

Jesus Reveals the Father: Interviews With Gary W. Deddo

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Introduction

This is a transcript of eight 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.

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.

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.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in these interviews is Gary W. Deddo, who was, at the time of the interviews, a senior editor at InterVarsity Press. He is now an employee of Grace Communion International, and a faculty member at Grace Communion Seminary.

Dr. Deddo earned his PhD at the University of Aberdeen in Aberdeen, Scotland, under Professor James Torrance. He helped begin the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship. He is author of numerous articles and books, including *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations* and *George McDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writing*. He has a keen interest in the integration of faith and everyday life.

The interviewer for the first six interviews was J. Michael Feazell, who was then vice president of Grace Communion International. The interviewer for the last two interviews was Michael Morrison, Dean of Faculty at [Grace Communion Seminary](http://www.gci.org/sem).

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## Who Is God?

**JMF:** I've heard you talk about "the essential theological question." What is it?

**GD:** When people hear the word *theology*, it usually has a negative connotation. People start out, "I don't want to have anything to do with theology. It's nothing but controversy, abstraction, and only for only 'egghead' types of people."

**JMF:** And those are the people who like it.

**GD:** Could be. Theology has a bad name, and it probably deserves it. No one should be interested in bad theology. An awful lot of what people have heard over the years and how it's conducted, it does give them that impression. So I don't blame people for having a negative attitude or stand-offish attitude about theology. A simple way to say it: often, the primary questions where people who want to talk about theology, have to do with what God is, or how things operate in God's universe, or in salvation. Sometimes theological questions have to do with why things are the way they are? or why they go the way they do. They surround the "what," "why," "how," "where," "when" questions.

**JMF:** The stand-offish – it's there, I'm over here – kind of questions.

**GD:** Right, it's an object for a study, for analysis, for debate... an endless debate. This exhausts people, and they don't understand the terms of the debate – they don't see any relevance to it. This is not only informal theology, but formal theology. Often, those are the questions people are trying to answer. But in my view, and I'd say it with James Torrance, he used to emphasize this with us over and over again, is that the primary theological question is not any of those. The primary theological question is *who* – "Who is God?"

**JMF:** That's a relational question.

**GD:** It's very relational. It means who is God in himself, and also who is God in relationship to me, and who am I in relationship to God? It has to do with the whole of reality, and therefore it is personal. Who? – it has to do with identity. Who is this One that we're talking about? And what does it have to do with who I am? It's much more concrete, it's much more personal, it has to do with interaction.

But it's not just a question that some theologian dreamed up and said, "Let's start with the 'who' question." Jesus himself pressed this into the minds of his disciples. It's the very center of the gospel of Mark. Jesus says to them: "Who do men say that I am?" After perhaps half of his ministry with them, the question he wants to press on their minds and hearts is: "Who?" The

“who” question – Jesus himself puts it at the center.

The first question is, “Who do they, those who have been listening to me, say that I am?”

They consider that. “Well, some say, ‘Elijah,’ and some say, ‘the Prophet,’ some say, ‘John the Baptist’ – this and that.”

Jesus allows them to give that answer, to warm up their thinking and their reflection. But then he presses them even more deeply, when he says this: “Now that we’ve covered that, now who do *you* say that I am?” Now it’s very personal, very direct, even intimate. “You’ve been with me a year and a half, two years – night and day. Who do you say that I am?”

We could say that Jesus is being a theologian. He is directing our thoughts, he is directing our reflection, he is sorting out what the most important and crucial and even central issue is, where our starting point proceeds from. Who do you say? That gets Peter rolling, as you know.

**JMF:** He gives a great answer.

**GD:** “You are the Christ – the Messiah.” But oddly enough, Jesus is not all that impressed with that answer. There is something wrong about it, because Jesus then has to indicate – this is going to involve rejection by certain people and suffering and death, and then resurrection.

This really disturbs Peter. Peter had the right label for Jesus. Jesus does not deny that he is God’s Messiah – the Christ. But he can’t really affirm it. Peter has the right label, “Messiah,” but he’s filled it with content that doesn’t fit. It isn’t accurate. It isn’t true, and in the end it doesn’t glorify who Christ is, because Peter thinks this has to exclude suffering and rejection and death and crucifixion. Where Jesus recognizes, this is going to be essential to who I am and what I’m here to do.

Jesus is leading Peter here, and the rest of the disciples as they are listening, in theological reflection. In a sense, he’s saying, “you got the right label, but you don’t have the right meaning.” He sees that Peter is being tempted by the devil to misunderstand this label, so that, if Peter hangs on to that definition of “Messiah,” which excludes suffering and rejection and death, he’s going to exclude Jesus himself.

**JMF:** It’s like the Bible trivia question, “To whom did Jesus say, ‘get thee behind me, Satan?’” And everyone goes, “Well, Satan, obviously.” No.

**GD:** It’s Peter, under serious temptation. Jesus is leading Peter in theological reflection, because what he has to do is fill that proper label, “Messiah,” with the proper meaning that corresponds to “who Jesus is.”

This is all in response to “who am I?” A label is not enough – and if theology can be of help to any of us, what its job is, what its purpose is, is to take appropriate names and labels – Jesus is the Son of God, God is infinite, or omnipresent – Jesus is the Savior or Lord – all these things are names, labels. But we’re not done just because we have a name and a label. Theological reflection is to try to help us have a proper *content*, to give a most faithful meaning to those name and labels.

**JMF:** That has something to do with experience, then. If you’re going to have content to a “who” question, there has to be some kind of experience of that “who.”

**GD:** You’re right, and in this case, what God in Christ is doing is meeting us face to face. Just like we’re meeting face to face. I have to come here from Chicago and show up. We hadn’t met face to face. We had various e-mail interactions and phone conversations and things like this, so we could say, yes, in some ways we’re getting to know each other. Not in falsehood, I mean we weren’t lying or deceiving each other, but I think after our time together, we’re going to know each other in a very different way face to face. This is what God has done in Christ – showed up in person, face to face, so that the “who” is actually with them.

The Scripture says Jesus is Immanuel – God with us. They’ve had names and labels and various discussions – they have the Old Testament – leading up to this time. But when God arrives in person with a name and a face, now they have an opportunity to re-fill all those names and labels and all those, as it were, phone calls and e-mails and discussions they’ve had up till now. They have an opportunity to re-fill all those with the deeper truth, because they’ve had a face-to-face revelation. As the Gospel of John tells us, Jesus is God’s self-exegesis, his self-interpretation.

As Jesus deals with Peter, he’s going to try to help him fill that proper theological label, “Christ,” “Messiah,” with the meaning of who he really is. If Peter will let him do that, then his words and concepts and ideas and responses of who Jesus will be more faithful. It puts Peter and the disciples and even us, at a certain crossroads. Will we let Jesus take our names and labels, and fill them with the true meaning? Or will we hold on to even proper names and labels, but hang on to an erroneous content?

The Pharisees had the same problem. They understood God in terms of their ascertained view of the law. When Jesus comes, the question is, will they hang on to their view of the law and interpret Jesus in terms of the law? Or will they let Jesus be the one who interprets the law?

When it comes to the Sabbath, we have the same problem – they believe Jesus is violating the Sabbath when he heals or allows the disciples to pluck their wheat or heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus' response is, I am the Sabbath. I'm the one who created it. I'm here to interpret to you what that's all about. So don't interpret me in terms of the law. Interpret the law in terms of me. I'm the source, I'm the creator of it. I'm here to tell you what it's really all about. And not only to tell you, but to *be* that Sabbath.

Theology is very personal – it involves repentance. We have our piety over here, right? In repentance, we think, stop doing actions, start doing “why” – as an action. The word for repentance in the New Testament, *metanoia*, it essentially means a transformation of mind, *meta* – change, and mind – *noia*. *Metanoia*, a change of mind, that's what we translate repentance. There is such a thing as theological repentance, where we throw away inadequate ideas and concepts, and even stories and illustrations.

Theology is a spiritual discipline – when properly done, it brings you to repentance. It has everything to do with piety – with a living faith, in a living God. Sometimes we might not like theology because we don't want to repent. We've already done enough of that over here with this action or with this attitude. We don't have to repent again.

But back to Peter: Jesus is calling Peter for theological *metanoia*. Peter, you have to throw out your understanding of the meaning of “Messiah” – you have to repent of those lesser ideas that don't allow the glory of who I am to come through, because “who I am” will include rejection of this particular people – suffering, death, but also resurrection.

Peter is brought to the point of *metanoia*, theological repentance – it's very personal, very upfront. But that happens only if we make the central and controlling question – the who question – the one that Jesus put before us. If you look back to the Old Testament, it's the main question that God is pressing on this whole people of Israel, who is the Lord? It's not a new question that Jesus places in front of them. It's been the one all along. We see this in Moses – he wants to know who God is, and if possible, to see him face-to-face. That's what God finally did in Christ.

So, theology is the “who” question, and the first response is to ask, “Who is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ?” That's the God we want to know. Any theological reflection has the central question, and Jesus himself is the first, central, most concrete, personal and direct answer. It's God's own reply. If you want to know who I am, then this is where to look. It is dealing with

who God is in Jesus Christ. That's the central question.

**JMF:** Most people don't think in those terms – even Christians. If we were to go out in the street and ask people who God is, they think of God as a Judge or up in the sky who looks in everything that they do and judges, weighs their good deeds against their bad deeds. He's primarily interested in behaviors, and gets offended if you go against his prescribed behaviors, and is going to judge you over that, and that's how God is viewed – he's the ultimate judge and police force to clean up mostly other people's behavior, but we also worry about our own. It's not a relationship issue with a person. It's a relationship with a set of rules that God is the arbiter of. So if you changed your mind, repented about this question of “who is Christ?” how does it change your view of this relationship?

**GD:** It completely rearranges it. We do tend to think about God in terms of our own practical problems or concerns. Today we may think, our society is morally falling apart. Or that what's wrong with my life. It is essentially doing the right things and not doing the wrong things. That is a practical problem, but we can't start with our practical problems and then ask how God fits in to that. But we often start with ourselves and what we think – we even start with our own ideas about who God is. We're all faced with the question: But is that who the God of our Lord Jesus Christ really is?

Part of it is, as Athanasius in the third century indicated to us, that we have to stop thinking about God out of a center in ourselves and let God tell us who he really is. Where that's going on is in Jesus. God is saying: “Let me tell you who I am. Let me interpret myself to you.”

It calls for a very careful listening and a willingness to set aside our ideas. Now is this what we see? Is this God – present and active and communicating himself or revealing himself, in person, face-to-face, is this God most concerned about a kind of morality – the rules of right conduct? People are wondering, it's probably not going to be that God will be concerned for less than that. We can grant that for the moment – that's probably going to come in there somewhere. But is that the central, controlling, guiding and deepest thing about God?

Reading Scripture and concentrating on the person and the teaching and the work of Christ, and all Scripture leading up to that – I don't think that's what you find that God is most interested in. If we listen to apostle Paul – it came to me many years ago about this – the apostle Paul tells us the law did not come in till 430 years later. Later than what? Later than the covenant.

If God is most interested in the rules of right conduct, isn't 430 years a little late to get around to it? Wouldn't it be strange if God was mostly concerned about that, wouldn't he start right there? Our impression somehow has gotten, it's as if God created things – Genesis – just got things up and running. Then the very next thing he did as they kind of came out of the garden, maybe, is that he gave the ten commandments. Well, that's not how the Bible story goes.

**JMF:** Sometimes we think he created the law first, and then said to himself, This is a good law – I need somebody to keep it. It's been the primary thing on his mind and if anybody steps on it and breaks it, he get angry and wipes them out.

**GD:** That's right. We get that impression, even though that's not how the story goes. What God essentially does is make a covenant with people, and that covenant can be simply put and is a repeated refrain, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God doesn't ask permission. What that means is, I'm going to be everything for you. I'm going to be your life. I'm going to be your future, your hope. I will be your guide, as well. But I'm going to use my God-ness for you, and you are going to belong to me as my people. This going to be a covenant relationship, which is most like marriage, as understood in Scripture. God is interested in this covenant relationship with Israel.

**JMF:** Even though it says, "I know you're not going to keep this covenant," he said, "This is what it's going to be, I'm going to be your God, you're going to be my people. Even though you're going to break your end of this, I'm going to pull my end of it, and I'm going to make you be this good thing that I intend for you to be, in the end, anyway, in spite of you."

**GD:** Yes, the covenant is a promise. It's a promise that's made from God's side unilaterally – from God's side. The covenant itself, the establishment of the covenant, the main maintenance of the covenant, and even the fulfillment of the covenant, does not depend on the response of Israel. If Israel resists the covenant and the promise, that's going to be a rocky relationship, isn't it? That's what you see in the Old Testament. It is a rocky relationship.

**JMF:** Kind of like my relationship with God.

**GD:** That's right. Israel is a picture of all of humanity, in its rocky relationship with God. The relationship has its ups and downs, but God has not reneged on his covenant. It is, as Paul tells us, irrevocable. "I will be your God." I will be your God and you shall be my people, and you're going to be my people on behalf of all the families of the earth. We have to remember that part of the covenant. First announced to Abraham and made clear.



Covenant is, first of all, a promise that God makes that is not conditional on the response. That will affect how the relationship goes, but it has no power to break off God's promise. Paul would tell us, that though everyone is faithless, God will still be faithful. Faithful to what? Faithful to his promise. That is the goodness of God, and the holiness of God – God is the one who is true to his word, and true to his covenant.

In a relationship, once you have the covenant established, then a parallel is, is that couples get married. If that relationship is going to run well and be harmonious, it will have to follow certain patterns, and we could describe some of the patterns of relationship in terms of laws. If you want to live and reap the benefits of this covenant relationship, so as a fruitful, joyful, loving, creative, life-giving relationship where you receive what I have to offer and give back to me, reflect back to me what you've been given – it will follow certain patterns. For Israel, it could be described in part, not in total, as certain rules: You will not worship other gods, you will not commit adultery, you will not steal, you will enjoy the Sabbath – and these types of things.

But these are not conditions to receive the promises – they're conditions for receiving the blessings, enjoying the blessings, because if you resist the covenant relationship, or if you go against the grain of the relationship, you will get splinters. But we don't have any power in us, and just because you go against the grain of that covenant relationship, you don't have any power to change the direction of the grain. You will get splinters. If you go with the grain, you'll enjoy the benefits of who God is and who God has promised to be.

The laws describe how to go along with the grain of the covenant relationship so that you don't get splinters. God wants it to be a joyful, peaceful and fruitful relationship, where we're receiving from him all his God-ness and goodness for us, and giving back to him thanksgiving and lives that reflect that thanksgiving.

**JMF:** Jesus not only comes to reveal who God is to us. He also comes as one of us. **(GD:yes.)** And that puts a new light on our relationship with God, when God comes as one of us. We're just about out of time, but we need to talk about that. We need to talk about union with Christ, vicarious humanity of Christ. What difference does the whole concept of Trinity – Father, Son, Holy Spirit in connection with humanity make? So, if you don't mind doing another program, we can talk about those things.

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God's Plan to Share His Love

JMF: Last time we were talking about the essential question – the “who” question – who is Jesus Christ? That gets us pretty quickly to the concept of who is God with us, and us with God, and the Trinity. But the Trinity is not most people's favorite doctrine. It's not clear to most people even what it is and what it means. I'd like to talk today about what difference that doctrine makes. Why is it important? What does it tell us about us, and who we are with God and God with us, that makes it worth knowing about?

GD: Right. Many people are beginning to ask that question, and they realize it has huge implications. In the New Testament we discover that Jesus is telling us, and the apostles and the writers of the New Testament tell us, that Jesus came to not only tell us about who God is, but to show us, in person, face-to-face – to answer the question, who is God in his being? The primary answer that Jesus gives us is that who *he* is, is the Son of the Father.

Often we describe God in terms of attributes – God is omnipotent, God is infinite, God is good, or merciful, or righteous or holy. But in the life of Jesus and in the teaching of Jesus, and in his whole being and character, in the New Testament – who is Jesus? Jesus describes himself – he is the Son of the Father. That's who he is.

And then, who is His Father? He is the Father of the Son. And who is the Spirit? The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. He names God in Matthew, the Great Commission. We'll see the one name – if we're going to talk about who God is, what name does God give himself? We're to go out and to baptize in the name – that's singular, in the Greek – the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God that we discover in Jesus Christ is the Father-Son-Spirit God. There is no other God except the Father, Son, Spirit God. That's what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity – that who is God, the essential, rock-bottom, most concrete personal way to refer to God is “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.”

JMF: That's getting on to something important, because typically we grow up going to church listening to talk about God, reading the Bible, we get the idea that the Father is God, and he's way out there in the sky somewhere on his throne, watching us – just like the song, God is out there watching us, from a distance. Jesus comes as his Son and he has a different idea, a better idea – he does away with the law and the judgment thing, and he brings hope and salvation and assuages the Father's wrath. There's two different minds going on – attitudes toward humanity. God is pretty mad about us breaking the law, but Jesus is getting things patched up.

But the doctrine of the Trinity, as Scripture unveils it, helps us see that there's no such thing as a Father "out there" who isn't the one who loves humanity so much that he sends the Son. There's no such thing as Jesus Christ who isn't one with the Father and they are feeling, thinking, being the same way toward us. If we've seen Jesus, we've seen the Father, and we don't have to worry that the Father might be different from the way Jesus is.

GD: Yeah. We don't realize fully the implications, and so our reflecting on this, theologically, is to pay very careful attention. Jesus is saying, "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." Or Jesus tells us, "I only do that which I see the Father doing." So we think, in "persons," there's some kind of difference or slip between one person or another, between a father and a son, or between one friend and another, or between a husband and a wife. What Jesus is telling us is there is no slippage – "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." "Whatever you see me doing, I am doing what the Father is doing."

Theologically, what we say is they're one in being and in action – they are united. There isn't any slippage. Jesus is showing us the heart of the Father. Why did the Father send the Son in the power of the Spirit? So that Jesus might show us the Father and take us to the Father and give us his Spirit. The Christian life is sharing in the life of the Trinity – to know Jesus, is to see reflected in him, the truth about the Father.

JMF: What difference does that make? The life of the Trinity – what is that? What are we talking about?

GD: It means that there's no God behind the God revealed and acting in Jesus. There's no difference, there's no slippage. We often want to think the Father is of a different attitude than the Son. Or has different priorities, or different concerns. No. There's no slippage. "He who has seen me has seen the Father." "To love me is to love the Father." "To know the Father is to know me." "To know me is to know the Father." "To do the things I had to do is to do the things that the Father is doing."

There isn't any slippage – in Jesus we have the self-revelation of God to humanity. The only way to know God is to know God in and through Christ. Otherwise, we're engaged in theological speculation – just making up in our own minds, independent of what God reveals. Jesus is here to show us the Father, that we might love the Father with the same love with which he has, and that we might receive from the Father, the same love he has in the Son. This is all throughout the Gospel of John.

JMF: We tend to think of God loving us only if we do well enough, if we behave well enough – then he'll love us. If we change our behavior and say the sinner's prayer, then he'll love us. He mad, but he'll change his mind toward us if we believe in Jesus and then he will say, "Ok, now, I love you."

But that leaves us with the fear that, if we fall short again, or we have a day of doubt, or we don't have the kind of faith we had at the moment we did that – he'll get mad at us again. It depends on our level of behavior and faith, but it isn't always that great. So, we're never sure that he's on our side or loves us right now, especially if we've done something we ought not to do. But Jesus being human, and us having some kind of union with him through that humanity, how does that work?

GD: God turns out to be not a lonely God, but a God who lives in the fullness of holy and good fellowship. Jesus, from all eternity before he was incarnate, the Son of God, lives in fellowship and communion with the Father and in the Spirit. God himself is communion – is fellowship. God has never been a lonely God, all by himself, or looking for someone to love... "so I had to create a universe."

God is the fullness of loving, holy communion, and fellowship and togetherness. So Jesus talks about the love he has known from all eternity – and he is returning to that. God is the fullness of loving fellowship and communion – such that if God were not that loving fellowship and communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God would not be God. The only God that is, is the Father, Son, Spirit God, who is loving, communion and fellowship.

When God creates, he has nothing other in mind – to create something that would also experience a part of that love – God is in fellowship and communion – a right relationship. It is right, it is good, it is holy fellowship – loving – or even a covenant relationship.

When God creates, he creates for the purpose of fellowship and communion. To bless us with all the fellowship and communion that the Trinity has. I picture it like this: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit says, "It's so great, our fellowship, and communion, and love for each... is so holy, is so good, it's so full of life. There's so much loving in our communion that it could fill a universe." Then they think, "Oh, wait a minute. There isn't a universe yet. But it's just overflowing, it's kind of going to waste. Can we do something about that?" The idea of creation was for God to create something to love with the same love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have with each other.

Now, it's not God – we can't return that love in exactly the same way. But it could be loved by God. And so creation is the overflow of the fellowship and communion of God. To create that which is not God, and yet love it in the same way, with the same love – so God creates that. So creation is created for the purpose and the end and aim of fellowship and communion – to be together with God and to belong to God. This is why God says to Israel, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” It is for that fellowship, communion and love that the Father, Son, and Spirit have had from all eternity – they extend that, to that which is not God – which is amazing!

Now, when this creation resists that love and that fellowship – the Fall – then does God give up on that plan – to have fellowship and communion with the creation that he loves with the same love that the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son? No. He doesn't give up – because, why? Because God's love is faithful – he makes a promise, he is true to his word. So when we resist that, what does God do? God has an eternal plan – and it's as if from all eternity, the Father and the Son think, “If we create this creation, it's not going to be us. It's going to be something other than us, it won't be able to return that love in exactly the same way. And what if it resists, do we know what to do with that?” The Father, Son, Holy Spirit says, “Yeah, we know how to fix that, even if that goes wrong. We know what to do about that.”

But... “Are we willing to pay the price? If that goes horribly wrong, and they end up being deceived about the very love with which we're loving them, and they won't receive it and reflect it back, are we willing to pay the price?” And the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit say, “Yes, because we love it, we are perfectly willing to pay whatever price, even if it costs us pain and suffering even in our own relationships. We will bear that cost.”

In that overflow of love, God anticipated even things going wrong. God creates in love, and God anticipates and is prepared to redeem that creation, if and when it goes wrong. God did anticipate and knew what would go wrong, and said, “Nevertheless, we will love it, we will redeem it, and we will bring it to perfection.”

JMF: The love of God brings the creation into existence, the love of God redeems the creation, where is there a place for God not loving the creation? It sounds like there is no such place, that's what it's all about. Jesus enters into it as a human being, as one of us, he says, “If I'm with you, I'll draw everyone to myself.” In him, with his union with him that we have, we are drawn into this relationship – Father, Son, and Spirit, by being in union with the Son, in that

relationship. What does that mean for us practically, right now and in the future?

GD: When the relationship is broken off, it needs to be restored. But it needs to be restored from the inside out – or all the way down to the bottom of our very being. When the relationship is broken off, it affects our very nature, our very being. God opposes that. God opposes whatever opposes his good purposes, for us to be in right relationship with God, to enjoy that fellowship and communion that is a reflection of the fellowship and communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So God says, “No” to whatever resists his eternal good purposes for his creation.

God says “Yes” to humanity – that is, “I will be your God, you will be my people and we will enjoy a fellowship and communion together.” When we say, “no” to that, God says “no” to our “no” to him. But notice, he is not changing his mind. His “no” reinforces his “yes” – in other words, his “no” negates our “no.” Which is to say, “I said ‘yes’ and I mean it.”

In order to restore, to reconcile us to God, he has to do something very radical. He has to not just tell us words from heaven, or give us instructions. He actually has to connect himself up with the very root of our being, and transform us from the inside out. He did this in sending the Son – he actually joins himself up with humanity. In and through humanity with all of creation, makes himself one with us at the very level of our being.

This is what we mean as the Son of God who is one with the Father and the Spirit – we say that’s his divinity. Then he becomes one with humanity. Who is this Jesus? He is the Son of God, one with the Father, therefore divine, and one with humanity, therefore fully and truly human.

So God connects himself up to the root of our being, with who we are, in order to transform us, renew us, restore us and bring us back into that right relationship, so that promise fulfilled, I will be your God and you will be my people, might come to fruition. But what’s wrong, so radically wrong that he has to have a radical correction – nothing less than God himself linking up, hooking himself up and uniting himself with humanity at the root of our being. Jesus is one with us, and we belong to him, there at the root of our being.

So the Incarnation becomes an amazing thing that shows the extent of the love of God. That to heal us, to redeem us, to bring us back in right relationship, he unites himself to us at the root of our being. He not just says something from on high, or sprinkles fairy dust on us from a distance – but he heals us by becoming united to us, one with us.

JMF: Then this union is true of all human beings, whether they’re believers or not. What is

the difference in the way this union plays out between a believer and unbeliever?

GD: We have to go all the way back to creation. As the apostle Paul reminds us, everything was created from the Father through the Son, and everything is through the Son, for the Son, and to the Son, from all eternity. Creation belongs to God by virtue of creation, whether people recognize it or not. No human life takes place without God giving it life. We don't have life in ourselves. The life we have, even of those who are resisting God, is coming from God. God is lending them life. We belong to God by virtue of creation.

The history of the human race is resisting God, and resisting that relationship, which means resisting receiving from God that life, and even righteousness itself. Right life, right relationship, we resist that. The relationship is broken. But everyone, everything belongs to God, and it has no power to get life from somewhere else – or to cut itself off entirely, totally or absolutely, where we cease to exist. Existence itself is a gift of God. Nothing exists in and of itself, by itself – as if it was an Energizer Bunny, with its own life-giving and existence-giving battery pack. When it breaks itself off, renewed life also comes from God as a gift. What God is doing in Christ is renewing and restoring that relationship so that we might belong to God in a deeper way – to be reconciled to God – and that it might lead to a third phase, of a glorified union.

When we're talking about our relationship with Christ – it's a relational dynamic – it has a beginning – creation. It has a middle – Fall and Reconciliation. But it has a future that we haven't reached yet, which is a Fulfillment and Consummation. It's a relational dynamic, rather than a static thing. Our relationship with God has these three phases.

The initiative is with God, the reality is established. All creation belongs to God by virtue of creation – and that is through the Son of God. But it also belongs to God by virtue of redemption. God was in Christ reconciling the cosmos, the world to himself [2 Corinthians 5:19]. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

God is reconciling to the world now by the Holy Spirit – we are then where we *receive* that reconciliation. God has made up his mind – not only about creation originally – but a resistant creation. He will love us, and love us till the end. That's what we see of Jesus, washing even Judas' feet. He loved them to the end. God has made up his mind about us. Jesus is not changing the mind of the Father. He is representing the mind of the Father, who comes to us, unites himself to us, to lift us back up, to transform us, and to send our sins to hell – to condemn the sin and yet rescue us from ourselves, back into right relationship, to share in the Son's perfect

relationship with the Father as Jesus' brothers and sisters to do that.

Now, will we participate in that right relationship? Will we trust that God has reconciled himself, that he has nothing against us, because it's all been made right by God himself through the Son and in the Spirit? God offers his word of reconciliation – you are forgiven, you are atoned... because God loves...

JMF: And that's true before you ever come faith...

GD: That's right. We're offered his forgiveness. We're offered reconciliation. We're offered the right relationship.

JMF: And yet, it's a reconciliation that is already so, we're offered to receive what is already true...

GD: Right. Do we trust that word, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

JMF: Every believer was once an unbeliever.

GD: Those who are believers are those who are telling the truth. God is the great creator, God is the great reconciler, God is the one who has atoned for all sin, God has reconciled humanity. I accept that, receive that, believe it and live by it and in it. So the order is: because God loves, God atones, he extends forgiveness to us.

Believing is accepting the forgiveness that's offered to us in and through the person and work of Christ. When we confess Christ, we're telling the truth about who God is. God is the creator, God is the reconciler, God is the one who's made atonement. I am trusting and loving that. So I repent of my unbelief, I repent of not trusting in God being the reconciler. I repent of not trusting God to be my good Creator.

What then should we do? What behavior follows? What response follows the offer of forgiveness? It is confession of sin, it is repentance. It's turning around and saying, "I trust your forgiveness. I trust your eternal purposes. I want to live in the middle of that right relationship that you have for me." Our forgiveness does not change God's mind about us. Even Jesus' atoning work does not change the Father's mind. The Father sends the Son because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit love us and want to be in right relationship with us. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all of one mind. "We want our original creative purposes to be fulfilled, and we have done everything necessary for that to take place."

In the power of the Spirit, as we submit to that, we repent and we believe to receive the gift that's already there for us. When we repent, we are admitting our guilt, but it is God's

forgiveness. He doesn't say, "*If* you repent then I forgive you." He says, "I forgive you, so repent."

"The kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus says, "so repent." Peter preached in Acts the whole work of God from Creation through Redemption, and then those listening said, "What then shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent." Repenting is receiving the gift of the completed work of Christ for us. That represents the mind of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To deny that the Father and Son are of one mind and purpose, is to deny the divinity of Christ, is to tear apart God and make three Gods differently. No, Jesus shows us the Father and takes us to the Spirit. The whole God is the redeeming, atoning, and forgiving God, and in the power of the Spirit, we receive that.

JMF: So our repentance doesn't change God's mind. It's a change of our mind to accept the truth of what it is.

GD: Right. It's to put our trust or faith in it and to stop trusting in ourselves – especially stop trusting in our own efforts to change God's mind about us so that he accepts us.

JMF: There's a certain rest in that.

GD: Absolutely.

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## Those Who Never Heard the Gospel

**JMF:** What about people who have never heard the gospel, there was never an opportunity? God's love is universal for everyone. He's the Redeemer of his creation. Where does that leave people who never have any opportunity to even know anything about that? Second, what about people who grow up in a Christian environment, so-called, like ours, in which there's the appearance of Christianity all around us, but it never seems legitimate to them, for whatever reason, and they never make a commitment. Where does all that fit with the broadness and depth of the love and grace of God?

**GD:** The first thing to remember is what God has done in Christ, and according to Scripture he has enabled us to know his mind, his heart, his character, his purposes, so we might know who God is, and worship him as the God he truly is. It's much easier, because God was successful to reveal himself, to know what God's up to, as compared to what we're up to, the "why" and "how" this would work out for people.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Jesus shows us the Father and sends us his Spirit; Jesus is the reconciler, the redeemer – that's what's on God's heart, what's on God's mind – that is what God accomplished through Christ, it is finished. God is reconciled to us. So whatever happens to people in the end it will not be because of the deficiency in the motive of God, in the mind of God, in the effectiveness of what he has done in Christ.

God has made up his mind: "I will be your God, you shall be my people – even if you resist me." God does not have anything against any human being any longer. He is reconciled to us. If someone manages somehow resist the grace of God, the goodness of God, the redemption of God to all in eternity, it won't be because there is some lack in God. Because the purpose of God, the mind of God is shown to us in Jesus Christ. God is like Jesus Christ – all the way down to the bottom. There's not another God with a non-redemptive side, a vindictive side where he does not want to be reconciled. What happens is God is the God who pursues us, pursues us to the end.

Sometimes I end up saying, if this is who God is, then there is no reason that anyone, any longer has to go to hell. That doesn't mean that somehow, some way, someone *might*... But you see, what ought to blow our minds is not that someone might, but that how could anybody resist the goodness and grace of God to that point? How could anybody do that? They might be able to do it. But given who God is, I don't know how they could, or how they should. We cannot put a

limit on God's grace. It won't be because he has changed his mind about them. His mind has been made up in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** So it would be in spite of God's persistent love, not because God is vindictive and angry and tricky, or he leaves someone out on purpose, or anything like that.

**GD:** Or he turns out, in the end, to hate some part of his creation that he created and redeemed. If someone manages to resist the grace of God to do that, their resistance is the denial of the reality. Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. God has made him that.

**JMF:** We typically draw a line at death and say, if somebody has not professed Christ before they die, that's it. But that's our line in the sand, isn't it? After all, Jesus conquered death. There is no death except in the death of Christ, and there is no death except that death that results in the resurrection of Christ – whatever people come out thinking or believing, there is no death except that one that ends in resurrection.

C.S. Lewis has this in his *Narnia Chronicles*. In *The Last Battle*, he portrays (it's not intended to be a theology book, but it's a wonderful analogy), a certain character who is more or less a different religion from that of Aslan, but when he goes through the stable and he comes out into Aslan's country at the end of the world, and everything is pulled through that stable, he sees Aslan and he recognizes him as everything he had ever hoped for, even though he did not know Aslan before. But when he saw him, he realized that this was who had been drawing him all along, and his heart had been pulled toward him, and he saw him as the culmination of everything he'd ever hoped and believed. (Whereas there were other characters who, when they saw Aslan, it was their worst nightmare, because their hearts were selfish and black and wicked, and they never had any regard for anything other than their own.)

It's an interesting analogy, and it is important for us to discuss that topic and think about it in the broadness of God's purpose throughout Scripture for humanity in binding himself to it in Christ, because we have loved ones, we have aunts and uncles and grandmothers who, for whatever reason, never became a Christian the way we think of becoming a Christian and we think, I love them and they loved me. Does God hate them? Does God punish them now in hell fire for eternity? This is not how Jesus Christ is revealed to us, and it leaves us with hope, of the salvation that is beyond our ken anyway, to fully comprehend in the love of God.

**GD:** We're again dealing with both the "who" question and then the "how." The "how" question is more difficult to answer, probably because Scripture doesn't explain all that. So we

have to go with the “who” question. If God is consistent with who he is, and there is no God behind the God except in Jesus Christ, it means God will use all his God-ness to rescue his children, who belong to him and he is reconciled to them.

Salvation is a relational kind of thing. There is a difference among those who “does it have to be explicit faith where they know Jesus, name his name, and recognize who that is,” or “might it be implicit – that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit?” There are people who realize, if they are going to have some kind of eternal life, they would need some kind of forgiveness that comes from God, that doesn’t depend upon them. God will have to somehow re-make them by his mercy.

They may not use those words, but those people might be in that spiritual condition – that is under the impact of the Holy Spirit of God, but not explicitly know that it *is* the Holy Spirit of God, because they have never heard of it through no fault of their own. My own view is, yes, it might be possible for them to have the right *meanings* without the right labels. Because the grace of God through the Holy Spirit exceeds the kinds of things we can do in our preaching, in our teaching, in our ministry, in our witness...

**JMF:** And can exceed our feeble attempts.

**GD:** Exactly. In Scripture, when we describe what we are to do, that’s assuming that we can do. But we can’t assume that the limitations that *we* have are the limitations that God has. Grace means God is not limited in the way we are. We cannot restrict the grace of God to our own limitations. The Spirit blows where he wills, and he will exceed our limitations. That Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, is the Spirit of redemption who will bring people to repentance and to a trust in God and even through Christ. Whether that has to happen explicitly, I don’t think the biblical story requires that.

**JMF:** There is no other name under heaven by which men and women can be saved. But whether they like it, or know it, or not, there is no other name under heaven. It doesn’t say you have to know that, but it’s true regardless of whether you know it.

**GD:** Whether it has to be explicit... A question I think of is, someone has a misunderstanding of God, a misunderstanding of Jesus, and they reject *that*. They haven’t really rejected Christ...

**JMF:** What if they rejected a false Christ?

**GD:** If they rejected a falsehood, they wouldn’t be condemned. God knows our hearts. We

are limited in that.

**JMF:** Right. Which of us has a full, perfect and complete understanding? We're relying entirely on Jesus' acceptance of *us* – we're not relying on our acceptance of him.

**GD:** We can get confused. We think we are saved by believing X. No. We're saved by Jesus Christ himself. And since that's a relational reality, that salvation will bring out a certain response – an affirmative, appreciative, thankful and repented response from us. But that response doesn't save us, that response is the sharing in it, the receiving the benefits of something that's already there – affirming, acknowledging the reality that is there.

We have no power to undo what God has done in Christ for us. We can live in denial. If you live in denial, if you resist the grain, you will get splinters. You cannot rearrange the grain – we have no power to do that. God is for us in Christ, we belong to him. God is doing everything in his God-ness and in his goodness and in his mercy to bring us to the point to admit the truth and the reality so we might enjoy the relationship that God has for us.

**JMF:** We reap what we sow, and yet we stand in the grace of God.

**GD:** We do, because that is who God is. We can't change who God is, fortunately – that's why (**JMF:** Yes, thank God.) God is faithful.

**JMF:** That is very different from universalism. There are various forms of universalism, but I think what most people think of with universalism is, it doesn't matter what you think, say, or do, you're saved and you can go on being whatever, doing whatever, thinking whatever you want. We're not talking about that at all. We're talking about what is in fact a relationship with Christ, and what culminates in knowing the Father and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent in the Holy Spirit. This is what salvation is all about. There is no other game in town, as Robert Capon sometimes has put it.

**GD:** Yes. They are not conditions to the grace of God, but they're the obligations of grace. This is what James Torrance used to say. If you think of a married couple being married... If they lived as a married couple, that's going to be one thing, if they're married and yet they don't live as if they're married, that will have implications. It does not de-marry them, un-marry them. That has been established.

To think of salvation as a relationship, then it needs to be a right relationship. We belong to God by virtue of creation and redemption. Now the question is, will we live as if that's the case? Wouldn't it be silly for a couple to come together, to go through the marriage ceremony, and to

pledge their eternal love for each other and then say, “Now, since we’re married, there’s no point in living together.” No, the point of being married *is* to live together.

Our belonging to God, through Christ, Creator, Redeemer, and Perfecter –now that we belong together because of what God has done, we are to live – this is the obligations of grace, not the conditions of grace – the obligations of grace is to live in that reality. If you count on “God has made us one in marriage,” then even when things go wrong, if you continue to count on that union, our being together and God supplying everything – that helps you get over the rough patches.

Living by faith is trusting in God being faithful over and over again. Rather than saying, “We’re married, so we don’t need to live together,” the Christian faith is, “Since we are married to God in Christ, we belong to him. At the root of our being, how do I live in the middle of that so that I receive and enjoy all the blessings, all the goodness, of that relationship?” Those who say, “We belong to God in Christ, so there’s no need to live...” – don’t understand anything about what that belonging is. It would be as foolish as saying, “Since we’re married, there’s no point in living together.”

**JMF:** Or, “Since we’re best friends, we don’t need to ever see each other again.”

**GD:** We don’t need to talk, we don’t need to do things together, we don’t need to be together. This is why in the early church to be a Christian, their essential definition was, “Being a Christian is: I am the one united to Christ.” That’s what a Christian was. I’m united to Christ because of what he has done for me in my place and on my behalf, I am united to Christ and now I want to live as if I am united, because I am. Union with Christ was the essential definition of being a Christian.

**JMF:** That’s what the Holy Spirit leading us into all truth does, the Father and Son dwelling in us through the Spirit, there’s where that union plays itself out, lives itself out.

**GD:** Yes, the grace of God isn’t just external and around us – the Holy Spirit actually gives us, as Paul says, the Spirit of sonship. We now have working in us the power not our own, that sets us free to be the children of God that we actually are. We are living, as Paul says, living up into Christ, because we really belong to him. We belong first, and then we believe that we belong, and then, as we’re believing we’re belonging, we’re going to be living up into it. The Holy Spirit is the power within us enabling us to live more and more fully and freely as the children – the reconciled children of God, that we really are.

We're living into a reality, we're not creating a new reality – that's been done in Christ – we're living up into the reality, or there are some people who are resisting the reality. But nobody's changing the reality. We either affirm the reality, or we're living in denial of the reality. That's our choice. Sometimes we think our choice is to create an alternative reality. No, that would make us God. We're not. Our only choice, and the choice that God gives us is, we're to live in the reality that God has established and created for us, out of his goodness, holiness, mercy, and grace.

**JMF:** Let's talk about the wrath of God in that context. We could start with the election, if we're elect because we're in Christ, he's the elect, as it were, we're in him, we're elect, practically that encompasses everyone, since everyone is in Christ, there's no other way to be human except in Christ. But there are passages that sound as though God is furious, vindictive, that seem out of context with Jesus saying, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you." But these passages sound very different from that in their tone. The one that comes to mind first is the 2nd Thessalonians passage... [chapter 1]

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony... [1 Thess. 2:4-10, NIV 1984]

Others also, a passage in Romans that is similar: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them" [Romans 1:18-19] and so on. These passages seem to make God sound more like a human being who's been affronted and who's going to get vengeance.

**GD:** Well, yes. The grace of God and the wrath of God are not opposed to one another. God is one, and the Father and the Son are not split on that. But God is against everything that's against his good purposes to reconcile and redeem his creation. God is never going to change his mind about what sin is... the greatest sin is to reject grace. God opposes that which opposes his

good, loving purposes. If God did not oppose that which threatened and opposed his good creation, his purposes, God would not be loving.

God's wrath is against that which is against his plans for love and reconciliation, and against that which destroys his good creation. It is a sign of his love. He's just as wrathful – against that which is against his creation – as he is loving. They're not opposed to one another.

Here's a simple illustration: I've enjoyed sailing in the past... If you're sailing with the wind, it's amazing what the experience is, it's calm, it's peaceful. You can't even feel the breeze, because you're going the same speed as the breeze. It's enjoyable, the sun is warm, it's quiet. But if you turn around and tack upwind (and sometimes you do this in sailing), you'll come about, and then you're heading upwind. In an instant it's as if you're in a whole different situation. All of a sudden it's windy, it's noisy. The water is splashing up. You're feeling as if you were double the wind. The wind speed plus your speed into the wind, now you've got twice as much wind. And if you're wet and there's all this wind, now it's freezing, although the sun is still out.

God's love is in a certain direction and towards a certain end – to bring us into right relationship, holy relationship, of sharing in his Son's sonship as his true children. If you go with the wind, you experience it one way, but if you turn around and resist it, it resists you. But the direction of the wind did not change. God's mercy, God's love does not change. But if you resist it, it resists your resistance. Sin is resistance of the good purposes and the love of God.

Resistance to belonging to God is resisting reality – that's what it is. It's denying reality. Well, that resists back. When God resists that which resists him, that resistance is his love in his good purposes. God will never change his mind, God will always be against that which is against his creation, that seeks his destruction and dissolution. He will always be against all that ruins and distorts and twists right relationship with God (in which we receive his goodness in a trusting way day by day, our daily bread). God will always, eternally, resist everything that ruins that, and he will never change his mind about that. Grace is not an exception to the rule of his love. The rule of his love is perfect, his promise remains to do that.

Somehow, some people may end up in the situation where they're resisting the love of God to all eternity. The Bible holds out that it might be a possibility for some – but not a possibility that God creates or God wants. He is actually resisting it. Hell is where you have to eternally resist the love and grace of God. That's your job, every morning you have to get up reject it



again, and again, and again, and again. It's eternal because God never stops being who he is – loving, holy, reconciling, restoring in his own being. So those who, somehow, manage to do this for all eternity – to me that's unimaginable, but they might be able to figure out how to do it. Their job is to have to reject the reality of who God is and the reality of who they are, every day of their lives. When you think about it, that would be hell.

And what would heaven be? Heaven will be living in reality, receiving it and reflecting it back each and every day, living in the presence of God's holy love, of sharing in the fellowship and communion that the Son has with his Father in the power of the Spirit. That would be heaven – to receive that fully and freely every day.

God is adamantly opposed to that which opposes the life, the fellowship, the fruitfulness of his creation. He'll never change his mind about that. God is not in two minds about his creation. In James, we're told not to be in two minds about God. Why shouldn't we be in two minds? Because God is of a single mind about us, and that mind is reflected in Christ.

God tells us to love our enemies. Does God not then love his own enemies? He does. Why? Because he's loving in his own being, but that means he hates what's against his good creation – he completely opposes it. We've got a wrong view of grace if we think grace is an exception to the rule. No. Grace is never giving up on the promise. God's love is eternal, and so he rejects that which is unloving. So, yes, God's wrath is as strong as his love and his mercy.

**JMF:** And yet, it's redemptive...

**GD:** Its purpose and its aim is redemptive and so, yes, somehow it might be possible that some reach a point of no return such that for all eternity they resist the truth and reality of who they are, who God is and the redemptive purpose of God. They live as if Jesus Christ is not their Lord and Savior. They live in the denial of reality itself to do that.

But how anybody could do that, given who God is? It might be possible, but I can't imagine how they manage to do that. But perhaps some may do that. But it is unimaginable. We tend to flip it around and say, how could anybody come to believe in God? We find it easy, given who God is and what he's done for us in Christ on behalf of all humanity.

The disciples say, "Jesus, who then can be saved?" They're viewing it from a human point of view: who then can be saved? It's hard for the rich to be saved, and in their view that means it's less likely for anybody to be saved, because the rich are the most likely, in their view. But Jesus doesn't say, "Oh yeah, you're right. It's hard for people to be saved. I know, I'm a

pessimist myself.” No, he says, “With God all things are possible.”

The Christian message and Christian theology (which is an act of faith itself) tells the truth from God’s point of view. It tells the truth about who God is: God is merciful, God is loving, God is redemptive in his own heart, and God is faithful to himself. Though everyone be faithless, God will still be faithful. God will be faithful still – he’ll be himself even if people in hell somehow manage to resist God’s mercy to all eternity. But he will still be their God. Jesus will be their Savior and Lord, he is Savior and Lord even of those who somehow might manage to resist that from all eternity. He’s no less Lord and Savior.

This is why the Bible talks about unbelief as foolishness, you are denying reality. Christians are those who are waking up smelling the coffee and admitting, confessing, saying with our mouths, the truth that Jesus is Lord and Savior as the new head, the new Adam of all humanity. That’s who he is, and by the power of the Spirit we confess, we say the truth, we announce it. Paul’s way of saying it is, “God in Christ has said ‘yes’ to us.” If we say “No” to God’s “Yes” to us, if God is going to be faithful to himself, what does he say to our “No?” He has to say, “No” to our “No.”

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## **Karl Barth and His Theology**

**JMF:** You are a scholar of Karl Barth's writings. What is important about Karl Barth for American Christianity?

**GD:** The most important thing about Karl Barth is that he points us to the gospel and to the God of the gospel. He has no importance in and of himself. He's not interested in being a Barthian himself, or having anybody call themselves that. I don't call myself a Barthian. His importance is that he points us to the gospel and the God of the gospel.

The center of that is ... what he saw was so important, especially in his day, and still in our day, is to realize is that when God showed himself in person in Jesus Christ, he was revealing to all humanity the rock-bottom total truth of who he is, that was true to himself in his own being (not just towards us). In his own being, God had figured out a way for human beings to truly know who he is, and that way was through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, and according to Scripture, that's who he is. You would think it would be simple, but it takes a lot of concentration, discipline and even repentance to recall again, and again, and again, that there is no other God except the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To be colloquial, in Jesus Christ, you have the whole enchilada – that's who God is all the way down – there is no other God, there is no God behind God. What you see in Jesus Christ is what you get. Another way to say it is, in Jesus Christ you get the Son of God, we find the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, all God, in the character of God, the attitudes of God, the purposes of God.

Therefore any theology of God has to be founded, centered, directed, disciplined, and oriented to the only place where there is this self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We can't go looking around Christ or to other sources as a norm and a status for that. God is who he is, in himself and towards us, who he is in Jesus Christ. Any knowledge of God and any faith in God has to be controlled, ordered, arranged and filled out in terms of Jesus Christ – as he is, God with us. What I find in my own life and in other theologies, it's much more difficult to stay centered on that center, as we're somehow tempted to develop knowledge of God on other foundations, with other sources, and they end up competing with what we find out about God in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** So this focus that Barth brings is different from other prevailing theologies ...

**GD:** Barth was so grasped by this and saw its importance that he corrected himself and regulated himself and asked himself the question, "Am I speaking of and speaking about the one

and the same God in Jesus Christ?” If you’re going to talk about the kind of ubiquity of God, you have to see how that relates to God revealed in Jesus Christ. If you’re going to talk about the eternity of God, if you’re going to talk about the mercy of God, if you’re going to talk about the wrath of God, or the election of God, or the atonement of God, or our future glorification, or our union with Christ – all these things... they all had to line up with the truth and the realities we find it in Jesus Christ.

He was so rigorous in that because he thought that’s the essence of theology. He was rigorous, what I find is that other theologies kind of wobble and waver – sometimes they get that in focus, and sometimes not...

**JMF:** What are some examples of “other theologies?”

**GD:** For instance, a theology that starts with the Fall, let’s say. Certain theologies are so concerned about sin – and indeed, it’s the problem of our human existence. But if you make sin and the Fall the defining moment, as if that shaped all of reality, and you then set up all your theologies, it becomes a theology of sin. In this case, let’s say, “Ok, sin is the problem.” If we bring in Jesus Christ after that, and Jesus Christ is defined in terms of the problem – because we’ve got a big problem to solve. What you’re going to say and how your theology will develop will be – Jesus will be understood as a problem-solver, the solver of sin.

**JMF:** If the focal point of your theological perspective is sin.

**GD:** The sin problem, and then Jesus comes down into the sin problem and does what he’s going to do in that circle. That’s a very truncated view of the Bible’s view of who Jesus is. It leaves out the fact that we find out, that through the Son of God who then became incarnate, everything was created, for him, through him, and to him. This incarnate one, Jesus, is not just the fixer-upper of the problem. Actually, everything belongs to Jesus Christ – it came into being through the Word of God, incarnate in Jesus, all creation belongs to Christ himself and is *for* him. It’s destined to be for him – as the Creator. So it’s the Creator God who is redeeming us.

God, who Jesus is, is much larger than the fixer-upper of the sin problem. He is the one by whom everything came into being, he is the one who has the future in mind for this creation, now fallen. It’s one and the same God. When Jesus completes his work on earth, he doesn’t just disappear off the scene because he’s got the job done, he doesn’t have anything more to do with it. He is the one for whom everything was destined – in him. In the Bible, Jesus has finished the atoning work, but his ministry as the Son of God continues.

**JMF:** This theology with sin as its focus is where a lot of people are. When they think about the Bible and God, the whole Christianity, religious thing – their focus is sin. They don't start with who is Jesus, they start with how do we deal with sin, and solve this sin problem. What is another theology that...?

**GD:** Another theology would be that God is essentially interested in moral order. This pretty much comes out with “what went wrong,” if you start with that view – God is interested in moral order, and sometimes we'll think the holiness is restricted to moral order.

**JMF:** So, a holiness focus.

**GD:** Right. If you start with that... Often that's locked in to the Fall, because the Fall is disobedience. As if God was merely interested in moral obedience, and not something more – (it's not less than that – but something more than that). So then Jesus just gets us back on track so we can obey a moral order and do the stuff that God wants us to do.

**JMF:** Again, he's a fixer of a problem.

**GD:** Right, of a moral order.

**JMF:** So he's not at the heart and foundation of the theology. (**GD:** Right.) He's a factor...

**GD:** Right. An instrument, we say theologically, and once you're done with the instrument and you've fixed whatever you're fixing, once you used the screwdriver to drive in the screw, then once the screw's in place, you don't need the instrument anymore. You dismiss it and say, he's done. But that isn't the God of the Bible. That's not the Lord Jesus Christ of the Bible. But if you only think God is interested in moral order, you'll think of God as most interested in a legal relationship with us rather than... an alternative would be a filial, personal relationship.

So you have a God that's primarily first law. Then if you started to think about grace, even the grace of Jesus Christ, then if law is the larger category, it's all set up, then often what God is interested to do is justice, and justice in this framework is often understood as having two sides. The justice of God is understood in this sense as being equally satisfied by two things. The justice of God in this frame is understood as rewarding the good – so God is just because he rewards the good, and the other thing that makes God perfectly just is punishing the evil. And that's it. [He is equally satisfied by either outcome.] God is essentially the God who rewards the good and punishes evil. And on that basis, that's why we call God just or right or holy.

**JMF:** So if that's the focus of your theology, you read Scriptures with that in mind, you order your life with that in mind, that's the kind of preaching you gravitate to – that's the kind of

books you read, you're focused on this vanquishing of the enemies of God. Of course, you see yourself as on the good side of that. Wouldn't that make you the type of person who is judgmental of your neighbor who does not behave as well as you wish he would and so on?

**GD:** And judgmental about yourself.

**JMF:** There's a lot of self-condemnation and self-doubt, frustration and anxiety about your relationship with God, but also that's what a lot of Christians are criticized for... Surveys show people don't want to live next to evangelical Christians because they're judgmental.

**GD:** It certainly can lead to that, because judgment and being judgmental go together. A legal God, and then as Christians we may be tempted to want primarily legal relationships with others. It's like a contract, which makes it conditional: if you do "X" then I'll do "Y," and we'll agree to that. But if you don't do "X," then I won't have to do "Y." A legal relationship with God is contractual.

We have lots of contracts around us. That's how we operate in society. But the question is: We may act legally, by contract with others, but is that the kind of relationship that God wanted with us from all eternity, before creation? Is that the kind of relationship God wants with us after the Fall, and after his redemption, where there is a contractual, legal relationship with God – if you do good, then I'd reward you.

**JMF:** It's the kind of thinking and approach to the Bible that a person has, when the child doesn't measure up, they cut them out of the will, or they cut them out of their relationship, and they'll never see them again because they did something ...

**GD:** Yes. On purpose or as a society, we often create contracts and live by them, and we think that's a good thing – that's justice. Often in personal relationships, they can reduce to the legal, where we contractually relate to each other [**JMF:** unwritten contracts], so we see the tragedy when a marriage (which is not supposed to be, in a Christian frame anyway, merely legal contract, but give promises to one another that are unconditional) is turned into a legal tit for tat: "if you, then I... If not you... then not I." That represents the collapse of the marriage, the dissolution of a marriage – it is a distortion of a marriage.

But pre-nuptial agreements and things like this, our society is pushing everything into a contractual relationship. Even the personal and some would call it, filial – which means a notion of sonship, or family, we're losing that dimension of our ability to relate to one another, and entering more and more in having more areas of our lives being contractually run.

**JMF:** Self-sacrificial love doesn't really have a place...

**GD:** No, that wouldn't be... It's all conditional, that *if* you fulfill this condition, then I will do something. But if you don't, I'm not going to follow through on anything...

**JMF:** But that's how we think of God... If we think God is saying to us, "If you change your behavior, say the sinner's prayer, then, I will act to save you." But up until you do that, I won't....

**GD:** Right. Often, as Athanasius said, we think out of a center in ourselves – but that is not theology – it is mythology. And furthermore, it's idolatry, because we're thinking God is like us. Whereas, no, God is not like us. God is not a creature. We have to stop thinking out of a center in ourselves and making ourselves and our experience the norm and standard for understanding God.

That's what God in Christ came to do – he is the great iconoclast, to break our false understandings of thinking about God as if he's something like us, but somewhat better. That is idolatry to do that. God came to say, No, I'm here to interpret myself as I really am... because I am God and not man. Even the wrath of God is not like human wrath. The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God, James tells us – nor does it work the righteousness of man. God's wrath works differently than ours. We can't think of God's love, God's wrath, even God's existence as just something like ours.

God was trying to get through to us, and Jesus Christ is saying, Here is who I really am. I am not just somewhat like you, just a little bit better. I'm totally different. I'm God and not man. The grace of God, and the love of God, is of a different kind.

Now, back to the law ... What is God's original purpose? Just to reward the good and punish the evil? Is that all God's justice can accomplish? So God would say, "Well, you know what, I've rewarded the good and I've punished the evil. I'm happy! That was my purpose. That's all I want to do. I'm just, I'm holy, I've rewarded the good, I've punished the evil, I'm perfectly happy." Is that really the notion of the justice, the righteousness, and even the holiness of God in Scripture?

Or is the justice of God and the righteousness of God really that God is the one who makes things right, who returns things to their right, and even perfects things to their full rightness. God's justice is a restorative justice, a corrective justice – making things right, so that the only thing that satisfies God's justice is that things are being made right.

If you bring creation as the first, and the purposes of God first, and don't make sin and the law the central, controlling thing, you have to ask yourselves the question, "Why did God create me in the first place?" Just to reward the good and punish the evil? Is that what God had in mind? Or that God has in mind, I want to love creation into perfection so the love that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit have been enjoying for all eternity, might be extended to creation and loved into perfection. And that is what makes God *just* – because he puts things right.

When it's broken, what does he do? He is the God who puts things right – so the only thing that satisfies the righteousness of God and the justice of God is to bring about righteousness and justice. If that's the purpose, then sin is resisting God's good purposes, and Christ is bringing about those original created purposes to make things right – in the New Testament, to bring about a new heavens and a new earth. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The justice of God is not, cannot, be restricted to rewarding good and punishing evil – as saying, I'm equally satisfied. That maybe all that we can do as human beings. But we cannot project our limitations of justice or righteousness or any other thing on God.

Is God incapable of doing nothing more but rewarding the good and punishing the evil? Or can he reconcile, transform and perfect his creation? Can he do that? Is that the heart of God? Is that what God is doing in Jesus Christ – to bring things to his perfection – to put and make things right in the end? That's a very different view of the justice and righteousness of God, which is not legal, because in the end, righteousness is right relationship where there is the perfect exchange of love – a fullness of life and fruitfulness in loving communion.

Jesus says, "I do not call you slaves any longer." Paul tells us not to fall back into the spirit of slavery, to do that. We are created to be the children of God – the children. That's his glory – to bring many sons to glory, in Hebrews 2. That's God's purpose, because that's God's heart. Because God in himself is Father and Son in that holy love in the Holy Spirit. He loves us with the same love with which he has loved his own Son, and he wants us to be a part of that. The biblical picture is that God does not have legal purposes for us, but filial purposes – loving purposes, and even the Fall and sin does not stop God from pursuing that end. He's done that in Jesus Christ, that we might share in Jesus' own sonship with the Father. That's a very different... that's what makes God righteous and holy. The filial purposes fulfilled in Christ, that we might participate in.

**JMF:** Barth's focus on this, in drawing theology back to a focus on Christ as "all in all" for



all the creation, is a reflection – you mentioned Athanasius, back from the 300s – it's a reflection of the earliest theology of the church from the beginning, not some innovation that is called neo-orthodox. There's some history with Barth, with views of God coming out of World War I and so on. But we have accusations against Barth a lot, saying that he is too liberal – he makes it too easy to be loved by God. Or he minimizes Scripture. What about the accusations?

**GD:** Barth was not attempting to create any kind of theological tradition, nor be enslaved to anyone. He wanted to be faithful to the God revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. And he was willing to receive help from anyone throughout the whole history of the Christian church who would help him faithfully think and formulate theologically on that. He would use anybody he found helpful. In the general Reformed tradition, he found certain strands helpful in this way, and he went back to Luther and Calvin – but he also went back, because Luther and Calvin themselves did, to the early church. The early church – Athanasius, Irenaeus, Hilary and others – they pointed back to the Scriptures and the writings of the apostles.

Barth was attempting to do nothing but build on that foundation. Along the way, he discovered his entire own training as a student had to be thrown away, which was in the liberal tradition. Barth's theology was a reaction and repudiation of liberalism – because he found that they did not build on that foundation.

So Barth had to re-train himself. After he had finished his training and he went to be a preacher and a pastor, he said, I had nothing to preach. So what I was forced to do is to go back to the whole new world of the Bible. That's his words, quote. When he did, he discovered a different God and a different Christian life, and even a different Christian ethic. He found the key to this all was Jesus Christ, because Jesus showed us who God really was. Barth discovered that many in his own church, many theologies had other norms and standards and sources of knowledge of God independent and apart from the true revelation of God himself in Jesus Christ. They had several sources that were intentional...

**JMF:** What sort of sources?

**GD:** A lot of it was human experience – human experience or human ideals and notions. For instance, the idea of the one absolute God – this idea of the absolute Spirit of God, they view this as the highest thing. Then they started trying to fit the biblical revelation into that and conforming it and shaping it, slicing off certain things.

They were into ideals, like the ideal of resurrection as a general idea. The resurrection isn't

an idea, it is an occurrence – what happened, Jesus Christ bodily raised from the dead. It's not an idea or a general idea: "Everything has resurrection life about it." "No," Barth said.

Similarly, they had the idea that human beings are imbued with the Spirit of God. We're all filled with the Spirit of God, and that shows itself up in our culture, and in our architecture and in our technology. This is building up to Nazi Germany. Barth saw that human beings were taking *themselves*, magnifying them, calling them god and then squeezing the Bible and its revelation into that. And that led to Nazi Germany.

When he saw that development both in World War I and World War II, he saw that his whole theological education had been built on a false foundation, and he had to start over, and this is what led to his writings and even re-writings – things from earlier times, to reconfigure this. As he looked back to the history of Christian theology, he saw he had to sort through certain things.

Certain things were going off-track, other things were more on-track, so he had to sort through this track that said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." "He who has seen me has seen the Father," and to stay strictly onto that. The view of Scripture around him was very low, because Scripture was crammed into human categories and human names and labels, and the norms became human experience. He said, Scripture doesn't allow us to do that. But even Scripture itself, he saw, was not tightly connected to their theology.

His main question was, "What's the connection between the written word and the living word?" Scholars of his day were reading the Bible, studying the Bible, but they were doing that as if the Bible itself were disconnected from the living word – from the living Lordship of Christ. The object of Scripture, the object of study, was Scripture itself, so in essence, studying Scripture meant in the end you came to know Scripture, but you did not know God – because God... there had been a distance, a disconnection between the living Word and the written word.

Barth was attempting to tell us that you cannot deal with Scripture apart from its real connection with the living Word. That connection meant, that to hear the word of God as the Word of God – to let the Bible be what it is. We couldn't have a deistic view of the Bible, to hear the word of God meant God himself by the Holy Spirit would speak again, in and through Scripture.

**JMF:** It's God revealing himself in Scripture, not Scripture being kind of another god...

**GD:** Right. Scripture would not be what it is, and wouldn't serve its purpose, unless God,

actively, daily, and moment by moment, by the Holy Spirit, spoke in and through that Scripture. If God were mute, if he decided not to say anything anymore – and we just had the Bible, but God himself was mute – Barth would say, in a practical sense, then God is dead. He says, no – God is the living God, that’s what the Bible says. God is the word, he is speaking. God is the one who communicates.

God hasn’t decided, “I’ll put it all in a book and never say anything more,” because the human heart would not hear the Bible without the working of the Holy Spirit. Barth had a high view of the Holy Spirit, not apart from Scripture, but he recognizes that the Bible as a book would not be what it is, and would not serve in the way it could (mainly enable us to know God), unless God was doing something while we’re reading the Bible.

**JMF:** And conversely, his point was that God was doing something when we’re reading the Bible. It’s actually a much higher view of the Bible...

**GD:** It’s a higher view of Scripture, because the Bible is what it is because there’s a living, continuing, actual connection between the real God and our reading Scripture. When we’re reading the Bible, it’s not like the only thing that’s happening is we’re reading. God himself, personally, by the Holy Spirit, is speaking. His Spirit knows the deep things in God, speaks in the depths of our own spirit, Paul tells us. How? In and through Scripture! Barth wants to know what Paul said, he’s listening to what Paul says, because he wants to hear what God is saying – not apart from the Bible, but in and through the Bible – because God is the living God, God is the articulate God, God is the Word, and he’s not mute. God never became silent.

Part of this means when you study Scripture, when you listen to the preaching of the word, then you study it and listen to it by faith in the living God. As you are reading you would say, “God, you need to speak to my heart – you, yourself. I need to hear a word from you.” As I’m reading the Bible, as I’m studying it, “Lord God, be gracious unto me, a sinner, that I might really hear you and what you are saying in and through this, your word, here and now.”

Otherwise, what we end up depending on is the words on the page, or our method. As if my sincerity plus my methods could enable me to hear the word of God – notice the grace of God is not even needed.

Studying the Bible is an act of radical trust in the living God – “Lord, get through to me, and get rid of all my false ideas and unworthy ideas of who you are and what you are – let me hear you again in and through this word, because if you don’t speak into my very heart and being, I

cannot hear you, because I am a sinner. Get through to me.”

All of our obedience, including studying Scripture, reading Scripture, listening to the Scripture preached, is done by faith in the living God as if this God was present and real and active today. Barth saw that when the German church separated Scripture from the living God, they manipulated that Bible to serve the needs and desires and even the ideals of Nazi Germany. They became lords over the Bible and used their methods to move it around to fit their needs and ideals.

Barth saw that the only way we have is to bring back in the sovereignty of God, which is the active living grace of God in our lives to overcome our resistance, and respond to the grace of God that we might really hear his word again. Barth’s view of Scripture is: Scripture is connected to the living word, and that’s what makes the Bible the Bible. If you separate them, the Bible becomes nothing – we become lords over it. I don’t think that’s a low view of Scripture. It’s a high view of God and his word.

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Is It Hard to Be Saved?

JMF: We'd like to talk today about some of the questions people have when they begin to learn about Trinitarian theology. One of the primary ones that I'm sure you've heard many times has to do with the narrow gate in Matthew 7:13-14, where Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it, but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." If God's grace is so broad and so wide, then how do you explain a verse like this?

GD: One of the most important things to remember is who is saying this. This is Jesus Christ, the one who came, as he said, not to condemn, but to save. So I've studied that passage and asked a similar question myself, puzzled over that.

One of the most important things is to remember what the purpose of a warning is (and this is clearly a warning passage, no one disputes that), and warnings are not to predict the future as to what will happen, nor does it show the purpose of the person issuing the warning. When we issue warnings to our children or others, such as, don't run out into the street; or don't touch that, it's hot; we're not trying to predict the future, nor are we indicating the purpose, I hope you touch that pot or I hope you run out into the street. The purpose of someone who's issuing the warning is to *prevent* that from happening.

We're not finished, but if we start right there, what's the purpose of the warning, I think it is showing us something about the heart of Jesus, that he does not want people to enter into distraction. He's issuing this warning so something doesn't happen. It's to prevent that outcome. So we need to start there. That's consistent with who Jesus is, and him showing us who the Father is and who the Spirit is. He is the one who is trying to prevent us from entering into destruction.

We can talk a little bit about "the narrow way" of the road – the way is very narrow. Linking this up with John, and who Jesus is — *he* is the narrow way. He himself. There's only one who enters in. He, Jesus, first as the high priest, entered in, the only one. So the way is very narrow in that sense. There is only one who can take us to the Father and send us the Spirit. That is Jesus himself.

One of the things to think about, someone has said, the way begins narrow, in Jesus himself. But as you enter into the narrow way, it gets broader and broader and broader. It widens out into the freedom of life in Christ. Whereas the way of destruction, yes, it is very wide, but it gets

narrower and narrower and narrower until it finally squeezes the life out of you. Jesus is indicating how things are. He is the way, the truth, and the life, to a life with the Father and in the power of the Spirit. He is the way to salvation. So his warning is to instruct them in the way.

It does sound a little bit like he's thinking about the future, but I think the proper way to understand a warning coming from Jesus here is that it's descriptive. Jesus is describing it *if* someone resists the grace of God. If someone somehow manages to throw off and try to deny the grace of God, these are hypothetical consequences that could lead to destruction. There is a real danger here, and that is rejecting the calling of Christ, the way of Christ. It's rejecting the mercy and grace of God, and there are consequences for that. It's a genuine warning we should take seriously, but it comes out of the saving, reconciling heart of Jesus.

JMF: So, as a warning passage, this is really full of hope and the joy of the gospel, because in spite of the fact of the impossibility of our being able to achieve this entrance into this narrow gate, Jesus is the gate, and he's the "few that have entered it" as it were, and he takes us with him.

GD: Right. He's describing that and wanting that. That shows us his real heart, to come to me, as he says elsewhere, and to enter in through him. It's very helpful, but he realizes some may resist, and he's trying to help them see the foolishness of resisting the grace and mercy of God present in himself.

JMF: Another passage that questions arise about fairly frequently is 1 Peter 4:17-18, which speaks of how hard it is to be saved. It says, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God, and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

The implication from the questioner is, You're saying that God's grace is very wide and broad, and Christ has already done everything essential and necessary for your salvation, so how do you explain the fact that Peter says it is hard for the righteous to be saved?

GD: One way to look at it is, it's actually *impossible* for anyone to be saved in and of themselves. It is only possible in and through Christ. There is no possibility for anyone in any other way. I don't think the difficulty of the way is the main point of that particular text. Notice it says "disobey the gospel." The gospel is the announcement of the good news of the reconciling work of God in Christ. To *obey* it is to trust it and follow in its way. This isn't setting up a kind

of legalism, which when we hear the word *obedience* we often think that's what is in play here. It's obedience to the gospel, which means our hearts follow along with the gospel, and therefore follow Christ, in his way.

The difficulty here is dying to self but living for Christ and in Christ. That's what Jesus is up to. There is a dying to ourselves and the other things we're committed to, and most especially dying to thinking we have a way, we can work our way toward Christ or in God, which is an impossibility.

Again, there are consequences. If we reject the gospel, which is the announcement of the grace and mercy and eternal love of God, the everlasting covenant, if we reject it, there are consequences. Jesus can't hide that. But it's rejecting the gospel, not responding, not having our hearts be obedient to the truth of the gospel of who Jesus is in himself, our Savior, and who God is, the Savior God.

JMF: In these passages, once we come at them from a Christ-centered perspective and begin with who is Christ for us, who is Christ with God, then it changes the whole perspective of the passage so we can see it as, this is how things would be if there were no such thing as Christ and there were no salvation in him. You've written about how the issue has to do with how we approach Scripture and how we interpret Scripture, whether we come at it with Christ at the center of it, or whether we come at it from just taking a passage out of context and trying to understand it in the light of our own logic.

GD: That's important. Every passage we deal with, we often bring to it some kind of assumptions. I think the most important assumption to bring to interpreting any scripture is to remember whose scripture it is. We need to remember, this belongs to God who has made himself known in Christ, the God who reveals himself and makes himself known in Christ, and the one who gives himself. We should remember this is the one whose word we're reading.

I liken it to the difference between receiving a letter from someone you know as compared to receiving a letter from someone you don't know. When you don't know them, you kind of have to fill in. You're not sure what they mean, or what they mean by this phrase, or how they would say it. We probably receive lots of those letters. They're mostly commercial in nature. We don't know what their motives are, what their heart is.

But when we read the Word of God, we're in an entirely different situation, because we know who it's coming from. When you read a letter from someone you know very well, as

you're reading through, do you know how sometimes you can hear their voice? You know exactly how they would say that phrase? What they would say, how they would say it, and what they would mean. That provides the larger context for understanding any sentence or even any word. Coming to Scripture is very much like that, because God has made himself known in Christ in no uncertain terms. God in person in time and space, flesh and blood. We have to remember that when we're dealing with any passage of Scripture, Old Testament, New Testament, whose Scripture it is.

JMF: One of the other concerns that comes up from individuals who are struggling with Trinitarian theology is, if (as Trinitarian theology puts forward) God's grace is wide and broad and Christ has reconciled the world to the Father in himself, then what is the role of repentance and faith? Where do they come in? Aren't they required for salvation, and what is the difference between believers and unbelievers?

GD: The Word of God reconciling the world to himself is a message, and is a reality. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Jesus says, "It is finished." It's a completed work – and that sets up a reality, and the reality is, What is God's attitude toward his creation and toward his creatures? It's a saving attitude, a reconciling one, an atoning one, to make it one.

That creates a whole new situation. It's a situation that calls for an appropriate response, which is repentance and faith. We repent of all other lords. We repent of all other kingdoms. We repent of making ourselves lord, so that our lives center around other things. This is the natural response to the announcement of a truth and a reality that is present. God is for us in Christ, from the bottom of his being, he is for us. The difference between someone who repents of their unbelief and their distrust in the grace of God and believes in it, and those who don't, is either an affirmation of the truth and reality of who God is in Christ or a denial of it.

But when we deny a reality, that doesn't change the reality. The reality stays what it was. Our denial of it doesn't have any power to change it. God doesn't change his mind about the person who rejects him, but he does resist their "no." He says "no" to their "no," because he said "yes" to them in Christ. He's telling them no, he's going to say no to their no because he said, and I meant it, "yes" in Christ.

There are consequences to resisting the truth and reality. The unbeliever is attempting to live in unreality. Their rejection cannot change the grace and mercy of God, cannot change who God is in Christ, God our Savior, cannot undo that.

One simple image is, if there is a “grain” to life in reality accomplished by God in Christ, you can resist that grain, and if you do, you’ll get splinters. But you don’t change the grain, the direction of the grain, rather, you get splinters. But if you go with the grain, then there is life. Because now you’re receiving and sharing and participating in all the fruits of that reconciliation, as compared to continually pushing those fruits away again and again, then you don’t benefit from them. But they are there for you.

JMF: For the unbeliever, even though God loves the unbeliever, unless that love is engaged, there is no enjoying the benefits of it. There’s no experiencing the benefits of God’s love. There is a huge difference between believing and unbelieving, and that affects evangelism, doesn’t it? Because another question that comes up is, If God has already reconciled everyone to himself, why do we need to preach the gospel, because God has already said yes to them, he’s already saved them, then why do we preach the gospel?

GD: We preach the gospel that they might participate, might have fellowship with God, and receive all the benefits of everything God has done for them. They miss out if they resist that. They continue to get splinters in their lives. We announce the gospel not to create a reality. The good news is the good *news*. It’s the good news about a reality. Sometimes we think that the good news we preach is a potentiality. That *if this*, then a reality will come about.

But what the gospel is, is the announcement of good news for all — a reality. Therefore, live by it. So, for instance, in 2 Corinthians 5, God in Christ has reconciled the world to himself. So, be reconciled. That is, live in that reconciliation so that they have the life of God now flowing in them, instead of resisting it.

The same is true in any relationship. I have three children, and over the years they have resisted my parenting. Not surprising. But does that make them any less my child? Even if they completely rebelled, even if they went away to the far country (as the younger brother in Jesus’ parable did), does that make them any less my child? Do I love them any less? No. That reality is built in. But the quality of relationship is entirely different as to whether they’re at home and receiving the love, or if they’re away and resisting it.

JMF: Isn’t there also a grief factor, where, just as you would grieve over the child who is gone or doesn’t want that intimate relationship with the family, so God grieves and desires earnestly our return?

GD: Absolutely. God does respond to our response. He’s aware of it. He doesn’t change his

mind, attitude, and orientation toward us, but yes, he is responsive. When Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, he compares himself to a mother hen that would have the chicks come to him. But he says, “You would not.” It does grieve God when we don’t receive his goodness, receive his mercy, welcome his love into our lives. He is responsive, but notice: it doesn’t change his mind about it.

JMF: In spite of the grief, there is no point of rejection.

GD: That’s the point. We tend to think that if we resist God, God gives up on us. We’ve probably experienced that. If we resist others and the good things they’re trying to give us, sometimes they give up. But that’s not true in the case of God. He is committed to us in body and soul, that is, in Jesus Christ. And that covenant, now fulfilled, is irrevocable. He is our Lord, he is our Savior.

So when we reject him, he resists that rejection, and it grieves him, because it’s not the truth. It’s not real. It’s not who God is. But he doesn’t then change his mind about us, even though he’s grieving over us, and decide, “Despite all that I am and all that I’ve done and all my purpose, I’m going to reject them outright.” No. We don’t change the grain of reality that God has set out, because he is faithful. Faithful to himself and who he is in Jesus Christ, showing us the heart of the Father and the power and aim of the Spirit.

JMF: Moving to the question of evil in the world: If God has included everyone in his reconciliation of mankind, why is there still evil in the world?

GD: I’m not sure I know everything about the nature of evil and why it is, but it seems to represent, in the providence of God, God’s patience. God is patient, giving us time and space to respond to him fully – and for as many as can to respond to him.

Because God isn’t yet finished, he’s not going to close down our current world, even though it is filled with those who resist God and act on the basis of that resistance, and enter into relationships in a way that destroys them and distorts them and twists them. God is giving us time and space to call out to us, for us to turn to him and to receive all the benefits of it. My only answer is, is because God is lovingly, graciously, and mercifully patient.

JMF: What about the victims of evil, though? If while God is being patient and merciful with the sinner, the victim is having to suffer as a result of it, how do we understand that in a context of God’s love?

GD: We see that in the apostle Paul, and in many others who went through suffering. He

reflects and says it would be better to go and be with the Lord. But he also recognizes that God has purposes for now, and even for his own suffering and rejection and being jailed and finally martyred. God is giving us time, and I think he does provide a healing and hope in the midst of situations, not exactly what we would necessarily expect or want. But under the sovereignty of God, God has never allowed anything to happen that he can't heal, restore, renew, and bring life out of.

We see that clearly not only in our own lives, but in the life of Jesus himself, where he sees crucifixion leads to resurrection. God overcomes all that he went through for us. He goes through what he goes through both for the victim, the ones who suffer, and we see the great sufferings of Christ at the cross. So he knows what the suffering of evil is. It was done against him, the very Son of God. He dies for the victim, but he also dies for the perpetrator.

We often pay attention to that. He dies to forgive us our sins. But he dies for both, because he brings new life to both through it all. God has never allowed anything that he can't heal and restore, forgive and put right.

The last question is, is it worth it? In many cases, I don't think we can see in our lifetimes why and how God will overcome it, or especially imagine how and why the cost involved for victim or perpetrator is worth it. Again, we have to look to Jesus. Jesus says to us, for the joy that was set before him, he endured the pain of the cross. In other words, he was no fool. He thought, "All that I will go through for them is worth it."

One other word from Revelation: "Every tear will be wiped away." Everything is going to be put, remade, made right. I have to hope in that. I only see it in Jesus. His crucifixion leads to his resurrection and ascension for us. We are in Christ, therefore that is true for us, too. I can't imagine exactly how it works out, but I see it in Christ, and my hope is that my life will be in his. Dying with him, being raised with him, ascending with him to share in his perfect human life.

JMF: In the early part of Acts, isn't it Peter who's giving a sermon and he speaks of the times of refreshing that will come, a restoration or restitution of all things, and we have to have a hope in that, for all the evil that everyone suffers. One of the reasons we want people to hear the gospel is because we want them to not have to suffer in ways that are unnecessary, but we look forward with such hope to this time of restitution and restoration that is promised in Christ after this life is over.

GD: We're very interested in the Christian life as the current benefits. And indeed, there are.

Those are the benefits of being in Christ and following Christ in our daily lives, we find healing from when we are sinned against and freedom from it. As the Spirit leads us, we become more like Christ.

We are in the process of sanctification. We are changed from one degree of glory to another in Christ. There are some immediate benefits, but it's nothing, Paul tells us, compared to the great hope we have. The Christian life isn't just for the here and now. It is trusting that every tear will be wiped away, that God will renew and restore everything that's broken and twisted now, and that in the end, we too will join him in saying it was worth it. The Christian gospel is a gospel of hope.

JMF: There's a passage in John 17 where Jesus is talking, or he's praying for the disciples. He says, "I pray not for the world, I'm praying for these (the disciples) but not for the world." Some have felt that, if Jesus isn't praying for the world, how can we say that God has included everyone in his grace for humanity?

GD: John 17 is one of my favorite passages. But one important thing is you can't stop at that verse and try to figure out what it means, because in the end, he is praying that through his disciples there would be many who would believe through their word. He is anticipating you and me and others.

How do we view that? It means "at this point I'm not praying for the world." It certainly doesn't mean I'm praying against the world, that doesn't follow at all. It means "at this point I'm not praying for the world, I'm praying for you." He goes on and says that you would be sanctified with my own sanctity. I sanctified myself for your sakes.

He does first pray for them. Why? Because the whole pattern of election is that God chooses some as a channel of his blessing for all. That's the pattern all the way through Scripture – starting with Adam and then Noah and then Abraham. God is always choosing some. When the Israelite kingdoms split, his purpose and calling continues to go through the one, but for the sake of the many.

We often think, if he chooses one, he's rejecting the others. That's not the biblical pattern at all. He's choosing the one. Jesus chooses the 12 and out of them the three. In order not to bless others? No. It's the *means* of blessing. He's choosing the one in order to bless the all.

In the end there is only one – the chosen one, the anointed one – Jesus Christ himself. He chooses the one not to reject, but to bless the many. That's what he's anticipated. If you read the

entire chapter of John 17, he's praying for the disciples on behalf of the world.

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What Is Repentance?

JMF: If everyone is included in the love and grace of God, then why do we have to struggle so hard to obey God?

GD: That inclusion is inclusion *in a relationship*. If we remember who this God is, God as revealed in Christ is a communion and fellowship of three divine persons in God. God himself is a fellowship, a being together, where there are real relations, knowing and glorifying and loving one another from all eternity. God's being is a fellowship and communion. His salvation for us is also a being in communion and fellowship. This is why we can say God is love in his own being, and we were created for loving purposes. Salvation is fellowship and communion with God.

When we're saved and we receive the mercy of God, we're saved into a relationship, so we have *our* being by being in relationship to God. We have our being by belonging to God through Christ. Obedience is just living along the grain of that relationship. It's receiving that unconditional grace, but then responding appropriately to that grace with repentance, with faith and hope and love, with thanksgiving. God is inviting us into salvation as he's inviting us into a real relationship with God. And that calls for our response and participation. We're united and belong to Christ in order to participate with Christ, in Christ.

JMF: So living the Christian life is not just a matter of keeping a list of rules, some arbitrary list that God came up with in order to have something to measure us with – it has to do with an actual relationship.

GD: Yes. He's calling us into a relationship that has a structure. To be loving, you have to do loving things. To have a free exchange of knowing, receiving back and forth, requires an order and a structure that's built into the nature of the relationship. In our case, we're in a loving covenant relationship with God where he gives us all of who he is and what he is, and then we receive it. And we pass it on to others. It's the demands not of the law, but as the nature of a loving, glorifying relationship with God.

We sometimes get confused. We often think that God has an arbitrary list of rules, things that he just wants done, whereas God enters into a covenant. He says I am for you in Christ. Paul says all things in Christ are *yes*, God's yes to us. Amen. There are not conditions to receive the grace, but as James Torrance likes to say, there are the *obligations* of grace itself. That is to receive it, to give thanks back, and to pass it on to others.

In some ways, you could describe a life filled with that grace, and with that giving and

receiving to it, as some kind of “rules.” You could say it looks like this, it looks like that. You could make a list from it, but the list could never be exhaustive, and it would never show you the true heart of the relationship.

We’re invited into a relationship that has a very definite shape. Our essential response is faith, hope, and love. We obey by faith, hope, and love, not out of obligations to arbitrary rules.

JMF: In a relationship with your spouse, you wouldn’t take out a list in the morning, or even the commandments, and say to yourself, “Today I want to have a decent relationship with my wife, so I must remember not to steal from her, and I shouldn’t kill her...,” That isn’t how it works. When you’re in the relationship, a loving relationship, there’s a desire to do that which is good and which enhances the relationship, as opposed to just taking out a static list of rules.

So what’s the point of the Ten Commandments, if the commandments are fulfilled in Christ and in our lives as we are in Christ, then what was the point of the Ten Commandments in the first place, and how do they apply to us as Christians as opposed to how they applied to the Israelites?

GD: We can see the place of those commandments in Exodus and, as Paul reminds us, the covenant came first. The law didn’t come till 430 years later. That can hardly mean that the law is first. God creates a covenant relationship very much like a marriage, where he commits and promises things freely for the sake and the favor and the benefit of his beloved. God makes a covenant with Israel, and with Israel on behalf of the world. He makes a covenant, he offers a promise.

JMF: You say, “On behalf of the world,” meaning?

GD: That Israel was to be a light to the world so that the world might come and know the same God that Israel knew. They were a servant people. They were a people with a mission. Often in their history they forgot that they were, but they were meant to be a channel of blessing.

Abraham knew this – a channel of God’s blessing to others. So the covenant is established. The simplest way we find it in Scripture, repeated throughout, is, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.”

God is going to use all his Godness, if you can put it that way, to bless his people. God chose Israel in order to be a blessing to them. But the greatest blessing was for them to pass that blessing on to others. As he has that covenant relationship with them, there are the obligations of grace, to live in the covenant where God will be their God and they shall be his people. To live in

that relationship, there are the obligations of that graciously given relationship.

That comes to be, to help Israel, described as laws. If you're in a loving relationship, if you're counting on God to give you all his promises, you will live a life of receiving that blessing like this, and like that, and like the other. You can list the ways, but those ways don't *establish* the covenant, nor do those ways *break* the covenant.

God has freely given his covenant to bless, and that is very much like a marriage, where you promise freely out of who you are to bless the other, and God does the same with us. Our fulfilling the conditions doesn't create the covenant, our not fulfilling the conditions doesn't break the covenant – but our failures do create a rocky relationship. That's what you see in the history of Israel: a rocky relationship when Israel resisted the covenant and refused to be the channel of God's blessings to others. There are consequences to resisting the covenant. It can be described as breaking the laws.

JMF: For many of us, it's as though we have a relationship with the law first, and God is just the arbitrator of the law, or the sheriff, or the enforcer or something. We sense that our real job is to keep this law happy, and we get upset if we're not keeping the law happy – but it changes the nature of the relationship from God to the law.

GD: Many are caught in that exact trap, and I was as well. It leads to burnout in the Christian life. We start thinking that God is at a great distance from us, and that he hands over to us just a law and rules, such that we don't really know the heart of God, the mind of God, but we have his rules. Then the law mediates the relationship, rather than Christ himself by the Spirit mediating the relationship. He is the one true mediator who brings us into the presence of God and who brings God to us in his own presence with us by the Spirit. He is the mediator.

This is why Jesus can say, I am Lord of the Sabbath. I created the Sabbath. I know what it's about. Don't you tell me what the Sabbath is about. I'll tell you what the Sabbath is about. I am your Sabbath rest. I myself. When we forget the covenant and forget who God is, the law can intervene and become its own mediator. Instead, Jesus is the one who takes us to the Father and brings the Father to us all in the power of the Spirit.

JMF: There's a passage in Daniel 12:2 that reads, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." How can we say that all are reconciled now, if some will be raised to shame and everlasting contempt?

GD: That passage is describing what might or *could* happen, and it's a warning passage,

given so that it *doesn't* happen. But there is a warning. It's important to remember what the object of God's wrath and judgment is. The object is sin in his creatures, who belong to him, created in Christ (Paul tells us), through Christ, and for Christ. We all bear the image through our creation, the image of the Son in us.

The object of God's wrath and judgment is on that which destroys his good purposes and his good creation, including us. God is against the evil that destroys his good creation. He's never going to change his mind about that. Never. God is implacably opposed to that, because it ruins his relationship with creation and creation's relationship with him.

When God's wrath comes upon us, it's coming down to do what? To get rid of the sin in us. If it weren't for Christ and God's wrath come down upon us in order to get rid of the sin in us, we would die in our sin. But, because the wrath of God, implacably opposed to all evil, comes down on Christ, one with God and one with us, the result is that evil is done away with. Evil has no future. It is done away with in Christ, and we are set free from it. We are saved, but our sins are not saved. God is not perpetuating the sin, but *us*, cut apart from our sin.

One of the meanings of forgiveness in the New Testament is to send away, to separate away. God separates it. When God's judgment comes (and it will always come against anything that ruins and destroys his creation) in Christ, we are rescued from it.

This passage is imagining people who somehow would resist God's work of separating us from our sin. If it's possible for some to do that till all eternity, to cling to their sin so tightly and to resist the work of God in their place and on their behalf in Christ, then what will happen to their sin and the evil in them may also happen to them, if they can manage to cling to their sin.

But in repentance and confession and dying to self and living to Christ, we don't say to God, make an exception about the sin in my life. What we say is, you're right, it's wrong, kill it, get rid of it, get it out of my life forever. I don't ever want to see it again. And God says yes, I will. He condemns the sin but rescues the sinner, and that is the good news.

Might some people figure out how to hang onto that sin? I guess it's a possibility. But that's the very possibility that Christ has come to see that it never happens.

JMF: Often we think that because we sin (especially when we sin in an overt way, that we're struck with it and discouraged because of it), we tend to think we're not worthy of the grace of God. We're not worthy of God's presence in our lives. And yet the very reason Christ did what he did is to deal with that sin, when we think we can't come to him because we're not

worthy to come to him.

GD: We can be caught in that trap of thinking we're not worthy. Sometimes we talk about meriting. But we were never worthy. It was never God's intention throughout all of Scripture for human beings to somehow work up their own righteousness.

The apostle Paul figured this out. It was never God's intention for us to have our own righteousness that God would then reward. From all eternity, righteousness only comes from God. The only way to receive righteousness, to have righteousness, is to receive it. This is why Paul counts all his righteousness as nothing, because the only real righteousness is that which is given as a gift and received by faith.

It was never intended to be merited, either in the Old Testament or the New. Righteousness is a gift, to be received by repentance and faith, from God. It was never about merit. It was never about earning or rewarding. It never was and it never will be. It's received as a gift from first to last.

JMF: That takes us back to the beginning of what we were talking about. If you trust God to forgive you and to cleanse you from all sin, and the question again comes up, that's too easy. It's too easy to just know God has forgiven you and to trust that he is still on your side and cares for you. Doesn't that encourage you to just keep on sinning instead of encourage you not to sin?

GD: If sin is just violating an arbitrary rule, yes. If grace is an exception to a rule – we think about grace periods, or I teach sometimes and so I'll be gracious, and the student won't have to turn it in on time – we often think that grace is the exception to the rule. No. Grace is not an exception to any rule. God doesn't overlook the sin. The sin has to be done away with.

When we receive God's mercy, we're living in his light, living in his love. That has a shape, and we could even say an obligation, the obligations of love. So we stay in that center. We stay in the light. We stay receiving from God all that he has for us. When we sin, we offer it up in repentance for him to do away with it and renew and restore us.

We want to stay in that renewed and restored relationship, and that requires effort. It's the effort of faith and hope and love. We are trusting in God to continue to provide for us and renew us and restore us over and over again. It doesn't lead to laziness or laxness at all. It leads to a vibrancy and fullness to want to remain in the very center, in the heart of that relationship, where we're receiving from God everything he offers us. There is a discipline, an order and a structure, but it's the order and structure of a right relationship with God and wanting to stay in the middle.

An analogy here would be to say, what is the point of people becoming married, because if you're married, then there's no point in living together. No, it's the exact opposite. The point of being married and declaring those covenant promises one to another is *in order to* live together, and it's the same as living in the center of God's covenant with us: that takes all the energy and creativity and faith and hope and love in God that we have. There's no laziness in it.

JMF: In many ways, the question doesn't make sense, that if God loves you and has forgiven you, therefore why should you go out of your way to live a Christian life? It doesn't make sense, because if you love God, you're not oriented in the direction of that question. Our typical response to such lavish grace seems to be that it overwhelms us. We think, how can such a thing be? It's like we have such a need to get a little of our own righteousness in there, and let that righteousness be worth something, rather than receiving the good things God has for us.

GD: Yes, it does put us in a position of humility – the humility to receive all God's goodness and all that he freely gives us. Sometimes that makes us nervous, so that we want to go back into a contractual relationship with God, where if I do this, God, then you do this. This creates a false sense of security, that if we need God to love us, all I need to do this, and then he will love me, but if I'm not so interested in God and I want to go off and do my own thing, I can just be disobedient for a while. That gives us the sense of being in control, which is false.

It is humility to live as God is loving in his own being, and extend that to him, so what he's calling me to is to receive from him daily. It is a matter of humility to receive him and to realize I don't control it, I can't earn it, I can't even dis-earn it. It is the reality behind who God is and who I am and who he is toward me. It calls for a continual humility of receiving. But it shouldn't lead to insecurity, because this God is faithful.

We see that faithfulness in Jesus Christ from beginning to end. From birth to crucifixion to life to ascension, continuing to intercede for us for all eternity, God is for us. We can't control God, but the good news is that we don't have to control God. God, out of the fullness of his own triune being, is loving and merciful toward us and does not need to be contracted with or bargained with or manipulated or pressurized. God himself, being himself, leads to that love and security.

JMF: And sin carries its own consequences, because that's what makes it sin. If you put your foot in the lawnmower, then it will cut your foot, so you want to avoid doing that, just as we want to avoid sin, because it has negative consequences. Christ came to deliver us from a life

that produces negative consequences.

GD: Absolutely. If we resist the grace of God, it will have consequences. The consequences aren't that we will change God's love into God's hate. No.

I've used this image before: If you know anything about sailing (I used to sail a bit), sailing *with* the wind is an extraordinary experience, of the wind blowing behind you, the boat going with the wind, the waves are going with the boat. It's calm. The sun's out. It's warm. It's silent. But you're moving through the water, sometimes at tremendous speeds. It's a wonderful experience.

But if you need to turn around and go back the other direction, or even at a 90-degree angle to that, in just a moment, as the boat turns very quickly, everything changes. The sail is now flapping and making all kinds of noise. There is all of a sudden wind, and you're going against the waves that are blown by the winds. The water is splashing on you. You're getting wet. You're getting cold. You would think you were in a different ocean at a different time in a different place. But what has changed? The direction of the wind? The warmth of the sun? The direction of the waves? No. *You've* changed.

When we resist the mercy and grace of God, it resists us. There are consequences. But the consequence is not that we can get the wind and the sun and the waves to change. They continue to blow against us. Why? Because God is, with his breath and with his wind, blowing us into the very center of his own heart. So there are consequences, but they cannot undo who God is, what God has done for us in Christ.

JMF: Jesus said, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself." That's got to be a journey that all of us are on, each in our own way as God draws us toward himself. The purpose is to get to the place where we're in that right configuration with the wind and the waves that you're describing instead of contrariwise to it. When we are in that right configuration, we begin to reap those benefits of being in right relationship with God.

GD: That's right. When we participate (that's an important New Testament word), when we have fellowship and communion with God, then everything God gives us, we receive, and it blesses us and enables us to deal with difficulties that we face. It reminds us of God and enables us to treat our neighbors in a loving and forgiving way. All the benefits flow through us then, to us and through us.

When we resist that, we're gumming up the whole works. Another simple image could be:

we're putting water in the gas tank of this vehicle that takes us to Christ to live in his very heart. God is not interested in seeing us go through that, much like parents watching their children resist good things from time to time. God wants us to live in the fullness of that relationship, even now, to its fullest.

JMF: And that's not something we can bring about or do ourselves and just get ourselves in that configuration.

GD: The amazing thing about the grace of God is not only God coming toward us and offering a relationship, but by his Spirit uniting us to Christ, enabling us to respond. Our responses are also a gift that we receive by faith.

We are saved by faith or justified by faith in the good working of God, but also we're sanctified by the good working of God. God grows us up. God transforms us and gives us Christ's own Spirit, so our responses are a gift of God that Jesus as our high priest mediates to the Father graciously, transforming them, perfecting them, and offering them back to God as if they were his. He is the great mediator that brings the things of God to us, but he also takes our responses and mediates them to the Father. The dual mediation of Christ.

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## Participation in Christ

**Michael Morrison:** I've heard theologians talk about how we participate with God in his life. Can you tell me more about how we, as human beings, participate in God, who seems so unlike us?

**GD:** That word is of great interest to me. Especially in the New Testament, that word that we translate "participate" can also be translated "sharing" or "partnership" or "being together with." Some people know the Greek word: "*koinōnia*." Our fellowship, our communion, our participation, that relates all to the same reality.

Our participation is two things — my mentor, James B. Torrance, used to emphasize this — the twin doctrines of our union with Christ and our participation in Christ. In Christ God has united himself to us. We are united to Christ in order to participate in the ongoing life of Christ. This is the work that God did in Christ, first, to join us to himself — by taking on our humanity in the Incarnation, and to make himself one with us and us one with him.

Now, the fruit of that is a life of participation, or sharing. A simple analogy would be participating in, let's say, a baseball game. In this case, you're on the team. You have a uniform, you have a position that's been assigned, all the training you need has been yours, and you've practiced, and now you participate in the game — as if you're on the team, you have the uniform, you had the training to be on the team and you play your part. So you're participating.

But notice: your participating doesn't put you on the team. It doesn't give you the uniform, it doesn't give you the identity or the purpose. That's given to you by being made part of the team — that's the union with Christ. Your participation would be to play in the game.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. It's not like God is doing something down on the field and we look with our field glasses down to see what's going on. No. By being united to Christ, we're actually a part of the game — we're down on the field, not watching, but joining Christ in what he is doing. The key to participation is realizing the gift of being on the team, and the joy and the privilege and the freedom of getting involved in the things Jesus is doing.

**MM:** That's an interesting analogy. It make me think of these teams that you're talking about: we are participating with each other as well. Does that flow out of this divine participation as well? Is that true to the way we live in Christ?

**GD:** Very much so. As Christ comes, he calls us to join him, but to join him together with others. That is, he calls us to be his *people* — he calls us individually, but he calls us to be a part

of his one people — that is the church, the *ekklesia*. The called-out ones is who we are. To be joined to Christ is to be joined with all those others who are joined to him. The apostle Paul's image in the New Testament is: Christ is the head and we are members of his body, one to another. So, yes, we participate together with all those who are also called under Christ to share in his life.

**MM:** As we participate with one another, in this analogy of the game, the game has certain rules. Are there rules that are relevant to our participation in Christ?

**GD:** We could describe them as rules, but usually that's misleading. Let's talk about purpose: is there a purpose? What's going on? It's important to know, as it were, the head coach, or what the team is. What God is doing together is to bring about his saving purposes. God is still calling others to himself to share his divine life with them. So when we are on that team, that team already has a purpose — not one I decide to give it, but it is to continue to participate in Christ's ongoing ministry — to call people to him, for them to receive life from him, and then live out a transformed life in him. There is a purpose that's guiding it, more than just rules.

**MM:** God has a purpose for his creation of humanity. You described a little bit of that in terms of a transformed life. Is that his primary purpose in what he has done with us?

**GD:** He calls us into a relationship with him, and because we are creatures, we grow up in that relationship, and we interact with others as we're growing up in that relationship. A lot of the dynamics is giving and receiving. First, we receive Christ's word, his love, his forgiveness and also his empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to share in, to join him in his own continuing ministry to draw others. That's how we're incorporated into this purpose and aim and ends that he has.

**MM:** I was intrigued with your word *ministry*, then I was thinking longer range: In the resurrection life, will we continue to have ministry with Jesus after we are all resurrected? In the new heavens and the new earth, is *ministry* a good description for what we do?

**GD:** Yes, I think it will be something like it. It's hard to tell exactly what it will be like. But it's not going to be totally unlike what we know here. Part of it we can think about as a *gift exchange*. We read in the New Testament that some have various gifts — of administration, or of liberality, or of helps — these types of things. In the life of God from all eternity, there has been a gift exchange between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus talks about the love with which he was loved by the Father, and with which he loved the Father back from all of history.

Jesus talks about his knowing the Father, and the Father knowing him from all of history. He talks about God glorifying him and he glorifying the Father back. There's a gift exchange in the life of God.

Here on earth, we have a gift exchange. But because love *is* a gift exchange, there's going to be some type of giving and receiving — perfectly, freely and unhindered. First of all, it will be praise and thanksgiving to God. We talk about a worship service sometimes. Worship is a service — it's a ministry. Christ is our great *leitourgos*, our worship leader. We could translate that as, He is the one true minister. Worship itself is ministry. That is the gift exchange of God giving us: his grace, his mercy, his life. We give thanksgiving and praise back.

We can also turn to one another and pass that on to each other, and so we can tell each other about the wonders, the mercy, the glory, the grace, the righteousness of God, and they respond back, yes and amen. I think that there will be this kind of continual ministry in Christ, which is an incredible gift exchange going on to all eternity, between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and also between us as his people, all to the glory of God.

**MM:** That made me think that Christ is a minister — he is ministering to us (that seems like maybe a more elaborate description of what love is, as ministry) — and how that fits into God's eternal nature. And that brings me back to participation — we are participating in the way he is.

**GD:** There's lots of dynamics to this life. Another dynamic, of love that's truly love is that it wants to bring about the perfection of the beloved, if it's not yet perfect. If we love our children and we love them dearly at 1 year old, in diapers, we don't blame them for that. We're not disappointed in that, that's where they are. But if they are 16 and still in diapers, we wouldn't be so happy. Something hasn't gone right. What we hope is that they grow up one step at a time — and God is doing that. Love desires the perfection of the beloved.

As God looks down on us as his children created in Christ and through Christ and to Christ, to be inherited by him, he wants us to grow up into the fullness of who he is. So there is this transformation of the individual to become more Christ-like, and that will change our relationships with each other.

Yes, love is ministry. But that ministry is to enable us to grow up, and in the growing up, that means to give more freely and fully of who we are and what we are, and to receive more freely from another all the life that they have to give us in this great gift exchange. Our growing up is this greater freedom, greater joy, and greater depth (maybe even greater creativity) as to



how to pass on God's love for us to someone else, to be a channel of his blessing, and that's our perfection. In the end, who has this, where we are going? We're becoming like Christ, we're growing up in Christ. We can sum it: as we grow, we become like Christ in his loving communion.

**MM:** As we are like Christ... How is that like or different than God the Father? You keep saying "like Christ," rather than "like God." Is there a distinction there?

**GD:** Yes, there is. In chapter 1 in the Gospel of John, the Son of God, the Eternal Word, took on flesh — our flesh, our humanity. So when I say Christ — who is this Christ? Well, he is the One who has been one with God from all eternity, but now he is also one with us in our humanity. To summarize it, we say he's fully God and fully human in one person.

So when we we're becoming like Christ, we're being drawn up to share in his humanity, and to participate. He takes (grabs on to) our humanity to heal it, to restore it, to forgive it and to cut it away from sin and set us free. When we become like Christ, we're not becoming like something different from Christ: we're becoming one with his humanity. He's sharing everything he has with us, so what's his is ours, and what's ours is his. Paul talks about he who although rich became poor for our sakes so we might be made wealthy with his riches [2 Corinthians 8:9]. There's an exchange — there's that gift exchange idea again.

We're linked to Christ's humanity. We're not turning into God — that would be to turn into his divinity. No. We are growing up into the fullness of Christ's glorified humanity. That humanity includes a perfect relationship with divinity that happened in him. Jesus is the only one who perfectly loved God and perfectly loved his neighbor. We are being drawn up to that, not to turn into God, but to join his humanity, united to his humanity. Then we're growing up to love God perfectly, as Jesus did, and to love our neighbors, as Jesus did — all in his humanity.

There's no possibility of growing up or participating except in and through the humanity of Jesus, through his link with us as one of us. Otherwise our whole life would be either to try to become something we're not (God) or to give up. What's the hope of trying to do that? I can't be like Jesus. (Right, we say.) No, we are being conformed to his glorified humanity, and that makes all the difference, and that is why we can participate.

**MM:** You talked about how we are to love perfectly, and I don't see that in myself — that's a frustration for me. You talked about how Christ wants to cut sin out of our lives and my frustration is, why isn't he doing that faster? How does my understanding of Christ help me deal

with my own limitations?

**GD:** The life he calls us to is one that is a *becoming*. Sometimes we like to think of perfection as like a statue, being in the perfect position, you know, spouting water or something, and never moving. But the life that Christ calls us to here and now is one of transformation from (as Paul talks about) “from one degree of glory to another” [2 Corinthians 3:18]. God is not that upset that it only happens one degree at a time. I can be upset with that, and we can be impatient with ourselves. The important thing is to realize that God is patient. He is not impatient with us, and when we fall down, he is happy to lift us up and help us take the next step.

The pastor and theologian George McDonald once talked about this type of thing. He said, “On the one hand, God is very easy to please, but hard to satisfy.” Then he explained what he meant by that. It’s back to that image of the child in the diapers. Every little move we make, God takes delight in, and is pleased as we respond to his grace, to grow up a little bit.

It’s like parents who have a newborn: every little thing is amazing to them. “He moved his head!” “He lifted it up off the pillow, he turned over.” “He followed my finger.” The smallest things mean something to those parents; they are delighted. But since love desires a perfection of the beloved, they’re hoping that other things will develop later on.

But a lot of times, we think God is impatient with us, and we think we ought to be perfect now. Whereas, no, God understands that it’s a process. It’s a process of growing up in and through the relationship. God is not anxious about it, about how fast we are going. All that Christ is calling us to do is, when we fall, get up, and let him take the next step. He can do that, and he will do that. Because the job of sanctification — becoming like Christ — is just as much God’s responsibility and purpose as is justification — our being put in right relationship with God.

**MM:** Is God ever disappointed with, perhaps, our unwillingness to take a step, or taking a step backwards? If he is disappointed, how are we to react to his disappointment?

**GD:** We can think about *our* ways of disappointing each other, or being disappointed by others, and then project that onto God. That’s mythology, not theology. Yes, God does have some of his own unique kind of disappointment. If God is disappointed, it’s never because he’s hopeless. It isn’t when *we* are disappointed and we become hopeless. That’s one of the most devastating things that happen in human relationships — that element of hopelessness: “you’re a hopeless case.” When that comes across either in tone or in content, it’s very devastating.

God is *hopeful*, as it were, and the reason God is hopeful for us is because (as Calvin used to

like to say), our whole salvation is complete in Christ. What Calvin saw here is what the apostle Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 1:30 — that our whole salvation (which includes wisdom about who God is, righteousness, or justification {being put right and made right with God}, and also our sanctification [is complete in Christ]).

Here the third point is most important: our whole salvation — complete in Christ — means our entire sanctification is complete in Christ — he has it there for us. It's done in him. Now, it *unfolds* in us. But it's *done* in him, so God is not worried. What he wants to accomplish for us is complete in Christ, and we receive our sanctification by trusting God for that, just as much as [we receive justification], our being put right and made right with God.

**MM:** I'm not sure that I'm hearing what you say correctly. If my sanctification is entirely in Christ, why do I need to do any of it myself? He's done it perfectly. What's my role in this?

**GD:** He's done it perfectly for me, that I might participate in it. Again, we can split [two things that should remain together]: I'm united to Christ, so I don't need to participate. I've mentioned this before another time, but that would be like saying, since we're now married, we don't need to live together. No. The point of being married *is* to live together. The point of being united to Christ and him completing everything for us is to participate in it fully and completely — that's the point. It's completed in him for us to share in, that's the whole point. Rather than “he did it so I don't have to.” No. He did it so that I *could*.

**MM:** It's like you're saying, “I want to participate in this sanctification, but the pressure is off.” Would that be an accurate summary?

**GD:** Yes, very much so. The pressure is off. Often we try to motivate ourselves by pressurizing the system. We're trying to motivate ourselves to do things by guilt, fear and anxiety. A lot of times, we also try to motivate others by guilt, fear and anxiety. We can create pressure, and yes, you can get people to do certain things under that pressure. In the past, I was (I don't know what word to use) addicted to being motivated by guilt, fear and anxiety. But these are not godly, and do not honor God, and they aren't what they intends.

Christian motivation for doing things is faith, hope and love. Faith in God, hope in what God is doing, and the love of God for us. Trusting in those. These create a different kind of motivational framework. Paul works this way. He says in Philippians 1:6, “Work out your own salvation.” Wow! Why would we ever want to take up that? That's impossible, it's just crazy. Why do we do that? Paul goes on and tell us. “Work out your own salvation...” Why? “Because

God is completing a work in us. He is working out to do and to will according to his good purpose.”

We can then join God in what he is doing. We participate in our own growing up into Christ — we get involved to do that. But doing things because we trust God, because we hope in the good thing God has for us, is a very different kind of (if I can even use the word) “pressure” — it’s more like a vacuum, being pulled into something rather, instead of pushed and scrunched into it. It’s being drawn out of ourselves, it’s a sense of freedom, a sense of privilege.

“You mean, I get to be involved in the very things that Christ is doing? Really, me?” Yes. So there’s a great sense of privilege. I don’t like so much “pressure.” But is there motive? Yes, there’s very much motive: of faith, and hope and love.

**MM:** For some people, it seems that pressure works faster. Is that accurate, or does the vacuum work more slowly? (That’s frustrating for us.)

**GD:** We value efficiency, and getting things done. The “can do” people. But God doesn’t value that in the same way we do. God is long-suffering, and he doesn’t mind being patient. He is not impatiently patient. He *really is* patient. He takes his time, and that’s okay with God because he knows the end has been accomplished for us. He is not worried, he is not anxious about it. But we get worried.

That short cut [of pressure] turns into a long cut. In some movie, a cowboy started shooting bullets at another guy’s feet and said, “dance.” Well, that cowboy did dance, to dodge the bullets. You can motivate people out of guilt and fear and anxiety, but it’s very short-lived and it short-circuits, because it leads to burnout. You can only do that for so long, and then your own resources run dry.

This is what happens in a lot of Christian lives, where we’re relying on our own resources, to try very hard to become like Christ — and notice: we’re looking back at ourselves. The burden somehow is all back on us. Instead of trusting Christ for his work, through his Spirit in us, over time, step by step, day by day.

So as we receive good things, we’re thankful. As we are not faithful, we give our repentance to him, again. And God is happy to receive our repentance and take us to the next step. Guilt, fear and anxiety are not the Christian virtues, and they lead to burnout. Sometimes people leave the faith because the pressure is so heavy they cannot bear it any longer. I don’t think we want to take people down that road.

**MM:** It's not transformational in the end. It's just a superficial dance.

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## What Is Jesus Doing in Our Sanctification?

**Michael Morrison:** Dr. Deddo, you have spent a lot of your life studying theology. What prompted or motivated you to go into that?

**Gary Deddo:** I started with an interest in biblical studies, and when I was at Fuller Seminary, most of my classes were biblical studies, and the closest I got to theology was studying with George Ladd in his biblical theology.

**MM:** A lot of people don't know the difference between biblical studies and theology. Could you explain the difference between those two?

**GD:** There is a difference, but there's also a connect, in that theology is grounded in the biblical revelation. Theology attempts to address questions and to pull the whole counsel of God together and see what does it add up to when you put the whole counsel together? Biblical studies tends to look at parts, but theology is synthetic, in trying to bring all the strands together, and it sometimes addresses questions or finds understanding that no one particular verse or passage in the Bible speaks to, and yet the whole might contribute to.

Part of my own journey is realizing I was really interested in asking questions and hearing about, Who is the God of the Bible in total as it all adds up? What's the whole picture?

Theology is to help us figure out what words, concepts, images, analogies, narratives we can use today to faithfully point to the same reality that the Scriptures normatively point to. We're trying to get rid of our own words and concepts. We have to think a little bit about how people around us are thinking — what words, concepts, and experiences they have — not to conform our theology to them, but to be aware of how can we best explain and help people understand the truth of the gospel today?

I didn't leave Scripture behind, by any means, but pressed on to try to ask, What does it all add up to, so that I might have a faithful witness today, that's part of what took me there. Another part was because many of the pieces I had gathered over the years weren't preventing me from going into and toward a terrible burnout in Christian ministry. It was because of that, that I went back to Scripture to ask the question, How does one really live the Christian life or participate and get involved in Christian ministry?

What was going on with me is, Christ loved me, Christ forgave me, Christ saved me, but after that I had to somehow figure out how to do his ministry. That was putting me down a path

of spiritual burnout. That's the final thing that led me back to say, "Let's look at this whole thing again."

**MM:** Your emphasis was on doing and doing and doing...but how did your understanding of God affect what you did?

**GD:** In pressing into this question about who God was, I discovered that I was a lot like Peter, having the names and labels for God right, but it wasn't adding up to a proper and deeper, profound understanding of who God is. Peter knows that Jesus is the Christ, but when Jesus explains to them what that meant, that the Christ is going to be rejected and suffer and then raised again three days later, Peter repudiates that [Matthew 16 or Mark 8]. That indicates that Peter had the right label, but he didn't have a proper understanding of what the label meant — who Jesus really was. So Jesus has to stop him in his tracks and say, I'll tell you what the Messiah is. It's not what you think. So, he had the right label, but not much content to that label.

Similarly, I think a lot of times we settle for simple descriptions and words that point to God, but we don't know much about what they mean, what they signify. Theology is the attempt to go deep into the meaning. It is faith-seeking-understanding — the meaning of these words and the doctrines that summarize these meanings. I discovered, even though I had been following Christ for many years, that my understanding was superficial. Theology is the spiritual discipline of trying to grab hold of the meanings and find the best ways to understand those meanings.

**MM:** A couple of theological words that I ask for a better definition of, and many people need, is justification and sanctification. Often we tend to merge the two and are not quite clear what the difference is. Could you clarify that?

**GD:** The connection between justification and sanctification has been an issue down through the history of the church. How do we best understand this? The most important thing to remember is that Christ is the one who justifies and Christ is the one who has our sanctification for us as well, worked out in us by the Spirit. They both have to do with Christ...you can't understand either of them without Christ. They both align, cohere, and have their reality in Christ.

Paul reminds us of this in 1 Corinthians 1:30 — Christ is our sanctification. In Christ, you cannot separate them. They are true in the one person. They're not really two different things — they're trying to describe two aspects of one thing that Christ gives us.

So how do we understand the distinction, now that we've grasped that they're together, they

can't be separated, they are one in Christ? A helpful way to think about it is to say that "we are justified" means we are put right, in right relationship with God. It initiates the Christian life, when we realize that we have been made right with God. Some people talk about a right standing, a right identity. We belong to Christ. All of what we are, all of what we will be, all of what we have been. It all belongs to Christ. That's our essential identity, the beginning point. That's justification.

Sanctification is just living that out step-by-step, day-by-day, growing up into the truth and reality that we belong to Christ, all that we are. That begins to take shape in our lives from one degree to another, so that we grow up into Christ individually and together as a body of Christ. Sanctification is the unfolding process of our being made right in a right relationship with Christ. It is a fellowship and a communion. Sanctification is a fellowship and communion ongoing.

Justification is the starting point, sanctification is the unfolding of that relationship. It's bearing fruit that way. There's a starting point, and then there's also a continuation. That is one way to talk about how you can make a difference between justification and sanctification, but both accomplished in Christ and by Christ for us.

**MM:** Might it be accurate to say that justification is a change of label, and sanctification is the working it out, of making that label true? ...that we are being like Christ and not just *say* that we are like Christ.

**GD:** It would be. But I wouldn't want to say that justification is just a label; it's a reality in which we now share. Christ has completed his work for us. He's reconciled the world to himself in Christ, God is for us in Christ. But I come to a moment when I, by the power of the Spirit, am given the gift of appreciating that accomplished work. Christ is my Lord, Christ is my Savior, I belong to him totally and completely, and that is a good thing that I receive, and I repent of anything else that doesn't belong there. It's a reality, not just a label, because we could take the idea of a "label" very superficially.

I belong to Christ. That's the reality. He belongs to me, I belong to him. There's a relationship that's there, that's established. Now I live it out and live up into it. There is a dynamic, but the dynamic is a reality.

It's like gravity. I live in that reality. Gravity is on most of the day. I can go with it, I can do things that agree with the fact that there's gravity. Or I can do crazy things or dangerous things, like jump out of a 10-story building, that don't go along and don't recognize the truth of gravity.



But gravity is on whether I resist it, or whether I go with it.

There is a reality of who Christ is for us, and then we recognize it, and we can say that I'm recognizing my justification in Christ. Then we live in it, and we live it out and grow up into it, and that is a dynamic growing relationship where I become shaped and conformed to Christ as Christ continues to give us himself.

**MM:** You talk about how we are shaped to conform to Christ. It reminded me of the phrase "what would Jesus do?" Is this an accurate description of the way we are to live? We're thinking "what would Jesus do?"

**GD:** Yes. People are interested and recognize that someone who calls themselves by Christ must somehow be related to him and recognizable. But I'm not sure that's the most helpful way to talk about it, though, for two things. It sounds like Jesus isn't doing anything anymore. You know, what would Jesus do *if he were here?*

If we're thinking about it that way, we've forgotten that Jesus continued to minister. He is living, alive, and reigning, and continues to intercede for us. Jesus is still continuing his ministry of drawing people to him that they might know God, worship God, and serve others in his name. Jesus is still doing things, and it's not just us doing it.

That WWJD paradigm is: Jesus isn't doing anything, so I've got to do something for him. You can get into that. But notice everything's thrown back on you. Because Jesus made it possible, all you have to do is make it actual and real. That is a huge burden, and it leads to burnout in ministry, as I was speaking to before.

Wouldn't the picture be better and more accurate if we asked, What is Jesus doing now, today, by the Spirit, and how can I get involved? But that wouldn't fit on a bracelet... The better question would be, What is Jesus doing, and how can I get involved or participate? Instead of thinking that Jesus isn't doing anything and so I have to do it for him or instead of him. That's the road to burnout in the Christian life and especially in Christian ministry.

**MM:** You're saying that Jesus is living in us, to use another expression. But *we're* also involved, too. How is Jesus motivating us to do these things that we know we should be doing?

**GD:** One of the points of theology is going through Scripture and finding different ways of talking about who Jesus is. It gets down to the bottom of what his heart is, what his mind is, what his purpose is, what his ways are. As we see who he is and what he's done for us, what he's doing through us, then we want to be with him. Obedience is a fellowship with Christ, so that as

I see the things he's doing, I want to do those things. I want to get involved. Or as I hear about the things that he has no interest in, then I don't want to be involved in those things, because he's not there and he's not doing that.

The whole of Christian life is fellowship with Christ. Our obedience is getting involved in the things he's doing and in the way he's doing them. So if Jesus is concerned about the poor, I am, because I want to be where Jesus is and involved in the things he's doing. If he's bringing people to repentance and faith and hope in God, I want to be involved in those things, because those are the things he's doing. God, graciously, can figure out ways for me to get involved, which is even more... He's got things for me to do that point to who he is and what he's up to.

It's only as we know profoundly who Jesus is, see his heart and his mind, his purposes, his aims, his ends...as we grasp that, that's what draws us out of ourselves — to get involved in the things he's doing. But without this grasp of who he is, and with just a list of things he does, doesn't tell us much. It's got to be *who he is*, because this is what Paul calls the obedience of faith. That's very important.

I used to think obedience was one thing and faith was another, separate. No – the Bible puts it together. You can find it in Romans 1, the last chapter, 16, and also in the book of Hebrews. They obeyed... everyone...Moses, Abraham...they all obeyed *by faith*. They trusted in what God was doing by his Spirit, and they trusted that God would show them ways of getting involved in those things. As a Christian, why would you want to be involved in anything else? It's the sense of privilege, of joy, of freedom. “You mean *me*? I can get involved in what *you* are doing? Wow!” That's what I want.

**MM:** There's a sense of attraction there. What about for people who don't find that as attractive? What can we say to them?

**GD:** A lot of people don't share their faith because they don't see very deeply into who Jesus is. All the Scripture is built like this... that the reason we do what we do is because of who God is and what he's doing.

Let's take the Great Commission, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel, teaching them to obey.” Why do we do that? “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Why do we do that? We could dream up all kinds of things about why we should do it. Pastors may do this. “How can I motivate my people to do what they're supposed to do for the Lord?”

**MM:** Because he tells us to.

**GD:** Yes. And if the people don't do it, then just speak louder, right? Be more insistent. Or you can heap guilt and fear and anxiety. Jesus doesn't do that. He tells us why: "Because I am with you always." [Matthew 28:19-20]. Why can we go out into the world? Because Jesus is going to be with us always, no matter where we are. If I'm going out somewhere into the world...to obey the Great Commission by faith is to count on Jesus being with us always.

There's another part to depend on there, to move us to the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me." What does that mean in terms of the Great Commission? It means anywhere you go in the world, even out of the world in the heavens, Jesus' authority is operating there already. He is the cosmic Lord, so you can't go anywhere and not find his authority already operating there.

Jesus is saying: "Go out because I will be with you, and because all authority, everywhere, is mine." Those are motives to go out — to trust Christ to be with you and to...exercise his authority. Those are reasons to go out. Those are reasons to be moved.

**MM:** It's not just his authority over us, but his authority over the world that we get to participate in.

**GD:** Yes. His purpose is being worked out.

**MM:** Another thing you seem to be saying is that as we see God more clearly, as we understand what he's like, it changes what we want to do. Is he changing our identity, our understanding of what we as human are?

**GD:** Yes. We find this first in Jesus, his humanity is fully what it is because of his union and communion with the Father and the Spirit. That's what we see in him. To be a human being is to be in right relationship with God, so that everything he gives us we receive, and then we reflect that back.

**MM:** But my neighbor has nothing to do with Christ. Isn't he a human?

**GD:** Yes. Not necessarily because he has something to do with Christ or doesn't have anything to do with Christ, it's because Christ has everything to do with him, and he may not even know it. That is the glory of it: you were created through Christ, you were created for Christ, and Christ has a destiny for you in Christ. This is who he is, and let me tell you and show you the particulars of his life as we find it in the Gospels. This is the great good news, that God has to do with us, way before we have to do with him.

**MM:** I'm thinking of my neighbor again. I'm asking him to give up his life and his interest in his job, for example, that he's doing very well in the business world even in a difficult economy and I'm saying, "That's not who you are, that's not important." How is he doing to accept that kind of message?

**GD:** It depends... We try to come along as God is working in his life. You may know a little bit about it, or you may know very little about it, but part of evangelism is to get to know people and see if you can't find little signs and telltale signals of God's working in their lives. He may look satisfied, but there may be something in which he realizes that in this economy it might not be wise for him to put all his eggs in one basket, to have his entire identity, his sense of self, be merely or essentially a success in business, or even just surviving in business. There may be little inklings where there's got to be something more. I was created for something more than this, what is it?

We come alongside a person to try to identify the work of God in their lives, even sometimes not recognized by them. Then we talk to them and interact with them about taking the next step. It might be a small step or a large step for them, but that's what we're doing in sharing Christ with people. Expect to find Christ involved in their life, see where that is, and see if there isn't some way that you can encourage them to take another step. It might be a small step.

You might end up saying, I'll pray for you, and as they admit that's a good thing, and they let you do it. That may be the little step for them. Or it might be, "You ought to get to know Jesus, since you belong to him, and he's got some great things planned for you. Why don't we get together and look at a chapter in the life of Christ? I think you'll be amazed at what you'll find there about who he is and what he's up to."

**MM:** In the case of this individual I'm thinking of, he has difficulty in relationships. He's kind of abrupt, which makes him successful in business, but it also leads to some frustrations. I'm wondering how that might be an avenue for leading to something more spiritual? Any ideas on that?

**GD:** You have to know the individual, like you do, and I don't. But coming alongside people, it is a custom job. God's work in every individual is unique. Part of it would be to ask good questions about what he's willing to talk about. "Tell me about that and how's it going, and what are you thinking about? Are you hopeful that it will improve? Do you think it's going to get worse?"

Sometimes you can ask, “Where do you think God fits into all this, if at all?” Part of it is as he is loved – we learn to love by the ways we’re loved, first of all by God. He’s going to change his relationship. The deepest thing that could happen is for him to grasp God’s love for him — this unconditional free and joyful blessing of God upon him. That will free him from being wound up and perhaps too controlling or authoritative or abrupt, that he thinks he has to be in charge all the time... By coming under the lordship of Christ, we realize there’s someone greater than yourself who is the manager. Sometimes I put it this way, and this might appeal to somebody: “Once you get to know Jesus, who else would you want to manage your life? Yourself, or him?” Another way to talk about the Christian life is “coming under new management.”

**MM:** That’s an effective avenue for a business person.

**GD:** Good.

**MM:** That idea stimulates some thought. I like the idea of the questions, too, that might help the person put in their own words whatever frustrations they might have. Then I could help them see that there’s a bigger vision, a bigger picture involved. As you say, they already belong to Christ. I’m not sure, but they might not like that idea at first.

**GD:** Right. If people are resisting the Spirit of God, it can be the stench of death, Paul says. But if the Spirit of God is moving and they’re submitting to that, surrendering to that, then it can sound like really great news to them. Sometimes people are resisting, sometimes they’re giving in to God. You never know until you get there at any one moment. If they are resisting, they may find our message needs to be resisted. But even in offering that, God is attempting to overcome their resistance.

**MM:** It helps us to know that all authority has been given to Christ. That person, my neighbor, is under his authority. If he rejects my message, it’s not about me. That takes some pressure off.

**GD:** Yes. We don’t preach ourselves, we preach Christ. That’s who they need to get to know. This is very important. People need to know more about who God is in Christ than they know what to do for him. The character of God, the purposes of God, the heart of God — the unbelieving person needs to know that, much more profoundly, but also then the Christian life is nothing but going deeper and deeper into the heart of God.

In some ways the unbeliever and the Christian need to move in the same direction. Even

though the unbeliever is behind on the road, we're all going in the same direction. We need to trust God on the basis of who he is and what he's done for us.

**MM:** The better we see that, the more motivating it is. It draws us toward what he's doing in our lives.

**GD:** It does. There can be two ways to motivate people. Imagine you were in an enclosed room. It has all the windows shut, the curtains over the windows, and the door bolted shut, and perhaps the lights inside can be on. Someone says to the people inside, "There's a sunset out there. It's really gorgeous, it's really beautiful, trust me. On the count of three I want you to really enjoy that sunset. Ready? If you don't, you're going to be very disappointed. You may even disappoint God if you don't enjoy that sunset out there."

Someone says, "Can't we open the windows?" No. We just have to be obedient here to do this. On the count of three I want you to enjoy that sunset as greatly as you can, because if you don't, something disastrous can happen. All right: one, two, three.

**MM:** Oh yes, I enjoy it.

**GD:** Yeah, I'm enjoying it! Well, that's silly. Oddly enough, a lot of times by just repeating the commands or what God would want us to do, even how to live the Christian life, just telling people that, and if they don't get it the first time, telling it louder and more insistently, or increasing the threats — if you don't, all the disasters, this and that and the other. Whereas, if they're really going to enjoy that sunset, what needs to happen? It's simple, isn't it?

**MM:** Open the window.

**GD:** Even better, go out. And the sunset itself draws out their appreciation and enjoyment. This is how God draws out our response, all our response, including our obedience, our worship, our prayer, everything that we are, is drawn out. We have to not just tell people what to do, they have to see the nature of who God is, more beautiful than a sunset. As that draws us out and that draws the right response out from us...so the Christian life and Christian obedience and even our evangelism is not to cram people and pressurize them off of a list of things they must do, or threats, but to show them the sunset.

This is one of the main challenges of Christian preaching. Preaching needs to be about God — who he is, what he's done, what God is doing even today — the same mission and ministry that Jesus had — what is God doing? As we tell people that, God will draw people to participating in that life he has for them.

But sometimes we don't trust that. We don't trust that the sunset's actually going to draw the response out. So we close the windows, we close the doors, we turn off the lights, and we tell people, "You really need to do this." That's backwards, and it's not how Scripture itself works. It shows us God, and then it says, here's the life that comes in response to that.

**MM:** That is great, but we are out of time. I thank you for being with us. It's been a great interview.

**GD:** It's been a joy.

**MM:** We've been talking with Dr. Gary Deddo. Thanks for being with us. I'm Mike Morrison for *You're Included*.

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Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with more than 47,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in southern California. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

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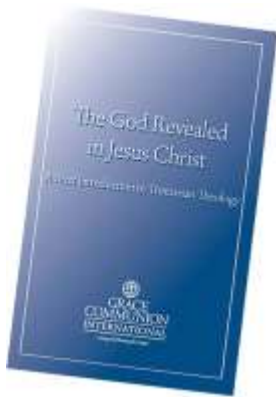
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