the hand of God. Everyone’s different. As pastors we

have to learn to love people, to befriend people, and everyone's different. There's no uniform way of going about things.

But we have to pray that... I found it very helpful as a pastor when I was visiting a parish, the home of a parish, to have a brief word of prayer before knocking on each new door — that somehow God will take over and I didn't know what to say...would God just say whatever he wanted to say. You just relax, you try to love your people, to enter into their joys and sorrows and interests and family life. And yet within that situation try and help them to an understanding of God.

## 50. ALREADY FORGIVEN

### The Christian life

**J. Michael Feazell:** Reverend Torrance, it's a joy to have you back with us again. I would like to ask you to draw on your many years of pastoral experience to talk about a topic today that has to do with how a Christian lives in light of the fact that they are union with Christ, and how a pastor should work with a congregation in light of the sin that so easily besets us and that we're surrounded with. How do those things work? We know that we're complete in Christ, we know that we're in union with Christ, we know that it's the vicarious humanity of Christ that makes us who we are. And yet, that doesn't mean that we can just not put any effort into serving God obediently. How does that work together?

**David Torrance:** That's a very searching and a very important question. How do we live the Christian life? How do we, as pastors, help our people to live the Christian life, or indeed, to receive Christ? I think that's what you're asking. What I feel very strongly about and I would say to myself as a minister because I am part of the church in all my faults...quite manifest.

Far too often we say to people, "You must live the Christian life with the *help* of the Lord or with the help of the Holy Spirit." Personally, I think that's quite wrong. I have a car, it's about three years old, and if it breaks down I'm not going to go to take it to the garage and say, "Could you lend me some tools so I can fix my car," or I'm not going to say, "Will you help me and give me a hand?" I hand him over the car. He fixes it. We can't come to Christ and say, "Lord, will you help me to live a good life, will you help me, guide me, in this line of activity." He is Lord. We have to surrender and hand over everything.

That is our problem of the Christian life. How do we hand over everything? It's vital. I always find it amazing, staggering in fact, that the

almighty God came down to this earth and became a man. He became a particular man, a representative man, and yet at one and the same time remained God. Jesus is man and he is God. As man, he has come because in the end we can do nothing. We are utterly helpless. We've been caught in sin, we are bound by sin. If you take the parable that Jesus told about the strong man, he said, "No one can enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods without first binding that strong man, then he can take his goods." In our natural state, we are overcome by the power of sin, which is a very real power, and we are helpless. But God has lovingly come down, broken into our situation. He has, in Jesus, bound the strong man...died on the cross and has risen victorious.

But he has done more than that. In binding the strong man and setting us free, he has actually lived out on our behalf a new and a perfect life, a righteous life. And he wants to give us that life. As we come to Christ and open our lives and we ask Christ to come, he comes as our Savior, he comes as our Lord. He comes to give us that new life so that we receive forgiveness, we receive redemption, we receive reconciliation with God. It's a marvelous thing because with Jesus ascended, we are made to ascend to the Holy Spirit. We are made to enter into the presence of the Father we are welcomed by the Father into his family.

What I always find staggering and amazing is we look at John 17...we are made to share in the fellowship of the Trinity itself, that God treats us as if we are Christ. But only, only because in Christ we become new creatures — new men and new women. Jesus has lived out our life for us in a double sense, that he took away our sin, our life...but he sanctified our life, turned it around, made it holy. So that day by day, month by month, you and I, as we open our eyes to Christ, keep our eyes in Christ, are simply appropriating Christ in every situation in life.

I think it's a disastrous thing to have people pray, "Lord, will you help me to do this?" Who's in charge? If God helps me, I'm in charge. I can't treat God as my servant or the Holy Spirit as my servant. He is the almighty God. He is Lord. I, myself, can do nothing. So every step, every day, every moment of the day has to be a looking unto Christ and surrender to Christ, but rejoicing, rejoicing that Christ is in control. So Paul can say, "It's not me, but it's Christ, Christ who lives in me." I think that's what we've got to try to get over to our people. The sheer joy, the sheer freedom, the sheer release from the shackles of sin, the sheer release from all the worries and the fears and anxieties is a letting go of God.

If I were to speak personally, I had a very happy marriage. We celebrated our 50 years. My wife was a doctor. She was, before we married, a missionary doctor in Africa. We came up to university together and ...my career was broken because of the army and the war. We met when she came home on furlough. She would have gone back to Africa, but she



didn't go back. We married...had a very happy time. But latter day she wasn't well. She had Parkinson's suddenly, and she died. People said, "Well, what did you do?" I never thought of tomorrow. I never thought of the future. I felt we were in the hands of God. God loves her, he loves me, and we had a very happy time together.

In actual fact, her illness brought us even closer together. I had to do an awful lot for her. She passed away in peace. It's hard to put into words...I remember vividly the day two and a half years ago, it was a very lovely sunny day, and after lunch I asked my wife what she wanted to do. She said she would like some sunshine so I took her out in her wheelchair and we sat in the sun, came back a little late, at 5:00, and that night our youngest daughter came in, we had a meal...and normally she would go to bed early at half past eight, but this time it's half past nine. I helped her get ready for bed. We had prayers, we always had prayers together, we prayed together. I kissed her, told her I loved her, helped her to bed, quarter of an hour later, she was gone. She was restless, I said, "Would you like to sit up?" So I helped her sit up. She was actually in my arms as she passed away very peacefully.

It sounds strange to say, but I had a tremendous feeling of the sheer love of Christ and the presence of Christ that she didn't suffer, she had no prolonged illness, didn't have to go to hospital. She departed — it was in the hands of God. I felt the kindness of God. People would say, well, what about the future? I can't say I ever thought about the future. We were in the hands of God. He is our Lord and our master, and we just day by day looked to him, thank him that yes, he's our lovely, glorious Savior. He's our Lord. He looks after tomorrow. Maybe that's oversimplified, but I feel that's the way I try to live so we don't have the worries, the fears.

I remember right in the area of the ministry visiting a home. She wasn't doing well and full of anxiety. I directed her to that passage in the Sermon on the Mount, "The birds of the air, they don't care about tomorrow, the heavenly Father feeds them. I said, "You read that." She told me a long time later, it was a great help and comforter, that the Lord provides. Yes, life can be difficult, it can be hard, we can face the dark and the stormy days, but we know that the Lord is there. Not only is he there, but as our mighty Redeemer and as a Lord who has total control over the whole situation.

So in the ministry I tried always to direct people to Christ. The most disastrous thing to do would be for the church to draw attention to itself, and what the church is doing. Sadly, the church is pretty good at doing that. But our task is to turn people away from us to Jesus Christ...and as far as possible to turn them away from their own problems and throw them to Christ.

## Dealing with sin in our lives

**JMF:** If I have a sin or a destructive habit that I'm struggling with or that's bringing me down, or that is not the kind of behavior that reflects one who is in union with Christ, what is my role? What do I do to deal with that, and what is the pastor's role? How does the pastor deal with that sort of thing in the congregation?

**DT:** We all have these problems, sadly, we're all sinners, and I, as pastor, yes, I'm a sinner. How do I go about it? If there are bad habits, what do you do about those bad habits? Or what about an illness? And sadly, there's a lot of illness in the world, and what do we do about that? We have to look to Jesus Christ. When Christ came and gave himself for us on our behalf and he died for us and he rose again...and he rose we have that great shout of triumph, the shout of the victor, "It is finished." It is finished. He had accomplished everything for our salvation, everything to solving all our problems and anxieties of life, perplexities...has done everything for our complete physical healing, everything. There's nothing left to do. So we look to him and thank him for what he has done in the finished work of Christ, so that he is the answer.

I attended a conference on prayer and healing under the director (name inaudible) on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of July. I had responded very warmly to that conference, and I've actually never ever witnessed so much physical healing ever before. Why I responded was because when someone comes who is sick, he doesn't pray, Lord, here's this person, he's sick, he's got cancer, please, take away the cancer. He said no, he said when that person comes – this is what he does in practice – he said you try and help that person to look away from their problem, away from their sickness, or if it's a bad habit like drugs or whatever, look away from that problem and to look to Jesus Christ and look to the cross and the fact that Christ has died and Christ has risen...and say that complete victory belongs to me in the light of what Jesus has done. Complete deliverance belongs to me from this evil habit because of what Christ has done. Complete healing belongs to me because of what Christ has done, thank you Lord, and go on and on saying thank you. And as you thank the Lord, the miracle happens.

Now it might sound very simple...it is very, very simple. But after all, the gospel is very simple. It's you and I who make it complicated with our sinful ways. Or the church makes it complicated. In that particular conference of prayer and healing, he had sessions on the Thursday night, Friday night, Friday morning was ministers/leaders, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon, then we had a prayer. There were some marvelous healings. That's all we did. Those who were asked to join in that prayer, and I shared in it, to help people just to look at Christ, the finished work of Christ. He would say well, now you say, because of what Christ has done, complete healing belongs to me, complete healing, because of what Christ

has done, thank you. There were some remarkable healings. I think when we approach our people and they share the problems...and we try to do that.

You take a common situation in a parish ministry...very, very common is broken marriages. I've tried all my ministry to visit people whose marriages were a problem or had a problem. I would have to say I find that the most difficult side of the ministry because of hardened hearts. I've equally found some incredibly lovely stories of people who have been reconciled and whose marriage was healed. That has always upheld me and comforted me. So I've had many failures at that and some very, very lovely answers to prayer.

I've always said, when two people have a marriage problem, and I could see very vividly in one parish...a couple, they were in their 60s, married over 40 years, and he happily went off with another woman. I went back and forth between husband and wife for over three months, and I thought in a way I was almost battering my head against a wall, because these are not easy situations. I tried to tell them that both had to first and foremost kneel at the foot of the cross and receive God's forgiveness for themselves. They had to think of their partner, as a wife not to think of a husband who had gone off with another woman, but to kneel at the foot of the cross and receive God's forgiveness for her life and receive the whole fullness of Christ, the life of Christ.

I said to him, yes, I told him he had to abandon the other woman...I said, "You've got to kneel before the foot of the cross and receive Christ. Only as you both die to yourselves, you'll be raised up as one new person. And after 40 years, it means you start again from the beginning. But as you both kneel before that cross and in the light of all that God has done for you, forgiveness, a new life...he will raise you up with new life."

I went off on holiday, and I came back, and there they were, side-by-side in church. And they were there every Sunday. They were the last people to say goodbye when I left that parish. It's a looking...trying to help your people...we're all sinful...I can't look down at that, I'm in the same boat as a fellow sinner sharing as a fellow sinner with my people. But helping them to try and look away from ourselves, from our sins, from our problems, or from our physical illnesses to Christ, to the finished work of Christ, what Christ has done in his life, in his death, his resurrection, ascension, absolutely everything...and that finished work of Christ.

Having said that, I feel very strongly that when we think of the atonement, it is the entire ministry of Christ...his incarnation, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and Pentecost. We are reliant on Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**JMF:** Is there a time for the pastor to admonish the congregation, then, about some prevailing sin?

**DT:** Yes. But we have to be very conscious that *we* are sinners. We are not standing on a pedestal. We are fellow sinner. We're seeking to come together and to ask God's forgiveness.

When I entered my first parish, the ministry had gone wrong. It's very sad when the ministry goes wrong. Everything is turned around about. Office-bearers wouldn't speak to one another, they were at loggerheads. In my very first board meeting, I walked in, and they were already there before me, standing around in a circle...and the two leading office-bearers in the center, just about to have a physical assault to one another. I had to strive into the middle and push the two apart. I wondered as a young man, what do I do now? I've never been taught about boxing [?] Christianity.

So they were a bit appalled that here is a minister having seized two men, pushed them apart physically. I said, "Well, now we begin our board meeting." This is my first board meeting ever in the church. It was the fastest meeting I had ever had, because no one would speak. It was over in half an hour, and I was asked for a quick session meeting with the superior body, so I said to one of the elders, my session clerk, my leading elder, I said, "What's the problem?"

So he got up, and I would say blew off. For about 20 minutes he told us all the problems, the animosities, and the back-biting, and all sorts of dreadful things. I had to finally silence him after 20 minutes and thank him, and ask the other elder to say what was on his mind. He marvelously stood up and apologized. I looked at that and I thanked him, and I read the passage from the Bible, "Little children, love one another." I didn't know what to do. That's all I could think about. I read them that passage.

I said to them, you know, we have sinned against God. Here we are, office-bearers of the church, striving, God's church, and we're quarrelling. I said the Lord is grieved with us! We are absolutely sinners. I included myself. I said we just have to pray and ask God to forgive us. So we prayed and asked God to forgive us. Every one of us, "bring us together." Then I shook hands, and they went away. I went home that night with a bit of a headache wondering what sort of church I had come to. For the next 18 months I preached through the Sermon on the Mount, preached on requests for forgiveness...we receive forgiveness as we give it. I said to them I would never appoint to office anyone in the church who was not at peace with God, without peace with everyone in the church, with everyone in the parish. In the end they came wonderfully together, and those two elders who fought actually became good friends. Another two who hitherto wouldn't speak, they actually asked to share the car together in visiting their district.

You stand with them as a fellow sinner. You together ask God's forgiveness, and you try to speak about the marvelous love of God and the fact that God is so sad that we quarrel. He loves us, he's forgiven us, he

wants us to come enjoy that love and love one another. We can't beat around the bush, but it's not easy.

**JMF:** You mentioned thanksgiving as part of the repentance process. In asking for forgiveness, we already know we have forgiveness, so in one sense we are giving thanks, aren't we, for knowing that we're forgiven, but we're giving thanks for the forgiveness even as we ask.

**DT:** I remember in the small Bible class, one of my teenage girls, very lovely person, said, "How often must I ask for forgiveness before I receive it?" I said, our Lord says in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, our sins." We ask, but we don't go on asking. That would insult God — that we don't believe that God loves us, that he's forgiven us? Christ *has* forgiven us. So we come and ask, "Lord, forgive us our sins," but as we look to Christ we thank him that he *has* forgiven us, forgiven us before we sinned, and before we were born. I find that a staggering thought. So I always tried to say to my people, You must ask for forgiveness, ask for forgiveness every day, but having asked for forgiveness, always, always say "thank you" that you *are* forgiven.

**JMF:** So the asking is like a participation in the fact of forgiveness.

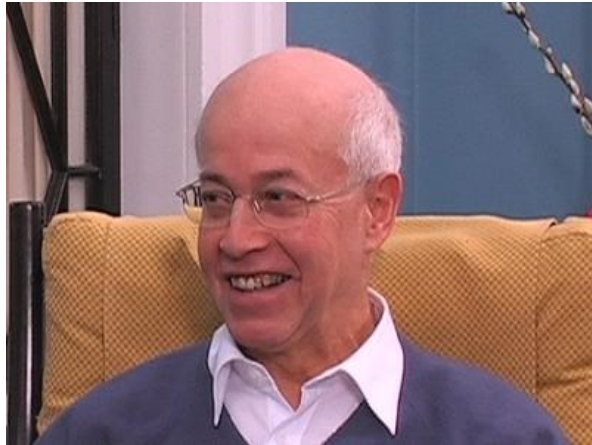
**DT:** Absolutely. It's a sharing in Christ's finished work. So Paul says, "In all things, in all times, in all circumstances give thanks to God." We're not very good at that. But that's very, very important that we pray at all times with thanksgiving. If we don't pray with thanksgiving, we have no faith. We're not believing, we're not accepting the marvelous love of God.

**JMF:** Paul gives admonition in Scripture, but he always does it from the context of "this is who you already are in Christ, this is who Christ has made you be, and therefore act like it." He never turns it around and says, "You're behaving badly, and if you don't stop it then you're lost."

**DT:** Absolutely. Perhaps the severest forms of judgment we see in the gospel are out of the lips of Jesus. He was absolutely frank. When we look at the cross, we might belittle our sins. We might, you know, think it doesn't matter. I say to people, "You look at the cross, you look at the fact that sin was so serious it took everything that God himself had got, to remove our sin and deliver us." I think of that great cry, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" There you see the depths and the horror of sin. Sin is very real, but thank God that we're delivered from it. Thank God. We can't, we dare not...our church needs to be cleansed, I pray every day that we will be cleansed. I pray for our church will be cleansed, purified. We must. But we thank God that there is complete cleansing, complete deliverance.

## 51. CHRIST HAS FAITH FOR US

**Introduction:** *You're Included* traveled to Scotland's esteemed University of St. Andrews for a special Thomas F. Torrance conference marking the launch of the book *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*. *Atonement* is the second of two volumes consisting of Torrance's lectures on Christology at New College in Edinburgh, Scotland from 1952 to 1978. Edited by retired theology lecturer and outdoor sports instructor Robert T. Walker, the two books have been called clear, accessible, deeply rooted in Scripture, and the most comprehensive presentation of Torrance's understanding of the incarnation and the atonement ever published.



As a nephew of the late Thomas F. Torrance, Walker gained an intimate understanding of Torrance's theology, studying under him and hearing his lectures in person. In the 500-year-old senior common room of St. Mary's College, St. Andrews' renowned divinity school, *You're Included* host J. Michael Fezell, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Robert T. Walker.

**JMF:** You're editor of two very important books by Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement* and *Incarnation*., They're having a great impact, and

we'd like to talk to you about the project, how it came to be, how it developed, and you're the person to talk to.

**RW:** I got a phone call from a classmate that I shared a room with at New College when we heard these lectures, and he asked me if I would be willing to edit the lectures. He had persuaded Thomas Torrance to get them published, and Thomas Torrance had given him the manuscript, or his son had, with a note saying that these needed an awful lot of work before they could be published. And Jock thought I was the best person to do it, so I said yes. But I had no idea how much work was involved in doing it.

**JMF:** You started in what year?

**RW:** 2003 or something. Thomas Torrance, my uncle, was almost 90 by that stage, and his short-term memory was failing a bit... he also had a stroke and so he couldn't have done the job.

**JMF:** So it involved collecting the notes from the class...

**RW:** No, actually, because by the end of his career, he had had all of his lectures...he read them out from a typescript. He'd often just stop and speak off the cuff, and those were often the best parts. But the lectures or such were all typed out and duplicated for us. Then, of course, later they were photocopied. All these photocopies he had, somebody already put them onto computer disk, so I got hard copies and the computer disks to work with.

**JMF:** It wasn't long before you realized that you'd need two volumes.

**RW:** Yes, that's right. When I looked at all the material and what wasn't there that I knew he'd given us handouts on, and there was a missing lecture that I remember hearing, a whole chapter, and I realized pretty soon we needed to have two volumes.

**JMF:** How many people were involved in helping you with the project?

**RW:** Mostly myself. Jock Stein, the editor of Handsel Press, who had initiated the whole project, was a great help. Any points of difficulty ...just to check that I'd interpreted it right, I checked with Tom's brother, David. So it was mostly myself.

**JMF:** As you went through and put together this material in a form that would be a book, you began to see that the lectures as they were prepared and presented are a little more accessible, easier to read for the average person, than Thomas Torrance's earlier academic work, his published work.

**RW:** Yes. They're lectures, so they're the spoken word, and so they come across much better, they're move alive. When he writes, it just becomes a little bit more polished. He still writes extremely well, but it just comes across differently. So these lectures are easily the most accessible way into his thought.

**JMF:** And they're also very thorough. As I recall, you had mentioned that they're covering pretty much the entire range of his theological thought.

**RW:** They cover the whole doctrine of Christ, the incarnation of God becoming human, the Old Testament background, the whole life of Christ, the atonement, justification, reconciliation, redemption, resurrection, ascension, coming again doctrine of the church. Yeah, they're pretty full.

**JMF:** And you also put together a synopsis at the beginning that goes through everything that you're going to see as a reader as you go through the book. You can get an overview from the very beginning.

**RW:** That's right. The synopsis is simply all the headings lifted out of the book and put together at the beginning. But that does give a very good guide to the contents in addition to the index.

**JMF:** Yes. I found it very easy to find a topic that I wanted to read about. It's easy using that synopsis or the index or together. It's very easy to locate a particular area of interest. And then you also included a glossary or terms.

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** It's very user-friendly, both of them. What kind of feedback have you received from those who have been reading it?

**RW:** Everyone says that they're very readable, and they've been surprised because Thomas Torrance has a reputation of being difficult at times. But my main aim...I mean, I heard these lectures. They were unbelievably thrilling and stretching—most exciting thing I've ever heard in all my life, and ever will, because we heard the lectures every day but Wednesday, when there were no lectures. The content was deeply moving, and inspiring, and thrilling. I was just very keen to make them as reader-friendly as I possibly could in breaking up some of the longer sentences, adding lots of headings, explaining the meaning of terms that the students of the day didn't have to have explained but the early reader does, and so just making it reader-friendly.

**JMF:** In talking about how exciting and thrilling the lectures were, what is it about Torrance's theology and his approach to these fundamental issues of the gospel and of Christian theology that make it so thrilling and exciting, so fresh, so worth reading?

**RW:** I think one thing is, it's deeply, deeply biblical. He was brought up to read the Bible three chapters a day and five on Sundays. He continued to do that all the way through his life. In fact, he read it two or three times each year. He is steeped in the Bible. And so that, but he has this Christocentric view. He interprets it in the light of his goal in Christ, and Christ as the atonement of sin and the heart of the Trinity. And with that focus, he's able to connect Christian doctrine and connect to biblical passages.

So you suddenly see also some connections and new meanings in the Bible, and then it just brings alive the Christian faith. I felt, why don't we get this in the church? Why aren't we taught this in the churches? That's the reaction I get when I teach it to a student. They say, "Why didn't we get this



in church? Because we should.” This is what they got at the Reformation, under Luther or Calvin. I just find it hugely stimulating, enriching, and exciting.

**JMF:** What are some of the areas that we don’t get typically in church that...in other words, a person would say yes, of course Christ is the center of the Bible and he ties everything together, but what is it that they’re missing, that this theology is bringing out of the Scriptures?

**RW:** I could answer that question for several hours, but for example, the way in which the importance of the person of Christ, who he is, that he is God, fully God, and yet fully man. We don’t make nearly enough of his being fully man, and not just that, but that he himself is the union of God and man in his own person. So he’s one reality. There’s one Jesus. There’s not a God Jesus and a man Jesus. There’s one Jesus. He himself in his person, he is the union of God and man.

It’s because that union that was forged and made at Bethlehem is unbreakable, that man and God will never be separated anymore, that they’re one in Christ. That’s the heart of the Christian faith and our salvation. We are joined to Christ because he shares our humanity. Christ is God, he’s joined to God. And because of that union, that’s the heart of our salvation. That’s the ultimate meaning of all the great “I am’s” of John’s Gospel. That’s just one aspect of a deeper biblical emphasis that we don’t get.

**JMF:** In thinking about that, it seems like most Christians tend to think Jesus came, he was a human being, then he died for our sins, then when he was raised again he goes back to being God. We don’t think of him, typically, as still being a human being, fully God, fully man. We think of him as fully God again, but what is the significance of him being fully man? Why does that matter to me and my Christian faith and my walk with Christ?

**RW:** It matters hugely, and it’s quite common to think that he’s no longer a man. But if he’s only God, then we’re here on earth, he’s up in heaven, and there’s a distance. Whereas if he’s still man, if he’s still bearing our humanity, then he’s the one who prays for us and knows what we feel like. He takes our prayers, our human prayers, and presents them to the Father. And because he shares our humanity, that’s an unbroken link with him.

**JMF:** You just said something very...you said he takes our prayers and presents them to the Father. So that would mean that we don’t need to worry about whether our prayers are good enough?

**RW:** That’s exactly right. We pray and we’re called to pray, but our prayers are never what they ought to be. He is the one who has taken our fallen humanity and perfected it. He takes our prayers and makes them his, and presents them to the Father. That’s the whole emphasis of the letter to the Hebrews, that he is our High Priest. Paul also says that if we’ve been

saved by his death, how much more will we be saved by his life? Which is, you know, very significant. You're saying if we've been saved by his death, how much more will we be saved by his risen life in heaven? Christian life is sharing in Christ's risen life. And if Christ is not risen as man, then we don't have that risen life to share in.

**JMF:** What does it mean to share in his life? Usually, again, we think of that as "We need to follow his example. We need to obey as well as he did, and that's sharing in his life." That doesn't sound like what you're talking about.

**RW:** No. It's a lot more than that; that he has become man in our place for us. God has become man to act as man for us. So in his whole human life, he's fulfilled everything that we ought to be doing. So it's not just a matter of trying to copy it, it's the fact that he has already done it for us and it's ours, so that his human life, his response to God, is our response.

That comes out very strongly in Galatians 2:20, "I've been crucified with Christ. I live, yet not I but Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by *the faith of the Son of God* who loved me and gave himself for me." Properly understood, our faith is not our faith in Christ, and it's not our faith that saves us. It's *Christ's* faith that saved us; it's his humanity. We put faith in his faith or in his human life, in his righteousness, in his human righteousness. That's the real content of our salvation. And so that we don't rely on what we do, we live out of his fullness, his prayer, his life. We live in union with him.

**JMF:** So the passages that speak of "We're already seated with him in heavenly places, we're already seated at the right hand of the Father with him, we already have passed into eternal life," we can take them seriously.

**RW:** Absolutely.

**JMF:** Well then, so our acts of obedience that don't merit salvation for us are our participation in the righteous...like the prayer you mentioned, he takes our prayer and he makes it his own so that it is effective, then he takes everything we are and do in the same way, then.

**RW:** Yes. We are called to live out the life that he has lived for us. The only reason we can live it out is because he has already done it for us.

**JMF:** We're living out something that's already so.

**RW:** Yes. We're living out the salvation that he has won for us.

**JMF:** It's not a matter of going around worrying all the time that that we'll make it, let's say, make it into heaven or that we'll measure up in some way.

**RW:** No. The gospel is the incredible realization that Jesus is not only God coming to rescue us, but he's also God coming to be man, to be man for us, even to make our response for us. When we make a response, I'm not making an extra response to God in addition to what Christ has made for us, I'm letting Christ's response to his Father be mine. I'm resting on his

faith. We need to have faith, but it's not faith in *our* faith—it's resting on Christ and his human righteousness and his faith.

**JMF:** So we trust in him, not in ideas ...like you said, we don't have faith in our faith. A lot of times, our faith is very weak...

**RW:** Yeah.

**JMF:**...so the opposite would be true, too. We don't have to worry when our faith is weak, we can trust that he has perfect faith for us.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** So we're trusting in him completely. It seems like immediately someone would argue, yes, but if you actually believe that, then there's nothing to keep you from behaving badly, from just being disobedient, since you would say, "I'm already taken care of in Christ, so therefore I can live in whatever destructive way I want and I'm still safe in Christ." How do we respond to that?

**RW:** That's a very good question. It's a key question. That was the question that Paul answered at the beginning of Romans chapter 6. Because in chapter 5, Paul has basically said we are saved. It's been done. At the start of chapter 6 it says, "Does that mean we can sin? We've been saved." And he says *no*, because for one thing, if we sin, we're bringing ourselves back again under the slavery of sin. But secondly, if we have been saved, we have been made *new*. If we sin, we're saying we haven't been made new, but we're acting a lie against what Christ has done for us and we're falling back into sin.

The fact that we've been saved doesn't mean we don't do anything; it's actually the opposite. It liberates us to live out the life that's given to us in Christ. We often think, and this is the way that Tom Torrance used to put it, some of God, some of man. He does his part, we now have to do our part. He always used to emphasize it's not like that. The way it works is: all of God means all of man. The fact that God has done it all, his part and our part, that actually liberates us to become ourselves in him and to live to the full out of him, because we're not worried about our having to do it. We're living out of Christ.

**JMF:** So how do we deal with the fact that we still do sin? Even though we are in Christ, we still fall short. How do we cope with that?

**RW:** Yes, and we'll continue to sin until the day we die. But it's not what *we* do that counts, it's what we are in Christ. And we are in the process of being cleansed, slowly. We never reach perfection. In fact, often the more we know Christ, the more we know our sin.

**JMF:** It does seem like that.

**RW:** At the same time, we trust more in him. It's not a matter of living out of ourselves and the concern with how good we are or how good Christians we are, it's a matter of living out of Christ, with Christ and out of him.

**JMF:** That brings to mind the passage in Hebrews 4 about, “Since we have such a great high priest, therefore we go to the throne of grace to find help in time of need.”

**RW:** That’s right.

**JMF:** It’s as though because he’s already done everything...it seems to be saying, like you said, because he’s already done everything for us and made us who we are in him, that when we fall short, that grace drives us to the throne of grace to find the help we need.

**RW:** Yeah.

**JMF:** That takes away a lot of the...well, it takes it away all, doesn’t it, of the fear and the anxiety and the worry about salvation?

**RW:** Yes, it liberates us.

**JMF:** It almost sounds too easy. It sounds too simple. It sounds like good news, but it’s so good that it can’t possibly be so.

**RW:** (laughing). Well, that’s exactly right. When somebody hears the gospel for the first time...I love Martin Luther’s phrase. He said it’s like a cow staring at a new gate.

**JMF:** (laughing).

**RW:** This can’t be true, is it? That is exactly the impact of the gospel when we first see it. We’re liberated. You are freed from thinking, “I’ve got to do this.” Christ has done it for us. When we understand that, that is the beginning of faith.

**JMF:** That would drive you toward sin.

**RW:** No.

**JMF:** That would drive you toward joy.

**RW:** That’s right.

**JMF:** And toward the faith that you have to live it out.

**RW:** Yes. Torrance used to use the analogy of...it was about...that when his little daughter was young, he used to walk with his daughter and she used to hold him tightly. But his hand was around hers. She’d often stumble. He said that what mattered was not her feeble grasp of him, but his grasp of her.

**JMF:** Yes.

**RW:** And that’s the same as Christ. It’s not our grasp of Christ that counts, it’s his grasp of us.

**JMF:** Yes. That raises the question of confession. We’re told to confess our sins, and yet we’re already forgiven and our sins are taken care of. What role does confession play in the process?

**RW:** Paul speaks about...on the cross Christ took all our sins and nailed them to the cross. There are numerous verses that speak about, if when we were enemies we were reconciled by the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we are saved by his life. The numerous passages indicate it’s been done. We’ve been saved.

We do need to confess our sins. I think that's partly for our sake, and I think it's partly that in the process of confessing, as it were, we don't bottle them up. We bring them to the surface in the light of what Christ has done for us. Our confessing them is part of the means by which what has been done already for us in Christ, as it were, is actualized in our lives. We come to know the power of sins forgiven, if we can put it like that. He has already put away our sins, and yet we still live as though we have them. But by confessing them we, as it were, bring them to the cross so that their having been put away on the cross now becomes...is verified to us, if we can put it like that.

**JMF:** So we're taking part in the thing that's already so. We're participating in the reality of the forgiveness we already have. Well, that changes the whole way we approach confession then... In my life, early on, I had the idea that God might not forgive me, so I would have to ask more than once and I would have to do it...and I would keep doing it with more and more fervency and intensity until I could feel that maybe I was convincing myself of the reality of it by just...it was though I was asking, or let me say begging, a boss for a raise or something. It was like begging that God would forgive me until I felt like he had. And even then, I wasn't sure that he might have. You know, why would he forgive me anyway, because this is probably the 100th time I've asked about the same thing.

**RW:** Yep.

**JMF:** So that changes the whole...we can confess our sins knowing we're forgiven. It's almost a joyful thing.

**RW:** That's right. It should be. It should be joyful repentance. We don't repent *in order to* be forgiven. It's forgiveness that leads us to repentance and to joyfully repentance. That's a proper way to understand it.

## 52. WHY THE INCARNATION IS GOOD NEWS

**J. Michael Feazell:** What is a Christian missing out on if they don't have an incarnational understanding of the gospel?

**Robert Walker:** Brilliant question. The first thing they're missing out on is that they do not know that God has come all the way to us where we actually are, because incarnation says that God has become man. In other words, he's no longer distant. He's actually come himself in person, into space and time, to do our salvation, to meet us face to face in Jesus. So if we don't have a proper understanding of the incarnation, that God became man, then we don't know that God is really with us.

But also, we don't know that he's really become man *to save us*. The fact that's he's become man means that he has come all the way to what we are and actually achieved our salvation for us as man. So on two counts, in a double sense, we're not aware of just how much God has united himself to us.

**JMF:** Most Christians, or a lot of Christians, think of Jesus as a role model — he came to show the way. We have popular songs, “He Came to Earth to Show the Way,” for example. What's wrong with just seeing him as a role model?

**RW:** If we think he's come to show us the way, that implies that “the way” is different from what *he* is. He says “that's the way, walk in it,” and he shows us. But he's much more than that — he IS the way. In John's Gospel he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” So what he's done actually *is* the way. He is the way and so there's much, much more than just *showing* us the way. He actually has done everything for us, and we come to the Father through him. So he himself is the way who has done it for us.

**JMF:** That would still fit with the role model, if we think of it in terms of following him — if he's the way, then do we follow him and just try to

do what he did?

**RW:** In a way. But at the same time, it's more than that, because he has done it for us. So we can't comprehend it in the sense of trying to do what he did because of our sin. The Christian life is living in unity with him, and so, living out of what he has done for us. Rather than trying to, in a sense, copy what he has done so that it's *our* doing it, he's become man to do it *for* us, and so we make what he's done ours, and we live out of it. We do the same thing but not, as it were, in our strength trying to do it all over again. Through union with him, because of the Spirit living in us, we find ourselves beginning to live the way he lived.

**JMF:** We talk of the Spirit and doing it in the Spirit, but we can't see the Spirit.

**RW:** No, that's right.

**JMF:** So how do we know that the Spirit is at work in us?

**RW:** We're familiar with light. When you go into a room and it's dark, and you flip a switch and the light comes on. We actually can't see light, but we can see what light lights up. And it's the Spirit that gives us the eyes to see Christ and makes Christ real for us, so that if we know Christ, then we know it's through the Spirit. The Spirit is the One who opens us up to live out of Christ.

**JMF:** You say that he's already done it for us. If that's so, then why do we...what is it that we're trying to do? In other words, if he's already done everything necessary for our salvation, what is left for us to do for ourselves?

**RW:** In one sense, nothing, but in another sense, everything. It's to joyfully live out the life that he has re-made for us. If we think of it in the sense that he has come and he's taking our fallen, dying humanity that wastes away and gets older and dies and then disintegrates in the grave...he's taken our life, he's actually remade it in his own life. That's what the resurrection's about — that's the remaking of our life. He gives us our new humanity. What we're living out is our new humanity that he gives us. So we're not trying to copy him. We couldn't — we couldn't rise from the dead.

**JMF:** That's just the trouble, isn't it? We try to do what Jesus says, but we fall short, and we may be successful to some degree, at least from time to time, but we fall short and then we feel guilty and we feel anxious and fearful that how can we be part of the kingdom of God? How can we be saved, because we fall short and because we're not following Christ as we should. And so we're fearful. But incarnational theology, looking at or seeing the gospel in the way you're describing, doesn't push us back on how well we perform, it sounds like you're saying.

**RW:** It points us to Christ, and so that we see his humanity, the life that he lived as our life. We don't see that he's done something and we have to

copy it, we see what he's done — that is our life. He was born for us, his birth at Bethlehem is our new birth. When he died, that was our death. When he rose, that was our resurrection. When he ascended into heaven, he took us with him.

This is all what Paul says – and that's the meaning of faith — that we understand that he so came into our place to live for us, that everything that he did is ours. We live out of that. That takes away all the strain and the burden and gives a whole new dimension to Christian living. We live in his strength, not in our strength. We live with all our strength...we are fully released to live to the full, and yet in the real sense we're not living in our strength, we're living in Christ's strength. But that liberates us to live fully.

**JMF:** Then the gospel is not about calling people to good behavior, it's about letting people know and calling them to a new identity — who they are in Christ — to a relationship with God in Christ, and that's different from...it's a whole different point of the gospel, isn't it? Because don't we usually think of the gospel as being a call to straighten out your life?

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** In other words, you're a sinner, and did you know it? Now that you know you're a sinner, you need to be forgiven of those sins, and so we're forgiven, we're told to behave better, and the Holy Spirit will help you and Jesus shows the way — and the whole goal is a better me through good behavior.

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** But the gospel is not all about that.

**RW:** No, it's much more than that. It's not just that God has come to show us what we ought to do, he's actually come to do himself for us what we ought to do. He's taken our human life and he's remade it. What he gives us in Christ, and this comes over especially at the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, he gives us our new humanity. Our task is to live out our new humanity. We don't start by trying to remake ourselves. We have been remade in Christ. We live out the new identity, as you put it, in union with Christ through the Spirit.

**JMF:** So it's the gospel's declaration that you've been made new, therefore live like it.

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** Not “live good, so that God will give you the kingdom.”

**RW:** No.

**JMF:** That's the opposite of what we typically hear.

**RW:** Yes, that's right.

**JMF:** It's putting the cart before the horse instead of the other way.

**RW:** That's right. The word *gospel* means “good news.” It's not the good news that we have to make ourselves better. The good news is that we *have* been made better, already been renewed.



**JMF:** It's almost like...the gospel is good news if you can achieve it. But sorry, you never will.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** You can try very hard, though, and that will make you happier. That's not good news.

**RW:** And usually it *won't* make us happier, because we know we can't do it.

**JMF:** It couldn't be more frustrating...and give up or whatever we do.

**RW:** Yeah. The exciting thing about the incarnation is that it's God himself come to do it. He's doing it as man, and that immediately takes us into the whole doctrine of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit. That opens up a whole new richer dimension to Christian thought and living.

**JMF:** How does it do that?

**RW:** For one thing, this is what God is — the real God is Father, Son, and Spirit. We're used to thinking of God as a kind of single being out there far off. But when we know God in Jesus Christ, then we discover that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and so we come to know the real God for the first time. Calvin says if we don't distinctly conceive God as Father, Son, and Spirit, then we don't really know God. It's partly just coming to know the real God.

The real God is a communion of love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father — they live in the communion of love with the Spirit. That is the nature of God — the three persons of God. That doesn't mean there are three Gods. There's one God, and yet somehow he exists — he is Father, Son, and Spirit, and they exist in relation.

When we begin to think in that way, then we begin to think of ourselves not just as individuals — an individual here and a separate individual there. We begin to think of ourselves in the human race as interconnected persons in relation. So it has an implication for a much richer and deeper sense of community. The doctrine of the Trinity...a lot of people are a bit scared of it. But I don't think they need to be.

**JMF:** It's into that, that Christ brings us, then — if we're one with him, if he comes and takes us in, takes humanity, us into himself, and he's in that eternal communion of love, then we're in that eternal communion of love with him.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** And that's the way things are.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** It's been done, he already did it.

**RW:** That's the miracle of the Ascension. When Jesus ascended still wearing our humanity, he took our humanity into the heart of God. So there's now a man in the heart of God. He's still human. That's our destiny — to live in fellowship with God.

When we think of people, we automatically think of people as complete individuals, and you are a totally different individual from what I am. And if somebody knows you, they don't have a clue what I'm like. But with the Trinity, it's different, because the persons are so interrelated, they're different and they remain different. They're each totally God — the Father is completely God, the Son is completely God, the Spirit's completely God — and yet they live in relation and in such a close relation that when we look at the Son and see the face of the Son, then we know what the Father is like. The Son is the image of the Father.

You know, you are different — if someone looks at you, they don't know what I'm like. But it's the opposite when we look at Christ. He's the image of the Father. He is the Son of the Father. To know the Son is to know the Father, and Jesus says that. Phillip says, "Show us the Father, and we'll be satisfied." Jesus says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." Especially through John's Gospel, when we listen to words of Jesus and we're drawn into his relationship with the Father and we begin to cotton on somehow, slowly, through the Spirit we begin to think in this deeper interpersonal way. We begin to understand something as a relation to the Father, and that's the heart of the gospel — the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit that he has come to share with us.

**JMF:** So when we talk about Trinitarian theology, are we talking about something complicated, or something simple?

**RW:** It's both at once. The simplest things are often the profoundest things...or put it the other way, the profoundest things are often the simplest things. There's a profound simplicity here. The person with the simplest faith can understand the Son, and the Son being the image of the Father and the Spirit. But this is something that stretches our mind. That doesn't mean that we have to be intellectual or brilliant academically, because it's not that kind of understanding. It's more a different way of thinking. It's profound...there's a deep simplicity, and yet at the same time, it's profound.

I think complicated is the wrong word. People often worry that theology is not for them, or the Trinity is not for them, because they haven't got the mind to understand it. But the thing with God is that God makes himself known to us. It's back to the thing about faith. We shouldn't think of our faith — have we got enough faith? We shouldn't think of enough reason — have we got enough reason, enough intelligence, to understand. It's more of who the God is we're trying to understand. If we focus on him, he gives us understanding — he makes us known — he makes himself known.

Now often, in the nature of the case, when you learn something new, if it's really new, we don't know it. How do we learn something that we don't know? It might seem impossible. But we all do. We all make breakthroughs. Slowly, slowly, gradually the pieces fall into place. So if we have confidence

in what we're trying to understand and in the person who is making himself known, we just hang in there and listen and wait, and then God gives us understanding. We're led deeper into this whole way of thinking. Especially, I think, through reading John's Gospel.

**JMF:** With some of the most simple things, such as if you go outside in the evening and you look at the sunset and you look at the stars, you can appreciate the profound beauty, and you're drawn into that.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** You have that sense of inspiration and beauty whether or not you ever study sunsets and stars and how they work — and many people do, many people study them and study everything from sensory appreciation from visual, how we process things we see, to how stars are made. There are so many different things you could learn more about from a sunset and a starry evening, but you don't have to, to stand there and appreciate it and be taken up by it.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** It's the same whether you know more about it or not. It's still itself.

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** I wonder if the gospel is somewhat like that. There's a simplicity in Christ in simply trusting Christ to be our all in all, and if so, he is everything he is for us and with us, in us, whether we study more about it or not.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** But we can, it's something we can explore forever, joyfully, and never come to the end of.

**RW:** Yes. The more we know Christ, I would say, the more we are drawn into understanding his riches. Paul says that we should be mature in our thinking and have a reason for the hope that's in us. The lecture to the Hebrews says similar things. It's part of our calling, too, in knowing Christ, and being drawn into this profound adoration and love and worship to do that with the whole of ourselves, and that includes our minds, so that we come to understand deeper.

It's not academic, it's a kind of different way of understanding that we all have because we're all made to know and we're all made in the image of God — to know and understand and think more deeply than we think we're able to — that that's given to us. My grandmother was Tom Torrance's mother. She was an evangelical with a profound simple faith. But for Tom, she was the theologian in the family, simply because of her spiritual influence — not through any academic thing learned.

**JMF:** If we want to understand the gospel in a truly gospel way, then, for what it is and for what the truth of the gospel is, or even if we want to help somebody else understand it, what is the bottom line? What is the

simple thing that we need to and can know, whether we ever pick up a theology book?

**RW:** That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and that through what he's done as God and man for us, our lives have been renewed in him, and he gives us a new humanity.

**JMF:** So our faith, then, the thing that we're asked to believe, is something that is true for us whether we believe it or not.

**RW:** That's right.

**JMF:** Even before we believe it.

**RW:** That's right. That's profoundly true. Paul said, "While we were enemies, we were reconciled." Even while we still hated God, before we ever heard the gospel, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. So the gospel is the message of what has happened for us in Jesus. When we hear it, it's good news.

It's like the story of the Japanese soldier, in I think it was the Second World War, who was marooned on an island. No one knew he was there. He didn't know the war had ended. He was discovered 20 years later or something. They told him, "The war's ended," you know? The good news. So the gospel is hearing the good news that God has done it.

**JMF:** It seems that some people don't want to commit themselves to the gospel because of the way it's presented. They're given something that really isn't the gospel. They're given this idea that you're going to enter into something where you will need to achieve salvation by doing certain things. You've got to, first of all, repent of your sins, and then you can't be sure if you've repented of all of them exactly, perhaps. There's so many barriers, it seems, that keep you from being able to experience joy or rest. It's not a gospel of rest that we hear preached so often, it's a kind of a gospel of anxiety —

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** — you're in big trouble and you better do something to get out of that trouble, or God is going to send you to hell. So we're looking for a way to avoid hell, but have to do something that we're not even sure we can do, in order to avoid hell. It's just a confused kind of a...and yet we're saying this good news — God loves you, so receive him, but he's going to send you to hell if you don't, because that's how he *really* feels about you.

**RW:** To put it that way is not the gospel. But what you said is just what many people believe. The gospel is that God has come to make himself known...by making himself known, that inevitably just exposes us for what we are. But there is a judgment on us, you know, that we are not what we ought to be. But God has taken his judgment on himself, his own judgment on himself, and has undone our sin and put it all in the past, and risen into a new life in the resurrection. That is ours now through the gospel. We are called to live out the new life that Jesus achieved, that he lived out in his life

and achieved in a permanent sense in the resurrection.

**JMF:** That's good news.

**RW:** Yes.

**JMF:** It doesn't require fear — we can rest.

**RW:** Yes, that's right.

**JMF:** I want to ask just one last thing in the minute or two we have remaining. If there's one thing that you would want people to know about God, what would that be?

**RW:** That he loves us and that he is love in himself — that's his very nature. He loves us so much that he has even entered into our hell for us on the cross. He's taken our godforsakenness and undone it, and cleared away all the barriers between us and him and united us to himself. He has taken our very flesh, our dust, and made it his. He is now a man in Christ. He's done all that for us. He's now with us, one with us.

**JMF:** That's a good reason to receive the gospel.

**RW:** Indeed.

## 53. THE IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS' RESURRECTION

**J. Michael Fezell:** As you were working on the project of *Incarnation* and *Atonement*, what were some of the memorable moments during the process?

**Robert Walker:** It's hard to answer that, because I'm not sure there's any one particular moment. But working on the whole thing, it was deeply moving and I felt this is precious, this is wonderful stuff. I heard all the lectures, but coming back to it, it just swept over me all over again. All sorts of things I appreciated struck me with much greater force, all sorts of things. It's been a wonderful experience and very rewarding.

**JMF:** Do you remember a couple of those that stand out?

**RW:** For example, this emphasis on the resurrection and the meaning of the resurrection. Normally we think the gospel is the cross, and then the resurrection is kind of an extra.

**JMF:** Yeah.

**RW:** But in many ways, it's the resurrection...you can't separate the two. There's a verse of Paul, "Jesus was put to death for our sins and raised for our justification." Raised for our justification. In other words, it's the resurrection that makes us righteous. The cross perhaps puts away our sins, but it's the resurrection that makes us righteous.

The resurrection is an almighty event. It's not just the raising of a body from death, it's the beginning of a new creation — the beginning of the renewal of all of space and time. For Torrance, it brings out the fact that the resurrection is forgiveness. It's not just the proof of forgiveness, it *is* forgiveness, because in the Bible, sin and death are linked. So for God to undo sin, means to undo death. So the resurrection, that means, is God's

undoing sin. It's raising somebody up who has taken our sin out of the grave, so that is our resurrection.

That's why Paul says, "If Christ is not raised, we are still in our sins." Something like that, which we often bypass, it just hit me with renewed force...and there are all sorts of nuggets like that in the book.

**JMF:** It turns everything on its head, doesn't it? Instead of hoping our sins are forgiven if we repent well enough, it gives us full assurance of salvation because Christ has already done everything. What a joy, what rest, what peace.

**RW:** Yes. The resurrection of Jesus is our forgiveness in action. They're identical — God forgiving and God raising Christ, they're the same thing.

**JMF:** You mentioned the resurrection as the new creation, as the starting place for everything — implications for the entire universe, for the whole creation. Could you elaborate on that?

**RW:** Yes. The incarnation means that God has taken part of the stuff of the old creation — our body — and in it has died and undone sin, so that when he rose, that was the beginning of the new creation. The early fathers had an analogy and said that when a baby is born, the head comes out first, and that's the hard part. But once the head's come out, the rest of the body will follow. They used that of Christ — that he's the head, he's the firstborn, the first fruits, and he's the head that's come out first, so the whole of the rest of creation will follow in what's happened to Christ.

That means...literally the renewal of all space and time. The whole physical creation will be renewed in Christ and reconstituted under him as the new head. That's the unbelievably cosmic dimension of the New Testament, and that comes out extremely well in Torrance's writings. He has a very good understanding of that — that the resurrection is not just somebody being raised from the dead, it's the beginning of the whole new reconstitution of everything—it's the beginning of heaven on earth.

**JMF:** That would imply that we don't know what space and time will look like, will be like in the resurrection, once we are immortal. What will that look like — as something not like what we experience now, perhaps?

**RW:** Obviously, we can't say. But we can say that it will be this creation, these bodies of ours, we'll recognize each other, so there will be continuity. And yet what it will be like when the creation is freed from sin and death and corruption and injustice, we can't say. It will be far more wonderful and glorious — we can only look forward to it. The Bible says that it does not yet appear — we cannot yet see what we shall be like, but we know that when he comes, Christ comes again, we'll be like him [1 John 3:2]. It speaks of Jesus now having a new and more glorious body, a body which no longer dies.

**JMF:** After his resurrection he appeared to the disciples several times, including on the seashore, cooking a meal and eating it with them. And yet

this was a resurrected body that he was appearing in and he was able to enjoy food and fellowship just fine.

**RW:** Yes. I like those stories, because dead men don't rise from the dead, so it's quite striking that the first reaction of the disciples is...they don't believe it. The risen Jesus meets some of the women and the women tell the disciples he's risen, and they don't believe it and they're afraid because ...is this a ghost? No, it's real.

The fact that Jesus is raised, he's the beginning of a new creation. In the 40 days that he was on earth, the new creation was overlapping with the old creation. When he ascended, we can no longer see the new creation that is there in Christ. We know it by faith, we know it because we meet and know Christ through the Spirit. We know the reality of it, and that's what gives the New Testament its tremendous sense of victory and of triumph and of looking forward to what we will be. It's not just pie in the sky, it's the renewal of this whole wonderful creation.

**JMF:** We're saved by grace through faith, and the Scriptures tell us even that is not our own. Luther goes to great lengths to explain that we must not look at faith as another work, because we're not saved by our works, so faith cannot be a work. How do the eyes of faith work? What is faith, and how are we to see this new creation and believe and trust Christ that we're in it? Where does this faith come from and how is it not a work?

**RW:** It's something that happens in us which is God's work, but it's something that really happens in us. We come to see and understand and believe, but the very nature of that is that we know that it's through God's work that we came to understand, because this is not something that we could believe for ourselves so that we really do believe and understand.

Torrance uses the analogy of the virgin birth. Mary did nothing to conceive Jesus. Joseph was set aside. There was no human input, Christ was born, a man. Something happened in Mary and she gave birth. All she did — she was told it would happen, and she said, "Amen." Faith is a bit like that — that God has become man for us — to believe, to do everything for us — and we say amen to it. Our amen is the way it happens in us. We've understood that it's for us and we say amen. We live out of what Christ has done for us. There's something real that happens in us. It's a real understanding, in that it's God's work.

**JMF:** So our job is to believe what is so. He is, therefore we don't have to be afraid.

**RW:** Yes. To believe the gospel, to rejoice in what Christ has done for us — not just as God but as man.

**JMF:** Your degrees are in philosophy and theology. How does Trinitarian theology bear on philosophy?

**RW:** I did a full degree in philosophy and I found that very useful. It does give a conceptual understanding, which isn't necessary but it does help



to understand theology. I enjoyed my study in philosophy hugely. When I did theology, it was going somewhere. There was a purpose, there was a truth, there was a reality. And the heart of the reality in the Christian faith is the Trinity, God in Christ. That gives us a grasp of reality as it is, so that having that grasp at once deepens and enriches our understanding of the whole of the rest of the world — of science, of philosophy, et cetera. The philosophy helps to understand it.

At the same time, the theology enriches philosophy. The Trinitarian theology, it gives a deeper dimension. Theology helps us to think in a profound way because in the gospel we know God. In theology we are knowing God not just with our feelings, our hearts, but with our minds. Our minds are inevitably deepened and stretched. So for me there's a link between that and the fact that, I think it's true to say, most of the really good philosophers today are Christians, which is a remarkable fact.

**JMF:** Academic work and working on a major project like this and so on is not all you do, you're actually involved in outdoor sports. Can you tell us about that?

**RW:** I am very fortunate. Edinburgh University has an outdoor center on Loch Tay, that's a lake in the Highlands — fabulously beautiful setting. I've worked there almost every weekend of the year except for July and August, and four or five months a year to mid-weeks as well. I teach kayaking, canoeing, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, hill walking, sometimes sailing and windsurfing. I love that. It's out in the open air, it's exercise, it's doing what I love and sharing with people. It's an ideal balance to the academic work, to theology.

**JMF:** We have just a little bit of time remaining, and in that time I wonder if you would mind sharing some of your personal observations, reflections on your uncle Tom, Thomas F. Torrance.

**RW:** I got to know him much better at the end of his life, having been asked to edit these lectures of his after his stroke. He was unfortunately in the hospital and in a nursing home for the last few years of his life, and I visited him once or twice a week, so I got to know him very well. Things that come across — he is very, very personable. He took an intense interest in people. When he died, a number of fellow students wrote or phoned up his brother and said that when they remembered about Tom was not his academic learning, although the amount he knew was incredible...what they remembered was his pastoral concern for them as students.

He was a minister. On the pastoral side he was always very, very strong, so that he was a unique combination — a minister, a pastor. He prayed for his students, he prayed for all the family each day, he read the Bible each day. That's the pastoral side, you've got the academic side. His knowledge of field after field of history, of theology, was just amazing. He knew science. He had incredible energy, he worked at great speed, and he

somehow held all these things together. He was a unique synthesis of theology and of life. His experiences in the war... that would be an adventure book in itself, some of the experiences.

I remember one of the stories. I used to try to get him going on some of his war memories, because even though I'd heard them, it was good to hear them again. One time he was out on patrol with the soldiers. He insisted on being with the soldiers whenever he could, and they gave him skis. This was in Italy, in winter. And skiing down, one of his skis came off. It was badly fitting, and it clattered down the hillside. It made a noise and alerted the Germans and they began firing at him. So he had to ski down on one ski to avoid enemy fire.

There are numerous occasions when his life appeared to have been saved by a miracle. They'd be sheltering down in a trench and the person on the left and the right would be killed. Or he'd sleep in his Land Rover at night and then one night he, for some reason, didn't sleep there, and the next day there was a bullet hole right through where he would have been sleeping.

He was a man of tremendous energy. He came back from the war and he said, "Mother, I'm not cut out to be an academic. I'm a man of action." He had this tremendous energy.

**JMF:** Tell us about your mother. She's his sister, and I'm curious about how it was to live with someone who came from such a family.

**RW:** It was an immense privilege. There were six children — three sons and three daughters. They were all given to the Lord before they were born, or dedicated, and the way that worked out was that the three sons all became ministers and the three daughters all married ministers. It was a tremendous privilege to have that theological understanding in the family.

My father was a medic. Going out as a missionary to Africa, he trained as a minister. He was a great sportsman. He played hockey for Scotland and he was very good with his hands...and I combine both. I love sport. I like doing do-it-yourself. But in many ways the heart of me is theology — it's knowing God, understanding the Christian faith, helping to communicate it to others.

We were made to use our minds and know God with the whole of ourselves, and most Christians, we tend not to use our minds about God, so we miss out on a lot. But life, human life is, in all its richness, it's about being part of the world, about doing things, so sport for me happens to be my work, but I think it's important for people to be active in some way, to use their bodies, whether it's in sport or painting or woodwork, because we're made to be physical beings, and so to me, it's good to combine the two.

**JMF:** There's no such thing as a separation then, is there, in between secular... if we know who we are in Christ, there's no separation between

secular and spiritual, as it were ...

**RW:** No, there shouldn't be. That's part of the meaning of the incarnation — that God has become man. In the Bible, in the Old Testament, the human being is body and soul as a unity. The Old Testament has no concept of a soul apart from the body so that when the body dies, that's it, we're dead. In the Old Testament the soul is thought of as a living body, a body with breath in it. That's why the resurrection in the New Testament is so fundamental, because if we're not raised, then that's it.

God loves this physical world, he made it as physical, and he's come to save it as physical, so he became a physical being, he became man, and he rose in the body. Jesus is forever bodily. We will forever be human. In some religions, we stop being human, we actually become God, we lose our individuality. But part of the glory of the Christian Hebrew tradition is that God loves us as we are, men and women, children of flesh and blood, and we will forever be human.

**JMF:** Did Tom Torrance ever talk about pets? I receive questions frequently, and I know C.S. Lewis had made some statements about it. Did he ever comment on...?

**RW:** He was a keen horse rider when he grew up in China. He taught the mule to jump. The mule had never done that before. And he skied. He and his family always had several dogs, so they loved their pets and used to take their dogs for a daily walk. When you'd go to the house there's this furious barking, you know? All the dogs barking and waiting to welcome you.

**JMF:** Did he have any feeling on whether there is a reunion with pets in the resurrection?

**RW:** I never heard him on that, but to me everything that we enjoy in this creation will be somehow renewed over there for us, perhaps in a different form, but there's a lot in the Bible about the renewal of the earth and the meek will inherit the earth, the new city comes down from above. To me it's wrong to think of heaven as a separate place "up there." To me, heaven is the future state of the earth, which will be so much more wonderful than it is now, because it will be freed from all sin and crying and tears and just wasting away or death.

**JMF:** Final question... it always arises, if God has redeemed or is reconciling everything through himself, "whether things in heaven or things on earth" as Colossians says, through Christ, or in Christ. I don't know why people are concerned about the devil and demons, but did Tom Torrance discuss the resolution of the devil and demons in terms of the new creation?

**RW:** He had a very strong and vivid sense, as the New Testament did, of the reality of evil powers, and Christ's whole life was a battle with evil. He used to say that evil is essentially parasitic. It cannot exist in its own

right. It can only exist as an attack on what is good, so that God has made this creation to be wonderful and good. Somehow the mystery of evil is that there's this force which attacks and tries to destroy it. But Christ has overcome this force.

Torrance used to use the analogy of two grindstones rubbing against each other. One is going one way and the other is going the other, and they're rubbing sparks off each other. One is saying, "I love you" and the other is saying, "No, you don't," and that for him was his picture of hell — that God remains love, God has redeemed the whole of creation, and the whole of creation is being renewed. The mystery is that some people, as far as we can, according to the Bible (and the Bible is our only authority and guide), have the freedom to say no, and they will say no. They refuse to enter this reality, and so they're on the outside, the fringe. He has a very good understanding of the nature of evil and the powers of evil.

**JMF:** The wheels give a great analogy because that's exactly what happens, is sparks, and it erodes you as you continue to say no, really, to who you are, to your actual identity of who God has made you to be in Christ. Yet it is kind of scary to receive something that you're unfamiliar with.

**RW:** That's right, because it means we're no longer self-centered, we're no longer in control, we're no longer turned in on ourselves. We need to learn to look out, to live for others and with others, and that's a life, the new life that God holds up for us in Christ. Some people just, I don't know why, it's illogical, it's daft. Why would we want to persist in death when we can have life?

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- *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary)
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- *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (with Douglas Stuart)
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (with Douglas Stuart)

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- *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*
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- *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*
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- *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*
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- *Grace Walk*
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- *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves*
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- *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry*
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- *God, Family and Sexuality*
- *Israel God's Servant: God's Key to the Redemption of the World*
- *The Mission of Christians and Jews*
- *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry* (with James and Thomas Torrance)
- *The Witness of the Jews to God* (editor)

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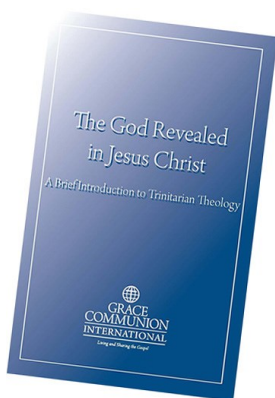
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