

# **Jesus and the Prodigal Son: Interviews With Ray S. Anderson**

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## Introduction

This is a transcript of three 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). Donations in support of this ministry may be made at [www.gci.org/donate](http://www.gci.org/donate).

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.

Please understand that when people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In 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.

Our guest in the first two interviews is Ray S. Anderson (1925-2009), formerly professor of theology and ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Anderson studied for his PhD under Thomas F. Torrance at Edinburgh University. Dr. Anderson is the author of the following books:

*An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*  
*Christians Who Counsel: The Vocation of Wholistic Therapy*  
*Dancing With Wolves While Feeding The Sheep: Musings of a Maverick Theologian*  
*Don't Give Up On Me—I'm Not Finished Yet! A Beginner's Guide to Self Recovery*  
*Evangelical Theology: Heirs of Protestant Orthodoxy*  
*Everything I Needed to Know I Learned From My Father*  
*Everything That Makes Me Happy I Learned When I Grew Up*  
*Exploration Into God: Sermonic Meditations on the Book of Ecclesiastes*  
*God So Loved ... : A Theology for Ministry Formation*  
*The Gospel According to Judas: Is There a Limit to God's Forgiveness?*  
*Historical Transcendence and the Reality Of God: A Christological Critique*  
*Judas And Jesus: Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*  
*Like Living Stones*  
*Living the Spiritually Balanced Life: Acquiring the Virtues You Admire in Others*  
*Minding God's Business*  
*Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church*  
*The New Age of Soul: Spiritual Wisdom for a New Millennium*  
*On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family*  
*On Being Happy: Everything That Makes Me Unhappy I Learned as a Child*  
*On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*

*The Praxis of Pentecost: Revisioning the Church's Life and Mission*  
*The Seasons of Hope: Empowering Faith Through the Practice of Hope*  
*Self-Care: A Theology of Personal Empowerment and Spiritual Healing*  
*The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry With Theological Praxis*  
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*Soulprints: Personal Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love*  
*Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament: A Practical Theology for Professional Caregivers*  
*Theological Anthropology and the Revelation of God*  
*Theological Foundations for Ministry: Selected Readings for a Theology of the Church in Ministry*  
*A Theological Perspective on Human Personhood*  
*Theology, Death, and Dying*  
*Unspoken Wisdom: Truths My Father Taught Me*

Our third interview is with Christian Kettler, Professor of Religion and director of the Master of Arts and Christian Ministry program at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Dr. Kettler studied under Ray Anderson at Fuller Seminary and has written a book about Ray Anderson's theology and helped edit a book of essays in his honor:

*Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*  
*Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family: Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson*

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, who received his D.Min. degree from Azusa Pacific University in 2000. At the time of the interviews, he was vice-president of Grace Communion International; he now teaches part-time at Grace Communion Seminary.

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## Starting Theology With Jesus

**JMF:** Welcome to *You're Included*. With us today is Dr. Ray Anderson. Dr. Anderson is senior professor of theology and ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. He's author of more than 20 books, including *An Emergent Theology of Emerging Churches*, and *Judas and Jesus*, *Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*. Dr. Anderson is also a contributing editor for the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*.

Thank you for being with us today.

**RA:** Thank you, Mike, I'm glad to be here.

**JMF:** We're looking forward to discussing some very interesting and important topics. I want to begin by helping our viewers understand a little bit about what theology is and what difference theology makes to the believer.



**RA:** You said my favorite word: *theology*. It's a scary word, to many people. But really, if you stop to think about it, it's simply a way of thinking about God in respect to who God is and how God has revealed himself to us. So *theology*, as I've often said, is reflection upon God's ministry. So ministry precedes theology.

I tell pastors that it's in the context of God's ministry that theology emerges. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath day, for example, and the legalists challenged him on that, and said, you're not supposed to do that on the Sabbath day. For Jesus, that's what God is doing. God is working, and therefore Jesus said that human beings were not made just to keep the Sabbath in a legalistic way. The Sabbath was made for human beings, for their welfare.

That is a theological statement. Somebody could just have said, Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath, and that's a narrative. But when interpretation is given of that, so that the *work of God* interprets the *word of God*, what God does interprets what God says. The statement of that, that's theology. Jesus had no text in the Old Testament for that. The blind man who is healed is the text.

**JMF:** So the story tells us something about God and theology.

**RA:** Yes. But the responsibility of theology is to not just read and narrate the story, but it is to let the story tell us and speak to us *of who God is*. This is who God is: God cares for you. God loves you. God will do his work of healing even on the Sabbath day. That's the purpose of the Sabbath to Jesus, that's an example for me.

**JMF:** So everybody, it's fair to say, everybody has a theology even though they may not realize it or think about it.

**RA:** Yes. You cannot be a believer in Jesus Christ, without implicitly saying, I believe he is of God, I believe he was sent of God, I believe that (as Paul says) he died on the cross for me, was raised again to overcome the power of death. In reciting the creed, whatever creed one recites, the Apostle's Creed – that's a theological statement. So that the average person in the church hearing the story and confessing their own faith in Christ, they are doing theology.

**JMF:** So one person might have a view of God (based on how they interpret what they read in the Bible) that says, "God is angry at me and I need to try to do better to get him back on my side."

Another person may have a view that God has made things and wound up the universe, and he's way out there; now we have to just work things out for ourselves.

Another person may say, "God is full of grace and mercy and therefore it doesn't matter what I do – he will still forgive me in the end and that's why I can behave however I want."

The next person may say, "God loves me and therefore I want to please him, and live according to what I understand him to expect of me."

Everybody, each of those four, let's say (and more people may have different views), these reflect the idea that there are many different theologies on the shelf.



**RA:** It's almost like when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" They thought it was a multiple-choice exam. So they came up with different possible answers: Some say you are John the Baptist raised from the dead, some say you are the prophet that Moses talked about.

They have all these kinds of answers, and each of those were theologies, they were current theologies. Jesus probed deeper: "But who do *you* think that I am?" —you have experienced me. Peter finally dared to blurt out, "You're the Messiah, you are the one we've been waiting for." Then Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, flesh and blood does not reveal it to you, but God who is in heaven." In other words, he said, "Peter, you're right, but you will never know why, because that's a revelation of God."

But Peter wouldn't have been right, Peter wouldn't have been able to have that theology – you are the Son of God, you are the Messiah – apart from following him, experiencing him, and being there. Standing off at a distance, the Pharisees came to different conclusions. They said, "This man is not of God" (John 9:16). After he healed the blind man, they said, "He is not of God because he does not keep the Sabbath." Jesus was killed on exegetical grounds. They had a Bible verse that gives them permission to kill Jesus because he violated the law. Jesus must have said, what's going on here? God is doing this work, God is in your midst, God is working through me.

The problem that all pastors face is, not that people are waiting to hear theology, not that they're waiting to be told to believe something. They all believed something. Every person who sits down to hear a sermon already believes something, and that belief has to be taken away and changed. That's the real task. That's why pastors have to be theologians, because they have to know the true theology that God has revealed. That has to enter in, in such a way that it corrects

the bad theology.

**JMF:** So theology is wrapped up in God's revelation of who he is, rather than any other way of deducing or coming to it, and that revelation is in the person of Christ.

**RA:** Yes, and in the act of God. I went through three years of theological seminary and went out and started to preach and began to preach my systematic theology notes. God is omnipotent. He can do everything. God is omniscient, he knows everything. He's omnipresent ...

**JMF:** The classical...

**RA:** Yes, the classical doctrine of God. Some of my people hearing that, said, "That maybe true, that's easy to believe that God can do everything, but can he do *anything*? If he knows everything (you want me to say he knows everything, fine. I already sort of believe that). But what I want to hear, does he know *ME* and my small place? Does he enter into my life? Does he make a difference in my life?" I realized that the theology I had been taught didn't answer that question. I have to start all over again. I went to the Incarnation. Paul says of Jesus, in Colossians 2, "In him is the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily."

Everything that God is, is revealed to us through Jesus. That's why the Trinity is so important. People stumble at the concept of the Trinity, and say it's just a theological bit of metaphysics and doctrine, it doesn't make any difference. It makes a tremendous difference. If the one who heals and the one who weeps at the tomb of Lazarus, the one who groans with pain and agony when he is confronted with deformity, if that's not the tears of God, if that's not the *pathos* of God, then we've lost connection with that.

Then we're back to a kind of a dualism, as Thomas F. Torrance (my former teacher) liked to say, in which you separate the concept, the doctrine of God from the act and being of God. Suddenly we lost touch with that [with the reality that everything that God is, is revealed to us through Jesus]. That's why legalism and formalism and all of those things begin to "take the place" of the grace of God as a living reality.

That's why I think the Trinity is that God is both above and he is below, God is *involved*. The one who dies upon the cross has to be as fully God as the Father in heaven. Jesus says, "God, my Father, why have you forsaken me?" This has to be, not only the language of Psalm 22, the human lament of forsakenness that Jesus takes on his own lips, but it has to be that God himself has, in a sense, assumed a humanity estranged from God, so that atonement begins in Bethlehem.

I wasn't taught that in seminary. I was taught that the doctrine of the atonement began totally on the cross. It was Torrance who helped me to see. He said, you have to go back to the fact that the one who was born from the womb of Mary was born to assume the human estrangement, to assume the sentence of death, so that, in that sense, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is a dead man walking.

Can God die? No. But for God to overcome human death, God has to become human and God has to assume that human death, so that when God the Son, the Logos (as John 1:1 says), enters in to become flesh, has in a sense, placed God from below.

In my book *The Gospel According to Judas*, my first book on Judas, I thought there is a way to get at this. If Judas is chosen by Jesus after a whole night of prayer (which we assume he prayed to make sure he made the right decision), and yet Judas, one of the 12, ends up betraying him and then in his own remorse, said, I have killed an innocent man, I have done something wrong, and in remorse he went out and killed himself. Many people say, well, that's it. Suicide is the unforgivable sin and therefore that's the end. But the gospel tells us that this Jesus who chose Judas, was betrayed by Judas, he's the final judge. He is the one who will determine the final verdict.



**JMF:** Most of us grow up in the church hearing sermons, reading what we might read, and we get the idea that God is out in heaven, he is out there somewhere, he looks at us, he judges us, we read the Old Testament and we see that God gets angry and so we think of God as being a judge, an angry judge who is so angry that he sends his Son to die, because somebody has to pay this price.

**RA:** That ends up making the Son merely the victim of God's anger.

**JMF:** But you're saying we need to see God as he shows himself to be in Christ as, not just



the Creator, but as the Redeemer at the same time. He is not just the judge, but the judge is the one who gave himself to save.

**RA:** As Karl Barth says, Jesus is the judge judged in our place. It's not only that we can set the Old Testament aside and say, we don't need that anymore because we have Jesus. It's only through Jesus that we read the Old Testament aright. Torrance helped me to see that with Jesus, we can go back and see that the antecedents for everything Jesus revealed of God are already there [in the Old Testament]. The divine covenant that God made through Abraham was universal – through you, he said, all the families of the earth will be blessed, through that seed.

The particularity of the people of Israel was not simply, it's only them and nobody else – nobody else has the chance, except they want maybe to join in with them. No, the promise to Abraham was the promise to a gentile. Abraham was a gentile. There were no Jews yet. When Paul sees the Holy Spirit coming upon uncircumcised gentiles, he goes back to Abraham and says, there is the example of that.

In Romans Paul says, when was Abraham declared to be righteous? Before he was circumcised, or after? The answer is obvious. Abraham as a gentile was declared righteous before God by faith, through grace. Then circumcision was given as a sign of that.

That's Paul argument, that we can go back and see from the Old Testament from the very beginning we have, the grace of God is there. It's grace that enters in when humans are hopelessly estranged from God, fallen away, and it's universal, which means that through Abraham and through the grace of God everyone is included, no one is excluded from the standpoint of God's intention. But grace itself places a demand. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, grace is not cheap. Grace is not just believing a doctrine and following the rules. Grace is abiding and living in that relationship with God.

**JMF:** We usually think of a relationship with God as being rules...



**RA:** Sure. Human beings, from Adam and Eve on, thought that by somehow keeping rules they could get back into that relationship, and they misunderstood even that the sacrificial system was not a rule to be kept, but it was a way in which they could re-enter through grace. It's the grace of God that overcomes that death. The overcoming of death in the Old Testament moves forward to God assuming that death and therefore, as Barth made clear and I learned from him (and from Torrance as well), that through the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, there is a retroactive kind of theology.

We go back and see that it isn't just that the Jews were wrong and we can dispense with that. They are the ones who revealed to us God's universal promise and purpose. But the Jews of Jesus' day had torn the law out of the living community of faith and made the law a standard of correctness and became specialists in the law. Jesus said, I have come to fulfill the law, and grace.

That's why it's difficult to preach today. Because everybody enters in with their own sense, if I just keep the rules... Perfectionism and legalism didn't start with theology. Legalism and perfectionism is a psychological effect. People think that if they somehow just do it right, that they will be accepted.

**JMF:** Jesus said that you search the Scriptures daily that you may find eternal life and then you refuse to come to me. [John 5:39-40]

**RA:** Because the Pharisees were, as I say, using Scripture to condemn Jesus, to crucify him. If he violates the Sabbath, they thought, he's not of God.

**JMF:** In Elmer Colyer's book *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, page 86, he comments under the subhead of "The Latin heresy: a 'gospel' of external relations." He says, "Torrance sees a growing tendency in Latin theology from the 5th century on to reject the idea that Christ

assumed our sinful alienated and fallen humanity and to embrace the notion that Christ assumed a neutral or an original and perfect human nature from the virgin Mary.” The book goes on to show how Torrance taught that whatever Christ did not assume, is not healed. [That is, if he did not become become *real* human flesh, fallen human flesh, then he did not solve the “fallen” problem that humans have.]

**RA:** Torrance is quoting there the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus in the 4th century who said, what is not assumed is not healed. That was in opposition to Apollinarius, basically, who argued that the Logos of Jesus was a perfect Logos, not totally human, that Jesus was only human from the neck down, that the self was not involved. Nazianzus said, The problem is that in the self, we are under sentence of death, and *that* has to be overcome.

“The Latin heresy” comes out of the Western tradition at Rome, from Augustine and following, that began to tear apart the atonement from the actual person of Jesus and made a formula – a system – out of it, and then began to take grace as almost a commodity, so that grace became something you could control by dispensing it. The sacraments became the means by which you could dispense grace and therefore control it. The heresy that Torrance points to, is the heresy of breaking truth apart from God, so to speak.

**JMF:** Is it the difference between a written contract between two people and a devoted friendship between two people? In other words, if there is a contract, you work out a law, penalties, etc. if something goes wrong in the relationship. But in a devoted friendship, you can hurt the relationship, but you’ve got the freedom to forgive and move on together ...

**RA:** More than that. If a relationship (such as a marriage relationship) is contractual, then we hold each other accountable to keeping the contract, so to speak. As long as I’m keeping my end of the contract up, you are obligated to fulfill my needs. That’s hopeless. That’s a form of legalism in marriage.

When I do pre-marital counseling, I talk about friendship, I say that friendship is the only human relationship that survives only when it’s constantly renewed and kept alive. Husbands and wives often will end up saying things to each other in times of anger, or whatever. If they said it to a friend, they wouldn’t have any friends. Friends don’t have to take it. So, people will be [careful to] preserve a friendship and at the same time destroy their marriage [by being off guard].

God is more than at the level of the friend. God is the lover. God enters a relationship with

Israel. Hosea said, He is the lover. He is betrayed, but God still said, I won't give you up. I won't let you go. [A friendship can be terminated by persistent offense, but God never gives up on his relationship with us; his relationship with us is not only better than a contractual relationship; it is also better than a friendship.]

So that it's true that [for many people] the legalistic, contractual aspect enters [into our relationship with God], seemingly to give us security and truth, in a sense, that we can control. But the moment we think that we control the truth, if I think I control the truth about my wife, I've destroyed something. She's always a mystery to me. She's always someone whom I have to be open to. My concepts of her have to give way to who she really is, and it's the same with our concepts of God.

C.S. Lewis had an amazing statement: "In his mercy God must destroy all our finest concepts of him." Our theology is a set of concepts that must be redeemed. Torrance said the atonement is as much the redeeming of our theology and concepts of God as it is of our sin.

**JMF:** I see that we are going to have to have more than one interview, because there are a number of things we've got to talk about yet.

**RA:** Well, that's because you get me started to talking on theology, Mike.

**JMF:** I need to get into your book *Judas and Jesus: Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*, but we'll save that for the next program.

**RA:** I'll be back.

**JMF:** I just want to come back to the kind of theology that Thomas Torrance and a number of other theologians are explicating from Karl Barth's theology ... I think we call it Trinitarian theology, and that is a corrective to what Torrance calls the *Latin heresy*. Could you talk about that?

**RA:** As Torrance often made clear in class (when I sat under his teaching in Edinburgh), Matthew 11:27 is the key verse. Most of us memorized Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden." But he said, Matthew [11]:27 is the key verse, which says, "*Only the Father knows the Son, and only the Son knows the Father, and those to whom it is given.*" That's a Trinitarian statement.

Knowledge of God is self-knowledge. It's knowledge of God that begins with the *Father knows the Son, the Son knows the Father*. How do you gain entry into that? You say, If only the Father knows the Son, then if I go to the Father, I'll know the Son. You can't do that, because

only the Son knows the Father. So, uh, ok, I'll go to the Son to know the Father. You can't do that, either, because only the Father knows the Son. OK, then I'll have to be *brought into that*. So the Holy Spirit brings me into that inter-relationship between the Son and the Father.

Torrance said, that's where atonement takes place. Atonement didn't just take place on the cross. Atonement takes place within the inner being of God – to God's love and mercy. Jesus is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Jesus said, the Son is come into the world in order to assume human death, die that death, and in resurrection overcome that death so that death no longer has the power to determine human destiny. No person's death determines their destiny. That's the thesis of the *Judas* book. Jesus is the one who determines the destiny of Judas, not even his own action. We'll talk about that some day.

That's Torrance's theology of the Trinity: atonement takes place, and a relationship is bound up in that. If you don't have the Trinity, then God becomes an abstract set of rules or concepts, and we're on our own – our own humanity has to, in a sense, bear the weight of worship and prayer. As it is, Jesus, in his own humanity, continues even now to be the one who prays with us and for us. Our worship is the worship of the Son to the Father (James Torrance, the brother of Tom, wrote a book on that). True worship is the worship of the Son to the Father, and we are brought into that worship. Our own humanity cannot bear the weight of authentic prayer and worship. The humanity of Christ does that.

**JMF:** Practically speaking then, when we pray, we ought not to be thinking, "I hope God hears my prayer." We're able to say with the Holy Spirit that this prayer I pray is the prayer of Christ praying *in* me, therefore I have confidence that I actually stand with Christ.

**RA:** That's why, when we pray in his name, it isn't a little magical formula to put in the end. That's not the bank code that gets you into the automated teller. Praying in his name is to say that the Holy Spirit brings us in, so that Jesus takes our prayer and offers it up to the Father.

**JMF:** A recognition that we stand together with Christ and he is standing with us in all that we do in our relationship with God, gives us a freedom that is not legalistic.

**RA:** The legalist thinks we've got to do it right, but we can't ever do that, so we're in default from the beginning. But if Jesus has assumed our condition and has, in a sense, made it right, that's what justification and righteousness mean, he has made it right. He has made it right not as an abstract deposit in our account — he made it right by saying, come unto me and join with me, and we're going to enter into the kingdom together.

**JMF:** Our faith is in Christ himself, not in how well we pray.

**RA:** That's right. Our faith is not in something, not in doctrine, not in a concept. Faith is a relational aspect. It is trust and it is the Holy Spirit who brings us into that relationship. We're saved not by works but by faith. Faith is for Paul a synonym for Jesus. (In Galatians 3, it's interesting that Paul says, before faith came we're under the law [meaning that before Christ came, we were under the law].)

**JMF:** Let's hold that thought, and let's pick that up as soon as we get together. Thanks very much for being with us, Dr. Anderson.

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## God and the Prodigal Son

**JMF:** Last time we were together, we were talking about Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance, whom you studied under, and Trinitarian theology and how important that is for the walk of the average Christian.

**RA:** The New Testament does not use the word Trinity. But it's like every case, we have to think out the reality of the fact that Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen God." Paul said that, "In him the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily." John says, he is the divine Logos that was with God from the beginning; he has now become flesh and dwelt among us.

If we accept that as the true narrative of Jesus' life – the incarnation – then we can answer the question, "Where is God in all of this?" Well, God is both above and below. Our God is entirely God as the one above us and the one with us. God is the one carried off into captivity, God is the one with them in their captivity. God is the one that comes out of captivity with them. But all the same time, God is the one above them.

In the New Testament, what was implicit or nascent has now come to birth, has now come into reality through Jesus, who can now say, "Everything that was intimated by the presence of YHVH in the Old Testament is embodied in me, I am the temple, the temple is now within me, I embody the reality of God with you." If you allow yourself to think in narrative form, like a story, then you can hold that together. The real advantage of a narrative theology is that it can hold together what otherwise would simply be paradox and we'd have to come up with one view or the other. The Trinity is a way in which the narrative of God's reality can be both the one who created the world and is sovereign above us, but is also the one that's entered in along with us.

The problem we often face is, "how do we connect the reality of our doctrine of God with the reality of people's lives?" I say we do that in narrative form. Every person has a narrative – it's their life, it's their suffering, their losses, their pain, the questions they're raising, "Where is God in my life?" That's their narrative.

"My God, why have you forsaken me?" – that's the narrative of humanity. There's also a narrative, God says, "I hear their cry" – the Old Testament. I heard them in Egypt. I love them, and because of my love, I'm going to come with them, I'm going to redeem them, I'm going to bring them out, and they will be a sign that I love, and am willing to include all the families of the earth. There is that narrative of God's love and God's grace. The job of pastoral ministry is to

connect those two narratives.

When I first became a pastor, I was called to the home of a woman, a friend of one of my members. She was in her 30s dying of cancer – terminal stage, two or three small children. Her priest had been there and prayed and she was in pain, and in a lot of anger about God. So would I go and see her? I did.

She said, “Why would God allow this to happen?” Where is God in my life? Here I am with my small children, why would God do this to me?

I was thinking and I said, “He can’t do anything about it.”

She said, “Don’t we have to believe that God is powerful and can do anything?”

I said, “No, I guess not.”

“Well then,” she said, “where is God?”

I looked on the wall of her bedroom, and on there on the wall was a cross with a little figure of Jesus on it. She’s Roman Catholic. I said, “There he is. He’s there on the cross. He’s with us. He’s with us in this very room. That’s how he comes to us.”

“Oh, she said, I never knew that before. I never realized... that is just a cross. You mean to say that that’s a sign that he is here with me now going through this with me?”

I said, “Yeah. He’s been here, he’s done this, he’s going through what you are going through. He’s experienced dying. You can do it with him, he can be with you in that.”

“Oh,” she said, “I can do it now.”

I prayed with her. She died two weeks later.

I went back, and I said, “Ok, what have I done? I’ve just denied God’s sovereignty and power over everything, because that’s what I was taught in seminary.” But her narrative of her living and dying enabled me to then look back in the tradition of the Scriptures and find that’s true, that’s also true, that’s where God was, he was with them in exile, he went into them with exile, and Jesus is the narrative of God’s presence with us in dying.

The Trinity becomes the theological way of saying, “That’s true. Everything I said is true. Because God is both God above us as Creator and Lord and God is also God with us. The Trinity is a way of simply saying, “what my narrative of faith tells me is really true.” To teach the doctrine of the Trinity apart from that narrative, it just becomes a doctrine.

So that’s how I think the Trinity is relevant – because it places God in our narrative, the narrative of God’s life, of salvation as part of our narrative story. The task of us as pastors is to



bring those narratives together. If we just preach truth about God and people's own narrative of struggle in life and faith is just left lying there, we have not connected, then we send them home without that connection.

**JMF:** To connect the struggle that people have when they go to church to hear the sermon, and they come away feeling more condemned than even when they got there, because they hear that God wants holiness, God wants obedience. They hear condemnation of sin – whether it's national sin or sin in this community or sins among the congregation. They're told we need to do better, we need to repent of your sins and improve. They come away with more of a sense of failure than a sense of connection with God. Trinitarian theology is a way of looking at God through Christ so that we see things as they are in our relation with God, as opposed to this...

**RA:** Yes, on other hand, we have to then press the point, if God has become human, what has God become in becoming human? God has become the sinner, which simply means without personal sin he still has a death nature, he's going to die of something, because he has assumed death as a consequence of original sin. What God has assumed in becoming human is to assume God-forsakenness, to assume that condition. For that to be lived out is part of the narrative of the Trinity at work, so to speak. The Trinity is the work of God, it's always something God is doing in our midst. Therefore we have to bring that into people's lives in ways that connect with them. As I say in the book on Judas, God has in fact assumed death for everyone.

Then as Karl Barth said, ALL are reconciled. Barth in an unusual way speaks of Jesus, not as the Redeemer, but as the Reconciler, that Jesus came to reconcile humanity to God. There's a good text for that in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, "God has reconciled the world to himself, no longer counting trespasses and sins against them." That's Paul, not Barth, not Torrance. God has reconciled *the world* through Christ, no longer counting their sin against them. Paul says, we become ambassadors, now you be reconciled to God.

So Barth said, "All are reconciled, but not all are redeemed." The Holy Spirit's the Redeemer. Here's where Trinitarian theology comes in. It allows us to say that God loves the whole world – God is not willing that any should perish. All are included in God's love. No one stands outside of God's mercy and love. Jesus came to assume humanity and death as a common human condition for everyone. All are included.

When Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I'm crucified with Christ," every human being can say that. Every human being is crucified with Christ. Paul said, "Nonetheless I live, and I live by the

Spirit of Christ in me.” That’s Trinitarian, isn’t it? God loved the world, he sends his only begotten Son that whosoever believes Jesus as the only begotten Son has reconciled the whole world, he passed through death, destroyed the power of death. Then the Holy Spirit is the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is the one that is to transform us. Nobody gets into heaven without being redeemed. The question is, when does that happen? The case of Judas, you see, I argue that Judas was redeemed after he committed suicide.

**JMF:** Let me read a paragraph or two from the book, if you don’t mind.

**RA:** Sure. See if I still agree with it.

**JMF:** Judas and Jesus, Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul. Formerly The Gospel According to Judas was the first edition. On page 116, in the voice of Judas:

The other eleven survived, despite their own misconceptions, and went on to become apostles of the risen Lord. Their calling may not serve as a model for your own calling from God. My own story is different from theirs. My calling as a disciple was indeed forfeited through my death. But my calling as a child of God’s Kingdom was restored and secured through his resurrection! I could not become his apostle, but I could become his friend (John 15:13-14). Jesus did appear to me as the resurrected Lord in the place where I believed there was no forgiveness, and he said to me, *my choosing of you counts more than your betrayal of me!* Through his grace I discovered that the calling of God by which we become children of the Kingdom does not rest upon our faith alone, but upon his faithfulness toward us.

That speaks to Trinitarian theology in the sense of our connectedness, because we’ve been made connected by God’s grace through Christ.

**RA:** Yes, what I did in that book, I (first of all) traced the story of Judas and Jesus (in the sense) to the very end when Judas betrays him, but then the last chapter, I wrote that as if Judas was now writing it. It starts out, Judas says, “I never had the chance to write my gospel (that’s why I called it the gospel according to Judas – the last chapter is still called that). This is the gospel I know. Unfortunately I, in my own remorse, I killed myself. I did not have the chance for that. Now is my turn. Now I’m going to tell you. I’m going to preach the gospel to you as though ... even though I died, committed suicide, I’ve met Jesus after I died. And he’s brought me back to life, so to speak.”

I used Judas there, in a sense, as a preacher of the gospel from the dark side, the deep side. I discovered that in the narrative of people’s lives, more people identified with Judas than with Jesus. I’ve not found many people say, “I have real affinity for Jesus.” No, [I have found more

people who say,] “Jesus – he’s up there, he’s perfect, I’m not. But Judas, yeah, I could have done what Judas did. I have felt that.”

After I published the first edition of this, one of my students was a chaplain at LA County Jail system. She went and visited, at that time, one of the brothers who had killed their parents – a famous trial that took place years ago. He said to her, “Do you think Judas will be in heaven?”

“Well,” she said, “that’s interesting, my professor’s written a book about that.” She got me to sign it, she took the copy into him. Later on she sent word to me and he said he wants to talk to you. So I got permission to go in and sit on the attorney’s bench. They brought him in shackled, and sat him down, shackled him to the bench, and he pulled out of his pocket a copy of *The Gospel According to Judas*. Opened it up, he had underlined it here and there and he said, “Can Judas be saved? Will God forgive the sins of Judas?”

I said, “You killed your mother and your father. You reloaded the shotgun. You blew your mother’s face away. Suppose that when you die God presents you in front of your parents and says to your parents, I give you permission to dispose of your son however you want – heaven or hell, it’s your decision. What will your parents say?”

He paused. “Boy,” he said, “that’s a tough one.” He said, “My mother will forgive me, my mother will forgive me.”

I said, “Then you know that Jesus will too.”

He said, “Is that true?”

I said, “Yes. Jesus can forgive you.”

He’s still in prison and he believes that. That’s why I wrote the book. I wrote the book for people who somehow condemn themselves and feel they’ve shamed themselves. While they are not as desperate as that, still many people come to church and they carry with them a little silent guilt that’s never taken away. They go through the liturgy of confession and they believe the gospel, but they carry with them shame and guilt.

The purpose of redemption is not just to save us, justify us, because of our faith. It’s to transform us, it’s to liberate us, it’s to heal us from that. That’s the terrible thing and the heresy of legalism. It’s shaming, it’s self-condemning. It’s so contrary to the gospel that we need to eradicate it, we need to preach that gospel of grace.

People are afraid of that. They say, if Judas can be saved, then everybody can. Then we have this debate going on now, that Brian McLaren is involved in. He wrote the foreword for my book

on *Emergent Theology*, charged with universalism – that maybe God will save everyone. If all have been reconciled, you see, you come back to the doctrine of the Trinity again.

God loves the whole world, not willing any should perish. Through Jesus Christ, the whole world had been reconciled, God no longer counts their sin against them. If God is not trying to preach against sin to people, then why are we doing that?

But, then Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, who is the Redeemer, the Holy Spirit that enters in and transforms.

Karl Barth said, “All have been justified and sanctified, *de jura* – the Latin word, *in principle*. But not all have been sanctified *de facto* – as a matter of fact. The Holy Spirit is the Redeemer. History is still open, it’s not a closed book.

The question then of universalism comes, “Is it possible that even after death, there can be some redemption?” Well, there are some theologians, Forsythe, a Scottish theologian said, “There will be more people converted after death than before.” He wrote that a hundred years ago. And Karl Barth says, “Be careful, don’t close the book on God. We don’t know whether or not God is a universalist. We can hope so. We have no right to say that. If anybody is a universalist and then eventually is going to enable everyone to be redeemed, only God can do that.

We don’t encourage people to wait for that. We preach the gospel now. But we should remember that universalism is a just the other side of the coin of *limited atonement*. Calvin taught limited atonement – that only those that God had elected for salvation are actually redeemed, the rest are not.

Universalism wants to say, “No, everybody is elected and redeemed.” Both of them are the same (sic) sides of a coin that simply is minted out of human speculation, whereas the gospel of God’s grace is more dynamic than that. The Holy Spirit yearns and struggles with people to bring them in. The doctrine of the Trinity saves us from universalism, at the same time arguing for the universal love of God for all, and the universal act of God through Jesus in behalf of all.

But the Holy Spirit is the contingent factor there.

**JMF:** So part of the issue is that, with legalism, we are talking about absolution from sins committed, and we only think that far. Whereas with Trinitarian theology, we are talking about a relationship, in which not just forgiveness of sins committed, but a restoration of relationship, a healing of ourselves, our minds, so that sinfulness itself is healed, not just a “on-paper

forgiving...”

**RA:** Yes, if we go through a worship service, whatever form of liturgy we have, if we have any – we confess our sins, we have sinned before you, God, and done the things we ought not to have done and so on, and then the pastor or someone will say, “I announce now, on the basis of your confession, you are now absolved and freed from all your sins.”

But people go home and they still feel the shame, the guilt. You went to a medical doctor and he said, “You have a brain tumor, but I’ve touched your head and I pronounced some words and you’re healed.” Well, you go home and you’re dead within six weeks of the brain tumor. The doctor could be sued for malpractice.

Forgiveness of sins and pronouncement of absolution without there being a transformation is spiritual malpractice. That’s a little strong. But the fact is, redemption means that we are being transformed from darkness into light.

What legalism does, it makes that conditional upon our faith. John McLeod Campbell, a Scottish theologian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he went out as a young preacher and he began to preach Scottish theology – except you repent, you cannot be saved. Every sermon started out: You are sinners, you need to repent of your sin, and now that you’ve repented I can offer you the gospel – the good news.

Next Sunday he said, “You may think you’ve repented enough, but you probably haven’t. So let’s repent again in order that I can pronounce the gospel to you.”

Sunday after Sunday, that’s what he was told to preach. Conditional repentance and salvation. He found out that the people were depressed, and filled with shame. So he started over again and said, “No, the good news is that Christ has not only died for us, he’s repented for us.”

He taught the doctrine of vicarious repentance – that Christ has taken up our lives and repented for us. Now the gospel is: Enter in and join that journey. He’s repented for you, he’s repenting with you, and your relations with him is now unconditional, it’s not conditioned upon your repentance....

But grace draws you into that relationship. Grace doesn’t just free you from the law. When Jesus said to the woman in John 8 who committed adultery, “I don’t condemn you, go and sin no more” – I tell my students, supposing that in a few weeks they come back to Jesus and say, “You know that woman you let off the hook – you didn’t condemn her, she is out doing it again.”

He will say, “Bring her to me. I’m the only one that never condemned her. Then I’ll tell her,

I just didn't free her from the law, I bound her to me. Have you been discipling her?"

The gospel is not that we're just freed from the law, to do whatever we can. No. As Paul said, we're brought under the law of the Spirit now, in Romans 8. We're brought into that new relationship.

It's like a child who's been in an orphanage. He's redeemed from the orphanage, brought into a family. Now, the child has to learn what it is to be a member of the family. In the orphanage, he learned how to beat the system. He learned to keep the rules. He learned to manipulate the system. That's what legalism is. It's manipulating the system, manipulating God.

But the child brought into the family – adoption, he's got... "No, you don't... you can't do that here. You must respect others at the table, you must eat when we eat, you must be part of the family life, we aren't just here to feed you, we aren't just here to cloth you, we're here to make you a child of the family." It's going to take years.

Sanctification is like a child being adopted, brought into the family, and that's where we are as Christians. That's a gracious thing. Never again can you lose that.

I have an adopted grandson, and he asked his mother, it was an open adoption, so he knew he was adopted, he was two or three years old, he said to his mother (my daughter), "Someday, you and Dad are probably going to give me away, like my birth mother did." Here's a four-year-old saying that.

My daughter instinctively said, "We can't do that even if we wanted to – because we took you to a judge here in Pasadena and we've got to sign papers and he said you can never again give him away. He belongs to you forever."

"Oh," he said, "Ok." A month or two later he was with his younger brother and riding along, he said, "You better be careful. Mom and Dad can give you away, but they can't give me away."

That's what adoption means spiritually, we are brought in and decisions made for us, and we're now participating in that new family. That overcomes the threat of universalism, saying, it's a free pass out of jail. It's not that at all. It's being brought in to the family.

**JMF:** Much of universalism has the idea that... it loses the idea that there is a necessary connection with Christ that must take place.

**RA:** Redemption must take place... and if universalism is simply another – the other side of the coin – it means that now everybody is now going to be saved, and God has to save the entire world.

**JMF:** Regardless of what they do.

**RA:** That's right. Barth said, that's preposterous – on two grounds. First of all, God is not going to bring anybody into heaven that is not redeemed. Secondly, God has to free them in the end. In my book on Judas and in my other writings I say, who makes the final... If death doesn't determine our destiny, who does?

Well, it's God! How does God do that? Paul said there's a judgment seat of Christ. Two or three places Paul says, it's Jesus that's the final judge.

So as I told that man in prison, you are going to have to face Jesus someday like your mother, and if you believe that your mother has maternal instincts for you, Jesus has even stronger instincts for you. He died for you, he loved you, you can trust that. But I said, that's going to be an incredible event. Jesus makes the final judgment. I ask my students, does Jesus simply read a transcript, does he read a list of names that's handed to him, does somebody hand a list of names? "Just read the names here?"... oh no.

Jesus makes real judgment. Jesus makes decisions, eternal decisions concerning human beings after they've died. That's what Paul said, he's the judge. If everything was all decided, like Calvin said, you can have a clerk of the court read the list. We wouldn't need a judge.

We need a judge, we need somebody. We know who that judge is. The judge is the one sent by the Father to die for us – the one who has sent his Holy Spirit to bring us into that trusting relationship with him.

That's how the Trinity works here. By this narrative it's not simply an empty, formal, abstract doctrine. It can only be told as a story. That's why I use stories, I use anecdotes, because that's how the Scripture uses narrative and story to get across these points.

The prodigal son, when does the father start to love him? He loved him all the way. The son comes back and says, I'm not worthy to be your son, and he tries to repent. He thinks that I need to come back and repent, and if I repent, at least I'll be given a position as a slave in the house.

He comes back, he rehearsed his repentance speech – "Father, I've sinned against you and before heaven, I'm not worthy to be your son." When the father sees him from afar off, Jesus said, he rushes out to meet him and he interrupts his speech: forget your speech, you don't have to repent, kill the fatted calf, come on in, because my love... So the father has loved him.

There is a death and resurrection at the threshold of the father's house in that parable. The son has to die to his own self of being a servant and be born again. The son is born again, so to

speak. The father has a right to do that. And in fact, the son never lost his sonship. He thought he did.

That parable is powerful, and often that story is simply told as a parable to make some point without drawing out the deep theological implications of it. If we're all prodigals, then we have a father waiting at home.

Why does the son come back to the father? If he wants just to be a servant, there are plenty of places along the way to hire himself out. What brings him back to his father to be a servant? Because there's a homing instinct, every human being has a homing instinct, and when we preach, we're preaching to that, we're trying to awaken that, we're trying to... And you don't awaken the homing instinct by condemning. You don't awaken the homing instinct in people to come back to the father by reminding them they're no good.

**JMF:** He knows that his father treats the slaves well, too.

**RA:** Yeah, at least, he is that. There is something there drawing him back. Theologically, every human being has that. They have concealed it, and sometimes they're so corrupted, it doesn't work. But you're preaching NOT to a sinner, you are preaching to a prodigal. And prodigals are not brought back by condemnation.

That's how I preach that story – that's the theological truth of it. That's why trying to make people sinners – the only people Jesus condemned as being sinners was when they are self-righteous.

**JMF:** In Jesus' preaching, and even in the preaching of the apostles and the few sermons we have, we find condemnation coming up only with the self-righteous, or in the sense of the execution of Jesus – a couple of comments about that in Peter or Paul, but in the the context of ... that he did this for redemption, there isn't the kind of...

**RA:** Peter's sermon on Pentecost – you killed the Messiah, but he came to save you. God graciously gave you that. That's the good news, see. When they realize, they ask, what must we do to be saved? Well, repent! Their repentance was simply to enter into the good news – that the one you killed is your Savior. So however bad you feel about feeling that, that's already been taken cared of.

Even Calvin said in his *Institutes* (and I say, even Calvin, because Calvin has been treated sometimes... so maligned), "No one can truly repent except they have received the grace of God." Repentance follows grace, doesn't precede it.



**JMF:** Repentance and belief are same coin ...

**RA:** Same, and they're part of a new relationship. I ask my students, or when I preach, I ask, "What happens the next morning after the prodigal son came back?" I'm always curious about the next mornings. What it's like after that?

I say, The prodigal son said to his father: "Father, I want to go back to the far country." The father said, "What?" The prodigal son said, "Yes, I need to go back, because I said you are a bad father. I maligned you. I said bad things about you. I want to go back and say you're a good father. I want to go back to the far country and preach the good news."

That's truly repentance. He tried, through repentance, he tried to gain entry again. It didn't work. Once he was given entry graciously, then repentance follows that. So that practical implication, that's why to me, most of my writing becomes practical theology. A theology that's not practical, that doesn't lead to that kind of preaching, it's already a twisted theology.

**JMF:** It removes the burden... Instead of feeling like in order for God to accept me, I must do something (and we never do it quite right or well enough and so we never feel like we are accepted), the good news is that we can know we are already accepted, we are already forgiven. Now in the knowledge and the security of that, we can go about doing those righteous things....

**RA:** Remember my analogy of the adopted child? The child is not simply rescued from the orphanage and given a wallet and told to go out and spend the money however you want it. The child was brought in to a family. The adoption that Paul likes to use as a metaphor there – we're adopted, we're brought back in to a family, and that means that believing is living in relationship.

Living in relationship carries with it certain things that we believe about that. The creed comes along as a way in which we affirm – yeah, this is true, what we live is true. But if you simply want it to be truth and you are not living it, it is no longer true.

That's where the postmodernism comes in. The postmodern tendency is to say modernity came out of Europe and the Enlightenment, and took truth in place of up here as an abstract kind of propositional thing. We're more interested in *meaning* than truth. If something is true that's not meaningful. People say, That's all relativism, that's purely subjective. Oh, no. The reality of God – self-revelation – if it's not meaningful to our lives, the truth of it is irrelevant.

When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," that had meaning for them. Jesus said, "Are you going to leave also, the rest of the people have left?" Peter said, "To whom shall

we go? Only you have the words of eternal life. We're going to hang in there."

There's an aspect of so-called postmodernity we have to look at carefully, because aspects of it are more biblical than simply the old modernity. A lot of the theology I learned was out of modernity. Simply abstract truth and doctrine. Therefore to get back is to get back into what I call a kind of pre-modernity – get back into the biblical narrative, that's my book on *Emergent Theology*.

**JMF:** In your book *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, Brian McLaren wrote the introduction, and he is well known for quite a number of books...

**RA:** Brian's first book that struck a chord was *A New Kind of Christian*. It was narrative form, a story form, in which a person was having to move out of legalism into the freedom of the gospel, and that led Brian to begin to continue to pursue this line of thought that what we need here in our so-called postmodern culture is to thread our way through the labyrinth of doctrines and belief systems that separate people. We need to find some common ground of grace for that. That's led to raising concern for people that he is not orthodox enough. But he loves Jesus, and he is concerned that we not allow these doctrinal divisions to divide us.

These things, we can talk about those. He asked me about universalism and hell. He said, I'm willing to talk with you about that, but I'm not ready to make that the litmus test for who's a Christian. We know who a Christian is – they are the ones that are brought by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to love the Father, we know that.

**JMF:** In *the Emergent Church* then, how would you describe it?

**RA:** I picked up the term *Emergent Church* from the contemporary literature on this. But I thought, where is the biblical narrative of that? I go back to Antioch over and against Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a legalistic community. Lest you're circumcised you cannot believe. They came up to Antioch, Paul says in Galatians, and the Christians up there, the Gentiles and the Jews were all eating together. When they came up and started preaching, no, you can't eat with these uncircumcised gentiles. Peter withdrew; Peter wouldn't eat with the Christian Gentiles. Paul said, even Barnabas was carried away by that false gospel.

Paul said, "I said to Peter, to his face before them all, that's heretical, that legalism is heretical – it's contrary to the gospel." Antioch is the place where that gospel of freedom came out of grace. I trace that whole thing through my book *Emergent Theology* came out of Antioch in which it's the Holy Spirit that comes through the narrative of the life of Christ, that liberates

you from that. Always under attack by the legalists from Jerusalem. I've caricatured Jerusalem a bit, but that's true, that the ones who attacked Paul attacked him by virtue of legalistic grounds – you're not keeping the Sabbath, you should be circumcised.

Paul's theology was eschatological – that is to say, the Christ that he knew was the Christ already ascended into heaven. Paul wasn't simply a witness of the historical resurrected Christ, he is a witness to the Christ who is risen and is coming. So Paul said, it's the coming Christ that's our criterion, through the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the coming Christ.

So the church is emerging – it's not emerging from the past, it's emerging from the future. That's why it's changing, and that's why the church, the last chapter in my book, is that it's about the church that's ahead of us, not just the church behind us.

To go back and say, the church should be just like it was in the first century. No, no. The church should be like what it should be in the final century – when Jesus comes, when Jesus comes here, yeah, that's what I have in mind. I want women to be free to preach. I had that in mind all along. I'm glad you finally discovered that.

I want Gentiles uncircumcised be part... circumcision is over. I'm glad you discovered that. So if you take the emerging church from the future, as Paul said, that's the biblical paradigm for that. It's not emerging out of modernity. It's emerging out of God's future.

Paul made concessions for the sake of ministry. He had Timothy circumcised because his mother was Jewish, so that will help you gain entry into the Jewish community. So in 1 Corinthians 15, Luke says they tried to get Paul to circumcise Titus. He is also a gentile. Paul said, no way. I won't circumcise Titus because to circumcise Titus is to make a concession for your legalism. I circumcised Timothy as an accommodation to the gospel.

To me, that all makes sense. But for some people, that's inconsistent, that's illogical. If Timothy has to be circumcised, so does everybody else. Paul said, no, it doesn't work that way.

Pastorally, we have to make accommodations. In Ephesus, I don't want women to teach and preach because they are carrying in with them a concept of a female deity. Other places in Rome, and Macedonia, women can teach, and Junia can be an apostle, Romans 16, no problem. But if we take certain texts out of Scripture, such as, I do not permit women to teach and have authority over men, and make that normative, we've already undercut the gospel of liberation.

Paul had to practice accommodation, so that we have people in our churches that carry with them remnants of tradition. We have to respect that for the sake of not offending them. Paul said,

I won't destroy someone's faith for the sake of eating meat. I can eat meat offered to idols, but if there are people whose conscience hurts some of them on that, I won't eat meat offered to idols. But if I'm their pastor, within a year they'll be liberated from that.

**JMF:** So they don't remain, we don't just leave them in that.

**RA:** That's right. But you have to recognize that people bring with them their own theology, and to them it's sometimes a matter of their personal identity, and we have to sometimes make accommodations for that. That's why even in the Reformation, there had to be accommodations made to the people that one time they thought the sacraments were the means of conveying salvation. So Luther said, we're going to still keep two of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, and these will be very important and the real presence of Christ is there, because we can't simply cut people off... Learning how to walk in grace, like a child being adopted, it's going to take a while.

Almost every one of our denominations has to go through that, and to have the wisdom, pastorally, is to have good theology behind you. If you don't have good theology, you're going to knee-jerk react. If you have good theology, you can say God loves everyone, Jesus has died for everyone – God is a universalist of his love. When it comes to being redeemed and joined to God, then God is very particular. God is so particular he doesn't want unredeemed people, and he has a means for redemption – through the Holy Spirit.

**JMF:** Yeah, if you are going to sit at the family table, you do have to learn how to...

**RA:** Sure, you learn the language, you learn the custom, you learn how to respect people and to live within that, so that the family has its own rules...

**JMF:** But we are talking about a father who is absolutely committed to your success in sitting at that table.

**RA:** Yes, absolutely. Therefore, even that discipline, as the Bible says, it's the discipline of the parent, and if you are being disciplined, as Hebrew says, it's a sign that you are a real child and not illegitimate. People miss that and they become antinomian, they think the law is no longer is effective, we can do whatever. Paul had to deal with that in Corinthians.

No, there is the law of Christ, and unless you interpret faith and relationship with God now in terms of that familial model, being part of the family of God – the body of Christ is that family. Families have rules, but the rules are grounded in love, not in law.

**JMF:** In your struggle to learn obedience, you are always embraced by God's love.

**RA:** Yes, and who has learned obedience better than Jesus, Hebrews 4. Though he was a son, he learned obedience. Jesus has been there, Jesus was the orphan. Jesus was brought in. Jesus has learned to live in family. He learned to be submissive to his father. If Jesus had been baptized at the age of 12 when he was out there parading all of his intellectual knowledge with the Pharisees in the temple – his mother was not impressed. Mother came back and said, where were you? You broke the family rules. Didn't you know your father... we were looking for you? Jesus said, didn't you know I should be in my Father's house? She wasn't impressed by that at all. She scolded him.

Luke said, he went back, was obedient, he didn't show up again for 18 years. Eighteen years later at the age of 30, he suddenly showed up with John the Baptist, now he's ready to be baptized. The obedience that took him from his baptism to the cross, he learned at home with his parents. Whatever obedience is required of us, we already have the obedience of Jesus to empower us. I don't have to be obedient in order to be accepted by Jesus. By the Holy Spirit I'm brought into the life of Jesus in his obedience – it empowers me, is the motive for my own.

That's difference between simply preaching legalism and conditional obedience as to the grace of Christ. The grace of Christ is not freedom from obedience, it's a gracious obedience given to us to empower us. That's Barth, that's Torrance, that's all that Torrance has tried to say – that whatever is required of us by God, has been accepted and fulfilled by us by God himself on our behalf.

**JMF:** Thank you for your time.

**RA:** It's a privilege. Pardon me for preaching, but this is really dear to my heart, this kind of theology.

**JMF:** I'm Mike Feazell, with Dr. Ray Anderson.

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## The Ministry of Ray Anderson

This program is offered in tribute to the life and work of Dr. Ray S. Anderson (1925-2009), former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. To read, watch or listen to interviews with Dr. Anderson, go to <http://www.gci.org/category/people/ray-anderson>.



**JMF:** Thanks for joining us on another edition of *You're Included* – the unique interview series devoted to practical implications of Trinitarian theology. Our guest is Chris Kettler, professor of theology and director of the Master of Arts and Christian Ministry program at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Dr. Kettler is author of *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*. [and more recently, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*. He is also the co-editor of *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family: Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson*.]

**JMF:** You just finished a book about Ray Anderson. I'd like to talk about that. The title is *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*. How did you first come to know Ray?

**CK:** Ray was one of God's great gifts in my life. I was a student at Fuller Seminary. Seminary students are a weird breed. They're supposed to be training for ministry, but they're actually still in the process of wrestling through life's issues and trying to really know God's grace. You usually go to a lot of academic classrooms – you go to biblical studies, church history and so forth, and you try to translate it into your life somehow.

A friend of mine recommended that I take a course from Ray Anderson, and I quickly found out that this man wasn't just teaching about grace. He was *presenting* grace, and I quickly found

out that this was a life-changing experience for me. What Ray does, what's so amazing is that, we think that it would be self-evident that theology and ministry should go hand in hand. But when you go to a typical seminary, that's not the case. You have the biblical studies department over here, you have the church history department over here, you have the ministry department here, preaching, and never the twain shall meet.

Ray was the professor who was a one-man department – professor of Theology and Ministry. He went to both faculty meetings, Theology and Ministry, but really he was himself a one department, because he's a unique individual. He was a pastor for ten years before he went on for his PhD under Thomas Torrance in Scotland and developed an understanding of a Christo-centric Trinitarian theology in a vital dialogue with the ministry of the church. He's made a tremendous contribution that way in relating theology with ministry more than anyone I know of. He has written a succession of books throughout the years that are very profound, provocative, and controversial.

I realized that more people needed to know about Ray, and so last year I sat down and began to write this book, a kind of what I call to my friends, "Ray Lite" – it hardly catches the exuberance and excitement and creativity of his theology. It's trying to just introduce people to some of Ray's thoughts and invite them to get into Ray, reading Ray – I think they would be very much rewarded in doing so.

**JMF:** There are any number of directions you could take in introducing someone like Ray. What direction did you go?

**CK:** The subtitle of the book is *Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology* to communicate that. In different ways Ray sought to bring them together. Then I proceed through some traditional doctrines – doctrine of God, humanity, Christ and salvation, the church, Holy Spirit, last things... but then look at them in terms of Ray's unique take upon them, and how he reflected on them in his teaching as well as in his books. You're constantly seeing that he refuses to have a theology that does not meet the test of being in the local congregation – meeting people where they are at, with all their crazy-quilt of problems and questions and frustrations, and realizing that if theology means anything, it's going to meet people where they're at.

The only kind of theology that really does that is a Christo-centric Trinitarian theology – one that takes seriously first of all that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ – it's not just the possibility, it's not just a religious quest, but it's a reality that we thankfully and humbly receive

by faith. That revelation is of the Triune God, the God who is in a relationship of love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's seeing how that works out in terms of the ministry of the church, realizing that the ministry of the church is not our ministry. We often think that ministry is our part. God has done his part in Christ. Now it's our part, as the ministry. That's a terrible, terrible theology, and it bears terrible fruit in practice, because we end up creating our own ministries, our own agendas.

No, there is one continuing ministry, and that's the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ continues to minister. Ray has written about that in many forms, and developed a Trinitarian theology of ministry that reflects a continuing ministry of Jesus Christ. He wrote a wonderful essay in the beginning of a book entitled *Theological Foundations for Ministry* – the introductory essay is titled “A Theology for Ministry,” in which he set out that agenda. It challenges theologians. This is not a case of a theologian saying to lay people, “You ought to read more theology.” No, it's quite the opposite. It's saying that the ministry is the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Ministry always precedes theology. But this is not simply to say that whatever is pragmatic, whatever is practical, then you shape your theology on that basis. No. The ministry, remember, is the ministry of Jesus Christ. That precedes the theology, and that should shape the theology. Theology should never be distant from ministry. Sadly, in theological education, distance is almost the rule instead of the exception—with separated departments, and the biblical scholars never talk to the theologians or never talk to the ministry people.



Ray is trying to break that apart. He's been a tremendous influence on generations of students at Fuller Seminary. I just noticed at Fuller they have a plaque now that says his name: “The Ray Anderson Classroom,” for the encouragement he gave to doctor of ministry students. Ray was the theological adviser to the doctor of ministry program at Fuller for many years. He



was the champion for that program. A lot of his colleagues were saying, “What’s this doctor of ministry? A doctor is supposed to be for PhD’s, not for ministry people.” And the ministry people were saying, “Why do I need another degree?”

Ray said, “We need to equip ministers, pastors, after their Master of Divinity degrees, to go on, to continue to learn at the highest level possible. He became the champion for these doctor of ministry students, and they appreciated that, even though he challenged them all the time with some very challenging theology. He did that for all of his students at Fuller, and some students don’t know what to make of it.

I have a good friend who’s a black pastor in Atlanta and a musician who said to me that he took one course from Ray Anderson and he thought afterwards “Either this man is a genius or he’s insane.” He is that much of a creative individual in his lectures, in his presence in the classroom. As I thought back on that, on my own experience, that many of us come into that classroom desperate for the grace of God, and Ray bore witness to that grace. I’m forever thankful to that. Fortunately, we have his books that communicate that grace as well, and I want to encourage people to dig into that... knowing it’s going to be challenging, but there’s a great reward in reading it.

**JMF:** His relentless tenacity in not letting go of grace and the reality of our union with Christ and communion with Christ as who we are, come through so movingly in his book *The Gospel According to Judas*. You don’t hear people talking about *The Gospel According to Judas* or even much focus on Judas, but in this book, Ray did take Judas as an example of who we all are. It was so moving...

**CK:** The subtitle was *Is There a Limit to God’s Grace?*, which may seem strange, but unfortunately for most of us, “Yes,” we’d say, “There is a limit to God’s grace.” But why do we say that? He questions that in terms of the person of Jesus and Judas, and presents an imaginary dialogue after Jesus’ death between Jesus and Judas. What would Jesus say to Judas? What would Judas say to Jesus? In a sense, would Judas refuse, not understand that he is forgiven? Or do we have to condemn Judas to perdition?



We all need a scapegoat. Ray explores this tendency we have, whether in church or business or family, to always want to have a scapegoat. We needed to have somebody to blame things on. In a sense he suggests for the disciples it was Judas – he’s the one. But Peter denied Christ, too. We think, well, Judas demonstrates that there is a limit to God’s grace. There is so far that you can go with this grace business or else you just hit license, and people would do whatever they want to. And so, Judas is a good example.

Ray challenges that and suggests, maybe there isn’t a limit... maybe Jesus really did forgive Judas. What would that mean? What does that say about grace? It would mean that if Jesus can forgive Judas, he can forgive me. That even though I fail him over and over and over and over again, that he can forgive me. In effect, there is no limit to God’s grace. We are the ones who put limits to God’s grace. God doesn’t. It’s a very powerful message about forgiveness that’s received a lot of readership from inmates in jails – many inmates convicted of murder wrote to Ray and say they read his book – “can God forgive me?” It’s a challenge for all of us to really rethink our theology and practice of forgiveness. Do we really believe in forgiveness, do we really believe in grace?

**JMF:** It’s an honest question, isn’t it? Often we hide ourselves from our own knowledge of ourselves as being sinners.

**CK:** Yeah, we need to pretend we’re not sinners, and then we come out as phonies. Or else it just becomes a repeated wallowing in the fact that we are sinners. Not that first of all that we’re objects of grace. Our failings never deny that – as was true for Israel in the Old Testament. God’s grace doesn’t let us go – that becomes the motivation for us to seek him, rather than try to appease him.

It’s because he won’t let us go that we’re motivated to love him – and to serve him, and

that's absolutely the difference in motivation. It's the kind of motivation you find in the New Testament. When Paul in Ephesians spends three chapters talking about our blessings in heavenly places in Jesus Christ, because we've been chosen, been given every spiritual blessing in Christ, it goes on for three chapters. Then with chapter 4, he says, "therefore, walk in a manner worthy of the calling you've received, because all this is who you are."

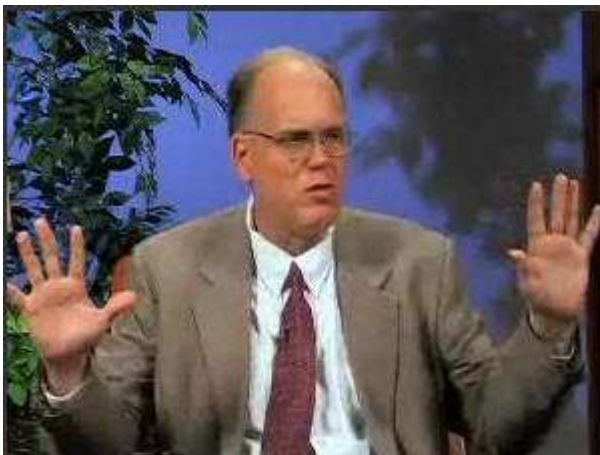
Ephesians 1-3 is indicative... (**JMF:** Is already so...) then, the imperative comes based upon that. It isn't that the imperative is the basis for you to be accepted. It's the opposite.

**JMF:** Like his letter to Titus – for his grace... that teaches you.

**CK:** Oh, yeah. For the grace of God has appeared ... exhorting us to renounce sin. [Titus 2:11-12]

**JMF:** The grace comes first (**CK:** Exactly.), and in the context of the grace, we're able then to move forward ...

**CK:** That's a constant theme, which Ray got very much with Karl Barth, and Thomas Torrance, his mentor, and also from his own experience as a pastor – which he saw that many people had been wounded by the church. For most of his time as a professor at Fuller Seminary, he had a little church, meeting in a school multi-purpose building – Harbor Fellowship. It attracted about 20, 30 people a week. They didn't have any programs, so if people wanted programs, they'd leave the church. It became kind of a half-way house for people who've been burned by the church. They came to this little group – just gathering together, hearing the word of God, sharing communion, and Ray preaching a very simple yet profound sermon, and people were healed. They were able then to go back to the other churches. This little community of grace, if you will.



Ray lives that. He's lived that theology in the church, as well as writing about it. You see

that in his writings much more than any other theologian I know. He never has ceased to be a pastor. There are plenty of professors in seminaries that used to be pastors and probably were failures at being a pastor. But then they went on to get their degrees and became a seminary professor. Ray Anderson never ceased to being a pastor. To the students of Fuller, his door was always open in his office – unheard of among seminary professors. You can walk in with a need. With the people at Harbor Fellowship he continued to preach the word and minister to them during the week. Particularly with the D.Min. students, mentoring them. Coming back, he used to say that they would come back anesthetized to theology by their own seminary training. Theology was irrelevant to them as a pastor. He had to help them work again at theology and ministry, and that became such a moving experience to a whole generation of D.Min. students.

**JMF:** A book you used in your classes, as well as one that I feel is very helpful and encouraging is *Dancing with Wolves While Feeding the Sheep* (**CK:** Yeah, wonderful title) – *Musings of a Maverick Theologian...*

**CK:** The wolves are faculty colleagues who had trouble accepting Ray and his theology of ministry. But he still wanted to tend the sheep. He saw himself as a maverick theologian. This is a remarkable little book that consists of questions. Questions that people are asking, that lay people have asked – but nonetheless are profound, theological questions:

- \* Will Judas be in heaven?
- \* Is Jesus an evangelical?
- \* What do you say at the graveside of a suicide?

It's very profound, practical, important questions. One chapter is remarkable – Does Jesus think of things today? It's a question that gets to a very important point. As we read Scripture, is Jesus reading Scripture along with us? Or has he left the building and given us the Bible because he's not around anymore? What kind of theology is that? Practically, that often *is* our theology.

But it's really a strange view of Scripture that thinks that we could read Scripture without Jesus. When we think of the road to Emmaus and Jesus himself had to explain to disciples where the Scriptures spoke of him. Ray plays with that a little bit in how we use and abuse the Bible and often don't read it in a Christo-centric way – in terms of all Scripture bears witness to Christ. The chapters are very provocative (and mischievous in some ways) but very helpful in the end.

**JMF:** I hope your book will move some people toward wanting to be more familiar with some of Ray's books.

**CK:** That's the purpose. This is just to give them a taste of Anderson and some of his insights here and there, and to move them into reading his books, because I think there's such a rich reward in reading Ray.

**JMF:** Many people may not know that Ray played part of a role early on in the transformation of the Worldwide Church of God, in the early stages after the transformation, of being a support and a help to many of our pastors, and attending many of our pastors' conferences and speaking at them, encouraging our pastors.

**CK:** Ray's always been able to connect with pastors, because he never ceased to be a pastor. The same time, he's a world-class top-flight theologian who will challenge you academically and intellectually as much as you want to be challenged. He's that rare individual who does both.

**JMF:** We had the opportunity to interview him two times on this program.

**CK:** Right, those were wonderful interviews, too. I commend them to the audience.

**JMF:** A couple of your books focused on some of these same themes that you were first introduced to with Ray, and one of them is this one – *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*. And your forthcoming one – *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*.

**CK:** Because of Anderson's influence, I increasingly saw that theology didn't need to be restricted to an ivory tower, and deal only with abstract, arcane or irrelevant issues. But theology at its best is taking the gospel and applying it radically to our struggles in our lives – such as doubt and despair and guilt and anxiety and loneliness. Ray's Christocentric theology reminded me that the solution needs to be constantly to go back to Jesus Christ. Maybe our Christology hasn't been healthy or strong enough.

Through the work of Ray's mentor T.F. Torrance, I encountered this doctrine on the vicarious humanity of Christ. It says that the atonement is not just restricted to Christ paying the penalty for our sins. He did that. But it's not just his death that's vicarious in our place. *His entire humanity* takes our place. It very much came out of Ray's pastoral theology that I became intrigued with dealing with these issues – but also his profound Christocentric theology and the influence of the doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ, which has so much potential for us having a Christocentric theology of ministry. Often when people talk about theology of ministry, it's just trying to be practical, or just become more skilled at being a preacher or a counselor or a church-growth strategist or whatever. No. It's got to be a theology that drives us back to the

Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and to the Triune God whom Jesus Christ reveals. Because otherwise we're just trying to do our best to do some crowd management in the church — or as Dallas Willard says, just do sin management.

**JMF:** Sin management, yes, that's right.

**CK:** Rather, we do sin management if we don't have that robust Christocentric Trinitarian theology. It's so encouraging to me when I hear what you folks are doing at Grace Communion International in drawing up the implications of a Trinitarian theology for the ministry of the church. That's really the future, and it's an exciting future in doing that.



**JMF:** I appreciate that.

Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, about the painting. On the newer cover, there's Rembrandt's painting of the return of the prodigal son, and then Nouwen goes through every aspect of that painting as it captures the pathos of who we are in Christ and the fact that we are held by his arms after everything we are and everything we've done, he's made us new in himself and won't let us go. It's an embrace of absolute, unconditional love despite who we are, and it speaks to the vicarious humanity of Christ – who he is for us, that he's made us to be in our rest and our comfort that comes of that. Because it seems like as you wrote about joy and despair, there's so much despair. That's where we're coming from.

**CK:** We see ourselves as just in despair, yes, God help me, but [we think] God is still distant from that. Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* [volume IV.2, page 21] has a wonderful section –

his exegesis of the prodigal son, do you know it? (**JMF:** No.) It's fantastic, it's called in a section, titled "the way of the Son of God into the far country." He sees Jesus as the prodigal son. He's the one who goes into the far country of our humanity, our despair, our doubts and so forth... taking upon our humanity, then is embraced by the Father. So we're not left alone in our doubts and despairs and anxieties. The incarnation means God is taking upon our humanity – that humanity is the humanity now, as it is now, filled with doubts and despair and anxiety. It's a fascinating way of looking at the prodigal son. (**JMF:** A comforting picture.) Exactly, but very much connected with Nouwen's emphasis and the Rembrandt painting.

**JMF:** One question we'd like to ask everybody at least at some point in an interview: If there is one thing you want people to know about God, what would it be?

**CK:** God is love. Christians always say that God is love. But we know that God is love because God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the significance of the Trinity, that God himself is in a relationship of love from all eternity, and that is made known, made manifest in the Incarnation. So when we speak of the love of God, we're not talking about something that is a feeling or sentimentality or something abstract, or even *our* ideas of love. Love is at the center of who God is in this relationship between the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. That's why the Trinity is so essential for the church.

**JMF:** And that's the heart of the Trinitarian theology, which this program is all about.

**CK:** Exactly. It means that God is love – and that means relationship in God himself that he then has shared with us in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** It's been a joy having you.

**CK:** It's been a lot of fun, Mike, I appreciate it.

**JMF:** We've been talking with Dr. Chris Kettler, professor of theology and director of the Master of Arts and Christian Ministry Program at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Thanks for being with us. I'm Mike Fezell for *You're Included*.

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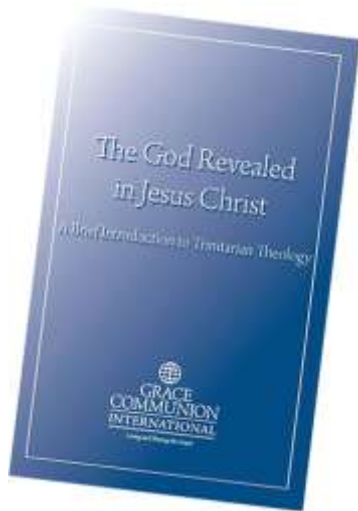
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