

Being Human: Interviews With Cherith Fee Nordling

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

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

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Our guest in the following interviews is Cherith Fee Nordling, now Associate Professor of Theology at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. She earned her PhD in 2003 from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. She is the author of:

- *Knowing God by Name: A Conversation between Elizabeth A. Johnson and Karl Barth*
- *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (with David Guretzki and Stanley Grenz)

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, D.Min., adjunct professor of theology at Grace Communion Seminary.

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What Does It Mean to Be Human?

JMF: Our guest today is Dr. Cherith Fee Nordling, [now Associate Professor of Theology at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Lombard, Illinois]. An ordained minister, preacher and popular lecturer, Dr. Nordling is author of numerous articles including, “Being Saved as a New Creation,” “Karl Barth and the Pietists,” and “Becoming Who We Are: Incarnation, Identity and Vocation.” Her first book [is *Knowing God by Name: A Conversation between Elizabeth A. Johnson and Karl Barth*, published by Peter Lang in 2010].

Thanks for joining us today.

CFN: Thank you for having me.

JMF: Would you begin by telling us how you came to be involved with Trinitarian theology?

CFN: Trinitarian theology (without having that name, and especially the fact that those two words feel very loaded and hard to understand) has been part of my way of knowing and loving and thinking about God for my whole life. Having come up through the tradition that I did, the person of the Holy Spirit was very present, clear and active. My understanding of Jesus as God who had come among us and as Savior was something from my childhood that I’ve always known and loved, and God as Father.

I was raised in a family where I was invited into the love of God as my Father through my father and my parents. This was the way that we spoke about God: as Father, Son, and Spirit – that was always part of how I knew God. It was much later, in my mid-to-late 20s, where the term *Trinitarian* began to take root as a way of being part of our worship life in our Presbyterian church.

I came into that Reformed tradition in my 20s and I loved being in these creedal traditions where you got to say the Nicene Creed and you got to say the Apostles’ Creed like bullet points or shorthand, or sort of PowerPoint presentation of the gospel. To affirm these things would get deep in my soul. Finally, one day a dear friend was worshipping and praying to God as triune, as the triune one who she exalted and loved and was loved by. The penny dropped – I thought, that’s a beautiful term that isn’t in the Bible but all of its content is in the Bible – this beautiful way of speaking about God as the one God who is God this way – as three persons in

communion.

The theology side (I'd always been a little nervous about theology) is very ivory tower and distant from the way that we're trying to live day-to-day as faithful believers in the market place. Yet I started to recognize that as a general term for saying, "How do we think about God, and how do we think about everything else in relation to God – to let that word be this covering. I thought, "There is a lot at stake whether we get this theology accurate or not." I don't mean *right*, because theology is deep and rich, and God's way of giving himself to us is clear, in terms of who he is as Father, Son, and Spirit. But the ways that he lets us reflect on him are many and good. *Right* and *wrong* always feels like there is only one way, and everything else is wrong. One of the beauties of being in the Trinitarian theology conversation is to go, "It's sort of like this, and when we think about this..." There are many angles that we as creatures can try to glimpse, and love and worship out of.

All of that life in the church made those terms less frightening to me when it came time to actually doing study, which I hadn't anticipated falling into but ended up in my mid-30s. I went back to school and realized that the deep questions I had – what does it mean to be truly human, what does it mean to be human in relation to God – were going to be answered only out of the only true human who has ever pulled it off – Jesus.

JMF: So you started to pursue some work in psychology at first...

CFN: I did. We were noticing a lot of amazing things in our congregation. People were coming in through radical encounters with the Lord. Lives were deeply changed, but they were coming in out of horrendous situations, with lots of brokenness and psychological baggage – sometimes deeply disordered. We had a counseling center as part of the church, and we were in good relationships with counselors in the San Francisco area – there were times when counselors would say, "Could we gather to pray?" ... because what we're doing in our therapy session, sometimes we need to discern whether this is something of the Spirit, or something of the evil one, whether this is demonic, whether this is psychological, what is it? I wanted to understand what we were doing.

Whatever we are doing, are we caring well, and loving well? So I went back to school and started a Masters in Psychology. Someone caught me in the middle of that experience and said, "Cherith, none of your questions sound psychological – they always sound theological – they're always of a much bigger picture, a much bigger arena in which all these things come to matter."

That became a moment where I thought, theology is not so much a frightening word – it's a nice term for the arena in which we as the people of God get to think about the things of God. He encouraged me to think about doing theology instead of psychology. So I changed course and I've become what I never thought I would be, which is what people call a *theologian*.

JMF: You started at Regent College?

CFN: I started my first Masters at the College of Notre Dame in Northern California, did my Masters in Christian Studies and Theology at Regent College, and then we moved to England. I had two sons who were 9 and 11 at the time. That was a big move for us, and my husband gave up his ministry and career so I could go back to school for five years there, and I ended up in London and then in St. Andrew's, as my supervisor took a post up there. That was a wonderful experience for us. We've been back in the States for about seven years and I've been trying to do this thing called theology professionally in the academy and in the church ever since.

JMF: A lot of people would be wondering, how did the kids do? Apparently it was a good experience for them.

CFN: It was a great experience for them. It was incredibly stretching. They thought they knew what English was, but discovered that England English and ours are different languages, but it was a gift to all of us. One of the most beautiful parts of that experience was to live in a little town far away from my school. I wasn't in a university setting. I wasn't surrounded by fellow students. I was surrounded by people who, by and large, had grown up in that little town – walking twice a week to a little church that had been there for a thousand years. We were part of this Anglican communion that had a deeply Trinitarian liturgy, and we took the Eucharist and participated in that communion on a weekly basis with wonderful people. They gathered around and helped me type parts of my dissertation and basically we were adopted into this amazing little fellowship of believers in England. They have continued to be part of our faithful family ever since, and that radically shaped not just my sons' lives but my husband's and mine.

JMF: You're asked to do a lot of lecturing. What sort of topics are people usually looking for when they ask you to come?

CFN: My father (Gordon Fee) was born and raised, as was my mother, in the Pentecostal tradition, but I lived in Reformed worlds that are curious about how to have conversations about what does it mean to live the life of a Pentecostal... I grew up as a person who deeply loved the biblical text, watched my father who deeply loved the Lord, and then love the biblical text (and

not in the reverse order). I used to go with my dad when he would teach, or go on retreats to do these kinds of things. I couldn't get enough of the story and it never occurred to me that I should be like him, because I thought, this is equipping me to get out into the marketplace. So I was a paralegal for 15 years and loved being just a Trinitarian believer in the work that God had called me to do at that time.

I came from a background that made life in the Holy Spirit normal or natural to me. I did not see a lot of excess, I did not see a lot of things that were confusing or frightening (I hear a lot of horror stories from people's experiences). So I'm asked to speak about that.

I'm also asked to talk about how and why the life of the Triune God matters to us, and what it means to actually being a Christian. I say, "There is only one kind of Christian and that's the Trinitarian Christian – the only life that you are invited into, is to know this God. This is how he's made himself known to you and this is the impact that it has."

Then, to talk about Jesus' life, which is a challenge, because his life is a mystery that I can't describe any better than I can describe the Trinity. But at this point in my life, I take very seriously the incarnation in the sense that God has taken on my humanity and restored my humanity permanently, and he holds in his current and on-going humanity the life that I will have as Cherith, female human image-bearer of God, and that is a permanent reality that God has made for me.

There is no splitting of my body and my soul, even if following Jesus has a thing I do with my head, or my heart. I think part of it is being around college students who are deeply ambivalent or confused or have a million messages about their embodied life and their sexuality, and then watching in my life in the church how those kinds of things get set in place, either very early or in those later years when they start becoming aware, whether they feel free to let the Lord be the Lord of that part of their life as well, so just trying to think how do we understand ourselves because of who Jesus is.

Not just who he was, but who he is, and what he's presently doing that helps inform our own understanding of getting up in the morning saying, "What are we doing today, Jesus? What are you doing today and what, by the Spirit do I get to participate in that continues to bring glory to the Father, in a way that you take my human life seriously and mediate my human life and pray for my human life today, and intercede that I would not be led into temptation but to walk in the way that looks like the kingdom come on earth, so as in heaven." And to pay attention to what

that would mean and not get my belief system locked in, but to function as somebody who is supposed to look like Jesus in a way that I'm going to look for. That raises a new wonderful dynamic about how to follow the Lord. That has become a deeply incarnational conversation that I didn't see coming, but just sort of developed over time over the last ten years.

JMF: Let's talk about your first book, with Peter Lang Publishing group. How did that come about, and what led you into that topic?

CFN: I was at Regent at that time. I knew in my heart of hearts (although I kept taking as much Bible as I could instead of theology, because I was afraid that systematic theology would become dry, categorized and compartmentalized) I loved theology emerging from the text. It took me a while to trust the theology classes that I was taking would reinforce that, and they did, beautifully.

It was later in my time at Regent, that I had a professor named Stan Grenz, who said, "Cherith, I know you're interested in doing something in your final thesis on the Triune life of God and how that influences our life as a community who participates in God. Here's this book called *She Who Is*, by a Catholic feminist theologian, who has re-constructed the doctrine of God, the Triune doctrine of God, in female form. She believes that she has permission to do this from her Catholic tradition and her understanding of analogy, and that being a way of talking about God. So would you mind reading this book and doing your thesis around this, because we are all curious whether she has a leg to stand on in this argument."

Naively, I said, "Yes." [**JMF:** You don't even have to think of the topic.] Exactly, except that I had no idea that I just jumped off the deep end of the swimming pool into 19th and 20th-century liberal theology, which I've never read, feminist theology, which I hadn't read, and Catholic theology, which I hadn't read.

So it threw me into a variety of new worlds. Instead of trying to sit back and observe, I was trying to get in. I was trained to understand this from the inside out, to ask, "Why did she want to write this book, why is this important to her?" She, very straightforwardly, said, "I do this because my tradition, as I have experienced it, feels like God is this solitary male figure, this ego who's unrelated to the world, who doesn't care about the world." She used the term "classical theism" for this old way of talking about God out there.

JMF: That's the way most people think about God.

CFN: They think about God singularly... kind of, there's God and us, as if there are two

subjects, and that's it...

JMF: The popular movies about God, as good and as interesting as they are, present this solitary picture.

CFN: Solitary picture, that's right, and always a male picture. She was of the conviction that the people who suffer most, including at the hands of the church, because of the way theology is either spoken or enacted, are women, and usually women of color with children. She had spent a lot of years caring for the poor and the oppressed in Central America, in South Africa... Over time, she felt that if we could talk about God as a female, then men would not use God as their alter ego and have God function in these ways that she perceived as distant. If we could have God be female, then it would be hard to see God that way and then hurt or harm women. I'm not convinced that that's true – not because it's not an interesting idea, but because we're so broken that no matter how we perceive God, we're still going to harm each other, and need to forgive one another.

I was curious about why she thought it was important to come up with a new way of thinking about God in order to get what she thought God was doing, which was loving people... What was it about the gospel that didn't sound like good news to her? What was it about Jesus that hurt her, that wasn't life-giving to her own life, or to the lives of women? I wanted to understand what drove her and her colleagues (who are dialogue partners in her book) to write what they did. I felt like I needed to sit with some humility and listen to that, and say, "Where has the church not stepped up? Why do they think they need to do what they're doing, because they see a big hole, a big empty space where the church should be bearing the image of God and being for the other, and especially the other who cannot be for themselves in the current world?"

My challenge in writing that book was to say, "There's a very different thing going on when you call the church to account" and say "Who are we really, and what are we called to in our obedience, and where have we really blown it, that we need to rethink God?" What does Trinitarian theology – as the church has understood its life lived in the presence of the Father because of Jesus by the Spirit – have to say that is the good news as it has been given to us, and where do we go back and listen to it in a way that calls us to account to change our ways of behaving. So I have a deep respect for them. But I also have a challenge...

JMF: You're seeing the same problem, same ways to meet the same roles...

CFN: I answer it with, I think, the conversation that God has given us over a very long time

without needing to completely change that conversation. But one of the fascinating things that's come out of writing that book is that this vein of modern theology that her book is part of, does, in one way, take Jesus' humanity seriously. They're nervous about a sort of divine Jesus who doesn't really touch the human condition. But what you end up with, in a lot of that theology, is you have a Jesus who never gets to be God made flesh. It's never really the Word who has come present to us. It's God who has adopted this man to be a divinely appointed or anointed or Spirit-filled man in a unique way. That changes the story completely – because you don't have God being present to us enacting, suffering with, dying, atoning – you don't have the things that are the reconciling acts that only God can do.

I have to think, “What does it mean to look at Jesus' humanity that says, ‘the one who is present to me is God as this person, one person, Jesus Christ, God and man?’” How is his life completely unlike mine in that there will never will be and ever would be another incarnation, because there is only the Son who has become permanently part of his own creation as the Creator. That is unique to Jesus and to no one else in the world, and yet his having become human is to take on everything that belongs to my humanity. Yet to pull it off, to be one who walks in obedience to the Father, who does not sin but who takes all the brokenness that is tempted toward that, and challenged by that, and think, “that means he lives his life everyday, all day long, having to obey – having to say, ‘Ok, who gets this moment – me or the Father?’”

What does it mean for him to say, “I only do what I hear the Father tell me to do, I only do what I see the Father doing, I enact by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is doing in the world. [That is what a true human being is about – to bear the image of God for the good creation and for its flourishing, and for its life to be restored and for its healing and for its recreational restoration.] ...to be faithfully what I am supposed to be and what I am going to be, as well as being God who is present to me, is ...”

I don't have words to explain the mystery and the beauty like that.

I've started to take his humanity seriously, because without his ongoing life, then it feels like he sort of dipped into the human story for 33 years, did a saving kind of thing for three of those years by talking about what life by grace is and what life in the kingdom is about, and then dying on the cross to make sure that we all get that life someday, and then being resurrected and ascending and popping off the scene and dropping his body somewhere and going back to being the eternal Word or this Son and his pre-existent “whatever.”

JMF: In a sense that still leaves us alone.

CFN: It does. Suddenly there is not God with us. What I grew up assuming, without ever knowing it, I thought Jesus dropped his body somewhere and was back to being the Son and was glad that he was done with that. I've read John 17 and I'd hear in that, "I can't wait to get out of this situation." The outpouring of the Spirit was my way of thinking, "I understand that God is still with us, and God is present to us, that the Spirit is Immanuel in this time. Because I didn't understand, fully, that it was not just the Spirit but it is actually Jesus who continues to mediate my presence before God as the firstborn of the new human race, the firstborn from among the dead or the firstborn of the new humanity.

In Hebrews 2 where it says (I always think like Jesus was having his arms around me) "both the one who is holy and the one who makes them holy, have the same Father. So he's not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters because we have the same Father." I think, "that's right, he is in that position – high priesting for me, mediating my life, saying, 'we're in this together,' we belong and we stand." Not only that he stands in that place for me before the Father, he really gets my life. Hebrews says he's tempted in every way except without sin. Well, that's every way, weariness trying to pull away, watching through the Gospels – where does Jesus, where do you get this where the sense of the Spirit is going? No, this is what we're doing.

I think of Jesus getting in the boat after being weary from teaching and healing and going away. It says he looked back and saw these people on the shore and had compassion. He says, "turn the boat around," and he begins to teach the next day, empowered by the Spirit to do this hard thing. In that day he feeds the multitude. Did he wake up that morning saying, "I'm God, so I think I'll do a miracle and that will convince them"? Or is he really living a life that is like mine, which would mean that he would have to be listening to the Father and listening to the Spirit? I'm curious as I listen to that story thinking, "When did you have this sense that this is what was going to happen, that is what the Father was inviting you into, that this is what the Spirit was empowering you to do? Was it when you prayed? I don't know, he doesn't tell us that, but to realize that this is not Jesus in his divine brain saying, "I think it's time for a miracle, I'd better do something holy or God-like."

When he was tired in the boat, this was his humanness coming out? What does it mean for him to be God who has become like me and relinquishing the privileges that come with acting divine without being human – which is what Philippians 2 says, that he relinquishes these divine

prerogatives, to enact them in a way that is a faithful human and image-bearer of the divine.

I watched his life through the Gospels and think, “how did he do that?” He said, “by the Spirit, and what have I invited you into, Cherith? Life in the Spirit – so what about your life? Do you think I don’t understand? What about my life do you think you’re not supposed to be doing?” That’s Paul’s language in Ephesians 1 and 2: “this is the one who’s ascended to this place and sits in this place of power and authority under which everything has been set. By the way, you, in Christ, have already been seated in this place of power and authority.” That’s what human image bearers are to do, to manifest the power and authority and the love for the other which is God in the world. “So you too should be getting on and being part of what Jesus is doing from that position.” That makes me wake up differently and say, “What would you invite me into today that isn’t what I would do by myself?”

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What Will the Resurrected Body Be Like?

JMF: You've done work on the need to see Jesus not only in the past as fully God and fully human, but even *now* as fully God and fully human.

CFN: Yes, and the important thing to remember as we have this conversation is that we speak about mysteries that we haven't seen, and yet we need to speak about them as loudly, happily and wonderfully as we can, because blessed are those who haven't seen, but there are plenty who did. The 40 days of Jesus' resurrection life shows up as a sort of a preview that says, "This is really me. I'm not here as a ghost, I'm not here as a spirit being who can walk through a wall just to say some last things before I kick off and leave. This is what it looks like for you to get your life back."

That is what the gospel is about. That is what salvation is: that *you*, who have been beloved before the foundations of the earth, you, who the Father and Son and Spirit never needed (because they are eternally happy in themselves (as Jonathan Edwards says, "Their love for each other is perfect.") For us to *be* at all is an incredible overflow of the love of the triune Persons for one another, saying, "Let's let others share in and participate in that. We aren't finished in our joy and our extension of that joy until we have Mike, until we have Cherith, precisely because it delights us that they bear the image of God in and for the world and that they are in relationship to us and to one another."

For Jesus' life to be so particular to say, this is the life that you have. We have God (one and three) because before the foundations of the earth, he predestined that you would become children of God, and once you have been predestined to become that, and you become that, you never stop being that. The only way to be children of God is to be human children of God.

For Jesus, it was 40 days of life, new-creation life, to say, this is what's coming. This is what you can anticipate. This is what it is like for you to see a body fit for the age of come which can eat a meal with you and walk through a wall, a body that is not dimensionally challenged for how time and eternity meet one another as heaven and earth join, and creation is restored into the fullness of all that it gets to be. It doesn't mean that you stop being who you are and have to turn into something else called a soul or an angel or something else (as if your humanity wasn't good,

it was just sort of good, or it was a good first attempt), but when it comes to eternal life, your eternal life will be *you* as something else.

That has nothing to do with the gospel, but it's the way that as a child, I heard that. I don't think I ever heard it preached to me except that it's the language of "when our souls go to heaven." It's falling into the language of our hymns, where we sing "then sings my soul" as if there is a different way of praising God in this deeper spiritual way of being, that if I can just ignore my body and not even have to deal with the shame that comes with being this embodied person, and just get into that spiritual place, then this is what I have to look forward to, is to shed this skin and be in a disembodied new way of being. I didn't realize this then, but this is called Gnosticism.

When I was 21, I was about to get married, and my husband said something to me that was very loving and adoring about me, loving me and my body. I reacted strongly, feeling betrayed by him that somehow he had seen me as this embodied woman without seeing the real me, who I thought he really loved. I was confused trying to explain to him why that was hurting me or upsetting me, because he was confused about what was disturbing me.

I called my dad. I said, "Dad, I'm caught. I can't get Robert to understand why this feels awful, that he focused on my femaleness and not the real me." My dad listened to me very kindly and finally quietly said, "Cherith, when did you become a Gnostic?" I had to stop and think about what a Gnostic is. Oh, that's somebody who believes that the material world or anything that's created, or has physicality to it, or a being to it, is bad, and that only the soul is good and only the spiritual realm is good.

So I stopped and said, "Am I a Gnostic?" He says, "Well, honey, based on what you just said to me, I think you need to get saved! You seem to think that Jesus saved your soul or something. He's the incarnate one who celebrates your whole person, and you can't be you without being you, Cherith, in your female body. Who do you think it is that he loves? Just your soul?" I was taken aback. I knew that mentally I should be able to say what he said to me, but deep in my heart, I did not know that.

So I started, in these last years, looking at what I was not seeing over and over in the New Testament text, that let me keep splitting out Jesus' divinity from his humanity, kept splitting out my soul from my embodied life. One day I came across the conversation that Jesus gets pulled into between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They're all good Jews and they're all well-trained,

but the Sadducees are trained more in Greek thought and they have no time for or belief in the resurrection of the body, because who would ever resurrect a body? It's no good!

The Pharisees are still holding to the Old Testament promises through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and all of these deep new covenant promises that when the new creation is restored, when life comes back, it will be the flourishing of all creation and you will get your life back. So, here these two groups are arguing and pulling Jesus in, and so they set it up with the woman marries the husband who dies, and then marries the many brothers that he has, and so who is she going to be married to in the resurrection? I had been reading this because I had had a few friends of mine, men (in theological studies, they are mostly men), and we were talking about Jesus' human life and his ongoing embodiment and how that matters. They said, "I don't understand... as you're doing this work and challenging this feminist theology, etcetera, why these women feel like they need God to look like them when in heaven there will be no male or female, so it doesn't matter?"

I looked at them thinking, where do you get that? They said, "You know that debate that Jesus is in with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. We will be like the angels and there will be no marriage and giving in marriage in heaven." I went back to that and thought, really? Is he going to turn me into something else? I'm not going to be human, and I'm not going to be a soul, I'm going to be like an angel? This conversation and that text came up in the course of two weeks, completely different conversations, unrelated to one another, and I thought, there is something serious going on here.

In that story, I noticed Jesus' way of coming into that conversation: oh children of the resurrection, you will be, in a sense, like the angels. It doesn't matter who she marries, because your question is all about who she will procreate with. Who will she carry the family line along with? Who gets to have her to bear the name? The fact is, you're not going to die, so this need to procreate and to create this ongoing lineage, this is a conversation which doesn't fit resurrection life, which is eternal life. You children of the resurrection have started to shift the plot into a different debate than what is authentic, which is that you will get your human life back.

I watched Jesus' life and the promise of his resurrection, which he kept instilling as their only hope (that he too had to trust that the Father would raise him from the dead), because he wasn't going to raise himself and he wasn't saying, "I'll be back in three days, I'm just going to die and I'll be back." He agonizes in this place of trusting, that he is doing something that the

Father will make an atoning eternity-changing reality and that he would, by the Spirit, bring him back to live in this whole new way that he has never died and hasn't experienced and doesn't know.

So I began then to listen and watch his 40 days of life and his insistence that his followers do not move until they too receive the Spirit, because there is no way that they are going to be able to begin to participate in the life that he has now guaranteed in his new humanity by the Spirit, in the same way that he was already beginning to enact prior to his death and resurrection, without the same Spirit that raised him from the dead. Paul uses that term over and over. Peter uses that term. John uses that term, "the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead," and "this Jesus whom you killed, God raised him from the dead and has seated him at the right hand of the Father, and with the Father has now poured out the Holy Spirit whom you see in here."

I then started reading Acts. Every time these apostles are held before the Sanhedrin, before Roman leadership, before Hebrew (Jewish) leadership, they are professing that the one who you killed who you thought was just this carpenter from Nazareth and an imposter, was truly God incarnate, and how we know that this was God present to us and what our future looks like is that he is resurrected. He is the firstborn from among the dead. He is the firstborn of a new humanity. He is, in Paul's words, the new Adam, the progenitor of a new race of human beings that aren't broken anymore, that are restored to their beauty that God has held before the foundation of the earth and guaranteed by entering into his creation and becoming one with us and bearing that image perfectly. Not with a divine credit card. Not with access to secret God powers that make it easy for him so that his humanity isn't really something I should take seriously, but to say, "I will enter into your condition completely, Cherith. I will take on the DNA of a mom. I'll have the nose of my uncle. I'll do the family business. People will have my furniture in their house. I will have to grow up as a teenage boy and obey in terms of my budding sexuality, my awareness of other people, my obedience to my parents, my trying to hear why it is that I am not getting betrothed when everybody else is," and trying to understand his story and obey his story both as a true human, but as one who has submitted to and is listening to the Father all the time.

Something in his baptism is unique up to that mold. He is functioning and living as a young man who knows how to pray for me because he really gets my life because he had entered into any kind of experience. A lot of people push back and say, maybe he didn't do that, or maybe he wasn't this. He doesn't have to experience every single human experience in particular.

JMF: No human does.

CFN: Exactly. I haven't experienced many of those things.

JMF: He would be abnormal if he did.

CFN: Exactly. It's doing a crazy thing to his humanity, which we also do to his divinity.

What we're talking about is, does he understand what it means to be tempted, to choose for himself instead of someone else? Does he understand what it means to be tempted to let someone become an object for his gratification instead to let them be a true person, a person he is for, and loves. Does he understand all the kinds of ways that my life every day is begged to question, Cherith are you going to do this out of your brokenness or are you going to do this in conformity to what God really looks like, which is what you are, an image bearer of God.

I think he gets it. He says, "So you don't get off the hook and look at my life and say, 'yeah, but you were God; it was easy for you to do all that cool stuff.' I want you to see that my baptism is when the Father names me and claims me and says, 'This is my son, whom I love and in whom I am well pleased.'" But this isn't necessarily divine language that comes down and says, oh, that's the pre-existent Son who came to you. That language comes way back from the Exodus. It comes from Deuteronomy. That's the language God uses whenever he names his image-bearers, whenever he calls a people for himself. He says, "You are my Israel, my true son, the one who bears my image for the world. So look like me, and love the widow and the orphan and extend yourself to the alien and be for the other who does not have anyone to be for them, because that is how I am God for you. So look like me. Listen to what I would do, and speak for me the way that I would speak, enact in power what is rightfully my power to give you because I am the Creator who can do what I would love to do for the flourishing of creation."

It is simple to isolate Moses or Jeremiah or Jesus and say, well, there is something special about them. The only special thing about Moses and Jeremiah is that, very begrudgingly, they obeyed and let the Spirit's anointing upon them free, let the Holy Spirit do what he wanted to do, to call the world to attention to Yahweh.

JMF: For most, in fact for everybody, we look back over our personal history, at the things we've been through and the things we do, and we wonder, how can this possibly apply to me? I agree with it in principle and I can see how this is God's will and God's purpose, and I can imagine it being theoretically possible, but it's really not talking about me. I can't identify with it because I know what I'm really like.

CFN: And what I'm really like is messed up and with a past that feels like it's never going to leave me, and generally feeling disempowered to change any of that.

JMF: Exactly. That's where most of us live.

CFN: I think so. The radicality of the gospel is that there is so much more – it would require that we don't change our thinking of what the gospel means, but that we just let it *take* at every conceivable level. Our salvation in Christ is not simply assent to this amazing thing that God has come and done for us that we couldn't possibly do anything about or for on our own, to make the possibility of being in a relationship with the triune God happen.

Everything that we are comes out of response to the fact that this is who God is to us. He doesn't just show up as an idea of the three Persons in one to invite us into this idea of communal love, but to say, "look, right here, in the way that God has chosen to be God, there is now a human being permanently present." So you are never without the ability to say, so what *is* my life about and where is it going? And what have you done with my past? Because the one who stands in for me is not only this perfect human who I can't relate to because he's perfect, but this human who bears the marks of a deeply broken and imperfect humanity who had entered into every kind of condition that humanity has, yet without falling and breaking in the process, without sinning into that process. His life bears the effects of being betrayed by his best friends. His life bears the effects of being isolated and alone. His life bears the effects of being unjustly and horribly, horribly executed. His life bears the effects of systemic sin, of personal sin, hitting him and influencing him all the time.

So how do I look at his life and say, "Then what is our response within the midst of sin and brokenness that shows me what a real human being looks like who doesn't live above all of that, who lives bombarded by and in it all the time?" He says, "Cherith, the place where you see me, who sits on the throne looking like a slain lamb, who bears the effects of the fact that I know your humanity inside and out as my own, means that there is nothing about your human life that I have not always known, and you are the one I've always loved." There isn't the, "oh, if she shapes up and follows me or just believes all that stuff and starts assenting to this right theology or something, then we love her so much better." Rather, it's "while you were a mess I came into the mess and said, she is broken and she will never get out of this by herself. But we plan to love her forever, and we plan to have her with us forever and in communion with us forever, which means that we, I, God, will have to enter into the human condition and take what belongs to her

and restore it for her, and in the process restore her.”

The thing that is so life-changing is to realize there is no human being that the Father, Son, and Spirit see and love apart from me, who is always the healed broken person, who is always the saved guilty person, who is always the restored alienated person, who always has the whole story held together, and the fact that the Father doesn't see me just as a before and after. He *always* sees me in the company of the Son. He always sees me with Jesus of Nazareth, Galilean Jewish male, forever as God's way of taking on humanity and keeping it, so that it doesn't dip down and go, “well now I can like you or now I can love you, or now we can relate to you.”

“How could I possibly be more for you, Cherith, than to become like you, as a choice of freedom and love? And to become like you and take that into my way of being God permanently, so that you are never without somebody who is also your permanent advocate. So, you can't make me love you more, you can't make me love you less. Nothing you do, height, depth, powers, principalities, your brokenness, your horrible past, your attempts to try to be good in your own strength. Nothing can separate you from the love that has now been guaranteed to you in Christ Jesus, who holds you in that communion with the Father by the Spirit and stands as God for you, having received and accepted and loved you, and stands as the new human.” He says, “Father, when you see her, see her as she will be finished. Because this is what she will look like.”

JMF: And already do.

CFN: Yes. So my Christian life is, I need to get on board because the kingdom has already come.

JMF: The starting place is the belonging. You already belong. You always will belong, therefore....

CM: And out of that relationship, what does it look like to be part of bringing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? If the life that Jesus is living has already determined where my life is headed, it also determines who I am, because this is my identity now. So the invitation is, “Cherith, do you want to start looking like who you're going to permanently be? Do you want to start doing the stuff that looks like a restored human being?”

You can't do that by yourself. You can only do that by the power of the Third Person of the Trinity happily taking up residence in you and saying, “This has been how the story was from the beginning, is that the Ruach of the Spirit of the living God would rest upon and dwell within his

image-bearer. *That* has been what we've been about. It's what Jesus' life looks like, as this anointing as the new and true image bearer, and now you, Cherith and Mike, beloved image-bearing children of the Father, who are conformed to the image of the Son, your brother and your Lord, who happens to also be the King over all kings and the one who is reigning."

How do you stand with him and participate with him today by the power of the Spirit to be part of what he's doing? How do you ask him and not feel frustrated by what he invites you into, but to say, "If I let you, you could empower me to be more of who I actually am." Then salvation becomes not a getting in or an entry point or just a conversion moment – it becomes this deep, permanent conversion into the person that I will forever be. My life becomes the *living into* my savedness, the *living into* my restoration.

JMF: The living out the reality of what already is.

CFN: The living out the promise that I don't only have in the future, but the fact that the future has dramatically impeded the present and has altered the course of everything from this forward. I think that is a very different thing than just to say, "I believe those things, but now I'm just going to try to gut it out to the best of my ability."

JMF: Muddle on through it.

CFN: Well, we can do that, but that's not the richest plot that we're in, and it doesn't have the greatest joy and the most amazing possibility. The place in the New Testament that talks about grieving the heart of God is when we inhibit the Holy Spirit. Because, he says, "how else could you bear my image in the world? How else can you participate in what I'm doing, when you block me there and say no and stick the stopper into the bottle and say, 'I'm only going to do what I can do instead of finding out what it would look like to do what God would do with me.'"

He says, "It grieves me, because you love me, but you are un-empowered to love me well or to love those who I love. You are disempowered to do the things you want to do." It changes the story. We become people who believe things about God, and then we become religious people. Everybody who believes anything about God is a religious person, but that's very different than being a child of the triune God who has been asked to manifest the presence and power of God in the world.

JMF: The good thing is he doesn't give up.

CFN: Amen. And it's a good thing because if I muddle or stop this bottle or whatever else, he is still the Lord of the church and the King of all things and he'll invite you back again

tomorrow when you wake up. Because he's already sealed the deal. He's already doing what he is doing, and nothing that I can do can also stop that grace from flowing.

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Image Bearers for God

JMF: One objection we often hear about Trinitarian theology, and the idea that God loves everyone, goes along this line: If God hates one person, then he doesn't love everyone, and Scripture specifically says that God hated Esau. He loved Jacob and he hated Esau. How do we respond to that?

CFN: The first thing we do is to take the words of Jesus seriously, instead of going to a place where we can't figure out what the Hebrew idiom might mean. If Jesus says that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, then we trust him that *that* is the overriding narrative. When we watch the entire biblical narrative with its moments of tremendous suffering, pain, injustice and often horror, it's to trust that overarching reality — that God so loves this world despite the broken image-bearers' attempt to take it down by not knowing how to do anything else, and in our brokenness he will not let us be left to our devices. He loves us too much to let the story turn out the way that it would turn out on our own.

If that is the way that the whole overarching narrative is held, by the way that God is God, and not by the way that we are in response to God or to one another or to anything else, then it's to look at the way that the biblical narrative is structured and given, and what these incredibly important terms and echoes are that come through the Old Testament. So when Jesus starts saying these things and attributing them to God, attributing all the back story of humanity in relation to God in his own human life and where human life for everybody is going, then it's to make sure that we're clear about what those identity markers are. So we can hear a text like “and God hated Esau” and ask what in the world is going on there? It's probably one of so many moments where an idiom is used to speak an idea that is not to be taken literally, and not to throw everything else out that doesn't agree with that one term.

How do we recognize it? As English-speakers, part of what we suffer from is that we are getting a translation of something that is an ancient language – a multi-layered and a beautiful language – so that when a pronouncement like that is made, there is deep meaning to that, that is not just the opposite of love and hate. We want to go to that deeper meaning, to look at those original echoes, and then to see what then does Jesus' incarnate life mean for us, pulling us into the life of the Trinity. We can't but not go there.

It's worth a little rabbit trail for a minute to look at how the New Testament, which...at the time that it is becoming what it is...at the time that these Gospels are being proclaimed, these letters are being written and read aloud to communities (so that nobody's picking up the letter to the Ephesians and reading it privately and ever hearing the word "you" and thinking that means me and my privatized Christianity and I need to behave these ways) —these letters were taken and read to everybody in the entire community sitting there next to each other squirming about the reality that they're being called to, because the only way to live this out is corporately, that each one individually matters.

Jesus gives those kinds of parables — that the Father seeks every one of us and adores every one of us and will pursue us until he pulls us into that fellowship. To go after the lamb or to go after the lost coin or to be the son that is longed for...in every one of those parables, they're brought home, they're brought back to something that is bigger than them. The son comes home, the coin is joined, the lamb is brought back to the flock, not set up in a little dyad with a shepherd out there in the middle of nowhere. It's trying to recognize that that salvation... throughout, individual life is priceless to God because we exist out of his pleasure and joy... we are his delight and his image and he will not let anything deter his good outcome for that. Our life when lived in a way that really reflects God, is lived together.

As these communities are hearing this, and the New Testament world is trying to reorient itself because of the reality of Jesus having come among them and risen in their midst...the only Scripture they know is the Old Testament. That's the only Bible, as far as they're concerned, because none of them are anticipating that their letters are going to end up in a canon that we are reading thousands of years later.

So when these terms—like Paul in Colossians using things like “he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn from the dead.” Or the fact that the Father uses the language of Jesus' baptism to say, “You are my Son whom I love and in whom I am well-pleased.”—when this community hears those kinds of terms, there are layers and layers of echoes that sound. It's like hitting a gong and all of this history gets played out, and they're thinking, “oh my goodness, he's what?” Because they have deep resonant meaning to those things.

Starting from the beginning, every one of these ancient cultures has a creation narrative that has some kind of battle that usually takes place over water – the water is the place of chaos, and who knows what danger is lurking there? Creation usually is the fallout or the byproduct of the

negative side of some kind of cosmic battle. Once this thing gets played out, then it's like, "Then what do we do with this stuff?" If we've got those gods or that god who ended up with all this stuff, how do we relate to that god to keep him appeased, or her, making sure that we're fertile, or whatever their relationship to these ancient gods is.

They all have a narrative that has this description of who God is in relation to them, life coming out of water and chaos, a description of life as sort of this temple-palace garden, and then there's this setting up of the image of the God in the temple-palace garden. In all of these, whether it's ancient Egyptian or later Mesopotamian Babylonian, these ancient cultures would have this period where if they were constructing a new temple palace for the god, they would, in the construction of the temple-palace garden, narrate the story of what this God is doing with them, and the priests would come in and undergo what they would call a spiration ceremony or a breathing ceremony.

The assumption was, that once they breathed this ritual over this idol or image of the god, then the god would take up residence there — that the presence of the god was there. It didn't mean that the god was only that statue, but it meant that where that statue was, that god was present. In the midst of that, whether it's Egypt and maybe Babylon, but if it's Egypt out of which God's people come, and they begin to tell their own creation narrative in response to the polytheism of Egypt or the way that gods are laid out in Genesis 1. "In the beginning God created...and the Spirit hovered over the water...and then God said..." There's only ever one.

Everything that is a god in Egypt is just creation to God. After six days of ordering and setting, and creating time, purpose, meaning, dimensionality and everything else, it's on the sixth day that God says, you're not going to create an image for me, I am going to create my own image-bearer. I will do my own spiration ceremony. We will create them, male and female, to bear our image. It requires them to be together to be truly human, because we are the Triune God, and there is no such thing as a single image-bearer that can bear the image of God without bearing that image in relation.

The Genesis 2 retelling of what it says in Genesis 1 — that here is God who chooses Adam from the earth and breathes his life into him, breathes his Spirit, *ruach*, into him. Then he becomes the one who literally is for creation. He is to name it, he is to tend it and flourish it, he is to have "the one who completes him as an image-bearer with the other." She is called the *ezer* to him, God's strong helper, which is the language that God uses of himself in the Old

Testament. You know, “Woe to Egypt who doesn’t have Yahweh as their *ezer*.” She’s not his right-hand support system – she, with him, bears the character and image of God in the world.

Genesis 3 then turns around and says, here’s what happens when the story goes bust, when the image-bearer fails to be the one who sees with the eyes of God, fails to see what God sees, which is good in the world, and fails to act in power what God would do, to speak for God and make these things be what they are, and have this divine human communion, not just about humanity in relation to God, but God who loves his world, everything in his cosmos, and who claims the entire creation as his temple-palace garden, who says, the heaven is my canopy and the earth is my footstool...and takes this reigning image of a throne room and says, “It’s all mine. I love it all, and you get to be the one who is for it even as you are for me, and I will be for you, so that I can be for all things.”

Genesis 3 says, when this goes awry, when the image-bearer forgets who he and she are and...and they become ones who try to assume that being like God is something that gives them equality with God, which is not something to be grasped, if we take Jesus’ life seriously, but by grasping something that doesn’t belong to them, they break and lose the image. The Old Testament then becomes this ongoing story of well, how does God restore them? How does he lead them out of that broken place and into the promise of new life, of new creation? They come out of this Eden and into not just barrenness, but a new Edenic situation.

Noah becomes another story where you have water and God whose Spirit hovers as a dove over the water, which shows up again at Jesus’ baptism. You have God who takes this person and his family and says, “I again will make a people for my name. They will look like me, and bear my name and presence in the world and my power, so that when they are present, nobody wonders if Yahweh is present — that is precisely who they are and what they do.” His judgment, even prior to Noah, is: these were my children, but they don’t look anything like me. They’re abusing and destroying, which has nothing to do with the character of the Triune living God. He says, “That is false to the core. My image-bearer cannot bear my name falsely in the world, because no one will know who I am. So I’ll call a people for my name again.”

You get it primarily in the Exodus, where God says, “Out of this people I will call a people for my name again.” He says crazy stuff to Moses. In Exodus 3 and 4 he says things like, When you go before Pharaoh, who happens to think out of the entire planet that he is the only living divine image-bearer of Ra, the sun-god or whoever he’s instantiating, you will go to him and you

will be like God to him. You will speak the words of God to him. When I give you Aaron, you will be like a God to Aaron, and Aaron will be like God to him as he speaks for you.”

This re-anointing and image-bearing says, “I will breathe my Spirit into you. You will begin to function again in a way that looks like me and not the power and the oppression of Pharaoh and the rulership, but the releasing of humanity to start functioning as what it really is in relation to me.” It’s a crossing through water again, and light, and those kinds of images.

You get it with the Jordan, and you get it over and over again, until finally in Ezekiel there comes this tragic moment where after so many of these faithful re-gatherings of his people and recalling them and renaming them and reclaiming them, he says, “This is it. You look like the idols you worship. You’ve forgotten who you are, which is (in the technical sense of the term in that day), you are my idol. The reason you’re not allowed to have any idols is because you’re my idol. People are supposed to look at you to know what Yahweh looks like. But you have started to look like these things that you have constructed. You act out of that, you abuse, oppress, defame, hurt, destroy and choose against the other instead of for.”

He says, “I won’t have it, because it’s unfaithful to what’s true. It’s unfaithful to the heart of love that is what allows everything to be what it is.” So the image that Ezekiel gets is to watch the Spirit of God hovering over the ark and saying, “Am I leaving?” He comes to the threshold and says, “Am I going to stay or are we going to go?” The tragedy of the image is that the Spirit goes. “And now you will wait.” So then the promise becomes, “I will take away from them their heart of stone, their law, and I will give to them a heart of flesh and I will breathe my Spirit on them and they will live.”

To look specifically at the Esau question... Here is God who has not only named himself but the un-nameable Yahweh of the sort of transcendent glory that’s so not his creation, which is them...however the Triune language gets put there. This is the God who has no shame, no hesitancy to name himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who are a mess, all three of them. He goes, “I’m happy to be associated with them. Their storyline has become my storyline. I have called them to myself, I’ve loved them in the midst of their brokenness and the things that they’ve done disobediently. I am for them, as I have made them for me.”

For Jacob’s brother, Esau, to be the one who of these twins is the firstborn, the true rightful image-bearer, the true firstborn son who should carry that name forward, that is Isaac, the son who came from nowhere in terms of God’s mercy. When Esau begins to look like the idolatrous

people with whom he marries into and begins to...instead of what Yahweh looks like, God says, “No. I refuse to put my name on that. I refuse to say that that is what I look like in the world. I will stand against that, but I will do that by being for it, by coming back around and restoring these people to myself.”

You finally have Jesus, who becomes this messianic promise... All through those Major and Minor Prophets it says, “There will finally be one like the son of man, who is going to come, who God will anoint, who will actually be the one true human image-bearer.” “I have finally chosen my last and only son to bear my name and presence in the world, and it all rests on him to get it right, and to do it like I would have to do it — not dipping in as God, but to take my humanity.”

From the entire human race down to this people of Israel, down to this priesthood, to this king, to these prophets...it gets smaller and smaller to this funnel where you finally have it rest on this one person who is God and man. His life set the entire thing in order and released it from that point forward...from the apostolic fellowship of the believers to become this Gentile mission, to become the whole world... That is way back up here when he promised Abraham, when I call you as a people for my name, this is like the promise to the whole deal...so that Mike and Cherith who are not Jews and they aren't circumcised will be in on this story thousands of years from now. I will be faithful to this and release it through my Son.

So all of us who are busy trying to figure out if we are okay in relation to God tend to forget when we get caught... (The enemy would love to cause us to look at our own image as it reflects back upon us, instead of to look at the one in whose image we've been made and who stands as the perfect image-bearer for us...) we need to keep remembering this isn't about how well I'm bearing the image apart from Jesus. The only way I get to be in on this story, the only way I get to play, and the only way I get to stand well, even with all of the marks of my woes and shame all over me, is to have that washed, because the person who stands in for me as my high priest...who can only be my high priest if he's like me. He cannot be my high priest if he's not like me, because the high priest is the one human being who stands in for the entire people before God. So God becomes his own high priest, in a sense, on behalf of humanity.

If that's my high priest, that's also what he's doing – constantly, permanently priesting for me, permanently standing in for me and offering perfect sacrifice of his life in the perfect human obedience of his life. I am always, as an image-bearer, joined to him. The Father always holds

the two of us — holds me and God’s people — but always holds us with his Son — to participate in something. It isn’t about how well I pull it off, it’s the fact that it’s already been pulled off.

JMF: So in Jesus you have the rejected Esau and the accepted Jacob who failed as well...

CFN: That’s right.

JMF: ...healed and redeemed.

CFN: Right. God will go to any length to make sure that no matter how far Esau wants to walk away, God will say no, so that his character and love for his world is not compromised. But at the same time, to say every time God says ‘no,’ it’s so that his ‘yes’ can be what it is. To say *no* to that about Esau is so that he can say *yes* to what is really true. He’s going to say *yes* finally...

JMF: Which is the point and conclusion of Romans 11.

CFN: Exactly.

JMF: And then Paul brings it up.

CFN: And how do you thank God for that?

JMF: Yeah.

CFN: Which is beyond our comprehension.

JMF: Yeah, it’s fascinating.

CFN: It’s tempting to say “but what about this? What about that?” Just stand back a little and say, “What would that mean in the context of this larger, incredible story that I’m in — that I’m not the primary character in? It’s not my private drama, it’s that I’ve been invited into this amazing story that is God’s story of his unfathomable and irresistible love for that which is not him — that he’s chosen to share it with them. Nothing can stop it, so how does that thing that I’m reading, that God hated Esau or whatever we might be fixating on...how would that fit into this larger narrative to understand? What is the *yes* of God in Jesus that would say *no* to these other kinds of things?

This suffering of the world (that seems so beyond our comprehension) becomes a “no” precisely by the fact that the story doesn’t end with the crucifixion — God’s “no” to suffering having the last word has to be passed through in order to have a “yes” of resurrection. There’s always going to be these beautiful mysteries of *yes* and *no* held in tension, but as followers of Jesus we have to be committed to the whole story, and keep seeing where we are in that big story, instead of just checking our checklist of beliefs and seeing whether we feel like they

contradict each other sometimes.

JMF: In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul speaks of looking at a poor reflection in a mirror. In the mirror, we see ourselves, and it's the broken image-bearer we're seeing. But he's saying that there is something better than that, that's already real, that we're not seeing most of the time — we're not seeing Christ as the one who has taken up our cause and made it his own.

CFN: Paul is writing a letter to a church he knows well and loves very much, who are trying to dehumanize Jesus and to super-spiritualize themselves in a way that stops them taking their own embodied humanities seriously. He won't let them. From the beginning of the letter, we are going to preach Jesus Christ crucified. For Paul there is no such thing as Jesus Christ crucified — there's only Jesus Christ crucified who is the risen one, which is why we can hold this crazy thing, because Jesus Christ is the risen anointed one who was crucified. Often we stop at the cross, forgetting that the cross would be very bad news if he is not the resurrected and ascended one...

Paul set that up and says, “now let's talk about life in the church.” What am I hearing? I'm hearing that there's this division around leadership as if somebody has more value in the community of faith, in the community of the saints, one over the other, when the one who we're supposed to look like has laid his life down. He, who was entitled to be over us, became one for us and submitted to whatever the Father would do for us. I'm hearing that you are having incredible sexual distortion between you marrying your stepmother (or whatever it is) and he doesn't even address those people directly. He says, “I hear among you that this has happened and that you're allowing this as a community.”

All these people are hearing this together. He's saying, “Not even the pagans do that.” “I'm hearing that you're tootling down to some pagan law court because you've got some grievance against your brother, and you want somebody who does not have the power and authority or the presence of the Holy Spirit to usher in true justice in the kingdom of God to settle a dispute for you, when you whose lives are conditioned to be for the other have now been given the power and authority to enact justice, and more than justice, mercy for the other.”

“I hear that there are some of you who aren't sleeping together. I hear there's some of you having sex with temple prostitutes — probably because you're not sleeping together as husband and wife.” “What are you doing that thinks that somehow this isn't about your embodied life?” “I hear that some of you are eating food from temples and some of you think that's...” Paul just

keeps pressing in, pressing in, pressing in. “I hear you’re disrespecting the table and one another at the table.”

He finally gets to this point: “It’s really all about the fact that you belong to each other, that you are this communal life enjoined to the Triune God together. There’s only *allelon* (it’s a Greek word that means ‘one anothering’). There’s only one another. You love one another, you forgive one another, you care for one another.” If the story plot of Corinth was looking at you, you wouldn’t know whose image you’re being conformed into. He finally says, “It’s all about looking like the character of God. It’s loving. It’s being patient and enduring and suffering long for the other, and believing and hoping and trusting.” We can’t see where this is all going, but at the same time we can, because we see him.

When he finally calls them to their worship life and he pushes them through their behaviors that they’re forgetting even in their worship life, it’s all driving to chapter 15, where he’s going, “How can I say this to you? Because we serve one who is resurrected and is a new human. Over 500 people saw him, and the apostles saw him, and even I saw him as one...reborn. And because he is who he is, and already holds our new humanity and has this body fit for the age to come, a spiritual body (which is like an oxymoron) but he’s got that body fit for the new creation.

Because Christ is like that, we already know who we are (you know where this is going) and we know that by the power of the Spirit, we’re to be enacting our future reality right smack dab here in Corinth in a way that nobody wonders what the image of God looks like in the world, because they see slaves and free people loving each other, who should have nothing to do with each other. They see women preaching who should have no mouths to bear witness or say anything in the fellowship. They see prophetic gifts running all these directions. They see forgiveness where nobody anticipated it. They see something that they can’t see anywhere else in the world, by how this odd crazy fellowship of Jews, non-Jews, men, women, slaves, every socioeconomic, racial, gender boundary comes together as a new people of God and says “we are going to live ‘the life that’s coming’ right here, because the life that’s coming has already become present to us in Jesus, and we are in on it.”

It’s impossible to do this without the Spirit. Jesus said, “Don’t leave Jerusalem, because you new image-bearers, new creation, you need the *ruach* of the Spirit, which was promised in Ezekiel 37, in Jeremiah. You need that heart of flesh to be anointed by the Spirit to become this new people of this new age, which hasn’t yet come to completion but has already begun.

It is that mystery, as you said, of seeing in part, but when I think it's all too hard to figure out, Jesus says, "Just look here, Cherith, take my life seriously, look here, the gospel witnesses to me, and you can't over-divinize me, you can't make me too much God and get yourself off the hook that I don't understand you or you can't be like me. I also don't want you to take my humanity so seriously that you somehow separate out that this is God who is present to you, so that everything I do really does restore your life." That's the beautiful tension that we get to walk in.

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What Jesus' Humanity Means for Us

JMF: You're working on two books in the final stages of production. Could you tell us about the second one?

CFN: Yes. It's less than final as far as the publisher is concerned, but I would love to tell you about it. The book has come into being because of the kinds of conversations that I've had with students over the last seven or eight years. I began to discover some concerns that were deeply problematic in my own receiving the life of Jesus for me. It was always this "idea" that I kept trying to cling to, instead of someone that I really knew, who I could see as a person standing for me.

The book is emerging out of some lively conversations, and maybe that's a good way for books to be written. Sometimes I'm wondering why theologians ever write books. It seems like we've already said everything. This book won't be anything new, but it will be revisiting why the humanity of Jesus actually matters. That has come out of conversations with students where either they have such a deeply held sense of Jesus' divinity, that the idea that he truly is like us (let alone continues to be like us as we will be) is hard for them to believe and to trust, let alone try to get their heads around.

The opposite extreme is that his humanity becomes something that they keep trying to generalize so that he just becomes the person that we can kind of retrofit into all of our own experience, instead of his life being what it is, which is that my life isn't your life, and your life isn't my life, and his life isn't my life either. It really is *his* life that he has lived.

The conversation that started to generate some of this came around the recognition of students realizing that they had a deep ambivalence about their own humanity. As we would discuss God being one who was saving their whole person, they were quick to discover that they weren't sure that they wanted their whole person saved.

JMF: And by whole person you mean...

CFN: It's like the fun phrase that Karl Barth uses when he tries to talk about us as embodied souls. The very next sentence he'll use the term ensouled bodies or souled bodies, because he doesn't want us to see one prioritizing the other. To be a person is somebody who is constituted this way. There is no way for us to be the deep inner-core soul person that we are, that does not

have its physical male or female manifestation. This is what it means to be Cherith. There is no other Cherith who is trapped in this body or currently taking up residence in this body. Embodied Cherith, at her deepest, is all there is. I'm not just my body. There's something that is deeply *core* that remains in terms of who I am with my new body. We're landing in territory that's hard to describe, so Barth plays those terms off of one another.

I discovered that like myself when I was younger and then through the course of having to deal with illness in my life and other ways of not taking my own body seriously—the limitations that it had, the struggles that I have, taking my femininity and femaleness seriously in relation to men and women, realizing that I had spent a lot of my life growing up in the church sort of neutering myself because I grew up in a household of all boys and had a mother who grew up in a household of all boys, so it was “try to be one of the boys.”

I was in worlds (in my many years in the law firm or in the church or the academy) that are mostly male-dominated worlds. To not use my femaleness in an inappropriate way, I always pretended I didn't have any. “This is just my shell, but the real me is this person who you want to know.” That was unfaithful to the gospel, let alone unfaithful to real human relationships, and it forced me to not take responsibility for myself and what my sons were learning about how to honor women and men well, and how to help them talk through some of those kinds of things.

I had students who were saying, “I'm not sure that I can get past the shame of my embodied life” or, “I'm 20 and a healthy male and I don't know how to think about women in an embodied sense that doesn't trip me up or get me caught.” And, “I can't wait to get to heaven and not have a body and not have to worry about how to think about stuff like this.”

I started to realize, “Instead of people who follow an incarnate Lord in freedom, we are quietly Gnostic in a way that tries to negate our humanity.” Then we let Jesus be a lot more docetic, or the Jesus who shows up in human form, or fills a human body—whatever these ancient heresies are (whether it's Apollinarianism, or these different kinds of terms that came from people in the church trying to relieve the tension of saying that this one is the God-man, that this one is Yahweh in the flesh).

Because those things were so hard to hold together, these heresies (which always happen inside the community of faith—outside they are just something completely other), but it's people within the community of faith saying, “Let's make him a little more human and a little less divine, so we can trust that what he did, he did as an authentic human being, because otherwise

it's God just taking over his will and his mind.”

Or on this side, people are saying, “We know that the material world isn't very good and God would never taint himself to really be like me, so I think he just poured himself into that human form and then got rid of it as soon as he could.” Most of us don't get walked through the heresies that were lively debates in the life of the church in the early first centuries. They were always trying to figure out how...we're trying to say this thing—have we said it faithfully enough without locking it down? Because we can't lock this thing down and really get our heads around it, but we know that we must say that he is God and that he is truly a man.

I would sit in class, and watch and study these things, and ask my students, “Go back to your church background and tell me which of these heresies is the most common in your youth group, which is the most common that you think happens in the worship life, or your hymnody—where do we tell the story about Jesus in a way that releases the tension and causes us to see him as two people—so he's the divine Son and then he's Jesus of Nazareth, and somehow they got crazy-glued together (well, that's another heresy!) ...and all the ways that the church was trying to say, “What can we actually say?”

If we give even the slightest bit on either side of those, the story falls apart, we don't have God present to us, and I can't really trust that my humanity is redeemed and whole and kept in the presence of God by somebody who knows my story intimately and is *for me* in that story.

JMF: In spite of that story.

CFN: In spite of it. He actually heals that story – becomes the person who enters the human condition and becomes my lived healing by his very life. Lots of “on the ground” questions you deal with, with young adults, and they are trying to sort it out. It's like, “How do you not fantasize sexually about somebody, as somebody who's really trying to follow Jesus and who would take a lead from Jesus on this, and to trust him about ‘what does it mean to let this man or woman become a *person* again?’ How would you do that instead of let them be an object (which is what your culture is constantly asking you to do, is to objectify them and to de-personalize them for your gratification or for them to sell you something or whatever else is going on). How do you become one who is the image-bearer of God, who restores their personhood, without pretending you're not a man who is aroused by them or a woman who's aroused by that man?” How do you become obedient in your humanity – which is very different than pretending you don't have any.

We would engage in some of these deep questions. In the process of doing that, I asked them to begin to hand in assignments that became reflections that were not prose. They weren't written papers. They had to be things that showed me in some other form—I don't give any restrictions around what it had to be—both their own body map and a God map. Not that you can completely categorize either, yourself or God, but how, through a tiny lens, how do you see yourself right now? What is your sense of your embodied person, and how do you see God? These were deeply far apart, because the incarnation wasn't the way that they saw God first. God was the big far-away God, or the wrath of God, or the confusing God, or the God that you hoped liked you most of the time.

One student handed in her God map as a bottle of oil and balsamic vinegar. The instructions were to shake it up as hard as I could, and for that one instant that it looks like these things are held together, she said the oil represents the goodness of God, and the vinegar represents the wrath of God. "I can't figure out how to hold those things together and trust that he really loves me, because I have this deep sense of his wrath." She says, "I can hold it for just about as long as those things look like they're mixed."

To look at her way of perceiving herself by the kinds of things that she would draw or paint or construct, I realized that our poor sense of Jesus' embodied life for us had deep ramifications, for these students would confess within their works – they would do their addictions, their self-mutilation, their sexual abuse that became part of their past story that they never felt like they could be released from, all kinds of issues that they felt like they carried with them, and they had no idea how to be that embodied human and trust that that was good news—that God loved that person, and that one, and pulls that person, me, this way—into the divine fellowship.

In the process of doing the word of acceptance and receiving me, is a word of reconciling, restoring and healing. Already before God, all that's broken, it's me who bears the effects of my brokenness, who has not yet seen what I look like when I'm finished. But *he* does. The parts that I don't know what to do with in my brokenness, he also sees through his Son, and his Son mediates as my high priest, and the Spirit intercedes for me that anguish of being caught in "the already and the not yet." The empowerment, the worship, and the joy that Jesus offers on my behalf and that the Spirit offers on my behalf....

This book is trying to get to the core of why Jesus' humanity matters every day, so that issues of justice do not become "topics of interest," if I happen to be somebody who's all about

social justice or I'm all about creation care, or I'm all about immigrant issues, or I'm about this, or I'm about that. You are a human image-bearer who is already being called to enact the future that's coming, where God's justice and reign, and the flourishing of creation is finally the way it is, where you finally get your life back, and so does everything else (referring to Romans 8 – that you are already the person that creation is holding on by its fingertips waiting for the glory of the children of God to be revealed, because once we get our lives back, so does everything else).

When Paul keeps going with that metaphor, he says, “What is the redemption, what is this glory, what is this thing that you anticipate? It's the redemption of your body.” You're going to get your life back, and you're going to be whole! We're not going to be broken and screwed up anymore! Imagine relating to your husband and loving him the way you want to, instead of the way you do, Cherith. Those are my biggest dreams and joys, to think, I will love people the way I really want to. I will stop defending and hiding for fear that people will not love me if they really knew me. There will be a transparency in relationship that I cannot wait for.

We have been called as a people to begin to practice resurrection...we are called to begin to enact for the sake of the world, the story that we're in, so they see what's already going on and where this finally ends up as a new beginning in this final restoration of all things. It has a very practical aspect, and it allows the chance to go into some of these fascinating and wonderful lively church conversations.

These heresies or creedal constructs were in academic conversations. These were... “What do people say when they get baptized? What do we mean when we invite people into the life of God and to be followers of Jesus and to this new creation? What are we actually saying?” One side would find themselves saying one thing, and somebody else over here is saying another... When we say these things, we are trying to articulate in short form in a little confession or a creed that somebody will say... “I believe this whole big narrative story, and here are the bullet points.”

Those became life-and-death conversations. If you change that one word by this letter, it means something completely different, and it's an iota of difference, and you're saying either Jesus *is* God, or he is just sort of *like* God but not really God. These were deep conversations with deep ramifications in the everyday life of the community of the saints back then. They still are; we are unpracticed and unlearned at thinking through the implications of who Jesus really is. I speak for myself and my own church traditions—it's easy to keep going back to the familiar

and just seeing what we know, without going into the part that's harder to say. We know what we need to profess, what we're called to be witness to, what we're called to say in worship.

At this stage I fall into doxology and worship and praise because I can't explain it as a creature-child – I just have to celebrate it, because it defines everything about my life. I look forward to seeing how this book finally comes into its final stages. It's also a book about "What does it mean to walk by the power of the Holy Spirit?" What does it mean to walk as people who are not just to model (which is never the word...to look at Jesus as some figure that I'm supposed to try to copy, which is impossible in my own strength and impossible to understand)...but to say "What would it mean to really be joined to what he's doing?" – which is always about justice, about the restoration of creation, about the care for the poor and the alien and the stranger, always for the other, always on the side of all these things, because all these things are already under his reign and his rule.

If they're already all-mattering to him and he would like to have something to say and do about them, where would he look but his human image-bearers, where he would say, "This is what I'd like to do about this today, Cherith, would you like to participate with me, would you like to play?" Or he'd say, "You know, Mike, this is what I'd like to do."

Sometimes it will look astounding because healing will break in, new creation will already break through... Anytime he talks about it, breaking through the concrete of the old creation comes this grass of new life. It will look like that sometimes. Other times it's that constant sense in Paul and Peter and John where it's the call to be filled with the Spirit in order to walk this incredibly challenging witness, to walk in these places where God wants to go, which is in the place of suffering—to talk into the places that he has claimed as his own, which is to stand with people in their pain and to make their need my need and to endure the suffering that's part of my own life instead of rail against God or run away from it.

He promised that I would participate in the fellowship of his glory, but glory for him, according to John 12, starts when he turns his face to Jerusalem and begins that final week of his life. It says, "And then Jesus was glorified." The glory and participation in his fellowship is suffering...so our participation in the fellowship of his suffering. These things are not one or the other. It's not "I want some glory, so I'm going to have to have a little suffering because Jesus suffered."

Jesus has been trying to turn this around for me and say, "Cherith, I suffered because you

do. I've entered into your situation. I knew what was coming for you. I know the human condition. I knew you would have this. And the only way for your story to turn out with a different ending than having that suffering be the final word, is to enter into your suffering and take it and heal it and redeem it, so that when you are in the midst of it, you see it as a participation in the fellowship of mine and you know the outcome, and you know that I can empower you to endure that, just as the Father by the Spirit empowered me all the way to and through the cross." It's become an earthy conversation in some wonderful ways. I am hoping by getting the book out there, that it will also create a lot more dialogue on some of these issues.

JMF: The sense of belonging and of being accepted from the beginning, and knowing that that comes before your life in the Spirit and before measuring up to anything (as though we could measure up to anything) seems to give a sense of freedom. We are able to enter into this suffering knowing that it isn't a matter of a pass/fail, it's a matter of you're already belonging, you're already accepted, and you're entering into a life that is real and will work out right because it's already been claimed and healed and redeemed. It makes all the difference. Many people fear, as you said, "I don't know if I can measure up. I don't want to embark on a journey I know I can't finish or don't believe I can finish."

CFN: Or see failure at the end of every day.

JMF: Right.

CFN: That's part of the challenge that gets addressed in Romans 7-8. Romans 7 is never Paul's description of the Christian life. Let's talk about three laws... If we're going to use the term *law* (because we get that term, because we all used to be under that law...) how about naming sin and death a law, because it always turns out that way? This is the way it goes. So we have this law of Torah-keeping, we have this law of sin and death that absolutely cannot be...and we have this new law of the Spirit, as Jeremiah called it (or Ezekiel or Isaiah calls it). He says that to walk under this new law is to be set free from this condemnation that comes with... "I thought I would be able to pull it off, and yet again I blew it. Who will deliver me from this?"

Paul is saying, "Nothing from those two laws will ever deliver you from that, but in the Spirit, every day, by continuing to trust and release and invite God." You don't have to *invite* him to be present – it's almost just letting him loose. It's letting him have the moment. To say, "Lord, I won't constrict you. I will listen when you talk to me and stop, and when I've prayed earlier today, 'Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil,' when you try to do that for

me, I will listen to you and not go into my default setting or not go the easiest place of my kind of bent-ness.”

Over time, God begins to take that bent-ness and straighten it into conformity with his Son, which is an obedient submission, which is a “What are we doing today, and how do I be a part of that?” I’ll have things all through every day that need forgiving, but the Lord already knows that before I woke up, and he isn’t inviting me or not inviting me in based on how well I’m going to do today, I’m just in.

He says, as my dad used to say, and still does, “God has never been about the business of fitting individuals for heaven. He has been about the business of making a people for his name and presence.” He has done that through his Son, and nobody can alter that outcome, nobody can alter that reality. Either we can participate in it more and more and get on board with what the possibilities are by our life in the Spirit for the other...and realize it’s not a triumphalism of, “I get more and more power to see things look easier or amazing.”

Sometimes what looks amazing and gets easier is to just keep loving the person who makes you crazy, to love the person who is the most painful person in your life, to love yourself when you’re that person who is the most unlovable person. And to watch the power of God begin to enter in as a choice of love again and again, and it becomes the radical participation in the life of the Holy Spirit that will sometimes look like healing and sometimes look like endurance. It will look like suffering long, which is the character of God for those that he loves no matter what they do, whether they even recognize that.

The beauty of the gospel that comes in Triune form is that when Jesus shows up and says, “I’d like to introduce you to the Father and I’d like to give you the life that we have together by the Spirit.” The minute that offering is laid out there, there is nothing anyone has done or could possibly do to have earned that invitation. When he is offers that through his own life, there is also nothing anyone can do to run out the warranty on that offering. There’s nothing where that eternal-life insurance policy gets cancelled. There’s nothing that can stop that from being the way it is, because it’s grounded in God, not me, and my humanity is completely grounded in that, because Jesus holds my humanity in his own.

I know how this turns out because he’s right there with me and he’s saying, “Cherith, you don’t have to wait for the future, would you like to be part of what I am doing today in my reigning, in my standing in as a priest for the sake of the other before the Lord? Would you like

to be an intercessor on behalf of... Would you like to go minister to the needs of... Would you like to stand for justice because I am the ruler over all things?" That means you have to stop and take the time to say, "That is not okay" instead of saying "well, that's sort of inconvenient for me, or as an American I feel entitled to it," or whatever it is.

He is saying, "I am Prophet, Cherith, which means that if you want to participate in that, then you need to tell the truth, and you need to be the first person who hears the truth as you tell it, which means that your life has to be conformed to the things that I am telling you. You can be a proclaimer of the gospel because that's what I am doing, is giving out the good news. You can be an enactor of justice because that's what I'm doing, is restoring all things for life and for good. I am being your high priest, and if you would like to be among the priesthood of believers, which you are, and offer worship through these different ways that I would invite you into this day that looks different than anybody else, and in some ways looks the same as everybody else every day, then you get to be doing what I'm doing until we're finished, and you're lodged in your whole new way of being human with me."

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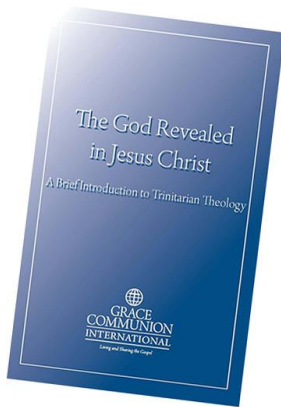
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