

Everyone Belongs, Whether They Know It or Not: Interviews With Jeff McSwain

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Introduction

This is a transcript of six 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.

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Our guest in these interviews is Jeff McSwain, the founder of Reality Ministries of Durham, North Carolina. Jeff earned his Masters of Theology degree studying with Alan and J.B. Torrance at St. Andrews University in Scotland. His passion is to combine sound theological teaching with the everyday practice of youth ministry. He is the author of *Movements of Grace: The Dynamic Christo-Realism of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the Torrances*.

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Helping Youth Experience Christ

JMF: How to help adolescents experience the loving embrace and life-changing reality of Jesus Christ – that’s the mission of Reality Ministries, a youth-focused ministry based in Durham, North Carolina. Reality Ministries founder Jeff McSwain will be talking with us today about the gospel and evangelism in the full light of who is Jesus Christ.

Jeff, it’s a pleasure to have you with us.

JM: My pleasure, thanks for asking me.

JMF: What’s behind the name, Reality Ministries?

JM: In Colossians 2 it talks about the reality being Jesus Christ. I found it interesting when I googled the name “Reality” all the different adjectives that come up for the word. The most prominent words to describe reality are negative ones – words that describe “reality” in much less than glowing terms, words like “brutal” and “harsh.” When I compared “brutal reality,” which had over 100,000 hits on Google, to “pleasant reality” – it was 900,000 to 50,000.

JMF: Really?

JM: The whole world talks about reality backwards. I fall for the same thing myself. Reality, however, as we find it revealed in Jesus Christ, and as Jesus talks about this in John 14, 15, 16, 17 – is simply God, as a relationship of love and all of us as his beloved, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is how we know what God is like, and that’s how we define what God is like through his incarnation, and his articulation of what the life of God is like.

JMF: The way you usually hear about it, though, you turn on the TV, you watch a Christian religious program, and what you usually hear is the “reality” that you are separated from God, you’re on your way to hell, until *you* do something – the sinner’s prayer, or whatever – and change God’s mind toward you so that he now loves you – and you’re saying that’s backwards.

JM: By buying into that model, what we are saying is that when we make a decision of faith, we’re actually changing the reality. We’re changing the truth – which to me smacks more of post-modern relativism than it does of the gospel. The gospel give us a way into understanding that what we are living into by the Holy Spirit when we come to faith, is something that was already true before we believed it. Or else, it’s not true. I don’t want to fall victim to, or set people up to believe that we *create* the truth by our decision.

People talk about reality in the light of the fact of the brokenness of the world, the injustice, the oppression, the pain, and the suffering. That’s the enemy’s ploy to help us to twist the whole

thing backwards, and to live by sight – because the world *does* look like it's going to hell in a hand basket, as they say. It does look like it's going down the drain. So are we going to define the world by what we *see* and by our experience of it existentially, or are we going to define it by something deeper and more beautiful in relation to the life of God and the Holy Trinity? It's tempting to walk by sight and not by faith. It's tempting, and yet Paul keeps encouraging us in the letters, in the epistles, ... what is seen is temporary, and what's unseen is eternal.

With the eyes of faith, we can know that we are anchored in a reality much greater than the pain and suffering that we feel in this life and that we experience. That reality can transform us, and as we begin to import the truth of the gospel into our broken experiences, we can have hope.

JMF: You've been working with young people for more than two decades in this, in helping them come to see who Christ is, and who they are in Christ as being the reality of their lives, now with Reality Ministries, what is the reality you want a teenager to see about themselves?

JM: I want them to know that the way we are treating them, the way we are accepting them, the way we are loving them unconditionally, the way we are embracing them at their worst and being faithful to them even when they're faithless to us – and you know how fluctuating the life of a teen-ager can be – one minute they're warm and leaning in and accepting of you and the love you're giving to them. The next minute, they're calloused, and the quills come out. They're like, "get away from me."

But to continue to be faithful to them regardless of their response – that's what we do with teenagers. What we want them to know in Reality Ministries is the reason we do that is because that's what God is like – all these things I just described. Sometimes I say to kids, or when I'm speaking and talking about my ministry to high schoolers, I say, "More than ever today, I think kids have an attitude problem." And everybody goes... they take pause at that.

And I say, "Before you jump to conclusions, let me explain what I mean by that. What I mean is that kids today, more than ever, don't understand what God's attitude is towards them." Because they don't see him as he truly is and have distorted pictures of him, they feel that God must be against them. Or even that the youth minister, or the youth leader that's reaching out to them and is treating them with all the fruits of the Holy Spirit, must be doing that in a way to somehow use it as a means to an end to get them to hear about a God who is really not like that.

We want kids to know that Jesus Christ (and hopefully, much of the time we are representations of Jesus Christ as his ambassadors) is truly an accurate picture of who God is. A lot

of people don't trust the picture that they get in Jesus Christ and believe that God is different from Jesus, and a lot of people, even all of us, whether young or old, are tempted to question, "What does God really think about me?" and "Is God really like Jesus Christ?" Those are questions that can haunt us if we don't...

JMF: That's what haunts us every time... We're all sinners, even though we are believers, and every time we fall short, every time we have a temper tantrum or we get angry with somebody or we do something we ought not – we go back to that, "Has God rejected me?" "Has God left me?" Why do we think like that?

JM: We have the tendency to go around the circle of analogy in the wrong direction. When I do somebody wrong in this world, and when I do something to someone or let them down, they do often reject me. They often distance themselves from me. We have the tendency to think, "We've done God wrong, and I have let him down, I've disappointed him, and so by virtue of my own human experience with other people – he's disappointed in me. He is not committed to me anymore because I've let down in my commitment to him."

The best way to get a young person or anybody to understand the gospel more is to not say, "You've ratcheted up your commitment, you're falling short, you're letting God down, you've got to do better." But instead say, "God is more committed to you than you could ever be to him." And to the extent that you understand that, you will be free to live in reciprocation of that love and faithfulness that God has given you in a real, abundant life-giving way even in the midst of your brokenness.

JMF: But isn't it often approached just the opposite – the retreats and so on I've been to, give the impression to the person sitting there that you've got to contemplate your sinfulness and how separated from God you are – they'll use Isaiah 59:1: "Your sins have separated you from God" and then say that unless you do better – you repent and believe and then behave, naturally every time you fall short, you default to that idea of God who is against me ...

JM: Everything depends on the starting point, doesn't it, Mike? For instance, if you start with hell, or if you start with "you are separated from God," you're essentially saying, that is the reality. Your starting point is the reality. The way we articulate the gospel, we communicate that hell is a greater reality. Heaven or life with Christ is the exception to the rule – it kind of sneaks in there, and God will tolerate you (because of what Christ has done) and he will allow you to come into heaven. Maybe at that point, you're told that everything changes and his attitude about you

changes once you become a Christian – and yet again, if his attitude was the exception to the rule for you as a Christian now full of grace, that means that really his attitude changed from being against you to being for you – and at the end of the day, can we trust that that is indeed the case? Or are we gonna fall back on the default of, “you’re not really sure if God loves you.”

JMF: Since you don’t measure up, he’ll be against you again.

JM: I’ve been troubled by that a lot in our preaching of the gospel. I’ve felt at times that we gave hell and sin more clout and a deeper rooting than we did the Triune life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and the love of God.

JMF: But that’s what you hear talked about – you’re not good enough, you need to be fixed, and then once you supposedly are fixed because you professed faith, what do you do then when you’re confronted with your sinfulness still, which is still going to be there...

JM: Exactly. The situation that I see often times is that a young person will go to a camp or something like that and be presented with the gospel in a way that talks about grace as the exception to the rule and talks about Jesus Christ entering to fix something that started out as being broken, instead of started out as being intact and whole, created in the image of God and in Christ. Then that person – a certain amount of psychological pressure is sometimes brought to bear – nobody wants to be separated from God, nobody wants to go to hell – and there are a lot of good and real and lasting experiences that happened by the Holy Spirit in spite of the fact that we butchered the gospel all the time. (I mean, who could ever say they’ve perfectly articulated the gospel?)

The Spirit moves in ways that compensate, and more than that, for what we do anytime we preach, and yet what happens is, oftentimes a kid will have an experience with Christ at camp in any way, shape or form, and he’ll be told, now you’re a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come – it’s as simple as that. A lot of times on the mountain top, kids believe that, they feel that, it feels like they’re new and whole and different, and that the old is gone. Then they get back into the world, and they fall off the deep end again, and sometimes even worse, they get into behaviors worse than they ever got into before they went to camp – and they begin to realize, “I guess that was the exception to the rule.” “I guess my sin and brokenness and the futility of what I’m enslaved to is the reality.”

JMF: And it’s stronger than anything God can do about it, because I can’t measure up.

JM: Right. So then what happens is, “well, I need to go get another dose of that, because this

one wore off.”

JMF: Or not.

JM: Or one of two things. Either I need to commit my life to Christ again, and keep going through that umpteen times, because we’re not secure in our standing with God. Or live a double life: I said I was going to believe this way and walk this way and yet now I know I can’t, so I’m just going to play the game for a while or tank it, like you said. It all goes back to, “What is God’s original attitude toward me, and did it change when I changed my attitude towards him?”

JMF: Now we’re not talking about something that we’re making up in order to make the message more palatable. We’re talking about the actual scriptural teaching on what the gospel is, who God is, who Christ is for us, who we are to him. We’re talking about what is actually in the Bible, it’s always been there, nothing new here.

JM: It depends, again and again, on, “Is Jesus Christ giving us an accurate picture of God?” “Can we really believe that it’s true that when he says, ‘quit asking to see the Father,’ he who’s seen me has seen the Father”? Or that Jesus Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God, as it says in Colossians 1 – or that he is the fullness of deity in bodily form. Or, as it says in Hebrews – the exact representation of the being of God.

JMF: How does that translate to the kids’ personal experience?

JM: Because if they can trust that, that’s an accurate picture of who God is, then they’ll begin to see that what happens in the Gospels is that Jesus Christ is embracing us at our worst and giving us a safe place in which to deal with our sinfulness. He never says, “If you deal with your sinfulness, deal with that, you’re stewing in your juices of sin, I’m going to get you to really feel that conviction and then *if* you repent, then you can be inside of the embrace.” Which introduces all kinds of conditions.

JMF: And repent means – be perfect.

JM: In that case, repent means, do something in order to earn the embrace.

JMF: That’s really not what repentance is about.

JM: Repentance is not about that. In fact, repentance is the word *metanoia*, and that is a radical re-schematizing of our minds, a radical change of mind, where all of a sudden we say, by the Holy Spirit, I’m not believing that Jesus Christ loves me conditionally. I’m believing that he loves me unconditionally and wholly, and that he says to me, “You are forgiven, therefore repent.” John Calvin coined the term, “evangelical repentance.” The idea is that you *are* forgiven; therefore

repent. As opposed to the idea, “*If* you repent, you will be forgiven.

A person that says “I forgive you if...” simply doesn’t forgive you. Kids read through that. They know, they see the duplicity in that, and they see the phoniness of that kind of love. We want to show them that Jesus Christ has embraced you at your worst. Not because he’s just saying I forgive you; go on and do whatever you want to do. I think this is the real distinction. A lot of people get scared with that kind of language, even though we see it with Zaccheus and the woman at the well, and the woman caught in adultery and on and on, and the gospel says all these interaction...

JMF: Those are some of the worst kind of sinners, as people viewed it, the adulterous woman and especially Zaccheus, takes advantage of people and is a traitor to his own people and those very people at their worst are embraced and accepted, held close by Christ *before* they make any changes.

JM: Notice particularly in Zaccheus’ case, Jesus says, I’m coming to your house, salvation has come to this house today, he’s going to go there, he’s there, and Zaccheus *then* acknowledges his sinfulness in a way that he knows that he is accepted and forgiven by the Savior. He doesn’t probably know exactly all the ins and outs of who this man Jesus is that he’s dealing with, but something supernatural has happened in his life.

JMF: And we can bet that he was not a perfect man the rest of his days, either.

JM: No doubt about it. That’s the key to ongoing repentance. Ongoing repentance would not mean groveling before God and saying, “Lord, I bought it. I hope I can get back into your embrace again, please let me back in.” But more of an awareness of the fact that we’re forgiven even before we asked, and therefore we are much more thorough in our confession, and we can talk to God seriously about the blackness and darkness in our lives because we know he’s not going to say, “You’ve crossed the line, or you told me you’re not going to do that again, you’re out of here, I’m sorry, you’re out of the embrace.”

JMF: He’s not an idiot, he knows darn well we’ll do it again.

JM: There is a huge misunderstanding about what grace is, but in liberal notions of grace, what you have is God is kind of the grandfather figure, he says, “Oh I forgive you, I love you, no matter what you do, just know that I’m always going to accept you and love you no matter what...” – that’s kind of a unilateral type, to me a Unitarian kind of forgiveness. It’s not a Trinitarian forgiveness. God is basically saying he doesn’t care. I’m going to give you *carte blanche* on your

sinfulness and I'm going to turn a blind eye, or grace lets us off the hook.

The beauty of Trinitarian forgiveness, the beauty of Trinitarian grace is that it always couches forgiveness inside of re-creation. It never says, I'm just gonna slap a little forgiveness on your sinfulness. Instead it says, "Yes, God is saying to you, I love you and I love you unconditionally, and I'm never gonna change." I like it to describe it this way: "We are never too sinful for God to stop loving us, unconditionally and purely, but we are too sinful to love God, we are in and of ourselves too sinful to love God."

The beauty of Trinitarian life that's revealed in Jesus Christ is that Jesus Christ went... when all we can say to God is 'NO' in our sinfulness, stuck in our sinfulness, when all we could say to him is "no," Jesus Christ comes and he says, "I'm going to extricate you from your slavery to the 'no' and I'm going to come and for the first time in human affairs I'm going to reciprocate the love and faithfulness of the Father toward you that's unconditional from the human side and I'm going to say, "I'm gonna first crucify the 'no' that you're inextricably bound in. I'm going to crucify it and I'm going to recreate you." God is not just saying "yes" to you or "yes" in spite of your sin, or yes, go ahead sinning and I'll forgive you as much as you want. He is saying "yes" from that direction to you in Christ, because Christ has taken the "no," he's crucified it, and he said "yes" to the Father in your behalf.

So when we begin to understand that grace is a "yes" to a "yes" – a yes from the God man-ward direction, and then a yes from the man God-ward direction, all of a sudden we begin to realize that forgiveness is pretty thorough, it's not just a matter of slapping forgiveness on our sinfulness, or just pardoning the criminal – it's actually a matter of crucifying us and re-creating us in Christ.

Every time we talk about forgiveness, I want us to move away from that liberal notion of just throwing a little forgiveness on top of the sinfulness, but instead, of understanding that God's forgiveness is so much more thorough and his holiness is so much of a consuming fire, he can't stand sin. He doesn't want to tolerate sin and what it does to us, and the way it destroys us, because he loves us so much that his wrath serves as love in this regard, and he comes and embraces us at our worst. The doctor becomes the patient and then he says "yes" back to God for us, and being wrapped up in that Triune life is something we're not aware of most of the time. But to the extent that we can be aware, and *awareness* is a keyword – because there is something going on, there is a Trinitarian dynamic that's going on already and the question is –

JMF: And we're part of it already.

JM: We're part of it. God has said "yes" to us and he said "yes" for us, not just a sloppy kind of liberalism...

JMF: And this is the reality. The reality is we already are a new creation, even though we don't see it yet because of our sinfulness. We already are a new creation, and it is the old self that we do see, that we are so frustrated with, that won't survive this. The new self is already seated in heavenly places with Christ.

JM: I hate it when I define myself by what I think about myself. Because I think about myself usually in a sinful way. I think about myself as the old self. If I could just think about myself in truth, and Paul talks about this coming to the truth, and this idea that the spirit of truth will help us, to repose what is truly true and more deeply rooted than my sinfulness and brokenness. But I have a hard time doing that.

Let's get back for a minute to that camp experience. We talked about how misleading it is to kids to say, "You're a new creation, the old has gone." Then they go back home and realize, the old has not gone. What we need to do is give them, we need to equip them for when they go back home so they know, "Yes, you are a new creation in Christ, not because of your decision, or not because of what you've done, but because of what he's done and what he's accomplished in his finished work and his reconciliation of the world..."

JMF: He will hold on to you and won't let go of you in spite of your ups and downs in the days ahead.

JM: Yes. You are that new creation and nothing can change that. That is the indicative truth of who you are. On the other hand, your sinful nature is still there. It's been crucified, and yet it's still ghosting around, and it hurts, and it's been relegated, if there ever was a question, by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ – it's been relegated to unreality status. But it hurts, it's painful, and it crushes our relationships with God, and with other people. Yet there's that sub-reality that we're tempted to call the reality: our sinful, painful, broken, oppressed – lots of it – of injustice, and yet there's a deeper Reality (with a capital "R" I guess you could say), and that one is eternal. This other one doesn't have a future, like you said. It's like the chicken that gets its head cut off and still runs around the barnyard.

JMF: That's where the repentance problem comes in, with people misunderstanding what repentance is. They think that repentance is a life of perfection. Whereas repentance is a change of

mind, to know what this reality is of who you really are in Christ in spite of this old self that still raises its head.

JM: Colossians 2 talks about Christ being the reality, and even Sabbath day observances can distort our mind and thinking and cause us to think that, that's the reality and even the good becomes the enemy of the best. Or religion gets in the way, and our proud badges that we wear. But it goes on in chapter 3 to say, you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above. Practice living and thinking by the rules of reality, not by unreality. You've been raised with Christ. He says in the first part of Colossians 3, you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Paul is not saying, put to death these things that belong to your sinful nature as if they haven't been put to death already, or put them to death for the first time. He's saying, be who you are. Live in correlation to the ultimate reality that's been established by Jesus Christ. Not in correlation with the counterfeit, the pseudo-reality that the enemy would want us to live in – the father of lies would want us to live in.

JMF: We are to live like who you already are, not like we used to be.

JM: Right. That's why the imperatives [the commands] are always couched within the indicative [the statement of fact]. Instead of giving someone more imperatives in isolated fashion – like pull yourself up by your own bootstrap for reform – change, that kind of thing. Paul is saying, you are hidden with Christ in God. It's always hid before rid.

Put on Christ means “put on the mentality of thinking in correlation with truth, remind yourself and remind each other of that” (it's a very corporate thing, as the end of chapter 3 demonstrates). This cannot be done and it's not meant to be done by individuals. We need each other. We need to speak truth into one another's lives.

I was with a friend who was struggling with pornography and he was a Christian brother. He felt like it had the best of him. He felt he was enslaved to it and there was not a thing he could do to change, and he was so ashamed and he was so broken by this. I remember having an opportunity to speak truth into his life and I said to him, “Brother, you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. You died. You are a new person.”

Instead of some kind of sin modification or behavioral modification or sin management and trying to help him with all kinds of techniques to stop his habit, I tried to go deeper and to stare that pseudo-reality down and to say to him, there's something deeper. Because otherwise it's like

re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. You're just trying to deal with those symptoms of the sinful nature that are still there. When I said that to him, it pierced his heart and he began to weep, because he needed to be reminded that this forgiveness was not something slapped on something that was the ultimate reality of his sinfulness.

JMF: His struggle with pornography is not the definition of who he is.

JM: No, it's not. The best way to convince him of that is by speaking the truth of Christ and asking the Holy Spirit to reveal himself in such a way that it would get underneath, underneath what he thinks about himself, and allow him to be free.

JMF: And in time that will result in fresh behavior. It will result in fresh behavior from inside out, and struggling with sin, we're always doing that on our own instead of with the repentant heart that says, this is not who I am. Here's who I really am. Then you've got some kind of a starting place, and it changes the entire perspective in the whole experience.

JM: It does, if you know you have a safe place with Christ and other people around you know they have a safe place with Christ, and they all together have a safe place with Christ, you can talk about your sin in a way that the true and ultimate reality can come to bear and bring transformation.

It says, because of these things the wrath of God is coming. The cross will be revealed in all that is, and that is God's "No" to our "No," and he loves us so much. It's like I love my kids so much, I'm not gonna let him go out there and play in the street, and I'm going to discipline him because I love him. But God's "No" is always a "no" not for retributive purposes but for redemptive purposes.

JMF: We have no need to be afraid of God's wrath because God's wrath is for us redemptively to help us, to save us, to hold on to us, to embrace us in love. It isn't to beat us over the head because we failed again – regardless of what...

JM: Exactly, Mike. There's no use talking about the wrath of God apart from the cross of Jesus Christ. That's where he takes our sinful, corrupt selves, and he crucifies them – in himself.

JMF: And that's reality.

JM: And his resurrection is reality.

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Does Jesus Appease God's Anger?

JMF: You have a long history of working with youth and you've named your ministry Reality Ministries. What's behind that name?

JM: Reality Ministries is based on the concept from Scripture, that reality is not necessarily what we see around us or what we experience in our day-to-day life, but it's rooted in the triune relationship of Father, Son, Spirit – of God as a relationship of holy love and all of us as God's beloved – being included in that by the grace of Jesus Christ.

JMF: The way we usually look at things is that God is probably mad at us and if he isn't, he should be. If he knew me like I know myself, then he'd certainly be mad, and I try not to think about that too long, because I tried to repent a lot and I beg for forgiveness a lot and hope maybe he'll...

JM: Try to get back into the place that we've already been given.

JMF: And that's not reality?

JM: No. It comes from reading the Bible in the wrong way. We have a tendency to fit Jesus Christ into our concept of God from the Old Testament. Instead of allowing God's self-revelation, Jesus Christ – the key to everything in our interpretation of God and to refuse to do it in and around Jesus Christ to try to talk about God as if Jesus is not the revelation of God himself.

JMF: There's a lot of kind of a separation, of God the Father is back here, a little ticked, and Jesus is kind of up front, trying to... you know, "don't get too mad, don't get too mad."

JM: Yeah, Jesus maybe smiling on you, but God is kind of frowning back in the shadows, back there.

JMF: All of that is very bad theology, and very untrue and not reality, and kids need to know about it.

JM: That's right.

JMF: You didn't always have a clear picture of this. I was reading some of your material around the year 2000 – you were attending classes in Fuller Theological Seminary. Can you talk about that?

JM: I call it an epiphany, or my biggest conversion in life so far. We all have different moments where we feel God has moved in our lives over our journeys. I came to faith at a very young age and grew up in a wonderfully warm Christian home. I struggled with this idea of there being two aspects of God that didn't seem congruent with one another, and that Jesus Christ

seemed pretty different from the other side of God that I've come to know or learn about over the years.

I was taking a series of courses from Fuller Theological Seminary through distance, not distance learning, but through satellite sites, and I ran into a professor named Dr. Gary Deddo. Gary taught systematic theology in such a way that refused to take any look at God, or to talk about God, without talking through the revelation that he had given us in Jesus Christ. He was thoroughly Christo-centric, and I've begun to realize that a lot of our thinking about God wasn't really Christ-centered.

JMF: Just to clarify that... What people usually think about God comes from a checklist. God is omni-present, God is... he knows everything and he's real strong and powerful. A checklist of what God must be, like logically speaking. Then there's that God, and that's how we think of him – the old man in the sky, but then Jesus Christ we met him in Scripture, but we hold the other view and we don't take what you're just talking about – the biblical truth that this is what God is like.

JM: We don't take the incarnation seriously. We have the tendency to think that the incarnation is just a way for Jesus to come to the earth and live for 33 years or whatever and then die on the cross for our sins. We forget that he became fully human – as fully human as he was fully God – and that he actually assumed our human nature and assumed our humanity in himself, that God actually came amongst us and that all of our lives are implicated and woven to his life, death and resurrection as a man. I had never thought of it that way before. I often thought that Jesus came into human history and he was the Son of God but he was externally related to me. Somehow he was “over there,” and somehow I could tie myself into the life of Jesus Christ by believing in him, I could get the benefits of his death and resurrection. But it was all external to me.

Then through the readings that Dr. Deddo gave us with T.F. Torrance and James Torrance, Karl Barth, but not just those guys from more recent times, but how they were rooted in the early church fathers – the Ante-Nicene Fathers, especially Athanasius and Irenaeus before him. I began to see that what I've done all along is I have been giving much more credit to the first Adam than to the second. I've been seeing myself as implicated in the fall of man, because when Adam sinned, we all went down, but I never really thought about the fact that Jesus Christ, the second Adam, was one in whom I was also implicated – and what happened to Christ is really the history – the His Story – of the human race. That is the reality of Jesus Christ loving us so much that he came to crucify our old selves in him – assuming all of our sinful natures in himself in order to redeem

them and present them to the Father as holy and whole and pure and right.

JMF: Now, that ties in so importantly with the Trinitarian understanding of who God is, but the whole point of us understanding that God is Father, Son and Spirit – the Father and Son are one God – is that, if Jesus likes us, well, that’s how the Father feels about us, too.

JM: Right. I thought for a while in my upbringing that God really loved me *because* I believed in Jesus and because I’ve given my life to Christ.

JMF: And he wouldn’t have loved you otherwise.

JM: I began to realize, I’m thinking about this in the wrong way. I love my kids more than I love other people’s kids, because they belong to me and that’s natural. But that’s a wrong way of thinking about God, as if somehow we belong to God by our decision and then he loves us more than he loves the other people. Instead, God has embraced all of us in a filial way and said, No, Jeff, I love every human being as much as you love your own children, and more – and that’s where your love for your own children comes from. Thinking about that circle of analogy and making sure and going in the right direction. Not that God loves that small sub-group of those who belong to him more than others – but that he loves all people in the same way, and even more than a loving father on earth loves his own children.

JMF: They all belong to him.

JM: I remember walking along the beach one day during that course and the epiphany that occurred to me at that moment, this touchstone into the truth and reality that I would give my life for now because I believe... it changed me so dramatically, was that they all belong to him, and as I walked along the beach that day, I began to look at them for the first time with the eyes of truth. I saw all of that flesh, and I thought Jesus Christ, the Word, became flesh, Jesus Christ embraced all of our sinful humanity, took it to his own in order to redeem it and to make it whole. I began to walk down that beach and for the first time I began to look at each person as ... I didn’t know where they stood with God in terms of their own experience, but I did know something true about them regardless of whether they knew it was true or not. And that is that they were my brother or they were my sister – Jesus Christ had brothered us in that way.

JMF: Doesn’t that change the whole perspective on how to do evangelism?

JM: It’s made a dramatic difference in the way I do evangelism, because what I’m doing first and foremost now is giving young people or anyone who wants to listen the reality of their belonging to God first – not just by creation in some general... God created us all in his image. But

Jesus Christ is the creator and he is also the Redeemer – the two are one and should not be pulled apart. Jesus Christ has belonged us to the Trinity – to the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship – and he’s done that by grace, and he’s done that in a way that’s so sure, that when you begin to speak that way – and make that kind of a robust claim upon a person’s life, the bell of truth often goes off in them and they begin to realize, I am created for something more, and not something that I have to create or make true by my own decision, but something that’s already true.

At that point, after establishing that sense of belonging by creation and redemption, we can talk to kids about sin. Because that’s what makes sin so bad. It’s that they belong to someone – it’s a relational problem, sin is. Once they know who they belong to, and they begin to know who they are because of *whose* they are, then all of a sudden, you can say, “and that’s why sin is so terrible.”

An analogy that I use sometimes is, if a boy ran away from this home – let’s say it was my home. My own son ran away from home and decided he didn’t want to live as my son, even though he was, and he ran away and rebelled against me and my authority. To a next-door neighbor, that wouldn’t necessarily matter to my next-door neighbor – because that boy doesn’t belong to him. It really matters to me because it’s my son. And that’s the way that God feels about us in relation to our sin. We belong to him by virtue of creation and redemption and therefore, to God sin is a very serious thing, because it crushes our relationship with him. But not only that, with one another. And we end up doing violence to ourselves – because the truth of who we are is being violated – and that’s been established by Jesus Christ and his creation and redemption of mankind.

JMF: The solution to sin, though, isn’t “try harder not to sin.”

JM: Right.

JMF: How do you get that across to kids?

JM: The key to me is you keep speaking truth, you keep helping them to put on Christ in a way that defines their lives – where they can define their own lives, not by what they think about themselves, about what other people think about them or say about them, but by Christ. The way to do that is not to say, “You shouldn’t be doing this, you shouldn’t be doing this.” The way I like to say it is, “It’s not about the supposed to’s, but about the *want* to, because of the belong to.”

The more you understand how much God loves you and how much you belong to him because of the claim that Christ has made on your life – the more you are able then to let go of those things that pull you down and cause you to operate in the sinful nature that’s been crucified with Christ.

Supposedly monkeys in Australia, the way that they catch them is they put a nut that they’re

very fond of in a jar, the monkeys will go and they will put their hand down into the jar and grab the nut, widening their hand and not allowing them to get out of the jar. Now they are caught there. All you need to do is put a large size nut in that jar, them to grab on to it, and then they're caught, they can't get their hand out because the jar is anchored to the ground. And you just go up and put a net around them.

In the same way, instead of concentrating on, "you've got to loosen your grip on that object, you've got to loosen your grip on that thing that seems to have a grasp on you," and really concentrating on getting them to stop sinning as much, instead of that, introduce to them something that actually is more attuned with who they really are deep down anyway, and is more (I guess you could say) something that's not just attractive to them in the sense that it's going to make their life better, but something that collates to the reality of the real core of who they really are.

So by focusing on telling them who Jesus Christ is and who they've been made to be in him, they then will let go of those other things and begin to follow and walk in the light and walk in the truth. So instead of really focusing on the sin and on the nut and on the supposed to's of quit this, quit that, give them the indicative truth of who they are in Christ and how much he loves them to the point where, by the Holy Spirit, they could believe that and begin to let go of that nut – whatever it is in their lives that they're holding on to and can't seem to be free from.

JMF: So the gospel is not about a better way of living, per se. It's not about here's a list of righteous behaviors, commands of Jesus, or whatever, sermon on the mount, that you need to embrace and start living by or God is going to be mad. But it's relational. The gospel is about relationship that we already have in God through Christ, in Christ with God – and that affects relationships with each other. Our relationships with each other are all about that.

JM: Right. It's like Christ has taken our life and he crucified it and given us a new life in himself. He's given us his life, he's taken our life – "the wonderful exchange" spoken of about by the early church fathers – where the Son of God becomes the son of men to make the sons of men sons of God. This exchange has taken place in Christ, and he has taken our life and given us his life for the Father. So now, I don't talk about, do you want to have a relationship with God? But more, "I can't wait to tell you something that's going on in your life. There's a dynamic that you're caught up in, you have no idea about – but Jesus Christ has given you his life. He is living your life for you in a way that is not impersonal – as if you get lost in a shuffle and become just a drop of rain in a cosmic sea, but in a way that really personalizes you into the person you are created to be."

How to do that? You don't create the truth by your belief, but I'll say to a young person, "Come along with me and let's do this thing together." Begin to pray together, read the Bible together and to worship together, because our growth in Christ has often been made in the Western World so individualistic. It's like, "Give your life to Christ and then go start having your quiet times by yourself." But it's never meant to be that way. It comes from that Enlightenment idea that – everything starts with me. And Descartes' notion of "I think, therefore I am."

Then it goes from the "I" to the "we" – but in Christ it actually goes the other way around. It's because Christ is, "we are," and because "we are," "I am." So I should never think of myself as walking with Christ alone. I'm always there as part of that Trinitarian life going on around me and with me and in me. But more importantly, corporately in the church we've got to continue to do this together. Then it's validating, and instead of putting all the emphasis on our agency to try to crawl into a truth that we're not in already, say, "Come along, catch what's going on, by the Holy Spirit." If you do that, you begin to try this on, you'll begin to see that it's deep and true and real, and we can really live in union with Christ in a way that makes our lives authentic and makes us people of integrity and we can begin to see change on this side of heaven in our own lives as we transform by that grace. But it has to be done together.

JMF: Isn't it a coming in to line with the reality that is already true, in other words, we already exist in Christ, who has already redeemed us and made us right with God. The issue is, as Paul keeps saying, because you are children of God, because of what God has already done for you in Christ, therefore, make these kinds of changes. In a paper that you wrote, I was struck by this concept of separation, that this idea that we usually approach evangelism with – of where you're separate from God and you take these steps and you do these things, then God changes his mind toward you – you wrote,

"In Christ God proves that in his holiness he does not desire to be aloof from the fallen creature he loves. God's holiness is so intolerant of sin that it will not allow him to stay separate from sinners. His hatred for sin demands that he do something to address man's alienation from God. His holy love is so fierce that he will not be satisfied until he has a consuming fire against sin that purifies and heals the sinner. God's holiness and his compassion have never been at odds – the good news of the gospel is that we are loved, accepted and cleansed not in spite of God's holiness but because of it."

JM: I see that most prominently in the Gospels, where Jesus interacts with sinners, especially

in Mark chapter 1 with the leper. In that chapter, Jesus is recognized as the Holy One by the demons. They see the transcendent picture of who this Jesus Christ who has been made flesh – they see that picture in a more accurate way than the human beings that are around Jesus at that time – there’s an irony in that. But here’s Jesus, this is where we find what the holiness of God is like, this story where Jesus Christ reaches out and he touches and embraces this leper at his worst.

He doesn’t cleanse him from afar and say, “Zap, I healed you. Now, come here, brother, give me a hug.” He goes up and touches this man wracked with leprosy. I can imagine him putting his hand right around his neck, right there looking into his eyes, right in the sores of his skin and saying, “Of course, I want to. Be clean.” And he was cleansed at that very instant.

St. Irenaeus gives a beautiful picture of that being the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for all of us – that he has embraced us as leprous and in our sinful condition in order to cleanse us and make us whole and presentable to the Father. He has done all of that in Jesus Christ. It’s not just an offer – that’s the thing that’s important for kids. Because if they have a hold of that nut in the jar, so to speak, something hypothetical is not going to do it for them. They don’t want just an *offer* of this kind of life that we’re talking to them about.

JMF: Because there are if’s attached to offers.

JM: There are if’s. They need somebody to save them from themselves to be able to say, I’m going to come in and embrace you, and I’m going to rescue you before you even ask me to, because you’re too sinful to actually ask.

JMF: And in fact I’ve already.

JM: Exactly. Because you have this in this hand, I’m not just going to hold something up from this hand that I’m trying to reach out to and get... I’m actually going to put it in that hand. You can see that this is so much better than this counterfeit over here, and begin to really relish that, and begin to have an awareness of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is your life. In a way, that makes you the person you were created to be, not less.

All we can do is preach the truth and hope that by the Holy Spirit people will have ears to hear. When they hear that, when they hear that good news, they begin to see the “NO” that God has against sin – inside of the larger “Yes” that he is saying to us. He never says “No” to us and then “Yes” to us later when we get cleansed. It’s always “Yes” to us, but he’s saying “No” to that sin and he does something about it. He doesn’t just give you an offer of some pills to take to make it better maybe. But “NO” – I’m so thoroughly against sin that I’m going to eradicate it. I’m going to

destroy it. Because you are so insinuated by it, I needed to crucify you in me as the Holy One, I needed to take you in myself and crucify you in order to make you new, and give you new life, and for you to share my righteousness.

JMF: This redemption and this inclusion applies absolutely to everybody. There isn't any human being that doesn't live and move and has his being in Jesus Christ.

JM: That's right. He's the head of the human race, as Ephesians tells us.

JMF: And yet, we're not talking about universalism here, because God doesn't force anyone to accept his love.

JM: No. That would be an automatic type of... everybody is going to heaven. Some theologies fall prey to that in relation to the idea that God is sovereign, that he has elected these folks to be died for and they go to heaven and they are automatically going to go there. And there's nothing they can do about it, it's just a matter of time before that irresistible grace catches up to them and they capitulate and move ahead on their life on into heaven.

JMF: So universalism is just an extension of that to everybody.

JM: Universalism is exactly that. It is taking that logico-causal kind of linear way of talking about salvation and saying it's inevitable that "the elect over here and the other" theology – the elect are all going go to heaven; it's inevitable. So if you say that Christ died for everyone and that he loves everyone, then that means it's inevitable that everybody is going to go to heaven.

JMF: All that reasoning misses the whole point of relationship.

JM: It misses the point of love, and here's the thing, can God's love be spurned, or is it a robotic kind of deterministic type of love? I believe in God's sovereignty every bit as much as the other guy, I really believe ... but I also believe that his sovereignty and his love should not be pulled apart. He loves us all, but will not force us to live in the reality and truth of who he's made us to be. We could not undo what Christ has done for us, ever – any of us. But we could deny the reality of it to our demise, and we could deny the reality of it all the way to hell. That's hard to understand. Because God is holy love in his inmost being, I know that he will not force us – that is just so contrary to love.

JMF: It doesn't even make sense, because love, if forced, is not love. Love by definition is giving.

JM: In Ephesians 1 it talks about election, it talks about that predestined election that we have in the eternal decision of God as being couched in love. First and foremost the Father's love for the

One with a capital “O” – Jesus Christ the elected One. And then all those who are headed up in Jesus Christ, and he is the one in whom all things are summed up – held together, as it says in verse 10. Election and love go together beautifully, and sometimes we pull those apart, and sometimes we say, “If God is sovereign, there’s no way that he is going to allow a person to deny him all the way to hell.” I can’t understand how that could happen, but I do know that Scripture says in 2 Peter 2:1, “these false teachers who are not Christians were denying the sovereign Lord who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”

JMF: It’s so telling there that we’ve read right over it, that he bought them too, even everybody are his, and “for God so loved the world.” God in Christ was redeeming everyone in heaven and on earth to himself.

JM: Right, so we have to decide where we are going to leave our questions as theologians.

JMF: God always says, “yes” even when we say “no.”

JM: He has said, “Yes,” but not “Yes” to our “No” — he has crucified the “No” and said “Yes” for us in Christ so that God’s grace is a “Yes” to a “Yes.” For us to buck against that would be to go against the grain of his economy, and to go against the grain can only bring splinters.

JMF: The only thing he says “No” to us ... or “No” to, is our “No.”

JM: He says “No” to our “No.” His wrath and his justice serve his love in that way. A lot of times people want to say, how do you explain hell? First and foremost, let’s make sure that in everything we do we are Christo-centric. Let’s talk about who God is and who Jesus Christ is, and let’s just talk about the fact that he is the one in whom all things live and move and have their being – he is the one in whom all things exist and hold together. He is the Lord of all. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the Savior of the world. Timothy says he is the Savior of all men – especially those who believe, and that God wants everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth. That there is one mediator between God and man – the man Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a ransom for all men.

Those are very comprehensive statements. Does that make us universalists? No. By no means does it, because we don’t believe in that inevitable deterministic kind of robotic love – it’s not really love at all. So I’m going to base my theology on what I know about Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the Scriptures that I just mentioned and others. There are question marks about hell. Do I know anyone is in hell? I don’t, I don’t have the vision beyond the curtain to know that there are. I can hope that... I think it’s okay for us as Christians based on scriptures to hope that no one

is in hell. Because Peter says, God is patient, does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

The verse I just mentioned from Timothy is, God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. That's his heart – that's his heart of love. It's okay for us to have that heart of love and hope the best. Even Calvin said, we can hope the best for all men. So I'm going to start with that. It's tough because you have to be able to allow for the possibility that anyone who is in hell is a forgiven child of God. I can't understand that, but I'm ok with leaving my question here, as opposed to leaving my question on the other end. That would mean that Jesus Christ himself created, in his sovereign will, some that he would not die for, and some that would go to hell without a chance.

JMF: And that's completely unscriptural.

JM: It comes down to defining God in a way that's less than Christo-centric. A lot of my friends struggle with that or believe that, and we have some vigorous discussions about it. We just have to keep going back to: who is Jesus Christ? And how does Jesus Christ inform our theology? And not talk too much about anything written in Scripture that could tempt us to go around the revelation of God that we have in Jesus Christ – to talk about God otherwise.

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Calvinism, Arminianism, and Karl Barth

JMF: We want to talk today about Arminianism and Calvinism. It seems that you're either an Arminian or a Calvinist, and never the twain shall meet. What is Arminianism, what is Calvinism, what are the strengths and weaknesses, and are there any alternatives?

JM: I'm glad we get to have a full session to solve all these problems about Arminian and Calvinist theology. This is something that's been debated for many, many years. I believe that there is another option, even a more evangelical option, than Arminianism or Calvinism. When I say Calvinism I mean, specially five-point Calvinism, or what we could call Dortian Theology, that comes from the synod of Dort. I think that's where the Tulip expression comes from, that many people are familiar with.

JMF: And could you rehearse that?

JM: The TULIP... Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and P – Perseverance of the Saints. We could spend a whole session talking about each one of those, which we don't need to do now. But there is another type of Reformed theology aside from Dortian or five-point Calvinism, and that's the reformulated Reformed position of Karl Barth – who, I feel, is most consistently reformed of all Calvinists. Most people don't think of Karl Barth as a Calvinist, but we can talk a bit more about why he draws much of his program from John Calvin.

But to get back to the Arminian question, what is an Arminian? An Arminian is someone who wants to make a place for the integrity of the human response to the gospel. They chafe under any kind of program that might have to do with predestination, the kind that de-personalizes us, and in a robotic or deterministic way lashes us and involuntarily brings us into heaven or into any kind of decision.

JMF: A focus on freedom.

JM: A huge focus on freedom, but interestingly, one of the weaknesses of the Arminian program could be that there is a misunderstanding of the word "freedom." Most people feel like freedom is a human-centered type of freedom, more of a libertarian type of freedom, where we are free to choose against God or free to choose God. That goes against the truth of how we're made. Because to choose against God is actually an anti-truth move, therefore, it's an anti-free move. It's more of an enslaved move than it is a free one.

The idea of what freedom is, is something that Karl Barth hammers on continually in order to

show us that freedom is actually a unidirectional freedom. It's the Son who sets us free. And the Spirit of truth blowing in and through our sails is what gives us the freedom to choose God. Without the Holy Spirit, without his work in our lives, we are not free to choose God at all. But in and of ourselves, if we try to choose God, or if we try to choose against God, we have to chalk that up to being an anti-truth and an anti-free movement – not a free one.

JMF: So in five-point Calvinism there's an effort to create a formula in which that freedom is taken care of. All the loopholes are covered and all the leaks are filled...

JM: Right, because for a five-point Calvinist it's very difficult to give the human agency too much potency. That's a dangerous thing to do, because it allows human beings to get outside of the economy of the sovereign God and be able to make a decision that creates the truth, which is something that no human being in actuality can do. Let me explain what I mean by that. To create the truth would mean to believe in a dualistic fashion that we are on one side of the ledger, unforgiven, unredeemed and separated from God. But then when a person decides, by his human response to the gospel, to believe in Jesus Christ, he moves himself from one side of the ledger to the other.

JMF: So that changes his decision and position toward God when he makes the confession of faith.

JM: Right. The human being is the agent who is able to make the decision to have faith in God and by that faith he is therefore now a forgiven child of God, now reconciled to the Lord, now redeemed, and now no longer separated from him – all those things that weren't true before, are true after the existential moment occurs, after the Jeff-moment, or the Mike-moment, you might say. And so the "before" and "after" of the decision really changes the truth about who we are.

JMF: The problem there is that it puts on us the actual causing of our salvation to take place. It's left to whether or not we make the decision and make it properly.

JM: That's correct. It's a question of ultimate truth and if there is ultimate truth, because that type of approach introduces this idea of relativity that the truth is not really true about me until I decide that it is. It's also very easy from that paradigm to pull justification by faith away from justification by grace. We know that justification by faith is a corollary to justification by grace. Justification by faith doesn't mean that I'm not justified until I have faith. It simply means that the justification that's been wrought by Jesus Christ, which is purely of grace, is in play and is real, and is true even before my own faith occurs in that moment.

JMF: In both Arminianism and five-point Calvinism you're left with the idea that you're not saved, not saved, not saved – then you make a decision for Christ, and then you're saved. In both concepts, even though they're coming at it supposedly from different angles, they wind up in the same position of the sinner's prayer is the point at which the change from “God doesn't love you” to now “God does love you” because you did the sinner's prayer, winds up being a linchpin in both cases.

JM: Right, which is ironic, because in five-point Calvinism those folks who adhere to that doctrine don't really believe that those things did occur in the existential moment. They believe that these things were established in the finished work of Christ 2,000 years ago. However, they don't want to give that away to everyone upfront because they believe in “Limited Atonement.” Therefore, they have to talk more about a person's sinful condition before God, as being separated from God or un-reconciled to God, which is actually inconsistent with what they believe theologically, but they say that in practice when it comes to the proclamation of gospel truth in their minds, they say that, because they don't know any other way to find out who the elect are.

Once they proclaim you are a sinner, therefore repent, and then they see people who do repent, then they can say, “Well actually, you were forgiven 2,000 years ago by the cross of Christ, actually you are already reconciled to God, and already redeemed by the finished work of Christ. But we couldn't tell you that upfront because we didn't know if you are one of the elect or not.”

The “Limited Atonement” piece is really troublesome and causes an internal conflict for the passionate five-point Calvinist evangelist – because he does want people to know Jesus Christ, but he's a little bit hamstrung because he can't get the good news out there at the beginning. He can't say, “You do belong to God, you are one of the elect, you are chosen by God,” until that person shows some kind of movement toward God, and then he can give them the goods.

The advantage of the Arminian program is that the Arminian doesn't have that problem. In a totally consistent manner and in good conscience, he can stand up before a room full of people and say, “Jesus Christ died for every single one of you. And if you're the only person alive in this world (as is often said), Jesus Christ loves you so much that he would have died just for you.” That's something that an Arminian can say unabashedly. But the reason a Calvinist can't say that is because he doesn't believe that Christ really did die for all. The reason a Calvinist can't say that in consistency with his own theology is because of the “Limited Atonement” part of his doctrine.

JMF: If you are a five-point Calvinist, how can you be sure that you are among the elect,

because if you were among the elect, then you should be bringing forth fruits that are meet for repentance. Every time you fail in some way, then you have to kind of look over your shoulder and say, “Well, maybe I just think I’m elect and I’m going through the motions but I’m not really right.”

How do I know for sure? The only evidence that there is, is godly behavior, a changed heart – so it comes back down to a lack of assurance based on whether or not you’re bringing forth fruit. And so, if we’re honest with ourselves, most of the time we’ve got a kernel of doubt about whether we really are. We can say, “I’m sure, I’m convinced, I know I am one of the elect.” But there’s really no way of proving it beyond any shadow of a doubt.

JM: That’s right, because [according to the five-point Calvinist] God, in his sovereignty, has chosen some people from all eternity to go to hell and some people from all eternity to go to heaven. Once that idea is introduced and Jesus Christ is lost in the equation, Jesus applies to the elect side of the ledger but not to the other side. It’s hard for those people to say, “Jesus Christ is God, and Jesus Christ himself decided from all eternity that some people would go to hell without a chance – that was his sovereign plan, but it is merciful that God would allow a few people to be saved and to go on to heaven.”

Once that idea is introduced and we begin to read that into the character of God, we really don’t know what he thinks about us at the deepest level. So we don’t know if we’re effectually called (as the terminology is used) or in-effectually called. We might be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, in that paradigm.

JMF: That kind of language is actually used.

JM: It is, and when a person doesn’t behave the way a person who is elect is supposed to behave in line with the perseverance of the saints, many times their salvation is cast in doubt. Perhaps you are ineffectually called; you’re tasting it but you’re not really in it and therefore, you’re more predestined to go to hell than you were to go to heaven. You’re disqualified or maybe even disenfranchised from the church that you belong to. That kind of thing does happen.

With Arminianism, you’re not going to have a question about the nature of God as much as you do in Calvinism, and that’s one of its greatest strengths, is that God is love toward everyone. A Calvinist will say that God loves everyone, but it’s very difficult for him to really believe that, because it doesn’t make sense that God would love you but send you to hell without a chance. We know what love is. The Bible tells us, 1 John 3:16, “This is how we know what love is; Jesus Christ

laid down his life for us.” Jesus and love and the sacrifice of the cross all go together, and you can’t force those apart and say, God loves everyone, but Jesus Christ does it apart from them in terms of redemption and in terms of his death on the cross.

That’s a very difficult line for a five-point Calvinist to take. If you’re consistent as a five-point Calvinist, ultimately what you have to say is that God doesn’t love everyone – he really loves those he died for, but he doesn’t love the reprobate and he may even hate the reprobate. “Jacob I loved, Esau I hated” is a template that’s often given to be able to rationalize the idea that God loves some and hates others, when we know from Romans 9 through 11 that Paul is not trying to say that.

JMF: Let’s talk about that. What is Paul’s point with that statement?

JM: I think it’s basically the hyperbole of contrasts. God did choose Jacob over Esau – no doubt about it – and that was important for that time in order to usher in the Messianic line. He chose Abraham in order to bless the whole world. The beautiful thing about the big picture of Romans 9 through 11 is that he chose Jacob to keep the Messianic line intact in order to eventually save Esau as well.

God’s election is not one of excluding others. It is actually meant to always include others. In Romans 9, God says, I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy. And Paul says, in the next paragraph, “God will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy.” It talks about “what if some people are made unto destruction and others for life?” So all these words are used... but I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy. Two chapters later, we get the crescendo to it all in Romans 11:32, where he says, “God has given all men over to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all.” So it’s beautiful: I will have mercy upon who I will have mercy, so I will have mercy upon all.

JMF: Getting back to Calvinism and Arminianism – you mentioned an alternative in Karl Barth’s theology, and then as that is expounded in Thomas Torrance’s theology. Let’s talk about that.

JM: Getting back to the Arminian’s strength, the strength is that the Arminians can say, “God loves everyone, God is love, he loves everyone, he loves everyone equally, he died for every single person.”

Now the weakness. There was a time in my life where I did agree with the Arminian way of thinking – I thought of the cross more as a hypothetical – there wasn’t anything actually accomplished by the cross and by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I could say Jesus Christ died for every one of you, but it wasn’t true that they were forgiven or redeemed or reconciled to God until

that person, in the Jeff-moment, made that decision. As I began to realize that, and began to understand why Karl Barth wanted to move away from that, I began to realize that it's a great favor to us as human beings not to be thrown back upon ourselves in order to try to make this true or to make this real, or to make this actual, or effective.

JMF: Is my faith good enough? Did I repent properly?

JM: Right. I'm going to be going through that revolving door all of my life, just like the five-point Calvinist will be going around the revolving door wondering what God really thinks about him ...

JMF: In both Calvinism and Arminianism, you wind up in the same spot.

JM: Right. Arminianism puts a lot of emphasis on "do," whereas Calvinist theology puts a lot of emphasis on "done." What Karl Barth wants to do is to take the best of those two things and say, "yes."

Just like the Reformed perspective says, Jesus Christ and him crucified did effect reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness – but not just for the limited group of people out there. Not along the lines of limited atonement... but for all. And the word "ALL" is used constantly throughout the New Testament to talk about what Christ did for all.

The Arminian hasn't given due credence to the past tense language of the New Testament, that these things have been accomplished in the finished work of Christ. Karl Barth wants to say, "Yes, they have been accomplished." They're not hypotheticals, they're not "true if you make a decision" – they have been accomplished, they are actual, they are real, and yet this is not in a deterministic way that makes a person a robot – because God's inmost being is about love, because God is love – one may resist the Holy Spirit, grieve the Holy Spirit and go against the reality of who Jesus Christ is and who he is in Christ.

This is thrown right out there for us in 2 Corinthians 5: "the love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that one has died for all, therefore all died and he died for all, so that those who live may live not for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised." Here we have "Jesus Christ died for all." Here we have the fact that "when he died, everybody died." We know from Scripture, from this passage and for most (like 1 Corinthians 13 and from Romans 6), that you have to keep the unity of Christ's death and resurrection together. Those who died with Christ rose with Christ. In Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive – this is the fabric of the work of Jesus Christ.

Paul is saying, “It’s not a question of whether everybody died and rose with Christ.” The question is, “Are you going to live for yourself, or are you going to live for him who, for your sake, died and was raised?” There’s an objective truth, but there’s a subjective participation in the objective truth. It goes on to say, “We no longer, therefore, look at anyone from a human point of view. We used to look at Christ that way, but from now on we don’t, and anyone in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone, the new is come.”

It doesn’t say, “You could become a new creation if you make a decision.” He is saying that because Jesus Christ has come and died and rose again, there is a new creation – everyone is a new creation. We no longer look at anyone from a worldly point of view. He goes on to say, “God has given us this ministry of reconciliation. God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and giving us this ministry of reconciliation. We beseech you, on behalf of God, be reconciled to God.”

Then he ends up with “do not receive the grace of our God in vain.” Today is the day of salvation, it’s here. That dimension is here and you’re in that dimension, do not buck that, do not kick against it. Do not fight against it. Be reconciled to God because you *are* reconciled to God. This puts the subject of participation together with the object of truth. You have been reconciled to God. You have been forgiven. The whole world has been reconciled to God and forgiven by Jesus Christ.

JMF: So if you reject that, you’re not rejecting an opportunity, you’re not rejecting a possibility. You’re rejecting the truth of what already is.

JM: Right, and in that passage it shows how one might reject those things. It gives the objective truth and it gives you an opportunity to “not receive the grace of the Lord in vain.” That would be subjective refusal – which is possible. It’s not a deterministic, robotic system. It is possible to receive the grace of God in vain, even though you’ve been included in the death and resurrection of Christ.

JMF: So the point is that you have received it. You can either receive it to good, or you can receive it in vain.

JM: You’ve been given this relationship. You were turned away from God in your sin and rebellion against him. God has come, he has assumed your sinful, fallen nature in Jesus Christ, and he has turned you back around and reconciled you to God, and that means that you’ve been given a face-to-face relationship with God in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit – you are a part of this

relationship, this is what reconciliation is.

Therefore as a person who's included in that, you may submit to it or may fight against it. The subjective participation is to believe, not only that you're included in this, but every person in the world is included. This gets past the "limited atonement" problem. If I don't know everybody's been included in this, I'm not really sure if I have been included in it. Because that goes back to... if just a few people are included, how do I know if I'm on the right side or the left side of the ledger? But to the extent that I know this includes everyone, I'd be assured that it includes me, too. But to the extent that I think it includes *some* people, I'll be concerned and worried about that, and my assurance would be virtually nil, or it will go through this revolving door syndrome.

The assurance is there because I believe this happened for ALL people – that Christ not only did something for us, but he did something with us. Now here is the point that a lot of people get to, and Calvinists really struggle with Barth's program, because it sounds like: If Christ has not only done something for us but he's done something with us, then it sounds to me like I'll still have to make a decision about whether or not I'm going to participate or not, and that decision is really back to an Arminian decision. It's back to this question of, "There's a new line in the sand, now the sand is not whether I'm forgiven or not forgiven, it's not whether I'm reconciled to God or not. It's whether I believe in that, or whether I don't believe in that prior truth."

That still feels like an Arminian problem to a Calvinist, because it's like, "It's still thrown back on you, because now you've got to believe it, you're the one who's got to believe it or not." An Arminian can buy into the Barth program and really relish it with great intensity, and I know a lot of Arminians who have done that, because they feel like it still gives place for a subjective decision – do I believe or do I not believe? – and they can decide, "All this stuff is true, there's one truth, it's not relative to whether I believe it or not. That's very refreshing, it's all been done by Jesus Christ. Now for me, my free decision is related to whether I believe in it or not."

An Arminian can stay right there, and that's great. So in this next section of our discussion, let me just say, for you who are Calvinists and realize, "Wait a minute, that's not good enough for me, because that belief still feels like it's up to me; it still feels like that's the critical moment in which all this stuff becomes true for me and lets me go to heaven."

I would say, that's a great place to be. I think everyone who's a Calvinist who wants to give the first and last word to God, needs to go through this strait of wrestling with that question – because it does still seem to exalt the "do" over the "done." But what Barth wants to do is always

keep the “do” *inside* the “done.” He would say the epitome of anthropocentrism, the epitome of humanism, would be for us to objectify God and to say from a distance, “This is the situation now (as I just described it a minute ago), and now I’m going to decide if I believe it or not.”

Barth would say that Arminianism, at the end of the day, is humanistic. He’d say that Calvinists are right in that it’s not good enough just to stop there, he would say that it lands us in a place of semi-Pelagianism – where belief becomes a work. Barth will never do that. But how does he keep the “do” inside of the “done”? He does that by using the word “be.” As Paul says in this passage, “You’ve been reconciled to God, therefore we beseech you: BE reconciled to God.”

This is not universalism. Universalism is way too easy. If God wanted universalism to be the case, he would never have gone through the trouble of the cross, and allow human suffering. He could just have said, “I love you guys so much you’re all going to go to heaven.” Universalism is way too easy, it’s very linear and very simple. But in this passage, Karl Barth realizes the apostle Paul is a passionate evangelist. He’s not just some couch potato who thinks, “God’s going to bring everybody into heaven.” Rather, Paul is thinking, “I’ve got to get this message out there.” The love of Christ compels us – we beseech you on behalf of God, be reconciled to God. Be reconciled to God, because you are. Not because you’re not, but because you are.

This keeps the “do” inside the “done.” It says even Christ is the one who believes that you are reconciled to God. So instead of standing out here, aloof and looking at this whole situation of reconciliation as if it’s in your laboratory, and you as the almighty human being get to make a decision about this, we have to say, “Part of reconciliation is that Jesus Christ does everything from the human side. There is not one modicum of our independent humanity that can make a decision outside of God. We all live and move and have our being in him.”

Even our believing is a participatory event. Grace includes the human response, Barth would say. In doing that, he is able to say, “Jesus Christ does it all, even your believing, and even your believing in Jesus Christ does it all, even in your believing, and even your believing in your believing in your believing that Jesus Christ does it all ... ad infinitum... you can never get outside of the brackets of grace – where God has represented in Christ, Jesus Christ has represented God to humanity and everything about humanity to God – you can’t get outside and quantify that and exalt your subject-self as being the one who gets to decide about God.

Instead of fighting to get ourselves outside of that equation, just recognize you’re inside of it. Don’t fight that, you’re inside. Submit to the ad infinitum. You can never get to a place where you

pull your belief outside of what God has done or what God is doing to make a decision about it as if you're quantifying God. That is actually religion. Instead, Jesus Christ has made this decision. Your decision is really more of a non-decision. The action step is really a non-action step. It's important, it's critical, but it's actually to submit to the ad infinitum of saying, "My decision is not that important anymore, my decision is secondary to the decision that God has made for me and Jesus Christ – that God has said, 'yes' to me and he said 'yes' for me in Christ."

I might submit to that ad infinitum and say, "I don't have to worry so much... my decision is that I don't have to worry about my decision, because I know Jesus Christ has done it all." That is amazingly freeing, once that penny drops – it still makes decision important, but it wraps it all up into the "done," and what is being done. Jesus Christ, as our representative high priest, takes everything from the human side, represents us to God and therefore he keeps the covenant of grace from both sides. We're caught up in that, why fight to get outside of it, why not just repose on that dynamic of Trinitarian life that we've been given?

The whole point about decision, sometimes we make too big a deal out of that, and the reason is because we're riddled in humanism, and we often go back to this verse: "What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be saved? What must I..." We're so wrapped up in that, and what Paul says to the Philippian jailer is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Not "you'll be saved if you believe in Jesus Christ." He's actually telling the jailer, "Jesus Christ has got you, he's carrying you." Just as best as you are able, surrender to that, knowing that you can never really surrender as an independent person but only as someone in participation with the surrender that Jesus Christ has made to God on your behalf.

I like that word "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." It's like Jesus Christ is the foundation for every human action to God. We can never get off that foundation. We can pretend that we are built on the sand, but we can never really get off that foundation and offer God anything as an independent agent.

That agency question is big for Calvinists and for Arminians alike, and it's usually the last thing to go – our agency, our human agency is usually the last thing to go because we are so keen to self-justify, we're so keen to make it happen. "What do I need to do, what do I need to do?"

Jesus is trying to get something through to us when he says, "If you want to find your life, you got to lose it." When you lose your agency, you lose your claim to individual decision-making and making-it-happen, you get back your personhood and you get back your share in the Trinitarian

persons and that great dance that's going on between Father, Son and Spirit. Who, if they knew, would want to hold on to their individuality and be wrapped up in themselves (which is a very small package), if they really heard the gospel with ears to hear and could lose their individualism to become a person?

JMF: The real person that you already are, without losing your own identity.

JM: You don't become a drop in the cosmic sea where you become less personalized – it's just the opposite in Jesus Christ. More Jesus means the more of us, not the less. That's why T.F. Torrance calls them the personalizing person. So anytime we get into theologies that want to get us down the de-personalizing route, we know we're going the wrong direction. Anytime we go down the road with theology that wants to take us to a humanistic route, one that is elevating the human subject self outside that of Jesus Christ, we need to be careful. Karl Barth gives us a way to move between those two – to keep the “do” within the “done” and to “be” what we are by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Are We Sinners, or Saints?

JMF: In Christ, we're a new creation, and yet we still sin. How does sanctification actually work in our lives?

JM: That's a great question, because one of the biggest struggles that we have is, well, if I'm already a new creation, then why do I sin the way I do?—maybe even worse than I did before I became a Christian? The other side of that coin is: What about people who aren't Christians, but who seem to live lives that are more Christian, than Christians do? What about people who seem to exhibit more fruit of the Holy Spirit who aren't Christians—where does that come from? So it's two sides of the same coin.

Where do the bad things in Christians' lives come from, and where do the good things in unbelievers come from? It's a very practical question. It's one that confuses young people tremendously. When they go to a camp experience and when they're told that because they made a decision for Christ they are a new creation—the old has gone, the new has come. And they really do feel that way when they leave the mountaintop. But when they go home, however, then life hits them hard and they begin to wonder: “Oh man, was I just brainwashed at camp? What was that good feeling that I had? I don't feel like a new creation at all. I feel worse than I ever did.”

What's going on there? Let's go to that passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul talks about a new creation – that whole passage is very universal in scope. (I hesitate to say the word *universal* because people often take that to the next step of Universalism, but no, this is the idea that every single person is implicated in what Christ has done).

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul talks about new creation in verse 17. Right before that, he had been talking about how everyone is implicated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and from now on we look at no one from a human point of view. We always look at people now through the perspective of Christology and who we know Jesus Christ to be.

Because of that, we can know that everyone has a sinful side to their lives—not just unbelievers, but also Christians. We can know that that's still there, but we can also know that there's been something that has been done about that in the death and resurrection of Christ that has eradicated all sin and made us pure, holy, and blameless in the sight of God.

But how do those two things fit together? That's the question. The first point is worth repeating: this is true for everyone. This pattern of the two things going on in the same space is not a linear one. Oftentimes we think of it as linear. I was an old creation, now I'm a new, and the old

is gone. It's a replacement of the old with the new. Anytime we think about this as just a replacement of the old with the new, all we have is the new. We have no way of interpreting any of our sinful nature or any of our sinfulness anymore because we've said the old is gone.

So how do we get bad out of good? We've got to be able to see that those two things are happening in the same space, and they're happening in the same space for every human being. However, by the Holy Spirit who lifts us up to live into our life with Christ and allows us to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in a more overt, or in a more manifest way than an unbeliever most of the time. We can see that, as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, the Holy Spirit works to allow us to grow into the person that we already are.

The key to understanding those two things that go on in the same space is Christology. It goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. I read the book *Fahrenheit 451* a long time ago. I don't remember what that was like, but I thought about writing a book that's called *Christology 451* or *Humanity 451*. It has to do with this theological anthropology of how we look at human beings from a Christ-centered perspective.

You don't need to go any further than a few verses down to see how it is accurate to say that those two things, our sinfulness and our purity, can be put in the same space, because we have to look no further than Jesus Christ himself. That passage says, "He made him who had no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" [2 Cor. 5:21]. What that passage says, and it packs a lot, is that Jesus Christ never lost his divinity and his deity and his purity in the incarnation, but he became sin.

How can those two things fit together? I've always been taught that a holy God couldn't touch sin. I've always been taught that sin and holiness are two completely different categories. But this passage explains that completely, and says yes, they are two different categories, but instead of it being a dualism, it's a duality. It's two natures in one person. That is the Christology of Chalcedon—two natures. Christ assumed our corrupt depraved humanity and he always remained God, pure and holy and unblemished the whole time. Somehow in the one person of Jesus Christ, those two things exist in the same space.

The whole idea of the atonement and the idea of *substitutionary* atonement sometimes falls prey to a Christology that is not orthodox according to the earliest creeds. What I mean by that is, you'll say, in order for Jesus Christ to become sin, he must have had to take a few days off, at least, from being God. There's no way that he can be sin and be God at the same time, because they come

into the whole thing with this presupposition that the two cannot exist in the same space and therefore there is a mutual exclusivity there that if God became sin, he must have stopped being God. That's bad Christology, but in turn it's also bad anthropology, because of what Christ has done for all of us.

JMF: A lot of times the idea is that Christ became human in the sense of Adam *before* the Fall, so that Christ's humanity is untouched or untainted, a perfect humanity.

JM: To say it that way, the church fathers would turn over in their graves, because for them, the un-assumed was the unhealed. If Christ assumed a perfect humanity, then how could he redeem it, what didn't need to be redeemed? He had to grab onto *us*, and really grab onto us, or else this whole thing becomes a transaction that occurs over our heads where it never really touches us. The fact is, he grabbed onto us and plumbed the deepest depths of our sinfulness.

This is all solved by the church in the Apostle's Creed. He descended into hell, the creed says. We have to know that he embraced us at our worst, that he became us—even Martin Luther would say he became the greatest sinner of all. Why did Jesus have to die? Because he was a sinner. This, people can't take because they don't think of those two things as being able to happen in the same space.

JMF: Not because he sinned himself, but because he took our sinfulness, our sinful nature on himself.

JM: He took our sinful nature in a way that was even more perfect and more deep than we even take our own sinful nature or that we even fall prey to our sinful nature. He does everything more perfectly than us. That helps, because we know there's no residue, there's nothing below our sinful nature that hasn't been touched by Jesus Christ, that he became 100 percent sin. He became sin. He was made to be sin, it says.

That doesn't minimize in the least anything about him becoming something *like* sin, or he associated himself with sinners. No. This is even deeper. This says he became sin, 100 percent sin. He was also 100 percent God the whole time. Thankfully, 100 percent God is deeper than 100 percent sin, otherwise we'd be in real trouble. But the point is that he reached down...

I remember Gary Deddo, one of my mentors, telling me this. I love this picture. He reached down into the sock, all the way to the very tip of the sock, and pulled it inside out. He didn't reach halfway down the sock or somehow touch the sock and zap it or do a transaction above it that somehow paid a penalty, but the doctor became the patient and he dived down into the very

deepest part of our sinful, corrupt humanity, grabbed onto us there, and pulled us out, pulled hell inside out.

People sometimes say, Jeff, you don't hell seriously enough. I say, you might be right, but maybe you don't take Christ seriously enough because hell, sin, death, and the devil have been defeated.

How do we translate what happened in Jesus Christ and his assumption of our fallen corrupt nature? How do we translate that into good theological anthropology for us as human beings? Getting back to that sanctification question is the next step to that. I think that we are not God. We talked at breakfast about the fact that to be adopted by God is good language, it's a metaphor, it has its shortcomings just like all metaphors, but it has its strengths in that we are not God, we are adopted by God to be in his family, but we get to share fully in the Trinitarian life of God, and we get a full inheritance as sons.

But, as Peter says in the epistles, we get to participate in the divine nature [2 Peter 1:4]. We are not of the divine nature intrinsically and inherently by right. We are not God, but we get folded into that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And because of that, we are sons and daughters of God. We are pure and holy children of God, and we really are. Not like Jesus, but he is sharing his real sonship with us, and so we participate in the divine nature, we have the indicative of grace, but we share in God's nature by grace and not inherently.

At the same time, we also know we're fully sinful in our old man, in our old selves. And we are one person. So in the same way the "two natures in one person" pattern of Chalcedon, there's a definition of our humanity. The only difference is that our divinity, so to speak (and the old deification idea is not that we become God, but that God has become man to share his divinity with us in such a way that our divinity, so to speak, as sons of God, is by grace, nothing intrinsic). But still, we really are sons and daughters of God, and that doesn't really sink in a lot of times.

JMF: We use the term "already, but not yet." It's like we focus more on the "but not yet" than on the "already."

JM: That's because we're creatures of habit who walk by sight instead of walking by faith. When Paul says in that passage in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "We no longer look at anyone from a human point of view," what he's saying is, there's been a change in thinking. We have a new framework now. We have repented. *Metanoia* [the Greek word usually translated as repentance] is a radical change of mind.

Let's say this is our fallen human selves, and we used to look at ourselves like this, and we saw our sinfulness and we saw our shame and we saw our guilt. And maybe Christ adds onto that somewhere, but he's kind of secondary, he's kind of incidental, he's kind of accidental, and maybe we can be like him someday, and we're trying to get better, and we're trying to be sanctified and to grow toward being more Christ-like, but it all really starts from looking at ourselves first and foremost as fallen, sinful people.

But instead, repentance is to look at it from the other side and says yes, this horizontal aspect of this duality, this horizontal describes our flat line, our death, our incompetence, our futility and bankruptcy as sinners. The wages of sin is death, and yet now we look at no one from that point of view. We look at everyone through Jesus Christ and we see that yes, we are all wicked, but we are righteous in Christ. Repentance is to turn in your thinking to look at everyone as if Jesus Christ applied to us all. That allows us to move past the zero-sum game of sanctification.

I don't know if you've ever heard people say this before, but they'll say, sanctification is kind of like John the Baptist, his saying of, "I must decrease and he must increase." If we think of that in a linear way, it's kind of like a football field and the teams marching down the football field, and they get to mid-field, and they get to the 40-yard line, 30-yard line, 20-yard line, and we're trying to get to be more Christ-like, which would be to cover the whole distance. But then we fall back, and we slide back, and we get pushed back into our own end of the field. And we're constantly going back and forth, and it's a zero-sum game. We'll be 60 percent like Christ and 40 percent not. Maybe we fall back to 30 percent, maybe we fall back to 20 percent and 80 percent needs to be improved on, and it's this sliding scale of sanctification. We think that we're trying to get to a place that we're not already.

The beautiful thing about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as it is patterned in the Caledonian formula, is that we're already there. We are 100 percent pure and holy, without blemish, free from accusation, seated with Christ in the heavenly realms as sons and daughters of God. That has already taken place—not because of anything we've done, but because of what Christ has done.

If we start with that as the baseline, then all of a sudden, instead of trying to minimize our sin or manage it, we can see how heinous it is. To me, this is one of the great keys of sanctification for us as believers in the economy of grace. We can give ourselves permission to say, "I am wicked in many of my motives. I am bankrupt. I struggle with original sin. I am tempted in ways maybe now

that I wasn't tempted before."

What we are allowing ourselves to do is to start with the starting point of total grace, and from within that, to be able to see our total depravity. But to talk about total depravity outside of total grace will destroy us absolutely. That's why Karl Barth, the Torrances, and others have always wanted us to know that God's "no" to humanity was always inside of the larger "yes." Our solidarity with Adam and our solidarity with Christ fit in the same space.

What Karl Barth does, and this is beautiful, in *Church Dogmatics 3, Book 2*, he takes Friedrich Nietzsche and folds him into his own program on anthropology because Nietzsche's outlook on humanity was dismal, hopeless, futile, absolutely abysmal, and it paints a terrible picture of the darkness of the human race. Karl Barth says, to take what Nietzsche says and to apply it in a vacuum is destructive. But if we understand total grace and that we're 100 percent there already, we can allow ourselves to then see, "I'm 100 percent sinful, too. I am wicked. I don't know if anything I ever do has a pure motive. I am a mixed bag."

We see this all the time. We think, these are great Christian men who seem to fall. A congressman who has a lot of influence, or a person who leads a Christian camp who abuses kids, or a person who leads someone to Christ even when they're cheating in an adulterous affair. What is going on there? It's so confusing.

If we can know that those solidarities with Adam and with Christ are there, we'll have greater victory over that solidarity with Adam because grace always outruns sin. Sin never trumps grace. Sin never gets the upper hand. But we allow ourselves to see just how bad sin is. That's why it just kills me when people say Karl Barth is soft on sin, because soft on sin means to play the zero-sum sanctification game where we think we're marching down the field and becoming more like Christ and becoming less sinful. That's the most proud, haughty, pharisaical way of thinking that there is. And religion is the great opiate that allows us to be able to rationalize our sinfulness and think we're not that bad. Karl Barth says: no, we're bad. God had to come and die on a cross.

JMF: If we're honest with ourselves, it's frustrating, because we know we never actually make progress, and if we do make progress we do lose it, and we get nowhere because we never actually get to the finish line, to the goal.

JM: To be able to say "I am moving toward the finish line because Christ has carried me across the finish line" is a beautiful way of thinking. I am going to make it across the finish line because I *have* [already] made it across the finish line. Sanctification depends on starting with the

end in mind. It comes down to believing that we're home before we start.

JMF: When Paul gives these so-called sin lists or gives admonition about right living, he always starts from "here's who you already are, therefore act like it, therefore behave this way." Not "*If* you behave this way, then you'll become the child of God," but "You're already a child of God, this is who you are, therefore start living like it."

JM: Yeah. First Corinthians 5 and 6 is a perfect example of that, when Paul is talking about church discipline, and he's saying, expel the immoral brother, expel the wicked brother from among you. But he's just told the whole church that they are the unleavened bread, they are holy and pure, that they should think in rightness and in truth about who they are.

There's an accountability to grace. The reason Paul doesn't want that person to be in the church at that particular time is because he's holding that person to grace. One of the greatest disservices that I think we could do, would be to exercise church discipline without the discipline of Chalcedon, without the discipline of the indicatives of grace.

Theologically, we've got to be disciplined enough to give everyone the indicative: This man is pure and holy and blameless, therefore we can call out the sinfulness of his behavior, and that of our own behavior, and say "That doesn't belong anymore. That doesn't fit. That is not in correlation with truth, and we're not going to pretend that it is in correlation with truth. He needs to learn his lesson and then come back."

The indicative, however, is never in question—not even with the wicked man, because then Paul goes down through that list of sins. And who could stand up under that? Idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, adulterers will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

We've all been idolaters and adulterers in Jesus' definition, and so is this some kind of sliding scale? Liars will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, but as long as you don't lie too much. Or, perhaps what it means by idolater is someone who practices it *a lot*. Where is that point when you become an idolater, instead of just falling prey to idolatry once in a while? The fact is, we're all, and I can say this because I believe in the total grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we're all idolaters.

Thank God that idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Thank God that that adulterous Jeff McSwain has been crucified with Christ and no longer lives. In the ultimate scheme of things, he doesn't have a future. Thankfully, I don't have to define myself that way anymore, so I can give full play to my sinfulness and say thank God that that doesn't inherit the kingdom, thank God Jesus Christ has taken care of that, thank God that grace is a slaying grace—that I have been

crucified with Christ, that when Christ died, I died, and so did all of us, and we've been given a new life. To think about it from that perspective...

JMF: The very fact that we are that way is why Christ came, and is what the gospel is all about. That's why the gospel is good news, because he's done something about that fact. That good news is not some kind of sloppy permissiveness. It's not some like, "Okay, I'll just forgive you, and you're off the hook." It's an accountability. Grace...because Christ is our life, sin would be to say, no, he's not. But he *is* our life, he is living our life for us, and there is an accountability to that grace.

We have to hold each other to grace. That's what that whole passage on church discipline is about. I'm going to hold you to grace. I'm not going to let you pretend like this is not true about you. It all comes down to how we view everyone in the church and out of the church. But the church is a group of people who want to live into this reality, they want to help each other and hold each other accountable.

If I knew that somebody in my church was involved in pornography, I wouldn't go and say, I'm not sure you're saved. I wouldn't go to him and say I'm not sure that you should be coming to church until you change your behavior. I would say to that person, "Listen, this is not of Jesus Christ. Christ is your life. This is not of Christ." I would hold him accountable to grace. It gives us a higher ethic than the law.

JMF: In Titus, Paul is writing to Titus and he says, "Grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness." [Titus 2:12] What a totally different perspective. The very fact of our desire to say no to ungodliness doesn't come out of saving ourselves and trying to work out our salvation and get salvation, it comes out of the fact that we already have grace, live in grace, are under grace.

JM: That's right. That passage, it starts out with, again, the comprehensive view of humanity, "The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness." Later in that same passage, he says, "The whole point of this is that you might be eager to do it as good. You're motivated by grace."

So if I'm holding someone to grace and they say, "forget that, I don't want to listen to that, don't tell me that, everybody's a sinner, I'm forgiven, I'll do whatever I want to do," then that is not the economy of God. That's some kind of sloppy permissivism, that's some kind of slapping some forgiveness onto sin and God saying yes to our sin. He's never said yes to our sin.

JMF: In spite of the fact that that's often used as an attack against you talking about grace too

much. I've never met somebody who actually says that, who actually believes "I can do whatever I want because I'm under grace." The spirit of God in us doesn't even let us think like that.

JM: Alan Torrance has a good line about that. He talks about how in the prodigal son story, when the son comes back and the penny drops for him that he's unconditionally loved and accepted and has always been a son in his father's eyes, and he comes home to the feast... Can you imagine that son, after that encounter with his father that day, saying oh great, now I can go back out to the brothel.

JMF: Exactly. It's nonsense.

JM: That's a misunderstanding of grace. That's why Paul says, "By no means does that mean you just go out and do whatever you want to do." Karl Barth gets us back to this very helpful way of thinking about Chalcedon when he says, in regard to the already-but-not-yet (because the already-but-not-yet goes both ways. The old man has already been crucified, but not yet. We are already seated with Christ in the heavenly realms, but not yet. Those two things, they go both ways).

Karl Barth says, "I was and still am the old man. I am and will be the new man." He gets those asymmetrical, those solidarities there, but he always wants us to know they're asymmetrical. One has a future, one doesn't. By the Holy Spirit we may and can live in it now. Even though our lives are in this matrix of a mixed bag of righteousness and wickedness, we may live as righteous children of God by the Holy Spirit now. The Spirit lifts us up to live into our true selves and therefore gives us the ability to call our old false selves what they are.

JMF: Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, we see in a glass darkly (in the Old King James) a poor image as in a mirror, but then he talks about how what we really are, is what we're having trouble seeing, seeing our true selves as he's made us to be. But he says the time is coming when we will see ourselves as we really are.

JM: Right. That distortion is there because we think of our own sinfulness in a sinful way and only by the revelation of God can we see him and ourselves as we really are. We have to keep reminding each other of that.

That's why this whole thing is corporate from beginning to end. What must I do to be saved? Well, be saved because you are. How do I do that? I want to know how. How? How? Well, let's do it together. Let's just celebrate it. Let's pretend like it's true. Let's keep thanking God over and over and be grateful for what he's done, and let's rub in the ointment of grace. And pretty soon

we'll begin to have the mind of Christ, which we have been given, to think about ourselves more accurately, but not only that, to think about everybody else in the world more accurately.

JMF: I was and still am the old man. I am and will be the new man. That's such a clear perspective to hold onto.

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Reading the Bible With Jesus as the Guide

JMF: We'd like to talk about the Bible now. Two people can read the same passage in Scripture and come to totally different conclusions. Is there a right way to read the Bible?

JM: I love that question, because it comes down to understanding and probing into the question that is behind it all. What is the Word of God? Or, more specifically, *who* is the Word of God? And is Scripture, this Holy Scripture, the same...do we want to talk about the Holy Scripture as the Word of God in the same way that we talk about Jesus Christ as the Word of God?

JMF: I've heard it put that way.

JM: Many times it's put synonymously.

JMF: It's like the Bible is Jesus Christ in print.

JM: It's God-breathed, and therefore [some say] "it basically is the equivalent of God himself." I don't think you have to say, that just because the Bible is God-breathed, that it's on the same pedestal as God himself. That can lead to some problems, maybe leading even more toward Biblio-idolatry, where we don't want to go, where we begin to worship the Bible in a way that it's not meant to be worshiped. (It's not meant to be worshiped at all.) We don't confess our sins to the Bible, we don't pray to the Bible. The Word of God, in its written form, is not the same as the Word Jesus Christ. You have to go no further than John 1 to figure that out.

I was doing a foundation grant recently, a proposal, and it had a place for me to sign off on their statement of faith, and part of that statement of faith said "the Bible is the only inerrant Word of God." I felt in good conscience that I needed to respond to that before being able to sign off on it, and say to them, "You guys probably don't mean the Bible is the only inerrant Word of God as a way of replacing the fact that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, right? I mean, I felt like I needed to say that and at least ask you that, because I don't think you guys would want to substitute the Bible in John 1 for the Word and say 'in the beginning was the Bible and the Bible was with God and the Bible was God.' I don't think you'd want to do that, but I felt like I should say it because of the way your statement is phrased." I passed muster and everything was fine, and we were still in contention for the grant.

But oftentimes we don't think about this. If we're going to have a really high view of Scripture, we need to keep the written word subservient to the Word, the Living Word. What I mean by that is to have the highest view of Scripture, it needs to be in its proper place. It needs to be held accountable to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ redefines the Old Testament when he comes in his ministry and says, “You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I tell you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” He’s reinterpreting what’s written in the written Word. He is reinterpreting that. He has a right to do that as the Living Word himself, Jesus Christ.

The highest view of Scripture we can have would not to be to put it up on the same pedestal as God and to worship it as God in that way, but keep it in a place where it serves Jesus Christ, because he is the most direct revelation of God that we have.

The irony is that we find out about Jesus Christ mostly through the Scripture, but we have to submit the vehicle to Jesus Christ, and we have to say that Jesus Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God. He is the way God has revealed himself to us. No one has seen God, but Jesus Christ his one and only Son has made him known. Everything regarding our biblical study must start with Jesus Christ.

JMF: I’ve seen a bumper sticker, I’m sure many people have, that says, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” They mean their personal interpretation of what they think God said, and that settles it in their mind, at least.

JM: Right. It’s easy to fall prey to a simplistic interpretation of Scripture that says... where it’s not really an interpretation of Scripture, it’s “I just do what the Bible says. Don’t give me any theology, don’t give me any interpretation, just give me the Bible.” But we all come to the Bible with a predisposition. We all read the Bible with a certain pair of glasses.

If I said to somebody, “You’ve got to hold the Bible accountable to Jesus Christ,” they would then, perhaps, if they were of that mentality, they might get really insecure and they might think, “If that’s the case, you can just pick and choose whatever you think is in congruity with Jesus Christ, and you’re just going to pick and choose, and it’s all going to be up to you.” It’s scary to them to let go of the idea that every single word needs to be worshiped in the same way and given the same value — and to allow for Jesus Christ to interpret the Bible makes them pretty anxious.

Yet when they say to me, “That just allows you to pick and choose,” I say, “People do that anyways. People pick and choose all the time.” Even the most literal biblical exegete or interpreter of Scripture or reader of Scripture, the most literal person who believes and exalts the inerrancy of Scripture, picks and chooses all the time. How many times have you seen somebody, lately, greet someone with a holy kiss? And yet that’s an express command.

JMF: Some say that the church falls short because they don’t [greet one another with a kiss].

JM: That's true. But there's so many places where the church falls short it begs the questions about whether or not we're interpreting things correctly.

JMF: There's even those who say, "I take the Bible literally and you must not, but I do, and I believe every word of the Scripture." They don't, of course. The Bible says God is a rock. They don't believe that God is a rock. They understand that that's a figurative statement, and in order for that statement to be true, you have to take it figuratively, because if you take it literally, it turns God into a rock, which is nonsense. So God is not a high tower, and he's not a rock... he's not water...

JM: Right.

JMF: All those are figurative statements, and we know that, and we interpret it that way. But people want to stand on the idea of literal, not even understanding what literal means.

JM: There's the story of the church leaders back during the Enlightenment day, who wanted to prove that the earth was the center of the universe, because God made the sun stand still for Joshua to complete his battle. God made the sun stand still, therefore it's the sun that moves, not the earth. And the earth must be the center of the universe. Galileo and Copernicus came along and proved otherwise, but those kinds of things come out of a literal interpretation of Scripture that's not meant to be literal.

We fall into those figures of speech all the time...calling the sunset or the sunrise by that particular phrase is not accurate, but it's just a metaphorical way of speaking. The sun doesn't "set," the sun doesn't "rise" — it does in our perception.

The greater disparity and the greater danger is when we get into issues of doctrine that divide the denominations in severe ways. Paul says in Galatians chapter 1, "If anyone has a gospel other than the one that I've taught you, let him be damned." A lot of leaders of churches professing their own particular interpretation of Scripture, their own brand, their own doctrine, will say in all seriousness, "I've got Paul's gospel. I know what he's talking about here." It gives them permission to damn people who don't have it, and to say they're in error, they're unorthodox, et cetera, et cetera. People love to do that kind of thing. It's part of our fallen nature. We shouldn't love it, but we enjoy making those kinds of judgments way too much.

Something's got to give here. Either Paul needs to come back to us and tell us what his gospel is, ...and that would settle it for everyone, what he meant by that...or we need to have a modicum of humility where it comes to scriptural interpretation and to be able to say, "God's ways are

higher than our ways, his thoughts higher than our thoughts. I don't have a corner on the market of truth. I can't comprehend the gospel, but I'm apprehending it, and I'm trying to learn what it means to interpret Scripture in a way that it all holds together most coherently."

It's an exercise, as T.F. Torrance taught us, of constant repentance. Theology is an exercise of constant repentance. You try a framework and a way to wear a pair of glasses to read Scripture, see how far it gets you, see how cohesive the Holy Scripture holds on that framework. If it doesn't work, you might go back and try another pair of glasses. I think a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture which allows us to say "that is of Christ, that is not of Christ, that goes along with the law of reality, the law of the real (as Bonhoeffer says), that does not seem to go along with the law of the real" actually holds things together in a better, more cohesive and meaningful way. But it means, again, to submit the vehicle itself to the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ.

My friend Douglas Campbell at Duke Divinity School [[click here](#) for interviews with Douglas Campbell] has just come up with a book called *The Deliverance of God* in which he tries to, from his perspective, interpret Romans in a way that's never been done before. He bases everything on this participation model of the Triune God and Jesus Christ as God's revelation of his life of love — Father, Son, and Spirit. Douglas does a great job of continuing over and over again to be disciplined as an exegete and as a theologian to define everything that he can by what God has revealed of himself in Jesus Christ.

Somebody criticized Douglas recently, and they said, "Can you believe in the preface... Dr. Campbell says that for the longest time I've been looking for a theology. I've been looking for a scriptural interpretation that would fit the theology that I felt God had given me, and finally the lights came on and I realized that this way of thinking actually held Romans together in a much more cohesive and life-giving way and in a more scholarly consistent way than any other presupposition or pair of glasses I had ever brought to the Scripture."

That was the gist of Douglas's words, and this guy said, "Can you believe that he's trying to fit the Bible into his presuppositions?" I said, "Well, at least he's honest about it." Everybody tries to fit the Bible into his or her presuppositions. The question really is, which presupposition is the most Christ-centered, which is based more on the accurate revelation of God that we see in Jesus Christ?

There are a lot of question marks for me when there's something that doesn't seem congruent to the way God has revealed himself in Christ. I just have to chalk it up to "I don't know. I don't

know how that fits together.” Instead of fitting Jesus Christ into the Old Testament [making him conform to our understanding of the Old Testament], I think it would behoove us to make sure that everything we read in Scripture is fit into the interpretive key of grace, the interpretive key of Jesus Christ. That means reading the Bible from right to left instead of from left to right, I guess you could say.

JMF: I find it fascinating in Luke 24, the road to Emmaus story, and the two people walking along with Jesus. They don't know it's him, and they're perplexed by everything that's happened, and they thought Jesus was Messiah, but he's dead now. Then, on the road, it says, “He revealed to them or explained to them everything contained in the Scriptures.” The thing that he reveals to them is that the Scriptures, meaning the Old Testament, the Scriptures that the Jews had at that time, were about *him*, and about that the Messiah would die and be crucified and raised in three days.

Well, it never says that in the Old Testament anywhere. You don't find that. And yet Jesus is telling them that *that* is what the Old Testament is all about, that's how you read it, how you understand it, and that's what it's all pointing to. What a light bulb that is, when you get your mind around it!

JM: Talk about the lights going on...I'd love to have been there and to have heard that. But we can imagine that, and we can think, what would he have said? We know a little bit about what he said from the text, but can you imagine him going through and elaborating on all the Old Testament Scriptures in that way?

The thing I imagine is that he takes the Psalms, I would think, and says, remember when you guys used to think of the righteous and the wicked in categories where you were the righteous and the other guys were wicked? You have the good guys, and that's you, and the bad guys, and that's the wicked. The Psalmist seems to be dualist in that way. Paul debunks that basically in Romans 3 when he uses all the passages that are quoted about the bad guys in the Psalms and he puts them all together and says that's *everybody*. “All have sinned and fall short. No one is good, no not one.”

Then he says that within the good news... all have been redeemed and justified by the work of Jesus Christ. There's the symmetry of the “all” and the “all.” All fall short, and all have been justified by his grace in 3:23 and 24. Paul reinterprets the Psalmist's dualism and what he wants to eventually lead to is to talk about the fact that those two things are not a dualism, they're a duality that's defined by the person of Jesus Christ, the two natures in one person — that Jesus Christ, that

we are the wicked, all of us, but Jesus Christ has shared our wickedness...that he is the righteous, but he's also shared his righteousness.

He shares our wickedness to give us his righteousness. That wonderful exchange moves us past the dualism of the Old Testament and moves us into the Christological way of understanding righteousness and wickedness as a duality, instead of in a dualistic way where we're the righteous, they're the wicked.

JMF: So we are actually the righteous *and* the wicked, because we are in Christ, and we are also the accepted and the rejected because we are in Christ, and these come together with the accepted and the righteous winning out because Christ has redeemed us in himself.

JM: He shares our nature with us, and in solidarity with us, he shares our nature, and he shares his nature as God with us, and we're made children of God like the wondrous exchange that the early church fathers talked about — the wondrous exchange which was the Son of God became son of men to make sons of men sons of God. That humiliation and exaltation that takes place in that movement of grace, that double movement of grace, is all in the Old Testament, but they didn't recognize then that what they were talking about in the righteous and the wicked was really a way of talking about what humanity looks like, because of the revelation of Jesus Christ, and instead they became self-righteous many times.

We have a tendency to do that now, to become pharisaical and self-righteous because we think in taking the Bible literally we'll read the Psalmist's expressions about how he's righteous. We think, that's us, too, now that we're Christians, or that's us, too, because we believe that to be true about ourselves, because Christ has given us some kind of righteousness to wear, maybe.

But it's interesting that in thinking about the Psalms christologically, we can give full play not only to our righteousness as being real and true by the grace of Jesus Christ, but also give full play to the wickedness of our lives, and we can know that, as Jesus says, "If your Father gives good things to you who are evil, how much more will he give of things of righteousness?"

JMF: It resolves also the unfairness that we see in the Old Testament so often. David was anointed king, but Jonathan son of Saul was a righteous man, faithful to God, dear friend of David, loyal to him in spite of his father's opposition to David, and yet he gets killed in an ignominious way, and it seems very unfair, the treatment of him. Even Esau... he like so many of us, he's hungry, and he's desperate for food, and so he despises his birthright, as it were, which is kind of a harsh judgment for just trying to get some food...

The New Testament says, let's talk about that, "Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated." That statement is often taken to show, or to prove, that anyone who says God loves everybody is false because, after all, the Bible declared that God hated someone, namely Esau, therefore you're a heretic if you say God loves everybody. What's a right way to understand that passage in its context?

JM: In the Psalms it talks about God hating evildoers. You think, if God hates evildoers, then as the righteous person that I am, I can hate evildoers too — it gives us that kind of permission. You've got the "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated," and you think, there is a place in God for hate, if you take those passages and lift them out of context. Jesus, though, as the revelation of the inmost being of God, says, "Love your enemies." What does it mean? Because Jesus even uses the word *hate* when he says, "If any man would come after me he must hate his father and mother." What does that mean?

JMF: We like to say love less, but the word actually is hate.

JM: Right. What does he mean there? I think it's the same thing as the Jacob and Esau. It's that hyperbole of contrast where he's choosing one. He's making a prioritizing claim. He's choosing one.

JMF: It's a hyperbole of contrast.

JM: To make a point he's saying there is a choosing, and I am choosing one over the other. I think it would be a mistake for us to say that Jesus wants us to hate our mother and father literally, because that would go against the Ten Commandments, and we're supposed to love our father and honor our father and mother. Surely that's not what Jesus means.

If we can interpret based on letting Scripture interpret Scripture, we can come to the conclusion that Jacob was chosen over Esau. It was a severe judgment at that time to choose one over the other, but in the end it was to bless even Esau.

JMF: It's for the sake of bringing about salvation of the world that God chooses Israel and doesn't choose the rest of the world.

JM: Right. To say that God hates evildoers...in the Old Testament, in the Psalms, you could say, if that's true, then what does Jesus mean about loving your enemies? You have to question, is Jesus God? If Jesus and God are the same, they're speaking out of two sides of their mouth at once. Unfortunately, a lot of people give up on the idea of Jesus being God in order to keep Scripture, that inerrancy question, alive because they would rather err on the side of Scripture being inerrant

than they would on the idea, in a way, of Jesus being the direct and full and final revelation of God himself....

JM: Unfortunately, in order to keep the idea of inerrancy intact, people are more likely to minimize Jesus being God ...

JM: So if God hates evildoers and Jesus is God, what do you do then? Because then it sounds like, if Jesus is God and God hates evildoers, but Jesus says love your enemies, it sounds like God's speaking, the Bible's speaking out of both sides...

JMF: You get the idea of the harsh God of the Old Testament and then loving Jesus comes long and he's kind of patching things up and fixing it and getting the Father out of the way.

JM: We know, even going back to that scarlet thread, of God's own description of his identity in Exodus 34:6-7, that that is a prophecy of Jesus Christ full of grace and truth, just like in Exodus Yahweh says, "I am God of love and faithfulness," which translates in the Greek on over to "grace and truth." That is, Jesus Christ is Yahweh. Jesus Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God.

I would rather err on the side of interpreting the Psalmist when he says, "God hates evildoers" than I would of trying to wiggle out of the fact that Jesus and God are of one essence and one being, because what Jesus says there about loving enemies is really expressive of the heart of God. But if you start with that, then what do you do with the Psalmist's quote? Then you have to say, "I'm sure the Psalmist felt that way, and the Psalmist is very raw about his feelings, but he probably feels, if God's on our side and God is with us and God is our covenant Father, then he must hate those people, because I sure do hate them."

JMF: Which is Paul's point in the first few chapters of Romans, where he is pointing out to Israelites that you're just as bad as the people that you want to condemn... Just going back to the Psalmist, he's condemning, and very accurately, the wicked evildoers, but he doesn't realize that he's in the same boat. And Paul brings that together and says, "We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We all also stand under the grace of God in Christ."

JM: That's right.

JMF: And that revelation doesn't mean we have to disassociate from the Old Testament. What it means is that we can draw and mine the riches of the Old Testament by looking at it through a Christ-centered perspective. With those glasses of God's revelation in Christ, we can mine the Old Testament in a way we never could before.

Even internally in the Psalms, a person who comes down on inerrancy has to struggle with some of the internal contradictions in the Psalms, for instance when David says early in Psalms...when he talks about the wicked, he talks about the evildoers as being in the other category of people, and then he talks about, in Psalm 14 and 15, about, “Who may dwell in your sanctuary, who may live on your holy mountain, those whose walk is blameless and do what is righteous, who speak the truth from their hearts, who have no slander on their tongues,” all these things. He does not see himself as indicted or as fitting the category of the wicked, but he does see himself as being able to carry off these things.

Later, in Psalm 51, in his repentance after his situation with Bathsheba, evidently he says things that are completely the opposite, about how sinful he is and how he doesn't seem blameless, or doesn't seem to claim righteousness or blamelessness in that passage, “Wash away all my iniquities and cleanse me from my sin, for I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.” That's David in both places. That needs to be figured out, it needs to be solved. It's tough for a person who believes in inerrancy to be able to solve that riddle, I guess, of the inherent contradiction within 50 chapters.

JMF: But when you go back to Christ as the key to interpreting all of Scripture, it's immediately resolved, because that's who we all are. We're both of those things, because Christ is perfectly righteous in us and for us, and yet he's sinned, in that he's become sin for us, as Paul puts it.

JM: Right. In an ironic way, Christ even defines our sinfulness. Not because he was a sinner in the things that he did, but because he assumed our sinfulness and teaches us about how sinful we are, but also to the great extent that we've been redeemed from that sinfulness.

JMF: It reminds me of how Jesus can take hold of a leper and heal him without getting leprosy, even though leprosy is contagious.

JM: Right. It's the doctor becoming the patient, but remaining the doctor the whole time and healing us.

JMF: It's funny how in human language we use metaphors and hyperbole all the time and we understand what we mean by it, and nobody takes it literally. If I say, “It's raining cats and dogs” nobody runs outside to see cats and dogs smashing against the ground. We know what I mean. We know that it's a way of saying that it's raining very hard. Nobody has a problem with that.

But God forbid that the Scripture should use the same kind of conventions that normal human

language does. Well of course it does! If I say the Phillies bombed the Dodgers, I don't mean the Phillies bombed the Dodgers literally. It's just a way of saying that they beat them with a high score. Everybody knows that, but then we go to Scripture and we all of a sudden want it to be literal in everything it says....completely misusing it.

JM: Right. And here's another thing that Christians tend to do along those lines, because they want to take the Bible as being applicable only to them sometimes, and in that way it's also narrowly viewed. This is what I mean: Sometimes I have people tell me, "Jeff, you're using these texts from the New Testament from the letters of Paul or the letters of Peter, but those are written to Christians. How can you say that that truth that you're talking about applies to everyone, when those are expressly written to Christians?"

Well, we have to go to the Scripture and say, okay, these people *are* Christians. *Why* are they Christians? When did those things become true for them? ...about them being sons of God, about them being adopted, about them being reconciled to God...if we say that those things became true for them *when they believed*, then I don't think I would have permission to use anything that was written to those Christians and then apply it to the human race.

However, there's a few places I could, because Paul does that when he uses the word "world" or when he says "all people." But if those things were true about them because of what Christ did, and Christians are only those who by the Holy Spirit come to repentance and believe in Jesus Christ, then they are believing in a prior truth — something that was true about them *before* they believed it and, in fact, is true about all people, but some haven't believed it yet, and some may never believe it.

JMF: Ephesians 1, Colossians 1 are explicit about that.

JM: What we can do, in a beautiful way, is to look through the *experience* of truth, to truth itself. It takes good theological exegesis to do this, but I'm looking through the experience of Christians who are experiencing the truth. You know how Paul talks about Christians coming to a knowledge, people coming to a knowledge of the truth. He doesn't use the word Christians. Well, that's what Christians are — folks who have come to a knowledge of the truth and who are celebrating it and worshiping God and giving credit where credit is due.

JMF: Our faith and our belief don't create the truth or cause it to happen — they accept what is already true.

JM: And unbelievers are a part of this truth. They don't know it, but... The good things that

come out of unbelievers' lives are there because of what Jesus Christ has done, and they are implicated in what he has done, and so if they act more Christian than Christians do sometimes, then that's because of Jesus Christ. And yet they don't give credit where credit is due as a worshiping, grateful, thankful believer will and should. In Scripture, what we need to do is look through the experience of believers to that truth that is applicable to all, and then all of a sudden we can see a lot of things that apply to everyone.

JMF: Sure. Good doesn't come out of nowhere. If there's good in the world, what's the origin of it? It only comes from God.

JM: There are a lot of people, a lot of different religions.... When Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, there is no way to the Father except through him. And yet as people have these thoughts about God that aren't Christian, what can you say? They would not even *have* those thoughts about God if Jesus Christ wasn't somehow associated with their life. A person could never produce a green shoot from a dead stump, as P.T. Forsyth once said.

It's because of Christ being nearer to them than they are to themselves that they could even have any thought about God. They don't know they're picking up the suitcase by their own handle. But as believers, let's you and I give credit where credit is due.

JMF: Sure.

JM: And let's say that no one even thinks about God, apart from the fact that Jesus Christ has unified himself with them, and that he is their Lord and Savior. Therefore no wonder they're going to have these thoughts about God. That's why we need to get out there and tell them the answer to this general feeling that they have.

JMF: Because it's the Father's will that everyone come to know Jesus Christ.

JM: Blaise Pascal once said, and put these words in God's mouth, he said, "You would not seek me unless you had found me."

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Everyone Belongs, Whether They Know It or Not

JMF: Could you tell us about Reality Ministries?

JM: Reality Ministries is an inter-church, community-based, 501(c)(3) faith-based nonprofit ministry in Durham, North Carolina. Reality Ministries' mission statement is "helping adolescents to live into the loving presence and life-changing reality of Jesus Christ."

JMF: "Live into"?

JM: "Live into" in the sense that "you are included, you are involved, you are implicated in what Jesus Christ has done and in his life on your behalf, his ongoing life on your behalf. You belong to him. Grow up into that reality, learn to live and breathe in that reality." We want kids to know that they belong to Jesus Christ not because of what they've done but because of what he's done.

We have a big banner up in the Reality Center that says "I am for you." We want everything that we do at the Reality Center to be Christ-centered. We want them to know that we are for them. Many of the kids we work with are disadvantaged youth, marginalized parts of the adolescent population. Our young friends with disabilities have been overlooked and underserved. We want every single student who comes into the Reality Center to know that we are for them, and the reason that we are for them is because God is for them. He has done everything for them to include them and to reveal himself to them through the person of Jesus Christ so that they might know they are beloved sons and daughters of God.

JMF: The kids you're serving are all in Durham?

JM: All in Durham. When we started the ministry, we were forced out of another organization. It's interesting because they came up with a document called "The Non-Negotiables of Gospel Proclamation," and I was asked to sign off on every detail of that document — every line, every part of the document. The interesting thing about it was that it was a document that endeavored to solve an age-old question of "How do we synthesize Arminian thinking and Five-Point Calvinist thinking?"

This organization, like many evangelical organizations who have tried to make sense of some of the scriptures that put more emphasis on God's initiative, some more emphasis on human decision, this document was a way to try to reflect as best as possible what it means to "preach like Wesley but believe like Calvin." For many years, I thought that was the only thing we could do—that was the best we could do, was to preach like Wesley and believe like Calvin (although,

and I'd have to qualify that a little bit by saying I'm not sure Calvin would really want to be known as a Calvinist).

The Calvinist way of thinking is that only some people belong to God. The Arminian way of thinking is that no one really belongs to God, he is not Savior and Lord, he is not their Father until a decision is made. An Arminian way of thinking about belonging is that "nobody belongs until a decision is made." The Five-Point Calvinist way of thinking would be more "some do belong, but only some, and Christ died for only some."

JMF: Regardless of decision.

JM: Regardless of decision. What we believe in Reality Ministries is neither one of those two options. We believe that everyone belongs because of what Jesus Christ has done. That in no way minimizes human decision. As we've said other times, it actually gives us a more personal and more free response because we are responding from within the truth, and we know the truth sets us free.

In Reality Ministries, we want every person to know that he or she belongs to God and that's where everything starts...that he is for them, that he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him, as Paul says in Romans chapter 8? And so, if God is for us, who can be against us?

We want them to know that, even in spite of the fact that some of their circumstances are really horrendous. The poverty in terms of some of the kids that we are working with, in terms of the at-risk youth, the challenges that are there for our young friends with disabilities. They might be tempted to think that God is against them. We want them to know that that's not the case, that they do belong.

I have never been more certain of giving kids their belonging as a starting point of evangelism than I have been after these last two years, when we had begun to work with these kids who have been beaten down in many ways throughout their life and are looking for somewhere to belong. Their families are fractured. Folks with disabilities, their mom and dads have a lot less likelihood of staying together in marriages because of the strain it's put on a family because of a child with disabilities.

When you've got low-income parents who often are not two-parent households, and you have a lot of single moms and absent dads, there's a real need for belonging. The last thing I want to do with those kids is say, "You can belong to God *if...*" Not just because that would be farther out of

their reach and be a mean thing to say, not that at all, but I don't believe it's true.

JMF: Most youth programs, or most churches, take that kind of approach where God is not for you until you say the sinner's prayer, until you confess your sins and accept Christ. Now Christ changes his mind toward you because of *your* action, which he may have led you to or whatever. But not until you make that decision, does what Christ has done for your salvation actually apply to you.

JM: Right. As I've said in other places, even a Five-Point Calvinist who knows those few, the elect, belong to God, but he can't say that on the front end to everyone, because not everyone does belong. So he has to hold the good news back, give the bad news first, act as a functional Arminian, and then after acting as a functional Arminian... because Calvinists, Five-Point Calvinists and Arminians can agree on one thing — we start with sin and then we'll figure out everything after that.

JMF: So the starting place in trying to teach the gospel to people is “you're a sinner, you need to admit your sin, look for the sin in your life, admit that, and then God will move on your behalf.”

JM: The topical memory system is what a lot of evangelists are trained on. And the B-pack of the topical memory system is called the gospel. The first verse is Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” It doesn't finish the sentence out. I wish it did. It stops at the comma. Because the second part of that sentence is one of the most beautiful sentences in all of Scripture, and yet it's just, “start with that point of sin and then if a person decides to follow Christ, then they belong at that point.” A Calvinist will say, “and then I can tell that person, you belonged all along, I couldn't tell you that upfront because I didn't know if you were one of the elect.”

That way of Reformed thinking is what I call back-door Reformed theology, because you have to wait until a person responds before you can give them their belonging, before you can give him or her belonging, because you don't know until *they* decide if that's the case. It's like a retroactive type of belonging.

I'm a front-door Reformed evangelist. I believe we give *everyone* his or her belonging, because Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, Savior of all, he's the head of the human race, he is the second Adam in whom all men and women are included.

Giving that belonging, making that claim on a person's life is very powerful. That cuts through a lot of the desire, to belong oneself to God, or to belong oneself to a gang. When we come right down to it, a lot of these kids we deal with are tempted to join gangs. They're looking for

some belonging, some semblance of a community. Even though it's a destructive community, that kind of belonging is attractive to young teenagers that we work with.

In the evangelical world, what I sense happening is that there is a group of people on the more conservative of the right wing of the evangelical camp who are circling the wagons fairly tightly and who don't want to give belonging away to anyone upfront. But what I feel is happening is, and I feel like we're a part of this somehow as God has orchestrated it and as we've navigated through these first couple years, somehow we're a part of a greater story that's happening within the evangelical world where there are a lot of people in evangelicalism who really do believe that everyone belongs by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the circling of the wagons on the right wing, there's created a huge swath of discontented evangelists in the middle and left side of the evangelical camp (I'm just talking about the evangelical camp) who say no!

In this generation, this broken and blended generation more than ever, we've got to start with belonging. We've got to start with every young person knowing that he or she belongs to God. To me, it all comes down to "are we going to define reality by Jesus Christ?" If we are, then there's at least four points that I think are in direct contradistinction to the four points in the extreme right side of the evangelical camp. Those four points would be

- 1) Do we belong to God because of what Jesus has done, or because of what we've done?
- 2) Second, are we reconciled to God because of the work of Christ, or because we made a decision?
- 3) Third, are we forgiven before we ask, or are we only forgiven when we ask? I think you can see the interpenetration of all these themes.
- 4) And fourth, are we a child of God when we decide we want to be, do we adopt ourselves into God's family, or are we adopted into God's family and made sons and daughters of God by the grace of God and what he's done in revealing his heart through Jesus Christ and in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

On all four of those counts, the conservative side of evangelicalism would disagree with me. But I believe there is a robust and passionate group of gospel-proclaimers that I see popping up all over the place who feel like they have a greater zeal for evangelism than ever before because this really is good news. In Reality Ministries, we want to be the heralds of that good news.

JMF: Some people would argue that what you're talking about sounds good to us, plays to our sense of fairness and so on, but it's just our wishful thinking, or your wishful thinking, but it's not a biblical stance and that theirs is the true biblical approach.

JM: I was in a staff meeting yesterday morning and we talked about Jesus Christ being the most exclusive and the most inclusive person that there is. All I can say in answering a question

like that is “let’s go to the Scriptures together.” Let’s talk about Jesus Christ being the most inclusive and exclusive. Inclusive — John chapter 12, Jesus said, “When I am lifted up (speaking of his death on the cross), I will draw all people to myself.” That’s inclusive. Exclusive — Jesus Christ says in chapter 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” That’s right there in two chapters, in John 12 and John 14 — the greatest inclusivity and greatest exclusivity that you can find.

Then, John 17... what do we want these kids to know? They’re included, but you don’t just leave it at that. “Oh, they’re included, they’ll be fine, they’re in the flock.” No. We want them to know the Good Shepherd. We want them to know Jesus Christ. John 17, Jesus says, “What is eternal life? This is eternal life, that they might know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.” He’s making the inmost connection between Jesus himself, between himself and the Father, and he wants us to know the Father’s heart by knowing him. That’s what we want these young people to know.

Yes, they’re included, but it’s *because* they’re included, that we want them to know how exclusive the claim of Jesus Christ is on their life. It’s the claim of truth. To live opposed to that, or in resistance to that, is to live in the economy of the lie and the father of lies, the deceiver, who wants to take the truth and twist it and distort it. He’s done that even in using the word “reality,” because usually we think of the word, thanks to Satan’s ploy, reality usually has bad connotations. It has connotations of the harsh realities of life, the brutal realities of our existence. “That was a great experience at camp this week, now it’s back to reality, back home in the rat race.” The word “reality” has been twisted around. That’s because the father of lies wants it that way.

We want kids to know, “The reality, the deepest reality of your life, is God’s love for you and your inclusion in his life in Jesus Christ.” That’s the deepest reality. That is the deepest, most fundamental reality. All the other realities of our fallen contingent existence are only contrasted and counterfeit to the ultimate real, the kingdom of God.

So when those kids walk through that doorway, we look at them, we treat them, and we act as if they are our brothers and sisters regardless of whether they have come to belief in the Lord or not. It’s our hope that they would want to live at home with the Father in the love of Christ by the Holy Spirit, but, as I’ve said before many times, many are lost in their thinking, but that lost-ness needs to be couched within the found-ness. It needs to be “a person cannot be lost unless he has a home.” We want them to know what their home is, who their home is, and how they can walk in

relationship with this great God that we know.

JMF: What are some of the passages that are used by those who would say we're *not* included, and that "the decision" is the lynchpin point?

JM: It was interesting on that "Non-Negotiables" document that I was telling you about. I said, "Wait a minute, is everybody, is everybody in this, is everybody in this mission going to have to agree to every part of this paper? That's going to be tough to do, because there are parts of the paper that don't agree with each other." It's going to be hard to get everybody to agree on every part, because there are parts that don't agree with each other, and the reason is because there were some Arminian elements and there were some Five-Point Calvinist elements in the paper, and they were all mixed together.

Belonging, in the Five-Point Calvinist mindset, is only given to those who belong to God, or those who are his sheep, those who are died for, those who are his beloved, those are the people of God. Those are the ones who belong, and that's been settled from all eternity. They'll use different templates from Scripture to explain that, like, "The road is wide that leads to destruction and many are on it, the road is narrow that leads to eternal life and a few are on it." They'll use that, and project that into eternity, and say that's basically the way it is. There's more people who don't belong, in that paradigm, than there are who do belong.

On the Arminian side of the coin, you've got a passage like, "God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life." In that passage, it makes it sound like Christ is something that we possess. It's like a container. It's like we're a God-shaped vacuum, Christ is out there somewhere...if we invite Christ to come in, Revelation 3:20 is often used in this way as well, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in."

The idea is that we're the one who has the power to let Christ in or not let Christ in. We're the empty container, we can invite him in, and until we invite him in, he has nothing to do with our life at all — we're just walking around totally separated from God. That smacks against the idea of God's omnipresence, and it smacks against the idea that what God has done in Jesus Christ is become Immanuel, God with us, and that there is nowhere we can flee from his presence.

We want kids to know they are in his embrace, Christ has embraced them at their worst, and we're not the center of reality, where *we* can invite Christ in as an accessory to our lives, or even to be the center of our life. Christ is *always* the center. He's never anything but the center. Because of

what he's done in Christ, he's the center of everyone's life. That sounds heretical to some in the evangelical world, but when you think about it, how heretical does it sound to say that Christ is not involved, that Christ is not the center, but *we* make him the center? To me, that sounds a lot more heretical.

JMF: That kind of language is used constantly — “make Christ the center of your life.”

JM: Right. And how can we do that? How can we make Christ the Lord? How can we make him the Savior? He simply *is* the Savior and the Lord. I saw a bumper sticker a little while ago that said, “George Bush is not my president.” Well, either that person wasn't a United States citizen or he could get away with that, but if he is, George Bush *is* his president. He may not like it, he may not decide it, he may not want it, he may not believe it, but George Bush *is* his president.

Jesus Christ is the center of reality. He is the center of everything. He's the center of everyone. And that's what makes sin so bad, is because we are bucking the reality of our lives. We are bucking it, we are violating God's economy, we are violating ourselves, when we act as if *we* make Jesus Christ the Savior or the Lord or the center of our lives.

We know that he is the one. “When you've done it to the least of these,” he says, “You've done it unto me.” We know he is the one who has come near and become a part of our lives in a way that if he wasn't, we wouldn't even be able to walk around. We wouldn't even be able to breathe, because even in creation it talks about God breathing his Spirit into us.

A lot of times we're not used to that kind of language, because we're used to the container way of thinking. We're used to the idea that we invite Christ in, we add him in, and he is not in our lives until we say that he is. So I think we have to re-train ourselves to think about the incarnational union that Christ has made with all of us. It has to do with a fancy word called *ontology*, but right out of Paul's sermon in Acts 17 at the Areopagus when he says, “In him we live and move and have our being,” this idea that all human being exists inside of the being of God, and Jesus Christ is God.

All human being exists in Christ, and in every human being Christ exists — not manifest in the same way, and hopefully by the Holy Spirit those who believe in Jesus Christ will manifest the fruit of the Spirit and will live a life of Christian worship and obedience. There is a big difference between Christians, or should be, between Christians and unbelievers.

What we want these kids to know at the Reality Center is that Jesus Christ is so near to you he has violated your personal space with his love. Usually violating someone's personal space is a

bad thing, and I hesitate to mix those understandings, but here's the point I want to make: If you're walking across the street and a big Mack truck is coming down the road and I run out and I tackle you and save your life, are you going to say afterwards, "Jeff, I can't believe you violated my personal space!" Of course not!

JMF: Especially if I didn't know there was a truck coming and didn't believe you.

JM: You might not realize the danger you were in until after you realize the rescue has taken place. A lot of times that's the way it is in our lives. After we come to know Jesus Christ as Savior, we begin, after being given that safe place, we begin to be able to acknowledge our sinfulness at a new level, and instead of managing it or putting a good face on it, we can actually confess it. What we want are not sin *managers* as disciples of Christ, we want sin *confessors*.

I'm going through a Bible study with this group I have at the Reality Center called Real Men. It's made up of a group of mostly at-risk young people. They are at risk of dropping out of school, they're at risk of joining a gang, they're at risk of domestic violence, they're at risk of substance abuse, all kind of things that we mean when we say "at risk." This is called Real Men, and the whole premise of it is, I want you to learn what it means to be a real man, which means to depend on Jesus Christ — not to live as an autonomous captain of your own ship or pretend that you're independent from God.

I asked them, using the story of Jesus in Luke 18, I said, "Which person is growing more in his relationship with Christ? The one who prays, who reads the Bible, who fasts [and I explained what that was], who tithes [gives money, I explained what that was], and that everyone thinks is a godly man because of those things, or the person who's a liar, and a thief, and a cheat, just a crook and a corrupt business person. Which one of those two people do you think is growing more in his relationship with God?"

It's a trick question. Most people, if they haven't thought about this story before, will say it's the person who values the Scripture and who's tithing and who's fasting, who is growing more in his relationship with Christ. But this story that Jesus tells about the tax collector and the Pharisee at the temple has a different outcome. It's the crummy guy, it's the worst guy in town (as tax collectors were known to be) who's going home [counted as] "right in God's eyes," it says, because he trusted God's nature and God's love. He was able to be real with God, because somehow he trusted that God was generous, that God was kind, that God was loving. And because of that, he was able to bare his soul, "Have mercy on me, for I am a sinful man," he says.

I told the guys, “That’s what a real man is. A real man is someone who trusts God’s love enough to where he can be real with God. And in turn, God becomes more real to us when we do that, and we become more real with each other and with other people.” That’s what we’re doing at the Reality Center. Not only do we think that it’s a great opportunity to tell kids stories from the Scriptures, but we want them to know that Christ is involved in recreation. We want them to know he’s very involved in their educational progress, in their educational opportunities. We want them to know that he is a God who has made us mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally for himself. Everything we do at the Reality Center, hopefully, is to develop that whole person in the wholeness and healing of Jesus.

JMF: Thanks for being with us. Time flies by so fast, we barely get started and we’re finished.

JM: It does. Right.

JMF: We appreciate your time.

JM: I love talking about Reality.

JMF: We’ve been talking with Jeff McSwain, founder of Reality Ministries. I’m Mike Feazell for *You’re Included*.

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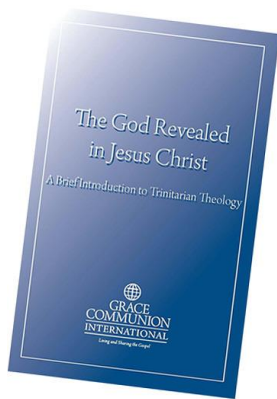
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Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of pastors and others engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the Incarnational life of the church.

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