

Joining Jesus in His Ministry Interviews With Andrew Purves

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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.

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

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

Our guest in the following interviews is Andrew Purves, Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, received his PhD in 1978 from the University of Edinburgh, in Scotland. He is author of:

- *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ*
- *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times* (with Charles Partee)
- *Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations With John McLeod Campbell, H.R. Macintosh, and T.F. Torrance*
- *A Passion for the Gospel: Confessing Jesus Christ for the 21st Century* (with Mark Achtemeier)
- *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*
- *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*
- *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord*
- *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry*
- *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church* (with P. Mark Achtemeier)

The first three interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, D.Min., now adjunct professor of theology at Grace Communion Seminary; the fourth interview was by Michael Morrison, PhD, Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary.

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What on Earth Is Jesus Doing?

Introduction: Today's guest is Dr. Andrew Purves, Professor of Reformed Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Dr. Purves is author of numerous books, including *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, and *The Resurrection of Ministry*.

J. Michael Fezell: Thanks for joining us.

Andrew Purves: You're welcome.

JMF: We appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule, which is pretty full, to be here with us. You have been a professor of theology for some time, and you've written a number of books that we'll be talking about. Tell us the story of how you became a theologian and how you got into writing such books on the topics that you've chosen.

AP: It's a long story, but as quickly as I can... I often get asked, when was I saved? My smart answer is, "I was elect in Jesus Christ from the foundation of the world." It's not just a smart answer, it's a true answer, because that grounds me in a reality other than my own experiences. I believe that 2000 years ago, my humanity was borne by the man Jesus and born unto God through his apostolic Sonship.

When I was 19, I was a high-school dropout wandering through life in Edinburgh, Scotland, and I had an experience that drove me the next Sunday to church. The minister got into the pulpit, said, "Let us worship God," and instantly I knew that God wanted me to preach the gospel. Then I had to go back to high school and all the rest, and then discovered I was good at this stuff, and started picking up degrees and became, by God's good providence, a student of Tom Torrance and James Torrance. At times I scratched against them, but at the foundation of my theological formation there was this classical, orthodox, evangelical, catholic theology of the confessional church.

After all my studies were completed and I came to the United States, I married an American woman and started to preach, and realized that the gospel I was to preach was the classical faith of the church. That's what began the process of inquiring more and more fully, "What am I to say in the sermon?" In due course I was called to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, now over 27 years ago. Then it became, "What do I teach the students who are going to preach the gospel?" That was the concern. This classical theology has been with me almost from the beginning.

JMF: You've done a lot of work with pastors, and about pastoral work, pastoral spirituality, and so on, and you've indicated in some of your recent books that pastoral work and social work seem to be overlapping in the church. Is that a good thing, or is that a bad thing?

AP: It needn't be a bad thing, but what defines us in pastoral ministry (that is, essentially of saying the ministry of word and sacrament, and the pastoral work that flows from that), is not social science, but Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father and the power of the Spirit. That reality that undergirds, that which defines what it is ultimately that a pastor and the mission of a congregation must be about, is bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That may lead you in social ministry, it may lead you to ministries of care and ministries of therapy, ministries of renewal, economic, health care, whatever, but Jesus Christ is Lord, and there's no aspect of the existence of the cosmos over which he is not Lord. So, in Christ, one would expect to be taken into all corners. But that which defines the core of who we are and what we are about is not some contingent need to which we give a pragmatic response, but that Jesus Christ is Lord.

If I could put this in a simple image (I use this image often in my teaching), you walk into a situation—hospital room, classroom, you are in a conversation at the grocery store with someone, and the primary defining pastoral question is, “Has Jesus showed up?” In the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, I believe he does, because that's his choice to be with us.

The pastoral question is, “What is he up to that I can bear witness to, point to...?” Whatever the context, [you want to] proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord at this point of connection or intersection of your life. That which defines ministry is Jesus Christ, not the present pain, but Jesus Christ, who will address the present pain. A technical image: we begin with a Christological starting point—Jesus Christ, present in the power of the Spirit and in the freedom of his love, and then try to help the people make the connection between their present life experience and the Lord who is with them to be for them.

JMF: That brings up something we were talking about earlier, abstract nouns, and thinking of them in that sense as opposed to what they really mean. You mentioned an example of grace as an abstract noun, and others.

AP: Abstract nouns are wonderful things insofar as they sum up and gather, encapsulate, concentrate, some aspect of our knowledge and awareness. Words like grace, hospitality, justice, inclusivity, all kind of wonderful abstract nouns. Love, for example. The trouble is when we distance them from the concrete reality of the Lord Jesus who is the ground who gives them the content, and they become free-floating entities. Sometimes they are used and come around the back, used as weapons against the very gospel itself.

So I tell my students, *grace* is a good word, but remember grace has a name, his name is Jesus. Love is a good word, but love has a name, his name is Jesus. Hope is a good word, but his name is Jesus. In other words, my hope is not in *hope*, my trust is not in *grace*. I do not try to live lovingly. What does that mean? What does it mean for me to live in Christ, who is my hope? Hope and love and grace and so on

become concrete and specific and not just free-floating entities where content from the culture can tend to overwhelm them.

JMF: So it isn't just grace that we should want, in the sense of getting off the hook, it's actually being in union with Christ. Can you talk about being in union with Christ?

AP: Yeah. Grace doesn't save us. Jesus saves us. Christianity at its core is not a system of ideas, let alone a system of abstract nouns. It is about God choosing for all eternity to have a people of his own desire, a people who would love him, people whom he would cleave to himself and who would cleave to him. Without going through a lot of rigmarole, in the fullness of time, in order that that people of his choice would belong to him, he sent his Son, who is the incarnation of God's love, providence, compassion, and grace, so that all of the abstract nouns have a content and a reality, namely Jesus Christ.

The purpose is that when we look into the face of Jesus Christ as he is attested to us in the Scriptures and as he is proclaimed in the preaching of the church, we apprehend not an argument or a series of propositions, but we are apprehended by, in the power of the Spirit, the living God. We meet Jesus. As we have this conversation this morning, in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus is the third person in our conversation. To the extent that that's the case, our lives and our conversation, and as this goes out, as it's broadcast, all of this is to the glory of the Father.

I have been professionally criticized for having too big a doctrine of Jesus Christ. Some people have said that Purves is a Christ-mystic, to which my response is, duh. That which makes us Christian is Jesus, a present, living, reigning, acting Lord who is up to God's ministry in every aspect of the life of the cosmos. That's what it means, that he's Lord. He's not just Lord back there who has given us a moral code, he is Lord now, a living Lord present in power in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit.

I don't manipulate him to be here. He chooses to be here, not now in the flesh, as he was 2000 years ago, but in his Spirit. The real question of ministry is a simple question. If he's here, what is he up to? Because that's what our people need in their cancer wards and their divorcing situations, with their teenage children—do we have a Lord who can be present in power to change the human reality, or is he just an idea? I want to claim that he's present in power.

JMF: Being a believer is more than assent to a set of facts. We often hear a sinner's prayer, for example, in a simple presentation of the gospel: "Do you believe this, do you believe that, do you believe the things Jesus did?" But it sounds like you're saying that being a believer is a great deal more than just a certain set of facts.

AP: My paradigm story here in answer to that question is Acts 9:5, Saul of Tarsus, this brilliant persecutor of the church. He's got the warrant from the court in his pocket, he's en route to Damascus,

he's going to round them up, he's going to get them, and he's going to poof out of existence this nonsense that this Jesus who is dead is somehow raised. Paul is accosted, encountered by the ascended Lord—the only story we have of the ascended Lord appearing. All the other post-resurrection stories are of the resurrected Lord, but now in his ascended power he comes, and Saul is knocked to the ground. Paul's question is the core theological question— “Who are you, Lord?”

It's not just “Who are you?” It's not a speculative, dilettante's question, “Who are you?” We often get that—“Who are you?” But it's “Who are you, *Lord?*” In other words, “Who are you, you who have so unilaterally and unconditionally staked a claim on my life and I have to recognize that?” I think the boiler-house of faith is that we are encountered by a person who establishes, from his side, our being in relationship with him, and who calls us to live our lives in terms of that claim upon us.

Because we are thinking creatures, we are then called to think about that as rightly and as faithfully as we can. That's what theology is. We try to think about the creative act of God claiming us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. There are better ways and less better ways, and even right and wrong ways, to think about this. For example, this is a silly illustration, but not every sentence that has the word “god” in it is an accurate and faithful theological sentence. I could say, “God is a pink banana.” That's not a faithful theological sentence. I could say, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” That is a faithful theological sentence.

We bring our minds to these experiences, to these encounters, as they are mediated to us in the Scriptures and as we encounter the living Lord in our own lives. At some point, if you wanted, I might tell you some of these encounter stories, because I know he lives and reigns because he met me.

I can't explain it. The Bible is nowhere interested in metaphysics. The creation, how did God create? We don't know. *Va'omer Elohim*, in Hebrew, and God said. That's God's choice. The Word became flesh—*Logos sarx egeneto*, the Word became flesh. No metaphysics. On the third day he was raised from the dead. How did God the Father raise the Son from the dead in the powerless world? No metaphysics. He ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. No metaphysics. Deal with it. He's done it. This Lord meets us along our Damascus roads.

JMF: Let's talk about the encounters.

AP: My first transforming encounter...there had been intonations. My mother was an Irish Catholic, my father a Presbyterian of loose form, not practicing. I wasn't brought up in the church in Edinburgh, Scotland; I was a high school dropout at 16. I was sitting in my parent's living room one Sunday evening watching television with my mother and father (my sister wasn't there).

We were sitting around the coal fire watching television, and this is not an allusion to John Wesley, but it was somewhere after 8:00 in the evening, and I got up to leave the living room. My lapsed Roman

Catholic Irish mother was in an armchair by the fire. I stopped at her chair and said, “I’m bored with my life.” My mother looked up, “Oh,” she said, “Why don’t you go to church next Sunday?”

Where in the name of heaven did that come from? My non-practicing, ex-Roman Catholic mother shattered me. I went to church. I told the story of what happened—the minister came to the pulpit, “Let us worship God,” and I got to do that. I went back home, told my mother, she was so upset with me, she did not speak to me for two weeks. There are many other stories along the way that the Lord encountered me. There is one big story that takes about three or four minutes to tell.

JMF: Well, we would need to hear it now.

AP: It’s a big story, and it’s the story that in many ways now defines my work, my life. Seven-and-a-half years ago I was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer. My colleague at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Martha Robbins, who has a Harvard Ph.D. in psychology, ex-Roman Catholic nun, called me up and said, “I want to come and pray with you.” Martha’s piety and my piety are a little different, but she’s a wonderful Christian woman.

It was a Saturday night, a few days before my surgery. Martha came with a boom box to my house and said, “I need you for an hour.” Okay, so we went down to the basement. She had me lie down on the couch. She read from Romans 8, said a prayer with her hands laid over me, put on some music, and said, “Trust me. I want to take you on an imaginative prayer journey.” She did some deep breathing to get relaxed, and then said, “When you’re ready I want you to picture in your mind a great big door. When are ready, walk through that door, and you will come to a flight of stairs.”

So I relaxed and eventually I see a big door, and for some reason I saw it as a church door, a double wooden church door. I walked through that door, and to my surprise, saw a flight of stairs going down. They were stone stairs. Why? Who would have thought it? She said, “At the bottom of the stone stairs, there are a second set of doors, and when you walk through these doors you will be in a safe place.”

Now what I’m about to say took an hour, but it will just take a couple of minutes to tell. After a little while, I walked through that second set of doors, and to my astonishment, I was in the abbey on Iona off the west coast of Scotland, where I had been many times—the spiritual home of Scotland, Saint Columba’s Island, where in 563 Columba and some Irish monks had settled and from there began to evangelize the Scots. This is our holy place, although the rebuilt abbey is 11th century and Roman, nonetheless, this is the place.

I was off at one of the side transepts beside sarcophagi of dead kings or queens or some folks, and I was small, curled up in a fetal position, scared. I became aware that this ancient abbey was filled with the saints of the Scottish church. This is probably not orthodox Presbyterian theology, but they were praying for me. There were thousands of them, undifferentiated. Gradually, they maneuvered me out of my hiding

place and brought me into the center of the abbey to the front of the communion table.

What I'm about to tell you is as real as looking you in the eye. There was a huge green Iona Marble communion table, and I was brought to the front of it. I don't know if I was kneeling, lying, or sitting, but I was low down. I looked up, and standing in front of the communion table was the Lord Jesus. Absolutely real. He said to me that my cancer was the attempt of the evil one to destroy me, but I assure you, I have the victory. That was it.

Two days after my surgery, I had a pulmonary embolism and almost died. That night, lying in bed in the hospital trying to process what had happened, all the tubes and stuff from major surgery still in me, and just for a flash, a nanosecond, I realized what these words meant, because it came to me again from the Lord, I'm absolutely convinced, "Whether you live or die, you live or die unto me because I have the victory."

That has shaped the last seven-and-a-half years of my life. I know he lives because he's met me. The one who has met me has been tested in his meeting me, and my attempt to describe it in terms of the great theological heritage of the church. This is who God is—the Lord who loves us, who claims us, who blesses us, who will not let us go, and who in the dire circumstances upholds us from underneath of the everlasting arms.

JMF: Did that move you toward one of the books that you wrote subsequently?

AP: I was in the middle of my big academic book, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, and the second half of that book was written during the six months of chemotherapy. Some of that is in the academics of the second half of the book. My editor wanted me to take it out, and I said no, I didn't want it taken out because this is the context of the book, writing on the ministry of the grace of God, the ministry of the comfort of God, the ministry of the presence of God, and the ministry of the reign of God. Although the book is technical, academic, these are not just words. These chapters that I wrote during chemotherapy were...this is my life. On this I depend. This is not just writing a book for the academic guild. The two subsequent books, *The Crucifixion of Ministry* and *The Resurrection of Ministry*, were putting into a more accessible form this theology of the living Lord who encounters us.

JMF: Is there a favorite book among all this that you've written that you feel the most affinity with?

AP: It's like...I have three children. How could I pick? Each book has its own story, its own context, its own reason for being written, and in the editing process, its own particular pain. But *The Crucifixion of Ministry* is in some ways special because over the last three years since its publication I've had hundreds of emails from pastors who I have never met telling me that they've picked it up and it has changed the ministry.

For the want of another image...and I hope this doesn't sound self-serving or arrogant, but that book

seems to have an anointing that I don't have any control over. It seems to have a life that God has given it for the blessing of busy, tired, middle-aged, underpaid, over-stressed, over-worked, underappreciated, collapsing self-esteem pastors—it seems to have connected. I will take that for what it is. If it's a blessing, then I am grateful.

JMF: In *The Resurrection of Ministry*, you quote a friend who said, “If Jesus is so big, so powerful, so victorious, why am I so unconscious of his presence so much of the time? Why, when I preach and teach the word of the Lord, are the people not bursting forth with the fruits of the Spirit? If Jesus is the reigning Lord of the universe, why are even little pastoral problems so confounding?” Is that what drove you to think about this topic and work on that book?

AP: In part. There are intractable theological problems. If God is all loving and God is all powerful, whence evil? Why does somebody like me get cancer and live while somebody with the same diagnosis gets the same cancer and dies? I can't explain these things. They're troubling.

When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask the Father, “Could you not have created a world without cancer?” I'm not sure I have a good answer in terms of a satisfying answer that would be acceptable to the logic of the world other than to make a confession: I believe that in the end, every tear will be wiped away and God will gather his people to himself, and there will be joy, and joy will have a name, and his name is Jesus, in whom we will be in communion.

It's not just “whistle a happy tune whenever you feel afraid” or “a pie in the sky when you die”—it's a question of trusting. No, that's wrong. That puts it upon me. Let me put it this way: I have decided that sometimes experiences and problems to the contrary, the message of the New Testament is true. I've decided to live by that, and that Jesus reigns. While there are a ton of things I can't explain (and at 63 there are more things I can't explain than I could when I was 43), and theology is inherently messy with all kinds of loose ends, I have decided to trust that Jesus is a victorious Lord.

My word to pastors is, don't point to what you can do, point your people to Jesus. Even if they experience things to the contrary, tell them, declare to them, that Jesus in the Spirit is with them. And heaven help us, pray God that the Lord will turn up in their lives. I can't manipulate it or control it, but I'm not without resources.

A story I tell at the end of *The Crucifixion of Ministry* might bear repeating. It's a story of a pastor who gets a call at 4:00 in the morning from Bill. Bill and Mary are a young couple in his congregation. They've been married a number of years, they're in their mid-30s, no children, but Mary's pregnant and in great excitement. They're a faithful couple, they are good people, and you get this phone call at 4:00 in the morning from Bill, he's in his car en route to the local obstetrics emergency room. Mary's hemorrhaging.

What do you do? You throw on some clothes, you get there, you get to the hospital, 4:30, Bill's in the

room waiting. He hears your footsteps, he turns around, there's tears running down his face. "Bill, what's the matter?" "The baby's dead." He looks at his watch. "Oh, it's just coming up for time. The nurse said we'll get in in a minute to see Mary. Oh, and by the way, we want you to baptize the baby."

You go, "Can I baptize a dead person? Do I have authority to do this?" You have but 30 seconds to conduct a theological colloquium in your head. The nurse comes, "You can see your wife now," and you walk into the room. There's Mary in a bed with sheets pulled up to her chin. Baby's in the bassinet completely covered in a blanket. The couple meet, and they're tentative and unsure of how to relate. You're standing there. You can't fix it. I'm a pastor and I can't fix it. I can't raise the dead. This child is dead. I can't heal their pain.

Then you realize that Mary's probably never held the baby. So you whisper in her husband's ear, "Give the baby to her mother." He goes, picks up the baby, and there's the three of them, a cameo. "Pastor, we want you to baptize the baby." Oh, what do I do? Then you remember that you had attended my lectures on Calvin's doctrine of the ascension (this is not kidding), and remember that Calvin taught three things about the ministry of the ascended Lord.

1) He prays for us. So this situation of family catastrophe and of ministerial powerlessness is being prayed for by Jesus.

2) Second, he sends the Holy Spirit. This is a charismatic environment. The Holy Spirit is here.

3) The third thing Calvin says, "And he gives us to the Father."

So you say, "Bill, Mary, let me show you what Jesus is doing right now." You take the dead baby and you lift up the dead baby and say, "At this very minute, Jesus is giving your daughter to the Father, and for my sake he is cleaving your daughter to his bosom." They won't remember a word you said, but they will remember the action where you bore witness to what Jesus was doing in this tragic situation.

We have resources. We can't fix, but we point people to what we believe the living Lord is doing. Pastors, to do that, you need to know the living Lord. To do that, pastors, you need to know your people, and you then facilitate, as it were, that conversation between the living Lord and the freedom of his love and the power of the Spirit and the lives of your people—you help them make these connections in your preaching, teaching and pastoral work. You can't fix it. But Jesus shows up—at least that's what I believe.

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Theology for Pastoral Work

J. Michael Fezell: In your book, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, on page 128, you wrote, “At its core, pastoral work involves bearing witness to the joining of two stories, the parishioners and God’s. Who is Jesus Christ specifically for this person amid the particularities and the exigencies of his or her current life experience?”

How does a pastor bring those two stories together?

Andrew Purves: It is a fundamental question in two regards. First, as a pastor, you have to live in Christ. You have to know the Lord. That doesn’t just mean passing the theology test (that’s important—know the Lord, knowing how to speak appropriately of the Lord), but you must know the Lord as the Lord of your life. That means a life of piety, of prayer, ethical attentiveness and so on. It means a life of worship, of living in Christ.

Saint Paul used the phrase “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” “in him” in his letters around 164 times. It’s his fundamental statement about what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is someone *in Christ*. I take that to mean an organic connectedness, a relationship...even in rather hackneyed terms, a “personal relationship” with a living, reigning Lord.

That’s something we have to attend to. It’s like cleaning your teeth. You get up in the morning and you clean your teeth. It’s a fundamental good habit. Just because it’s a habit doesn’t mean it’s bad. Our habit, the *habitus*, the rhythm of our life, is to attend to our life in the Lord. You can’t do ministry unless you have a life in Christ, in him, embedded in him, rooted, growing up in him, so that the flower of your ministry and faith is a result of your roots of faith—life being deeply embedded in the soil of the word of God.

The other thing—to be a pastor you have to be embedded with your people. You’ve got to know your people. One of the sad aspects of contemporary ministry is that ministers tend to sit in big offices with a sanctuary outside, and people come and visit the minister. In the olden days, ministers used to go and visit the people. The word parish comes from two Greek words *para, oikos*, beyond the house—the parish was the walking distance that the minister or priest could cover to get to the houses of the people. We read in Acts that Paul visited from house to house.

This is to say the pastor must know his or her people. You’ve got to be involved in their lives. You’re with them in their births and deaths and getting jobs and losing jobs and in their hospitals and all their ups and downs. You’re with them. That’s the genius of a pastoral charism, of a pastoral giftedness—that your joy is to walk with these people.

So you know the Lord, you're embedded in the life of the Lord...when one thinks perhaps of John 15—you're a branch connected to the vine, you're organically connected and you are in Christ, abiding in him. But you're also in the people, you're abiding in them.

As the pastor, then, you are the one who enables that conversation. They know the Lord, too, but you're the one whose special job and appointment is to bear witness. So I tell my students, don't use phrases like "pastoral counseling." If somebody needs a therapist, find a good therapist. Your job is rather to help them interpret the context of their life—the vicissitudes, pains, tragedies, joys. Go to the graduation parties as well as the funeral homes. Make the connections, and in the small things you often don't even have to say words. You are making connections between Jesus and them. It feeds into the sermons.

For example, I preach all over the country and I come in on a parachute. I preach, I don't know the people, I don't know the context. I preach, people say how wonderful it is and all the rest. But at the end of the day, that's not effective preaching.

Effective preaching arises out of a preacher or pastor, a man or woman who is embedded with the people and preaches into the context of their pain, preaches into the context of the silence of their cry to God— "where are you, God?", and they hear nothing back. They preach into these terrible cosmic silences, these ambiguities and these confusions that are the normal part of ongoing life. There's that dual embedded-ness.

One other thought that I've played with through the years is that I think all ministry has a "from-to" character. That is, you move from your place as the pastor, from your life in Christ, from your safe place, *to* where the people are. That may be not be a comfortable place.

Although I'm well acquainted (sadly) with hospitals because of my cancer, I don't like hospitals. I have a daughter-in-law who is a physician. She's comfortable in hospitals. I will never be comfortable in hospitals. Hospitals are not my "to" place. Yet as pastors we have to go into these uncomfortable places. But we can only do what we do in these places because we have a deep groundedness in our "from" place, and that's our anchor.

I would encourage pastors really seriously in this regard. If you have no life in Christ, you have no ministry, because we read in John 15:5, "Apart from me, you can do nothing. Unless you are connected into me, the vine, you can do nothing." So the most practical, pertinent question I can put to a working pastor is, "What's going on in your life in Jesus?" Because if you don't have a life in Christ, you don't have a ministry. No matter how technically proficient you are in the skills of ministry, no matter how many committee meetings you go to, your life in Christ means that you can go into these situations and you know who Jesus is, what he is up to in all of these contexts, and you can point to that, bear witness to

that.

JMF: It might seem like a trite question, but how does a pastor do that? How does a pastor remain?

AP: It's not a trite question. It's a critical question. Most seminaries in the United States (this is a non-scientific poll, but I have the sense) do not have enough attention paid to the spiritual formation of the pastor, or in different terms, to the pastor's own formation in Jesus Christ, the pastor's own relationship with Jesus Christ.

I've often been struck, when the disciples saw Jesus praying, they asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Some form of God's history with Israel had been around 1100, 1200 years. They knew how to pray. Yet something was going on here, because what was the Lord praying? Surely he was praying out of his own Sonship in the Spirit with the Father. I think he was praying, "My Father" because he alone is the only begotten Son. "My Father who art in heaven." The disciples discern that something profound in its spiritual connectedness and power is going on between Jesus and the Father. So they're not saying "teach us the techniques of prayer," they're not asking, "teach us how to do deep breathing when we pray" (I don't know if that's bad), but they're saying, "How do we get in on your Sonly communion with the Father in the power of the Spirit?"

That's the point of prayer, is that we are in on the Son's...the technical word might be *perichoretic*...communion of love with the Father. So Jesus teaches them the Lord's prayer. But back of that, theologically, is that Jesus is teaching them, "pray in me, pray through *me*," so that our prayers are through Jesus Christ our Lord. Our prayers are accepted not because Andrew Purves is pious (God knows he's not) but because they are given to the Lord, who takes what is ours—broken, muddled, irregular, incoherent, distracted—our broken prayers...takes them in himself, heals them, and gives them to the Father in his name. He takes what is his own communion with the Father, his life of love, discipleship, obedience, worship, and says, "Here, this is yours." Not just "here, take it"—"It's yours! It's yours!" Not just a possibility. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian says it's an actuality. It's the actuality that we are in Christ, participating in his life, that makes it possible for me to pray, makes it possible for me to write books, teach my classes, engage in ministry.

The question is for me, for pastors: "Will I pay attention to that life in Christ? Will I seek to grow more deeply in Christ?" Psalm 1 is Psalm 1 because Psalm 1 is doing something that no other psalm can do. Psalm 2 can't do what Psalm 1 is doing. What is Psalm 1 doing? Psalm 1 is the gateway, the threshold, the entrance into the book of Israel's response to the Lord, or rather the five books of Israel's response to the Lord. You have the Pentateuch, five books...the five books of the response, five books of the Psalms. Psalm 1 is setting up this response. It's a two-way psalm. Will you abide in the way of the wicked, or will you abide in the way of the Lord? I think that's the challenge for any Christian disciple. What does it

mean more deeply, more convertedly, more faithfully to live into that reality that has already claimed them—to find me. To abide in the Lord and to make my home there.

The psalm uses an image about a tree being planted by a stream of running water. It's a psalm of the exile. It's all desert — emotionally, spiritually desert, but also physically it's desert. Yet the Psalmist used, “In the Lord you will be like a tree planted by a stream of running water.” Out of that planted-ness, a plant of faith grows, and the plant of ministry grows. So in the education of ministers, clergy for ministry, we need to help people know what it means to have a deeper, more abiding life in the Lord. I've gone on too long with that question in answer to it, but it's important.

JMF: It also raises the question of the meaning of grace in terms of one's devotion to the God of grace without there becoming a legalistic framework or an attempt to be something that we aren't. How do those work together? How do we bring a complete faithfulness to God in his grace toward us without bringing our own so-called righteousness and yet living in Christ, in union with Christ?

AP: Let me refer to a Bible verse in order to be precise, because your question is important. Colossians 2:6...and this picks up the Psalm 1:3 image too, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...” That's the piety, that's the formation. “...Strengthened in the faith you were taught.” This is the faith of the apostles; this is the faith of the church. Get the theology wrong, and you will get life and ministry wrong. Then at the end, and this comes directly to your question, “...overflowing with thankfulness.” The response that comes out, the life that comes out of this rootedness in Christ, is not a life of guilt, obligation or duty. It's not “I ought, I should, I must, I have to.” It's a life overflowing with thankfulness.

The Greek word for overflowing here in other translations is sometimes translated “abounding.” Abounding is an old funny word. I don't abound (especially as we get older) much anymore. The word means overflowing. Paul uses it in Romans 5 to talk about grace. Overflowing. Three times he says, “Grace overflows.” Again he says grace overflows, and the third time he puts it in the superlative—grace super-overflows—it's Niagara Falls of grace, not just a little trickle-down effect. It's this huge grace, so that sin has no chance.

He uses the same word here, “Now out of this life in Christ, growing up in the faith and every way into him who is the head, we abound [or we overflow] in thankfulness.” *Eucharistia* in Greek. What a wonderful energy system—gratitude, thankfulness, not obligation and duty. Not *musts* and *should* and *don't* and *have to's*, but a heart filled with gratitude.

I think this is ...I don't know the right word to use...the genius of the Christian gospel. The point where we are called into practice, into ministry, into service, it is not at the point of “I've got to go to another meeting, I am exhausted, I've got to go and work harder.” I tell my students this, I *get* to get up in

the morning to come and talk to you about Jesus Christ.

Or you say, “Folks, I get up in the morning to preach... 11:00 on Sunday morning that Jesus is Lord.” When that has taken hold of your life, and gratitude and thankfulness abounds within you, your preaching will not be dull, because a thankful person is not a dull person. A thankful person is a person full of the joy and the energy of the gospel.

JMF: We’re told we love him because he first loved us. It reminds me, as you’re describing that, in Titus, “It is grace that teaches us to say no to ungodliness,” and so on. It begins with the grace of God. He moves for us first, and we can move ahead in that.

AP: Often our sense of guilt or need or obligation begins to take over. There’s another verse from Paul in Philippians 3. Through the chapter he is saying that nothing can compare with the fact that— “I’ve lost everything for the fact of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is my Lord.” At verse 12 he writes, “Not that I have already obtained this, the fullness of Christian life, the perfection of life, or have already arrived at the goal. But I press on to take hold of it.”

Sometimes you hear preachers say we’ve got to press on, we’ve got to work harder, go to more committee meetings, give more money, press on, press on. You know, “I guilt you, I guilt you, I guilt you,” and I’m tired of guilt. But if they’ve read the whole verse, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” What is the first thing? It’s not that I press on to attain the prize of Jesus Christ. I press on because Jesus Christ has already taken hold of me and I am his prize. The Greek word here means “seized hold of.” It’s not just that Jesus Christ has taken hold of me, it’s Jesus Christ has *seized* hold of me. It’s an intensive. “I seize hold of the Christian life because Jesus Christ has already seized hold of me.” I think of it as we’re grabbed by the scruff of our spiritual necks. We’re seized hold of intensively. When Jesus Christ has us by the scruff of our spiritual necks, we can buck and we even try to get out of it, but he has got us by the scruff of the neck. Because we are seized hold of, with thankfulness I am going to live this life the way he wants me to live it, and give it my best shot, knowing that no matter what, he has seized hold of me, and on that I will depend.

JMF: And your success or failure is not what determines his grip. His grip is the reality.

AP: Remember Peter walking on the water. I’m thankful for silly Peter, Peter the doofus, because he’s walking toward the Lord on the water, his faith deserts him, he begins to sink. What stops Peter from drowning is not that he’s reached up and grabbed Jesus’ hand, but that Jesus has reached down and grabbed his hand.

There is a place for us to seize hold, but it’s lower down the theological food chain. What saves me is not my decision for Jesus, but Jesus’ decision for me. He has seized hold of me, and my response is: In gratitude I say, “Yes Lord. Show me what you want me to do.”

JMF: In that story, the word immediately is used. There's not a lot of time when you're sinking.

AP: That's comforting because as pastors, we can't throw people back upon their own strength and resources. My teacher Tom Torrance used to say this all the time, "Don't cast people back upon themselves, upon their own faith, their own ethics, their own piety, because we break, we will give out. Cast them back upon Jesus Christ. And held by Jesus Christ, they will discover the resources of their piety and their ethics and their service, but again, out of gratitude and thankfulness, not out of guilt or fear."

JMF: Ephesians 2 is a long number of verses about the grace, the riches of kindness and so on that has come to us. It concludes in verse 10 with, "We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works." Not that you do good works to be...

AP: That's right. To put it in the terms of what high school English teachers used to teach us, using indicative and imperative language: The indicative is prior to and conditions the imperative. The indicative is the statement of fact, of reality. You *are* in Christ. You are loved cosmically from the foundation of the world. You have been seized hold of by Jesus Christ. Now therefore, this is how... The imperative, how you are to live, is the *consequence*, and is conditioned by the prior reality that we are in Christ by God's choice and act. That is the gospel.

JMF: In so much preaching, though, it makes people feel it's the other direction... that they need to do something in order for God to feel this way toward them. So they're looking over their shoulder for what they've done wrong, for where the weak link in the chain lies.

AP: Most of us scratch a little theologically and spiritually, and we say, I deserved this from God. I deserved this punishment, this cancer, this divorce or what have you. That is tragic.

It was the great Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, who, in the 1950s, published the message that said that God had decided from all eternity that God would no longer be God without a people to love—that God is the God of love. That doesn't mean to say that he's not the God of justice, of judgment, but I can say to you, "I forgive you," and implied within that "I forgive you" is...you've done wrong. I wouldn't "forgive" you if you hadn't done wrong. But it's the "I forgive you" that is the larger reality under which the judgment is subsumed.

There is judgment, and we need to preach that. But we preach it within the context that there is something bigger than the judgment, more that overwhelms the judgment — the "I forgive you, I love you, you are mine, you belong to me, I will not let you go." That is grace. That is why the Word became flesh—that we may know God is a God of love.

To put it differently, the relations within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not relations of law or obligation. The Trinity is a communion of love—three persons, one being. The heart of God, if we can speak, the being of God, who God is, is God is love. God gives us law in order to help us live in an

appropriate way. But the heart of things, the center of things is not law, but love. Not condemnation, but forgiveness. That's freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free [Galatians 5:1], not for guilt. For freedom Christ has set us free. Thanks be to God.

JMF: The gospel really is good news.

AP: Right. It's called gospel.

JMF: What does a pastor need? What skills should a pastor have? What knowledge and experience should he or she have, expect to have, or strive to have, to be an effective pastor?

AP: That's a complex question. Let me work my way into it, because I have no slick packaged answer to your question. The first thing I would say: To be a pastor, you need to be well-apprenticed to a theological heritage. There are good theological heritages out there, and to be apprenticed to them means that you put yourself, as it were, under the authority of a tradition that the church has said "This is faithful."

If you're in a Pietistic tradition, under the Wesleys perhaps, my Reformed tradition under Calvin... Who was Wesley apprenticed to? The Greek fathers. Who was Calvin apprenticed to? The Greek fathers. You apprentice yourself as a pastor to the men and women who have framed and converted the mind of the church, so that the pastor, as the teaching elder, is a man or a woman who has the mind of Christ and who can teach the people that they may grow and have the mind of Christ.

Being a theologian is not just something that strange people do... get a technical education and so forth. Being a theologian is a requirement for everyone who would be a pastor—anyone who would teach Sunday School, even if it's the tiny tots. My wife this week in her church is doing Vacation Bible School, and there are tiny tots running around. Those who teach these little children need to be theologians. They need to know who is the Lord, who is God, the God whom we name, the God who we trust has claimed us, and be able to express that in cogent, accurate and careful terms.

To be a pastor you need to be apprenticed to a tradition of ministry. Too much modern ministry is gimmickry. I don't mean to be offensive in saying this, but too much modern ministry is enthralled into passing psychological fads or sociological fads.

In the fall at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, I will be teaching a course on classical texts for pastoral theology. I think there's a copy in your pile of books. We'll be reading old dead guys:

Gregory of Nazianzus, 380s, the first systematic text in pastoral ministry in the history of the church.

John Chrysostom, the Greek father from Antioch.

Gregory the Great, 590, became pope. His book of pastoral rule was the book of pastoral care for the next 1000 years in the Western church.

Martin Bucer, the most important pastoral writer of the Reformation age, his pastoral theology just

being published in English for the first time.

Richard Baxter, [who wrote] *The Reformed Pastor*...it doesn't mean the Calvinist pastor; it means the renewed pastor, the pastor in Christ.

And the reminisces of my favorite, John McLeod Campbell of Scotland.

All these texts are available. They are old texts, but I'm including them... I'm sorry there are no women in them, I wish that were the case, but this is what we have. This is the great wisdom, the depository of pastoral knowledge in the history of the church. I teach this stuff, and the students catch fire. They are staggered at this stuff, this wisdom.

We've got to apprentice our students to the wisdom of the pastoral heritage that has been passed down. People knew how to do pastoral ministry before Sigmund Freud came along. They knew how to do pastoral ministry before we got into all this modern psychology and sociology. None of that's wrong, but it's not what defines our work. Read the great texts, study the great theologians.

The third thing I would say is: Read the great spiritual saints. Read the Augustines and the Gregory of Nazianzuses, read Calvin's chapter on prayer in his *Institutes*, and read Luther on Galatians. Read some of the great Roman women—Teresa of Avila. You may not agree—that doesn't matter! These are books that have been around for a long, long time for a reason.

C.S. Lewis, in an introduction a few years ago to a translation of Athanasius's book on the incarnation, a famous little introduction...Lewis said, "For every new book we should read two old books, because the old books have been around and are tested." Read the old theologians, read the old ministers, read the old teachers on prayer and be guided in your formation. Read contemporary books, too, but they probably won't be around as long as these old books.

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We Are Not Generic

JMF: In your work over many years, you've undoubtedly had some ah-ha moments. Can you tell us about one or two of those?

AP: You mean in the classroom or...

JMF: In the classroom, or in general study on your own, or walking down the street one day.

AP: One that immediately comes to mind... (I haven't thought about this in a long time because it was painful.) I was in pastoral ministry for four and a half years in the United States, and there was a middle-aged elderly woman in my congregation who was challenging. I was on the job a week, and I was told in no uncertain terms I had to pay a pastoral call on this woman. I was told she was difficult, so I was brand-new and very nervous and went to pay my pastoral call on her. We chatted a little while and then I got up and said goodbye, and I got out of there and, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, I had made my pastoral call and took the rest of the afternoon off on order to get my self-respect back.

That night my clerk of session in the Presbyterian church, that's the senior lay person, clerk of our board of management, called me up and said, "Andrew, I received a call from so-and-so. It was appreciated that you made the pastoral call, but you did not pray at the end of the pastoral call." I said, "Did I not? I was so terrified I just ran away." "Well, she is very upset that you didn't pray."

That was a tremendous learning, because all kinds of people no doubt visit this person and do good work. But one of the things I was to do as the pastor that hadn't entered my head... I was to be the person, if nothing else, I would pray for that person. That was a major learning.

The second event that comes to mind is also somewhat painful. I was about a year and a half into pastoral ministry... I don't recall the circumstances, going back 30 years now... I realized I had no spiritual life. I had studied in four major European universities, around the world and in Europe and in the United States. Nobody taught me to pray. I began to realize that this was a problem. I started casting around who would teach me to pray, and I couldn't find anybody to teach me to pray.

Eventually I discovered a group in Washington, D.C., called the Church of the Savior, an intentional formational community of discipleship led by a wonderful man, Gordon Cosby and his wife, Mary Cosby, and I went off to do a retreat. I was there four days, in D.C., the first 26 hours of which were in silence. It absolutely devastated me. I had never been silent that long in my life. We went through a program, and I came back to my little country congregation in western Pennsylvania and got up on the Sunday morning after I arrived back and said, "Folks, I've had a major experience. I think I've just been converted, and I think I realize that I've got to have a relationship with Jesus and I've got to become a man of prayer. I'm

just being really candid with you.”

A group of older women from my congregation came up to me after the service and said, “Dr. Andrew, we knew something was going to happen to you, because we’ve been praying for you.” That was a real learning. I tell my students, “May you be blessed with a group of older women who sit on the back pew who will pray you into conversion as their minister.” That’s some serious learning for me.

As a seminary professor, it’s been less dramatic perhaps. But one learning I think I want to share...it’s not dramatic, but it’s serious, and that is, make sure you don’t fake it. Be honest with the people with whom you’re dealing. They will suss out a fake. Even as half-professor, don’t be afraid to be vulnerable. Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.”

As I get older I hit more and more walls I can’t explain. When I hit a theological wall, I tell my students...I get a question in class and I will wander around and think out loud, and I will say, “I’ve gone so far, I need to think some more about this. But I’ll tell you what I’m thinking at the moment is, I may be hitting a theological wall that I cannot get over. But you know what I do when I hit a theological wall? I get down on my knees and I thank God for the mystery of the gospel.”

Our theology ought to drive us to our knees. It took me a while to learn that and to be comfortable with vulnerability in the classroom. That’s important in ministry in general. I’m not a person who knows all the answers, I’m not that bright. I don’t know everything. As I mentioned in another talk, I was a high-school dropout, I haven’t had a classical education, I don’t read Latin — I wish I did, and then I could intimidate my students, but I don’t. What’s the point in pretending? I’ve had a good education and I’m good at what I do. But there’s no point in pretending.

Be honest, be vulnerable. That doesn’t mean be soppy, that doesn’t mean use vulnerability as a manipulative tool to earn the sympathy of your audience, that’s just co-dependency and manipulation... Have genuine vulnerability, because I am a person speaking to people. I have read more books than my students, but nonetheless I don’t know everything, and it’s all right to be vulnerable, and it’s even all right (in appropriate ways with appropriate boundaries) to be intense and emotional.

A student who is a friend came to me and said so-and-so is wanting to take your class on such-and-such and wanted to know what you were like as a teacher. The student, a middle-aged woman, said to me, “I was candid, and I thought you might be interested to know. I said, with Dr. Purves you take notes for half the class and then he starts to preach. Once he gets worked up, he starts to preach and then you put your notes down and listen to the sermon because he’s moved from the classroom into the sanctuary.”

I praise God for that because the borderline between theology and proclamation ought not to be that far apart. Theology and exegesis, the interpretation of Scripture, are for the proclamation of the gospel. Exegesis without proclamation is aborted process. As Calvin knew, theology is for the proclamation of the

gospel. We ought to get to messing a little bit and into preaching, I think.

JMF: Tell us about some of your mentors — the key people, formative people in your life.

AP: My first book, *The Search for Compassion*, I dedicated to my father, an unlettered man, a barber, left school at 14, but he taught me a number of lessons that are dear. He taught me to love his wife. A man must love his wife. He loved my mother. He taught me about love for one's wife. He taught me about honesty in one's dealings, and he taught me about humor. My father died two days before my first child was born. I was in the United States, pastor at the time, my father was in Edinburgh in Scotland, and my mother called me the night of his death and said, "Don't come home for the funeral, you need to be with Cathy" (my wife) because she was due two days later on her due date. Brendan was born two days later, on his due date — our oldest of the three children, and Brendan's birth was announced to my family at my father's funeral.

This is a very personal story. I've never worked out the emotions of my father's death and my first child's birth. But I know, and this is a metaphor, that my father and Brendan and Jesus and I will sit down together in the kingdom of God. I can't explain that. It's more than a metaphor; it's a statement of expectation — that those who we have lost and loved a while, we would be with. My father...my wife Cathy.

During my cancer seven and a half years ago, I was off for eight months. She was staggering. I was in the hospital for 14 days, she was to come in the morning, and we'd read the daily office of the Episcopal Church. Why do we do that? It's structured, we like it. So come 8:00 in the morning, we'd pray the daily office, she'd chant the canticles...nurses, doctors coming and going in there, she's singing it to them. At the end of the day, she would sing, pray, even in prayer, and these wonderful blessings at the end of the day. I came to see that my rhythm in hospital was morning and evening prayer, and her strength and love and support have been... Nothing in my life and career would have happened without her.

Professionally and academically, James and Tom Torrance have been tremendously important to me. Their theology and more than just their published works, them personally, have been a great influence on me and have undoubtedly been the primary influences in shaping my own thinking and my own work. I'm grateful for the two of them.

I must mention my now-retired colleague at Pittsburgh Seminary, Charles Partee...a magnificent Calvin scholar, but for nearly 30 years we've been colleagues and friends, and he has been an amazing encourager, scolds sometimes when he told me I could do better than I, at times, believed that I could do, but I would honor him by saying that I love Charles Partee, he was a wonderful Calvin scholar and dear friend. Although he is retired now, I will be teaching a course in the fall with him on the theology of H.R. Mackintosh, the wonderful Scottish theologian who taught Tom Torrance. There are many others along

the way, but these would have been the principal mentors.

JMF: You mentioned a story about the last time you saw Tom Torrance. Do you mind sharing that?

AP: It's a lovely story and it's dear to me. I was in Edinburgh, this was six months before my cancer, and wasn't feeling well. I knew something was up but was a little un-brave, shall we say, cowardly, about dealing with it. I called Tom and said I was in town, and he said come round to his house the next morning. So I went round at 10:00, rang the doorbell, his wife answered the door and said, "Andrew, Tom is upstairs in his study waiting to see you." I walked up the stairs and was just about to knock on the door. He must have heard me coming, and he opened the door and greeted me with the words, "Andrew, how lovely to see you again. I pray for you every day." I walked through the door and entered his study, an extraordinary study, and he said, "Sit down in that armchair. Karl Barth sat in that chair." I thought, "Wow, sitting in the chair Karl Barth sat on." We chatted for a while and after midday we went out for lunch—I remember it was a chicken sandwich. Tom got up to pay for lunch at the end of the sandwich in the bar and dropped a huge wad of pound notes. There was the great Tom Torrance, the most important English-speaking theologian of the second half of the 20th century on his knees in a bar picking up pound notes.

Then we went back to his study for a while and chatted some more. About 3:00 in the afternoon I said I had to go, and he said, "Well, what of my books don't you have?" and I mentioned there was one that I didn't have. He pulled it off the shelf and signed it, and then he said, "Before you go I need to pray for you." His study was lined with stacks like in the library, not books against the wall, but stacks coming out at right angles from the wall, and round the back was a little prayer desk, way back in the corner. He took me by the arm, brought me down there, and had me kneel at the prayer desk, and laid hands on me, and prayed for me.

I felt like Elijah — that the work that he had done was being carried on — that I was charged with the theological task, part of a theological heritage that goes back through Irenaeus, through Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, through Luther and Calvin, through John McLeod Campbell, William Miller, H.R. Mackintosh, Tom Torrance...this is my heritage. These are my teachers, and my commitment has been I will not just read what Tom Torrance says about these people, but I realized a while back I had to make them my teachers too, and to go back and to read these primary texts again as being transformational for my teaching.

Now I discover my students love these people! They get so excited by Gregory of Nazianzus, Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Irenaeus, and on it goes. "Why weren't we taught this?" I teach Doctor of Ministry students, old guys, "Why did nobody teach us this stuff?" They come alive in the great theological heritage of the church.

JMF: You do a lot of teaching about pastoral work and your wife is a pastor. How does that work in the family dynamics?

AP: Graciously. It's complex...there are boundary issues. You can only do so much theology in pastoral work without going nuts sometimes. There are times when we've got to watch World Cup Soccer or go out to dinner as a couple going out to dinner after 35 years of marriage and we just want to talk about our three children and not what she's preaching on Sunday or what book I'm writing. We are a normal couple that does normal things and enjoys doing the things that a couple of 35 years marriage enjoy — companionship and affection and gentleness. But we also talk theology. We read books in common. I should say this quietly...I'm not sure if she reads my books anymore. Sometimes I put this to her and say, "Have you read what I said?" "Oh," she said, "I don't so much read them, I live them when you're writing them," so maybe that's the case.

I am a pastoral associate in her congregation. It's a small urban congregation in Pittsburgh. So she's my boss. That functionally means that when she's not in the pulpit for one reason or another, I get to preach without being paid. The congregation loves it when we're in the pulpit together...seems to (I don't know) indicate something...that we are together pulling in the same direction. She's a Calvin scholar by trade more than I am, and she's a good theologian. Sometimes it can get intense. Can I tell you one time when it got intense?

JMF: Sure.

AP: It's a curious story. I am a convert to the need to recover the doctrine of the ascension. I'm big on the ascension because the ascension means that Jesus is in the present tense, not in the past tense. Without the ascension, he's not present in power. So I'm a big advocate for the recovery of the ascension — it ripples through a lot of my recent books. This past spring I asked Cathy, "Are you going to have a special service on Ascension Day Thursday?" "No, we're going to do ascension on the Sunday before." "You can't do ascension on the Sunday before. You need to do it Ascension Day! We need to have ascension day parties and give ascension day presents as we have Christmas parties and Christmas presents and special services at Christmas, and celebrate communion on ascension day, because as the Lord descended incarnation day, so the Lord ascended ascension day. This is counterbalanced, equally important."

She said, "I can tell you're a seminary professor and don't have to deal with real people with busy lives. I wouldn't get away with having an Ascension Day party." "Oh, you've got to have an Ascension Day party!" We got kind of testy at each other. Maybe next year she'll have an Ascension Day service, I don't know. But when we push the ascension off to the edges of our pastoral and liturgical consciousness, something gets lost. That is, Jesus not just as a past Lord, but as a present Lord, so that we speak of him in

the present tense.

Now and then we'll get into a... she'll say, "What did you think of that sermon?" and I only comment on the good ones. They're mostly good. But now and then I won't make a comment. She'll say, "Why didn't you like it?" I'll say, "You used 'ought' too many times" or, "You talked about the gospel as an offer. It's more than offer — it's here, it's yours!" She said, "But I was..." So sometimes we can get into little tussles.

JMF: God does not deal with everyone in the same way.

AP: Right, we're free.

JMF: Why is that important to know?

AP: Because we are not generic. We are not particular instances of the genus humankind. There's you, and me. We are specific, particular, actual, real human beings with real autobiographies and histories, and we are complex people. We are people, and people's lives are different. Our histories are complex. There are things we share in common, and much that's different. I speak of God with a Scottish accent (I hope I still do), and my sense of things is actually European...31 years I lived my life in Edinburgh in Scotland. I'm not American, I'm different...so, different heritages and different family dynamics.

It seems to me that one person needs (thinking biblically here) a demon cast out. Another needs to be told, "You're forgiven." Another needs to be said, "Get off your pallet and walk." Another needs to be told, "Sell what you have and give it to the poor." Another needs to be told, "Climb down from the tree because I'm going to come and eat dinner at your house today." The knack, the trick, the discernment in pastoral work is to know which aspect of the Lord's work is the word of gospel grace for a particular person on a particular day. A parishioner with whom one might speak is not a generic person for whom is a cookie-cutter response, but it's personal and particular, it's situationally connected. I'm not arguing for situational ethics, that's all relative. What I am arguing is that it's particular and personal.

I learned this lesson when I wrote my book *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* and I read the great classical texts of the church. At the end of Gregory the Great's *Book of Pastoral Rule*, he has, I think it is 72 case studies, each a paragraph. Pastoral care of a tall person may be different from pastoral care of smaller person. Pastoral care of a man may be different from pastoral care of a woman. Pastoral care of a poor man may be different from pastoral care of a...just instances, all kind of instances about pastoral work...the gospel is brought to you in your context specifically, not generically. That's both the challenge but what makes pastoral work interesting, because you never know what you're going to confront with the myriad of interruptions that makes the pastor's day, because pastoral work is about being interrupted.

As I've often said, you know the Lord, you know your people, and you must know your people. We

cannot sit in an office all day. We cannot just run the shop all day. My friend Judy Peterson is great in this. We're not shopkeepers. You've got to know your people. You've got to know them in their workplaces, in their family places, in their play places, and the grocery store. You know your people and you make these connections. Absolutely critical. The good pastor, the faithful pastor is the person with a heart for that kind of dual connectedness.

JMF: As we come to a close here, let me ask, if there was one thing that you want people to know about God, what would that be?

AP: You belong to him because he loves you, because in Jesus Christ he has elected you to be his son, his daughter, and that nothing in this world, not even your foolishness and your silliness, can separate you from what God has chosen for you. You belong to God, and you are unilaterally and unconditionally loved. Now therefore, live in terms of that freedom. Live in terms of that good news. Honor what it means that you are loved and will remain loved because...I'm going to put it very specifically...in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus knows you by name.

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Let the Lord Be the Lord

Michael Morrison: I wanted to talk to you today about one of your recent books, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*. That's an intriguing title. Why should I want to crucify my ministry?

AP: Because it means putting to death our messianic pretensions — our pretensions that lead us to think that we are the messiah, that we can raise the dead, forgive the sins, fix the divorce, un-diagnose the cancer, do all these things that is the Lord's job to do. The book is about letting the Lord be the Lord, and we are not the Lord. As I thought this through, I thought sometimes we are so fixed on my ministry, my church, that we forget it's not my ministry, it's not my church. It's the Lord's church. He is the one who is messianic, who will raise the dead and forgive the sins and at the end of times will dry every tear and everything will be made whole in him.

The book is about what it means to have our ministries displaced, so that we are not in the center of things, but he is in the center of things, and then through our union with him, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, joined to him... a John 15:1-11 image, that we are the branches, he is the vine, and we are joined into the vine, the work of the Spirit, abiding in him. Through sharing in his ministry, we get in on *his* ministries — not he who gets in on *our* ministry, we get in on his, because it is his ministry that is the healing and saving, redeeming ministry, not ours.

I play with the image. It's just a metaphor, but it's an image in that sometimes we become so wedded to our own ministry that God needs to give us a great shove to get us out of the way. That shove might have to be strong enough that it feels like a death, because I'm no longer on the throne of the universe, and I want to be on the throne of the universe!

MM: It hurts my pride.

AP: It hurts my pride, my ego, my self-esteem. It's a book about the lordship of Jesus Christ, thought through at the point of the nature of ministry — his ministries. What is his ministry, and how do I get in on his ministry?

MM: I was just going to ask you that. How do I see what his ministry *is*? How do I join?

AP: Who is he? The great theological question is essentially a *who* question, not how did you do that, or what did you do, or can I do what you did? The essential question is, "Who are you, Lord?" — Saul's question on the Damascus Road. When we ask that *who* question, we discover that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and because he had a ministry in the past, in history, and we have the gospel attestation of that, we have the records of the early church, we have some fairly strong ideas about what he was, what he was up to, the kind of things he did, what he stood for.

And he's raised. The interesting thing about him being raised...let me put it in a shock way, because sometimes as a teacher you like to say shocking things — it keeps students awake. The New Testament isn't interested in *the resurrection*. The New Testament is interested in *the resurrected Jesus*. The issue is not the metaphysics of resurrection — “How did you do that?” The interesting thing is, “Who are you, Lord, now that you are raised and ascended?”

If Jesus, as we confess, is raised — and not just raised, ascended, so not just locked into the past but now ascended and so Lord of all time and space, Lord now of the present tense and not just of the past tense, it becomes a question then of, “What are you up to?”

With the resurrection of Jesus, we also have the resurrection of his ministry. His ministry is not just a past ministry, because if it remains a past ministry, Jesus becomes a dead moral influence — you ought to do this, you ought to do the next thing and so on... I'm not messianic, so that becomes a recipe for guilt and burnout, for depression. The mental health professionals tell us that the highest mental health insurance cost for any professional group in the United States are professional clergy.

Part of the issue is that we're trying to be Messiah. We're trying to do what is not within our constitution or capacity to do. But Jesus does it. So the existential question is, when I walk into a hospital room, a cancer ward, what am I going to do there? I can't un-diagnose the cancer. I can't raise the dead. But I am going to trust that Jesus is going to show up, if not in merely historical terms, then certainly at the end of time terms, he will have the complete victory. My job as a pastor is to bear witness to what he is doing.

MM: In some ways, it's that we admit our incompetence. Yet we go to a seminary to become more competent, don't we?

AP: There's nothing wrong with good skills for ministry. Put it on this level — we're dealing with people. You've got to know how people tick. You've got to know things...family systems and some of the sociology. When you bump into various forms of mental dysfunction, you've got to be able to recognize that and not get hooked into it, and to be able to refer your parishioners to appropriate professional contacts.

Our primary job is not to be psychological fixers. Our primary job, put in conventional terms, is to declare the gospel that Jesus lives, that Jesus died for their sins, in Jesus Christ they are forgiven, and to help them in the process of going into that reality so that they may grow up into Christ into him in every way who is the head, and that they may live lives of holiness, of sanctification. We need to recover our core job description of ministers of word and sacrament — to bear witness to Jesus and to help our people grow up every way into him who is the Lord. We need to have the people skills, but these don't define our job. The theology of our life in Christ defines our job.

MM: So the role of a pastor and the members, too, is to stop looking to ourselves and look to joining Jesus.

AP: Yes, and by the Holy Spirit we are bonded to Christ. In my own tradition John Calvin is our theological father, and at the beginning of Book 3 of his *Institutes*, very famous theological four-volume work, he says that by the Holy Spirit we are bonded into Jesus Christ — bonded, as it were, cosmically glued into Jesus Christ! It's almost like we're covered head to toe, inside and out, spirit and body, by super glue, and we're bonded to Jesus Christ. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, so that our being, our identity is in Christ. That's Paul's teaching, who is a Christian in Christ.

MM: Right. In your book you use the phrase union...

AP: Union with Christ.

MM: Is that what people are getting at with the phrase "relationship with Christ"? Or is that somewhat different?

AP: It's on the way. The problem with the word "relationship with Jesus" is you can think of yourself, "Here am I, independent, self-actualizing person, here is Jesus, and we're going to come to some sort of neutral little arrangement here." It's more radical than that. Because in union with Christ, his life becomes my life, his being becomes my being, so that even I have the mind of Christ. I am in Christ. He is the second Adam, and so in Christ is in the second Adam. My whole humanity is remade, reconstituted. I'm a new person, a new creation. It's not just that the old Andrew Purves is having a nice little relationship with this guy called Jesus, it's that Andrew Purves is turned inside out, converted in a fuller sense of my being so that I'm a new person.

The old Catholic monastic habit, when you become a monk or a nun, you got a new name. I like that. When you're in Christ, you're a new person. Have a new name to identify...I'm a new person! The old baptismal theology...in baptism the old Adam died and in Christ, through the waters of baptism, I'm bonded to Jesus Christ in a new person.

Union with Christ to me carries something more of that profound personal transformation. The question is, will I live it? The question is, do I believe it? Martin Luther says somewhere that "I thought that the old Adam drowned in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim." Until we rise again at the end of the age with Jesus, there's a kind of a "yes, but"... also, "but not yet" tension in the Christian life, that we have the power and blessing of the Spirit, but this mortal body will die, yet to be raised. All things are not complete. In this life, and in ministry, it's strange to say, the old Adam still creeps around, thinking that I can save my congregation, I can renew my congregation, I can be the savior of my people.

MM: That's what they pay me for!

AP: That's right, but you're not a messiah. So *The Crucifixion of Ministry* is about putting to death our messianic pretensions. Crucifixion is a good word. It's a saving word, it's a redeeming word, it's a death word, and it's a deadly death word. I see the crucifixion of ministry as God saying, "I'm not done with you yet. I am reclaiming your ministry even in mid-career, and bonded to Jesus Christ, we will do great things with you."

MM: What does the congregation do when the minister that they knew is crucified and stops doing the approach that the ministry used to have?

AP: I don't have a slick packaged answer for you, other than to say this: We ought to take a far bigger responsibility for teaching the people. Teach the people about who Jesus is and what the church is in him, and what the job of the pastor is in the church.

Let me give you an example. I often hear pastors tell me, "I serve the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church." I will say to the pastor, "No, you don't serve the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church. You serve Jesus Christ as Lord, and Jesus serves the Timbuktu Presbyterian Church, because he's their Lord. You serve the Lord." When that focus is in place, it redirects ministry, because then the attention is "What is the Lord doing...what has the Lord called me to do? What about his ministry am I called to bear witness to for the sake of the people?" — because what they need is him. They don't need me as the pastor.

MM: Then the pastor is just a facilitator in some ways — is that what you're saying?

AP: No. You're a New Testament scholar. The word for martyr is *martyres*, bearing witness. I think our primary task is to bear witness. Here's the issue. Do you think Jesus is up to anything, or is he just back there as a dead moral influence? That's the critical question.

MM: Or is he unemployed up in the sky?

AP: That's right. Is he, in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, an actor in history? The New Testament is saying yes, the church at its best is saying yes, and so I think the issue is fundamentally Christian — do we believe Jesus lives? If he's living, he's up to something. The issue is, how do we as a congregation, how do I as your pastor help us as a congregation get in on this?

MM: The pastor is to be a witness for that.

AP: Be a witness to what Jesus is doing. That's right.

MM: And the other members of the congregation...

AP: Get in on it.

MM: They all have a ministry.

AP: Two things will happen. When we are in Christ, bonded to Jesus Christ, two things will inevitably happen. You'll become a person, you'll become a congregation that worships in Christ. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, all of our prayers and worship go to the Father and the Spirit through Jesus

Christ our Lord. But also bonded to him, we share in his continuing mission from the Father. So we're thrust out into the world. We become dialectically a people of worship and a people of ministry and mission — both/and. The trouble is, we have a lot of ministry and mission stuff going without a lot of worship stuff going. Sometimes we forget to see that in Christ we share in his communion with the Father and in his ministry from the Father.

MM: As people join in the ministry of Jesus, pastors or members, how do they know what he's up to? They know who he is. What difference is it going to make on the street in the way they actually interact with one another or with the world?

AP: As I said earlier, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We have the Bible. But we're students of the Bible not just to know what the Bible said. We're students of the Bible to know what God is up to. That's one radical statement. It's one thing to know Bible verses, it's something else to be...as it were, to go through the Scriptures and apprehend and be apprehended by the living God.

MM: So we need to be reading not just the words but read *through* them...

AP: Read through the words to a reality that can't be contained within the words, but that the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, use these words in a unique and authoritative way — that we go through them to a reality... These are just words on a page. I don't worship words on a page, I worship the living God. But through this, we know the Lord, and then we have the doctrines of the church, we have the great confessions of the church. So we have structures, lenses as it were, like my glasses, by which we can interpret the Scriptures in way that the church has said, "This is faithful."

There is some degree of caution — we also have the Lord in our lives. It's not just left-brain or cognitive, but everybody in your congregation has been met by the Lord — small ways, big ways, quiet ways, loud ways, he still meets us on the Damascus Road. He still meets us in the hospital room. He still meets us wherever we are, because he's a living Lord. Helping the people then not just to know the Scripture, not just to know the great traditions of the church, but how does the Lord work in your life? Where has the Lord met you in your life? Get people telling these stories.

MM: Aren't people often oblivious, unaware of his presence, of what he's doing? And the pastor's role is to help them see a different perspective on what's already happening?

AP: Sure, and maybe stop talking and being a little quiet and learning to name and own your story, your story with the Lord. How has the Lord dealt with you? How did the Lord deal with you when you met your spouse and you fell in love? How did the Lord deal with you when your first child was born? How did the Lord deal with you when your first parent died? Etcetera, etcetera.

MM: Aren't people a little reluctant?

AP: Yes.

MM: Why is that? Why would people be so reluctant to think that the Lord is working with them?

AP: It's very personal — it makes you vulnerable when you speak this stuff out loud. So the pastor, with appropriate respect for boundaries (because you don't say all things), you begin to model, to show by your life an openness, a vulnerability, a sensitivity to, an awareness that God is a God who gets involved in the lives of people, even my life. I would trust that slowly a congregation would begin to be aware, yeah, this is a living Lord — not just giving assent to propositions, but to a living Lord who is involved in my life.

MM: Some people might prefer that God stayed at a distance and stayed out of their lives — that he's good for fire insurance, but they don't want him crucifying their life.

AP: Yeah...Augustine famously said in his confessions, "Make me chaste Lord, but not yet," "Make me holy, Lord, but not yet, there's still a few things I want to mess with here." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German martyr, Lutheran theologian killed at the end of World War II in a concentration camp, wonderful theologian, in one of his books says, "When we are encountered by the living Word, one of two things must happen. Either the Word must kill us, with us being born again, or we must kill the Word." This Word is not tame. This Word, who confronts us with an unconditional claim on our life...

MM: It meddles...

AP: It meddles, and that may mean there are some things in my life I have to put to death. Paul is full of this stuff — put away, put away, be done with...lists all over the place in the second half of all of these letters...put away all of that, but on the other hand, this is how you are to live. Yes, there is a moral inventory involved.

While we are not perfect, and as a Calvinist, I am pretty skeptical that I will be perfect this side of eternity, nonetheless, I'm in process. There are issues I struggle with and try to deal seriously with, and do so under grace and not under law. I try to do so because I am loved and I want to respond with gratitude, not because I am fearful and want to respond with fear and terror of a God who is out to get me. I believe, rather, I am dealing with a God who has unilaterally and unconditionally said, "I know your name and I love you, and my name is Jesus."

MM: In the end he can be trusted.

AP: Yes, he can be trusted.

MM: What happens when the pastor is transformed, has a revised ministry, and the congregation catches some of this vision? How would the congregational life be transformed by a renewed understanding of who Jesus is?

AP: That's contextual, because each local community has its own issues and its own life and ministries in response. So I don't want to slap on a grid and say this is always what will happen. But some

things surely will happen... The preaching will not be dull, the worship will not be dull, and the people will be caught up in the ministry of Jesus in some regard. As grandparents, parents, schoolteachers, plumbers, guys that fix roofs, guys that dig holes in the road, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, whatever they do... The criterion of holiness is not “how do we live for the Lord on Sunday morning” but “because we live for the Lord on Sunday morning (and that’s not a throwaway, that’s real), how then am I going to live for the Lord on Monday morning?” The criterion of holiness is what I do the rest of the week. That reality is taken into business, the marketplace, where consciously and intentionally I am saying the bottom line is my faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Where is he in this bank? Where is he in this business?

I’m not a great lover of dentistry, but it’s a necessary reality. My dentist gets the list every morning of the patients, and before a patient has come through the door, he prays for every patient. That’s a Christian dentist — that even drilling teeth and scraping plaque is done for the glory of the Lord. Paul says do all things in Christ — not just Sunday morning or pious things — so drive your car in Christ, make love and have babies in Christ, grade papers, teach a class in Christ, pay your taxes in Christ. What does it mean to live in Christ in all things, so that we concretize this reality that has personally claimed us, and whose name is Jesus and who is at work doing what he is always doing — bringing in the reign of God.

MM: This will transform people’s understanding of who they are, but for some people this is a little stretch.

AP: Yeah. I think we’ve made it too tame, on the whole. We’re too much of “Jesus at home in our culture.” I’m not advocating an angry Jesus, but even in Palestine 2000 years ago Jesus wasn’t always at home in his culture — challenging, provoking, particularly the religious...

MM: And his culture rejected him.

AP: Right. What does it mean to have a Jesus who might be a provocateur in our culture... I’m a Scot, I’m not an American. Just to say something that’s deliberately provocative, what would it mean for our thinking and acting if we were to say that I trust that Jesus is Lord, what therefore does that mean for defense policy? What does that mean for economic policy? If he’s Lord of all, not just of a little religious parcel of my life, but Lord of all — and I’m a Christian and I’m a defense contractor — nothing wrong with being a defense contractor — what does that mean for the ethics of my defense contracting? Or I’m in the military — what does that mean for my ethics as a soldier?

I think we are called into these difficult places of life to bear witness that Jesus is Lord and to expect...how do the Acts of the Apostles put it? These people are turning the world upside down. When you turn something upside down, that’s called a revolution. The revolution of the reign of God. A new heaven and a new earth. I get excited about that. That’s worth getting up for in the morning. That’s going to get me into a pulpit or into a lecture room with some excitement! The Lord is doing something, let’s get

on and pray the power of the Spirit to bond us to what he's doing and let's get on with the work.

MM: You say it's upside down, but in a way, the world we have now is what's out of kilt.

AP: That's right. It's not Jesus who is upside down, it's *we* who are upside down.

MM: But it's hard... I've heard the story of the glasses that will change a person's vision so they see upside down... they'll adjust to it. But when they take them off, they have to go through the adjustment process again.

AP: Is this not Romans 12:2, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind"? Our minds have to be rewired. We have to learn how to think out of a center in Jesus Christ, not out of a center in ourselves, not out of a center in our culture, not out of a center in given values, but out of a center in Jesus Christ.

Because we live in a culture, I can never be in Christ apart from being a Scot. There's always a tension here between Christ and culture. It's not one or the other, it's Christ in culture, Christ transforming culture, not Christ apart from culture. I'm not going off to some desert to play monk; I'm in a culture. I speak of God in Scottish accent. But how can I do that more faithfully and more convertedly and more consciously and more critically, rather than less so. That is the challenge. Only at the end of the age when I am raised with Jesus, will I then see face-to-face. But for now I am in an inevitable tension between Jesus is Lord, and I live in a culture. That's part of the missiological frame within which we go in the world.

MM: Jesus was in a culture, and he spoke with Galilean accent.

AP: Right.

MM: Romans 12 tells us, "Don't be conformed to the world," yet in some ways there are aspects of the world we need, and we need to discern the difference.

AP: That's right. I have to pay taxes, I have to drive under the speed limit. Laws and rules are given, mostly, for our good and for the well-being of the commonwealth. There need to be politicians. Praise God sometimes when there are Christian politicians. I don't think any aspect of the world's life is intrinsically evil. Every aspect of the life of the world, Jesus is present there. In hidden ways, perhaps, and that's our job, to make that visible. But there is no part of the world's life over which Jesus is not Lord.

MM: There's a common saying of "what would Jesus do," but it seems you would want to change that to say, "what is Jesus doing now in my life?"

AP: What is Jesus doing now? That's right – and in the life of my community. It's not just what would Jesus do, that's appealing to a past moral influence. It's naïve. We think our children will look down at their bracelet... I was a 16-year-old male once, and I've seen some mischief I can get up to, and I look down at my bracelet and think, "WWJD, oh, I'm going to stand up and fly right." That's naïve.

I think the power question is to ask, *now* what would Jesus do? It's not a bad question, I just don't

think it's the most powerful question, but what is Jesus doing now? That's a living Lord.

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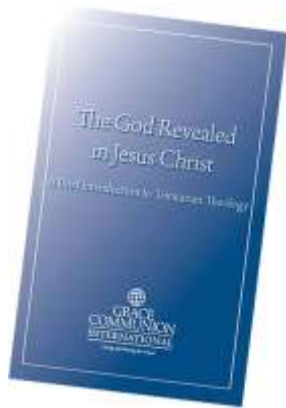
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Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

This denominationally recognized program is available for both credit and audit study. At minimum cost, this online Diploma program will help students gain important insights and training in effective ministry service. Students will also enjoy a rich resource for personal study that will enhance their understanding and relationship with the Triune God.

Diploma of Christian Ministry classes provide an excellent introductory course for new and lay pastors. Pastor General Dr. Joseph Tkach said, "We believe we have achieved the goal of designing Christian ministry training that is practical, accessible, interesting, and doctrinally and theologically mature and sound. This program provides an ideal foundation for effective Christian ministry."

For more information, go to www.ambascol.org

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