God, Faith, Sin, Hell, Church and Bible
Interviews With Elmer Colyer

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Introduction

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

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Our guest in these interviews is Elmer Colyer, Professor of Historical Theology and Stanley Professor of Wesley Studies at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary and an ordained United Methodist Pastor and elder. Dr. Colyer edited *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch* and *The Promise of Trinitarian theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance.* He is author of *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* and *The Nature of Doctrine in T. F. Torrance's Theology*.

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How Trinitarian Theology Is Relevant

J. Michael Feazell: Dr. Colyer, thank you so much for being with us. We've been looking forward to this for a long time.

EC: I'm delighted to be with you, Mike.

JMF: I thought we could begin by talking about "what is Trinitarian theology?" because we often hear, "Christians are Trinitarians, they believe in the Trinity, so when you say 'Trinitarian theology,' you're not really saying anything, are you?" What is Trinitarian theology?

EC: A lot of people, when they hear "Trinitarian theology," they know they should believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and they affirm it. They know it should be important to their Christian life and faith, but they're not really sure *how* it is important to their Christian life and faith.

Sometimes the church does people a disservice in some of the illustrations we use to try to help people understand the Trinity. I don't know how many times I've heard in children's sermons or even in regular sermons that the Trinity is like water, steam, and ice – three different forms of one substance. Or, an egg – the white, the yolk, and the shell. (**JMF:** or a flame) Yeah, or flame.

The problem with those illustrations is they attempt to help people understand a doctrine that they affirm, but they do it in a way that doesn't relate it to their Christian life. Doesn't relate it to how they became Christians in the first place or how they live out their Christian lives. Often, people hear the illustrations and it makes the Trinity seem more distant from their Christian life.

When we talk about the Trinity and about Trinitarian theology, we need to start from our most basic encounter with the gospel. It's that knowledge of God – the little old lady in the back of the church who's read her Bible all of her life, who's prayed, who's worshiped, who's been in Christian fellowship, who's attempted to love her neighbor – that knowledge of God that she has, meditating on the Scriptures, coming to know the love of God the Father, through the grace of Jesus Christ, in the communion of the Holy Spirit – that *is* Trinitarian theology, and that's what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about.

[Thomas] Torrance once said that Trinitarian theology can never be more than a clarification, a deepening of that basic knowledge of the Triune God that every Christian has, that arises out of the gospel itself. When we talk about Trinitarian theology, we're talking about that doctrine of God. Who is this God that comes to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Who is this

God that's poured out upon us in the Holy Spirit to the church? And how does our belief in this God then impact all our other beliefs and our practices? And it does – it profoundly impacts all of the rest. Trinitarian theology is all-encompassing, it isn't simply about the doctrine of the Trinity, it's about how that doctrine bears on all aspects of the church's life, the church's witness, the Christian life, prayer, everything.

JMF: For the sake of clarification for people watching the program, there are other kinds of theology… there is Liberation theology, Feminist theology, biblical theology, and so on. How do some of those differ from Trinitarian theology in their focus?

EC: A lot of the theologies that you mentioned, Liberation, Feminist theology, arise out of the modern turn to the human subject. Many of them tend to focus on human experience – in Liberation and Feminist theology, the experience of the poor, their experience of oppression – and then you read the Bible in light of it and attempt to understand your life or situation in the Scriptures. Same thing with Feminist theology, it's based on women's experience.

The problem with basing any theology in human experience is always the question, "Why *this* experience and not another experience?" It's also why experience-related theologies tend to be divisive. They separate people into groups and their experiences. In Trinitarian theology, we're far less concerned about our human experience than we are the God that we come to know in and through the gospel.

When we focus on the Triune God and God's love for us in Christ, our human experience ends up being richer and deeper and broader than it would be otherwise. It's a very different way of approaching theology. It's a way of approaching theology with a center outside of ourselves and the gospel in God, rather than starting with human experience.

JMF: Biblical theology – people will hear the term "biblical theology" – "That's what I want, because I'm a Bible believer and my faith emerges out of the Bible…" How does Biblical theology differ from Trinitarian theology?

EC: Good Trinitarian theology is biblical theology and good biblical theology is Trinitarian theology. Sometimes, though, what people mean by biblical theology is an approach to Scripture that neither myself nor T.F. Torrance would embrace. It's what we call the concordance method of doing theology. If you want to know what the Bible teaches about the "love of God," you get out a concordance, look up all the passages that talk about the "love of God," read them all, summarize and synthesize them, and then you have the Bible's understanding – the biblical

theology of "love" according to Scripture.

This assumes that Christian faith is primarily cognitive rather than personal and participatory. You can read everything the Bible says about the "love of God" and have a vague idea about the "love of God," but still not really know it. It's like coffee – I could describe to you the aroma and flavor of coffee in great detail. I could tell you how to order it, how to fix it and drink it, but until you actually participate in the reality of coffee, you really don't know what it is. You only have a vague and general idea.

It's the same way with the "love of God." The Scriptures are there for us to encounter the very love of God and Christ. When we read the scriptural text and the Spirit of God illumines the text and we hear the living voice of Christ speaking to us the "love of God," we're not simply reading information on the page, we're actually coming to participate in God's love. That participatory knowledge – that's only mediated through the Scripture, we don't have it apart from Scripture – is what real biblical theology ought to be.

Sometimes people think biblical theology is simply summarizing whatever theme we're talking about by using a concordance and reading everything about it in the Bible. But Trinitarian theology and biblical theology is actually much deeper than that. As Torrance says, you have to go back through the text to the reality, the vicarious humanity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, so that you encounter Christ anew in and through the Scriptures, which were called into relation to Christ to continue to communicate Christ through history, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

JMF: The Bible is not an end in itself. You compared it to hearing about and reading about coffee …

EC: Our knowledge of God, our knowledge of the Christian faith, is participatory. We come into contact with the reality of it. It isn't simply reading about it in the Bible, it's coming to know it and participate in it. I could explain to you about coffee, tell you how to order it, tell you how to drink it… but until you've actually have a taste of it, you still don't understand what coffee is.

The Bible is like a love letter you can read, but until you actually encounter the One that it's talking about, you really don't understand the letter. It's only when you participate in the love of God and Christ that Scripture makes sense. Theology needs to be rooted deeper than simply in the text of Scripture. We need to go *through* the text of Scripture till we come to know the reality. And that happens in the worshipping life of the church.

Most lay persons know what we're talking about when we talk about participatory knowledge of God. We've been in a Bible study, we've been in a worship service. Maybe someone has shared the gospel with us. No longer do we simply hear human words. We hear the voice of the living God. We come to know more about God than we can ever express, in the same way that when you smell and drink coffee, you come to know more about it than you could ever explain.

Our human language points beyond itself to the reality, and we can never fully capture the reality in human language. That's why Torrance repeatedly in his writings uses the phrase in the early church, "*deo semper maior*" – God is always greater than anything we could ever think or ever say about God. So it's only in a participatory relation, when we actually come to know the love of God in Christ…

Think of the time in your life when you were most fully aware of God's love and presence. Maybe in a time of worship, a time of prayer, maybe in the mountains, in the pristine beauty of God's creation, when God was so palpably real that you could no more deny God's love than you could deny your own reality. That's a participatory knowledge of God. It's only mediated through the Scripture, in the church, in a tradition – but it's something that's deeper than just the text of the Bible. That's what we mean when we say "participatory."

JMF: It reminds me of the idea of reading – in college you read an analytical essay about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for example – or you're asked to write one, but if somebody reads what you've written, they really have nothing until they actually hear the piece, until they hear the 1812 Overture, whatever it is (that's what I happened to write about in music appreciation class). The participation is what sets apart the ideas behind biblical theology from Trinitarian theology. How did you first become acquainted with Trinitarian theology?

EC: It was primarily through Torrance's writing. In my undergrad work, I was in a secular philosophy department that provided all kinds of challenges to my very evangelical and traditional Christian faith, and I encountered Don Bloesch's theology at the end of my undergrad work, and so I went and studied with Don at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. There I first encountered Torrance's theology. Don was incredibly helpful, but I found the depth of Trinitarian theology in Torrance's work that I didn't find in Bloesch's. So it's really Torrance that acquainted me with it. Since then, Torrance has taken me in other directions back to Karl Barth, the Church Fathers, and other places where you find that kind of Trinitarian theology as

well.

JMF: You've written that this touched you in a way that you haven't been touched before, and made you thirsty to go further into it.

EC: When I first read Torrance's work, it was *Reality and Evangelical Theology;* it was in a course on pastoral care. It was my first attempt to interpret Torrance, because I had to write a précis of the book. Torrance is a very difficult theologian. I often found myself exasperated by the difficulty of his prose, his over-compressed composition, all the things that pastors and scholars and other people complain about in Torrance's writing.

But there would be times when I would be reading, that Torrance would take me into the center of the gospel. For example, the vicarious humanity of Christ – Christ assuming our actual diseased, sinful humanity in order to heal it, to redeem it. Not that Christ ever sinned, but that God would love us that much, to become a weeping, wailing baby, to take on this broken, diseased humanity of ours, to enter into the midst of it, in order to redeem it, I found myself on my knees in praise and thanksgiving that God would love us that much, to come that close to us.

Torrance's theology helped me understand that basic knowledge of God (that took place in my year senior in high school, when Suzy Riffle first proclaimed the gospel and led me to Christ), to help me understand what I always believed, but with a depth and breadth that made my participation in that reality even richer and deeper than it had been before.

JMF: What kind of inroads do you see Trinitarian theology making in the American Christian denominational scene?

EC: I came out of the college evangelical sub-culture in North America, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, and I'm an ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church, which tends to be viewed as one of the more liberal mainline Protestant denominations. Despite all the differences between United Methodism and American Evangelicalism, there are some things they have in common that's astonishing – their individualism, their tendency to accommodate Christian faith to our American consumer culture in ways that are not helpful – and this is some of the places where I found Torrance's theology to be particularly helpful.

For example, many congregations across the theological spectrum in our culture today tend to view Christian faith as one more institution providing goods and services within the great world of North American capitalist consumer culture. The church simply provides spiritual

goods and services for people to consume.

In my travels across the country, the two main models of the church that I run into among laity and people coming to seminary are: one what I call the Shepherd/Sheep model, where the pastor is the hired professional who provides spiritual pastoral care to the laity, which they then receive. Or the pastor as CEO – that's the large church – where the pastor manages his staff of paid and unpaid people who provide programs for people to consume.

You even hear it in the language we use to talk about the church today. People come into a new community, what do they do? They go "church shopping." You never remember anything about church shopping in the New Testament. It shows the way in which, in our American culture, the church has accommodated itself to the culture in order to find its place. In some respects then, it legitimates our American consumer culture as well.

But that's not what the church is, according to the New Testament or in Trinitarian theology. The church is that community on earth that is in correlation with the gospel that manifests Jesus Christ's presence in the world today. As soon as we allow it to become co-opted by our consumer culture and we view it as providing spiritual goods and services for people to consume, it re-enforces our consumer culture and our individualism.

The church ought to be such a profound community of love that when the world looks at the church, it sees manifest in our relationship with one another, something on the human level the kind of love shared between the persons of the Trinity that we participate in because of the gospel.

The early church of Acts had no program of evangelism. No program of being culturally relevant. But it did have such a profound community of love that people wanted to become a part of it. It had a compelling witness all its own without having to try to be relevant on the culture's terms.

The church today would do well, before it attempts to export its consumer culture and draw people in, that it would develop that kind of creative, profound sense of love and community, that people would want to be a part, and maybe then the whole question of relevance would be less crying than it is today in the church.

The other part is *individualism*. It's not coincidental that in American Evangelicalism, in the Presbyterian Church, in Methodism, the doctrine of the Trinity has not been the primary doctrine of God in those traditions – it's been the doctrine of the <u>One</u> God – the solitary individual who is

all-sufficient, all-knowing, in control of everything outside of God – kind of like a super model of the American individual. That doctrine of the One God has played a far more pivotal role of influence in the church in this culture than the doctrine of the Triune God has.

The problem is that our individualism is an abstract concept. There are no individuals. All persons are already persons-in-relations. The question is, what kind of relations constitute them? If it's relation of consuming goods and services of individuals, it's ultimately de-humanizing. It doesn't manifest the kind of community that people really long for. I don't think it's coincidental in our culture that people are lonely. Consuming goods and services as individuals leads precisely to the loneliness that's characteristic of our culture.

JMF: As a pastor, you've experienced the dynamics of this kind of thing in the local congregation. Many pastors I've worked with have a sense of "we need to grow, we need to get the gospel out." They put together programs or ideas about how to reach out into the community, how to hold a supper for disadvantaged people, or put together a food drive or whatever. Their goal is to bring people, or attract people to the church, and they get very excited if one or two people say, this is a nice church, maybe we'll attend. A couple of people might attend for a week or two, and then they're gone.

With all the programs that have been put out and tried, there's an ulterior motive – it isn't just, "people need help and we're going to help them." It's "we hope that this is going to draw people into the church." There's an ulterior motive to the help. In all of what's been done, very little church growth occurs from it, and yet that still seems to be the primary means of trying or attempting to draw people into the church.

And yet what you're explaining, in Trinitarian theology, the idea is to become more fully what the church really is, and that creates a magnet that draws people in to something that's already happening. I visit a lot of churches, and as you go into a church and you hear the announcements and so on, everything is about things we're going to do, things we're going to do – but you don't hear a lot about what we're doing together as a church that promotes our own cohesiveness and our own love for one another. You do hear it, and there are prayer requests for one another, and so on, but there's so much of an emphasis, and even a guilt-trip, to some degree, placed on how many people have you contacted this week, how many people have you approached with the gospel this week.

The emphasis is not on becoming and letting Christ make us into a community of love, so

that we are what we are supposed to be in the world. But it's this outward thing. I find it frustrating, but I don't know what kind of terms to put it in – its like a snowball going down the mountain, as to "This is the way to reach out." How do you cope with that in your congregations and in pastors you talk to?

EC: While I'm a seminary professor, I'm also a pastor of a small congregation in rural northern Illinois. The question shows the problem with the church today, how profoundly our consciousness, our vision of what it means to be the church, what it means to be a Christian, is far more formed by the culture than it is by Trinitarian Christian faith.

I'd like to call a halt to all of those programs for a period of time because I don't know if it's a good idea. I wouldn't say anything about your denomination, I'll pick on the United Methodist Church, because that's where I'm a pastor. We've lost 60,000 members every year on average since 1968, when we became the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church is dying, and in its present form, perhaps that's not a bad idea. Maybe it should die in its present form.

Sometimes what happens in our Christian life and in the church, we have to fail so miserably on our own, with our vision of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a church – that we go back and ask what God's vision is of the church and what it means to be a Christian.

So everyone listening to this, I hope all of you fail, and fail miserably as churches, as pastors, as laity – if that's what it takes to get you to step out of the world in which Christian faith is about the kind of programs we provide in order to attract people to the church, and go into the raw character of genuine Trinitarian Christian faith, where Christian faith in the church is all about what the Triune God longs to do in and through us, both in our life together in the church and in our outreach.

When the church begins to manifest something of the miracle, the mystery and the freedom of the gospel, in our life together in the church, we'll not have any problem bearing witness to our faith in the world around us. It will come spontaneously as an overflow of the power of the gospel.

It's because we're trying to substitute something else for what only God can provide us – the miraculous character of Christian faith. All these programs don't work. We try and we ask God to bless them, and like you said, we get two or three people as a result of it.

Look at Acts chapters 2 and 4, when it describes the early church. They so encounter the

power of the gospel that they couldn't help but gather together for fellowship, for the breaking of bread and for prayer. There were no needy persons among them. People sold their properties, they laid the money at the apostles' feet, they manifested the kind of love towards one another that they encountered in the gospel. It was spontaneous – not that there isn't a place for planning, but that kind of spontaneous power of the gospel comes only when we look away from our programs to the power of God in the gospel – that's the only time it really happens.

JMF: How do you help pastors and members catch that vision?

EC: Before you can move forward in ministry, with congregations, you first have to allow Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to begin to transform their vision of what it means to be a Christian in the church. Otherwise, if they continue to operate out of the vision that's implicit on the church today, no matter what you do, it just simply perpetuates the same problem.

There's a wonderful story about Major Ian Thomas that illustrates this. He became a Christian when he was in high school, and he became a whirlwind of activity for Christ in high school and all through college. This went on for about seven years until he burned himself out. One night in desperation, in despair, he got down on his knees by his bed and he prayed. He knew that God was going to be terribly disappointed that he'd reached this point of crisis in his life, and so he said, "Lord, for the last seven years, I've done everything in my power to live my life for you. I tried to bear witness in the gospel, I tried to being faithful, but I'm sorry, I just don't have what it takes to be a Christian. I'm sorry, I quit."

Thomas said, "I thought that Christ was going to be very disappointed." But he said, "No sooner than those words left my mouth, I sensed Christ breathe a great sigh of relief. It was as if Christ was saying to me, "for seven years, with great dedication and misguided zeal, you've been trying to live a life for me that only I can live through you, and finally, I'm in business."

Thomas went back and read the New Testament, and he was amazed at how much there is about this in the New Testament. "It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Or in John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If the branch remains in me it bears much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing."

With congregations and with individual Christians, sometimes they need to come to a point of failure – that's why in spite of all of the problems in the United Methodist Church today, economic, loss of membership – I'm hopeful, because I think the situation is getting so bad that the United Methodist Church is maybe ready to hear a word from the living God again.

When you go into a congregation and you want to bring about renewal, you have to start with the basics of the gospel. You have to begin to transform their vision of what it means to be the church. Instead of thinking, we're a dying congregation – look at all the people around us who are 65, 75 years old – young people don't want to come here anymore, pretty soon we're going to die. So we have to hurry up and get some programs together and get some young people in here. And should a young family ever descend on that congregation, the congregation descends on them – but it all has the smell of desperation and death, not the power of the gospel.

Instead of thinking of themselves as a dying community that has to somehow create their own new life, once a congregation gets to the point where they realize they are a missionary outpost, and that the Spirit of the living God has been given to them, to mold them into a community with such authenticity and integrity and love and fellowship that people want to join, once they begin to get that kind of vision of what Christian faith and Christian community is all about, then almost any program they use is effective. But until they get to that point where they entrust themselves to the raw power of the gospel, oftentimes it's a form – it's Pelagianism, it's an ecclesiological attempt to save ourselves by developing some new slick program that will bring a few more people into the church and keep them here. God simply doesn't seem to bless that kind of programming.

JMF: Christ said, "By this shall all men know that you're my disciples, if you have love for one another." And yet the kind of congregation that you're describing, where there are hardly any young people left, that it's mostly elderly folks, and they're struggling to find some kind of outreach program to draw people in, then if somebody dares say, "what if we actually look at one another and what one another's needs are, and meet one another's needs, and begin to focus on and care for one another so that we become the kind of loving, cohesive community that is a reflection of the kingdom of God here on earth as an outpost of the gospel," someone's bound to say, "That's just navel watching. That's just becoming inward and not thinking outward, don't you care about all those people out there?"

It becomes a "we shouldn't do that, because that's just inward and caring about ourselves." But really, that's not what it is at all. It's one thing if your focus is, OK, we need to put our attention on beautifying something in the church building that doesn't make that much difference. That's another thing. But when it comes to actually caring for one another and knowing one another's needs and being there for one another, that's a very different thing.

EC: That's very perceptive. Part of the problem is, is that even in Evangelical circles, the tendency when we talk that way about discipleship is to focus on what's in it for me? What does the gospel provide for me? Spirituality then becomes a self-preoccupation that can hinder us from going outside the church. When our focus is on the love of the Triune God, a God who lives in community and loves in freedom, and our lives take on the character of this God, we love in community, live in community, and we love in freedom as well, it's not self-focused that way.

The United Methodist Church about 15 years ago started a program entitled *The Disciple Bible Study*. It's a high-expectation program, 34 weeks, 12 people, read 80 percent of the Bible, they gather once a week for two-and-a-half hours to study the Bible, and I've taught it 11 times; it's a great tool, it's another program (which is part of the problem, but it's a good one nonetheless). I want to use it to illustrate this point – that what happens is, as people focus on Scripture and on discipleship and on sharing the depth of their struggle to live out their Christian life in our culture that's going more pagan all the time, what they find is that they develop a kind of a community, a kind of a fellowship that they have not experienced elsewhere, in our culture.

When the Disciple Bible Study is over, none of them want to stop. It isn't because of the Bible Study, it isn't because of the discipleship, it's because of the participatory fellowship – what we mean by *koinonia.* So they try to perpetuate the Disciple Bible Study, but once you leave the structure, the groups tend not to function. What we're talking about is not simply focusing on our own spirituality – we're talking about focusing on a love that sets us free from ourselves, and yet free to be truly who we are at the same time.

Both in the early church and in the early Methodist movement, there were two equally primordial, equally basic forms of the church. There was the large group gathered for worship, which is what happens in most congregations in this culture. But an equally primordial, equally basic expression of the church was the smaller group gathered to manifest and embody this kind of *koinonia*, this participatory fellowship. You see it even in Jesus' life with his disciples: he taught the crowds, but he had the 12 basically live with him for three years, and they became the apostolic nucleus – the community that carried forward the gospel in history.

In Acts, when the Spirit of God is poured out on the church, they gathered in the temple courts for worship, but they also gather in one another's homes for fellowship and for breaking of bread. That small-group participatory fellowship is one of the things that needs to be re-instituted in the church today. That could help then focus our attention back on this Trinitarian

participatory reality.

That was part and parcel in the early Methodist movement. Even before you became a Christian in the early Methodist movement, you become part of a class, and most people were in a class about 12 to 14 months before they became a Christian. Once you became a Christian, you went to another small group called the Band, and when you progressed in your Christian life, you became part of a Select Band, which was designed to help you grow in your relationship with Christ and community at that point. In Methodism, there was never a point in your spiritual life when you are not manifesting this kind of fellowship and community. It was community that tended to draw people into Methodism, as much as the circuit riders.

JMF: Unfortunately, we tend to focus on the structure, the details… how many people there, what time to start and what everybody should bring, and all that becomes more important than the simple fact of getting together. In all those examples in Scripture, they gathered – it's the getting together that matters. The details are not as important as the actual coming together, which is what people miss when the structure runs out and the lessons run out.

EC: Right. We're talking about a radical change in our vision of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be the church, and we have to break free of this consumer model where the church is one more entity within this culture – providing goods and services. As long as we think that way, no matter how good the small group, it gets subverted by the underlying vision that's constitutive of people's vision of what it means to be a Christian and be the church. The first thing that has to happen is for pastors to help the laity begin to catch another vision for the church. One of the best ways to do that is to try to find a way for them to enter into the participatory kind of fellowship we're talking about.

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Our Faith Is Weak, But He Is Strong

JMF: You're editor of what I call a remarkable book, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*. What led you to bring that project together?

EC: I started reading Torrance in my seminary work, and quickly found his theology helpful to the point that I wanted to do my doctoral work on Torrance's theology. Back in those days in the '80s, there was very little written on Torrance's work. There were a number of dissertations – none of them in print before 1990 that I know of and a few articles. Alister McGrath had not yet written his intellectual biography of Torrance, and so when I completed my doctoral studies, I wanted to begin to mediate Torrance's theology to North America, somewhat like Torrance tried to mediate Barth's theology to the English-speaking world.

When you enter Torrance's horizon of theology, you're faced with the difficulty of his prose – his over-compressed exposition – and then the fact that he never published a systematic theology. So if you want to figure out the over-arching vision of his theology so you can understand how the various works fit together, the only way you can do it is to read all the way through it. So once I finished my PhD work and started teaching, I realized that we needed two volumes: one volume on how to read T.F. Torrance – which would provide an overview of his theology and direct readers to secondary sources, and number two, to begin a scholarly conversation about his theology – a friendly scholarly conversation.

That's where the *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* developed. I got together a group of scholars, some of them who had studied under Torrance, some of them who knew him personally, and the book was designed to be kind of a festschrift – a present to Torrance on his 80th birthday. The interesting thing about this book different from some festchrifts is it simply isn't honoring Torrance, it's about his theology, and it invites him in a final chapter to enter into a critical dialogue with the other authors. It was my attempt to begin to stimulate scholarly conversation with Torrance while he was still alive, and those two volumes, including the one mentioned, are the product of that.

JMF: How easy was it to get scholars who wanted to participate in this book and enter into this dialogue?

EC: That was not a problem. There were a lot of scholars in Europe, particularly England and Scotland, who were already reading Torrance's theology. Very few over here were: Gary Deddo, Ray Anderson, a few people who had studied under Tom, but not a lot of people were

reading Torrance's theology. Just about the time my books came out, Alister McGrath's book, his intellectual biography, had come out on Torrance, and both of us agreed that Torrance was one of the premiere theologians, maybe the most outstanding theologian in the English-speaking world in the 20th century.

Finding scholars to do it was not all that difficult of a project. Now that Torrance has died (just over a year ago), there's a flood of interest in Torrance's theology like I have not seen in the early years when I was first writing on his theology. It's very gratifying to see how many people are interested in studying Torrance's work now that he has gone on into the other side.

JMF: You describe him, and many others describe him, as one of the premiere theologians of the 21st century. What is it that makes him premiere on that level?

EC: There are a number of factors that make him that significant. First, he is one of the primary theologians in the dialogue with the natural sciences. Throughout his lifetime, natural scientists often viewed him more highly than people within the theological world did. Part of the problem in modern western culture has been the tension between Christian faith and modern science. Early on, Torrance realized that this tension didn't need to exist, and there is another way to think about the relation between theological science and natural science that would overcome that hostility. He contributed significantly to that debate.

His appropriation of the Trinitarian character of Christian faith, the concept of the vicarious humanity – these are developed in Torrance's theology in a depth and breadth that you find very seldom in the history of the church. For example, the sacraments – George Hunsinger considers Tom's work on the sacraments to be the most important work on the sacraments in the Reformed tradition since John Calvin. It's because he thinks them out in a Trinitarian, Christo-centric fashion – the way he does all of his theology.

There's a scientific rigor – a Trinitarian vision that's worked out on all the different dimensions of theology that makes him a theologian's theologian – but the thing that I found so marvelous about Torrance's theology is the way his theology bears upon the life of the church and the life of a pastor. I'm a scholar, I teach in a seminary, but I've done all of my academic study in theology while I was actually serving churches – I'm serving churches now. I always had one foot in the church and one foot in the academy, and I found that to be a good thing, and I found Torrance's work not only helpful in my theologizing as a theologian and a seminary professor, but particularly helpful in my pastoral work.

JMF: In what ways does Trinitarian theology have an impact on the lay member on a congregational setting?

EC: The place where I found Torrance's theology so personally helpful is that often – particularly in North-American culture that puts so much emphasis upon our ability to create our own life, our own existence, our responsibility, our freedoms, all of that kind of thing – it's easy for Christian faith expressed in North America to feel that at some point along the line, in Christian faith and life, part of the responsibility rests on our shoulders. Wherever that rests, it always creates a weak link in the chain.

There are a lot of laity in the pews – actually, probably a lot of pastors that we all know, that we're not nearly as good as Christians as we present to those around us. There's always a tendency in our humanity, in our sinfulness, in our brokenness, to be looking over our shoulder wondering when the shoe is going to fall. It robs us of our freedom and joy in the gospel …

JMF: Every time somebody is having a problem, the pastor typically tells them, you need more faith. If you had more faith, then God would come through for you. What else can you do, but look over your shoulder and say, "Where am I lacking in faith, help me to have more faith, I need more faith, because if I have more faith then I won't have to worry about this."

EC: This is precisely the problem. We turn faith into one more human work. I come from the mid-west, it's 18 below zero in Iowa today. My son was born on January 17th 28 years ago this Saturday. It was 28 below zero when he was born. So we get really cold temperatures back in the mid-west.

(I'll pick on Southern California.) There was a gentleman from Southern California visiting Wisconsin, and he was out on a lake and he heard the ice cracking, and being a really smart man from Southern California, he realized that if he got on his stomach and spread his weight out over the ice, he'd be less likely to go through the ice and freeze to death.

So he got down on his belly and inched his way across the lake absolutely petrified that he was going to go through the ice at any moment and die. He got up on the shore, he brushed himself off, he heard a sound behind him, he looked back over across the lake and here comes a team of horses with a load of logs down onto the ice, across the ice and up the other side.

These two individuals had a rather different experience of what it's like to cross the ice in the middle of the winter in northern Wisconsin. The one had absolute faith in the quality of the ice – so much faith that he was willing to drive a team of horses across the ice. The other one's

faith was so weak that he was down on his belly praying any moment that he wouldn't go through the ice and drown. But you notice it's not about the quality of their faith, is it? It's about the quality of the ice. The ice held up the guy driving the team of horses, and it held up the man crawling across on his belly. Jesus Christ and the gospel are the ice. They'll hold the entire universe and our lives, even in our moments of doubt.

There's a wonderful story in Matthew chapter 14, where Jesus is trying to teach his disciples what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, living out his relationship with the God he called *Abba* – the kind of relationship that Christ invites us into. Right after feeding the 5,000 – remember in John's Gospel, there 5,000 men plus the women and the children. It was the end of the day, everybody was getting restless, and the disciples said, "send them away so they can find some place to get food."

And Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." And the writer of John's Gospel adds this little parenthetical insert: "for Jesus already had in mind what he was going to do." He wanted to demonstrate to the disciples the sufficiency of the grace of God to meet human need.

Jesus fed the 5,000 – the Gospel doesn't tell us that he did a miracle, it's because the Gospels are self-involving narratives, they invite us to say that Christ did the miracle. At the end, the twelve apostles picked up twelve baskets of the broken pieces after feeding the 5,000 with the two small fishes and the barley loaves.

How much do you think the disciples learned by this concrete illustration of the sufficiency of God to meet human need? Absolutely nothing. Mark's Gospel adds that their hearts were hardened. I like Luther's translation – "they were not one whit the wiser."

Jesus has his disciples get into the boat and go across the lake while he goes up on the mountain to pray – probably praying for his disciples, because they don't get it. Then in the middle of the night, the boat is in the middle of the storm, the waves are breaking over the bow of the ship, the disciples are straining at the oars, the perspiration is pouring down their brow and every wave that broke, threatened to sink them to the bottom. Jesus goes to them walking on the water – demonstrating that everything that threatens to be over their head, is already under his feet.

In the midst of the storm, there's peace. He comes up to them and says, "I am. Stop being frightened. It is I." The Greek words are *egô eimi* – "I am."

It should sound familiar. Remember when Moses asked for God's name? God said, "I am

that I am." Jesus' "I am" saying: "I am the Bread of Life." – I am.

There's a lot of scholarly ink spilled in commentaries over the significance of that "I am" saying. There are a lot of scholars who are uncomfortable with Jesus walking on the water and saying, "I am, stop being frightened." There is one commentator on Matthew's Gospel who says, "Jesus' words in this context have a certain luminous quality about them." You think?

Peter understands what Jesus is saying. In his need, he says, "Jesus, if you are, bid me come to you on the water." For the first time in that event, Jesus smiled, because one of the disciples is finally beginning to understand the simple child-like character of this participatory Christian faith. "Jesus, if you are, put under my feet what is yours."

Jesus said, "that's all I've been waiting for. Step out of the boat, come to me on the water." And Peter does. He begins to walk on the water, to Jesus. As long as his eyes are fastened on Christ, he walks on the water. But then he beheld the wind and the waves. A wave slapped him on the right cheek and another matched it on the left; in that moment of time he began to reason with himself, "This is really ridiculous – people don't walk on water, what am I doing out here?" And he goes down for a dunking.

Then comes the most important verse in that whole story. A lot of Christians – this is how their Jesus responds: "Peter, you deserve it. I am glad you went down for a dunking, you weak faith… You took your eyes off me, you're getting just what you deserve!" Is that what Jesus does in the story?

Immediately, Jesus reaches down his hand and catches him. When our faith fails, Christ's faithfulness doesn't fail. We don't rest our Christian life, we don't rest the existence of the church on our faithfulness – on our faith. We rest it on the faithfulness of Christ. Even when we doubt, Christ's faithfulness is unshakeable – he reaches down and finds a way to catch us and lift us out and put us back on the boat.

Remember what the end of the story is? The end of the story, the disciples say, "Truly, you are the Son of God." And they worshipped him.

Jesus coming to them on the storm said, "I am. Stop being frightened." They finally learned to say, "You are. We are not frightened." And that is the Christian life, the Christian church, Christian ministry in a nutshell. In each and every circumstance, Christ says to us, "I am. Don't be frightened." He invites us to say, "You are. We are not frightened."

JMF: Later in the story, they're back to where they were again, and they have to be

reminded of this kind of thing again. Torrance brings out that it isn't our faith, it's Christ's faith. We tend to think if our faith is weak, that there's a big problem going on and we'd better get our faith strong. But we're not dealing with our faith, we're dealing with Christ's faith, for one thing, and more than that, we're dealing with him. Our faith is in him, not in our faith.

EC: That's an excellent way to state it. This is the problem. Often the church doesn't have a concept of Christ's vicarious humanity in its total substitutionary work. We think that some place along the line, there's something that we have to contribute to our salvation. Whether it's repentance, whether it's faith, whether it's obedience – and wherever, we make some kind of autonomous contribution to our faith. It's the same with pastoral ministry in the church, to our ministry – any time there's some part of that chain that we make, as an act in and out of ourselves, apart from Christ – that becomes a weak link in the chain. That's where we find ourselves looking over our shoulder wondering when the shoe is going to drop. Because we know we don't have the kind of faith that we need, the kind of obedience, the kind of sacrifice. We don't. That's not what the Christian life is all about. It's about Christ's faithfulness.

JMF: Even our prayers. Trinitarian theology teaches us that when we pray, we don't have to worry about how effective and effectual – fervent and so on our prayer is, because Christ takes up our prayer in himself, redeems it and makes it his prayer. We're praying in him. So we're trusting him to be our prayer, and our pray-er for us.

But what happens, even in sermons, we think of ourselves when we pray – I didn't pray that quite strong enough, so I'm going to try it again with more … I'll clinch my fist a little tighter, I'll tense my body a little bit more, and I'll say it again with more fervor, and I'll start to plead and beg. Well, that's probably not good enough – I've got to go even more. We interpret the James passage about Elijah – the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. So we try to make that be us. But Trinitarian theology teaches us that this isn't the point. We're in Christ. Christ is that effectual, fervent pray-er for us.

EC: Well said. I think that it's part of our sinful nature, we think there's always something that we can contribute, even if that's our self loathing. This is where Torrance drove this point home for me: when Jesus starts his ministry, the first thing he does is he goes to John the Baptist and he's baptized in the Jordan.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and I never could get my mind around why Jesus went to John to be baptized. He didn't need to be baptized. He didn't have any sins to

repent of. So what is this thing with Jesus going into the Jordan and being baptized?

Torrance points out, whose sin is Jesus confessing there in the Jordan? He doesn't have any sins of his own to confess. But taking our sinful, diseased and alienated humanity upon us, as our elder brother who does it *all* in our place, on our behalf, and in our stead, Jesus even confesses our sins aright, because we can't even do that.

All of this wallowing in our guilt and everything that we often do as Christians, we don't even do that right. We can't even repent. We don't even feel sorry for our sins in the right way. Jesus has to step into the Jordan. Think of it, the Son of God stepping into the Jordan, confessing all of our sins once for all in a perfect way, so we don't always have to be worried, "did we confess it enough?" "Are we sorry enough?"

That simply cuts the ground out from underneath it. Christ has already done that, in our place, in our behalf, in our place – he invites us to simply say, "Lord, I screwed up again, but thanks be to God you identified with me in my brokenness, you already know it, you've already confessed it, you offer me your new life once again on the basis of what you've done there on the Jordan confessing my sins."

JMF: What I get from pastors and sometimes from lay people, in talking about that, is: "You're just teaching an easy believe-ism." In other words, we don't have to do anything, we just say, "Jesus already did it for me, so therefore, I don't have to do anything, I don't need to worry about anything. I can behave anyway I want because Christ has already done it all for me."

EC: Don Bloesch, my mentor in seminary, said, "We always have to fight on two fronts, there are dangers on both sides." I'm not convinced though, both as a pastor and in my own Christian life as a seminary professor, that that's where Trinitarian Christian faith leads to. We have to remember Christ in his vicarious humanity, we see what it cost him in order to do this on our behalf, in our place, in our stead. It was absolute agony – the baptism that takes place at the Jordan isn't the end of the deal, is it? At the end, after he comes up out of the water, the Spirit of God comes upon him. The Holy Spirit comes upon our very alienated, diseased humanity, so that our humanity gets adapted in order to receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit learns to dwell within our brokenness of humanity.

What does the Spirit immediately do? Sends Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days of agonizing temptation, and there in the garden, when the temptation gets really bad, Jesus is in

absolute agony. When we see what it cost Christ to believe, repent, and obey on our behalf, I don't think it leads to a lackadaisical life – I think it leads just to the opposite. It provides us freedom to *want* to follow along in discipleship. Not because we're worried if we don't, the shoe is going to drop, not because we're worried if our faith fails, we're actually going to sink and Christ is going to leave us there – but because we know that what he done in his life, death, and resurrection has set us free from that whole way of life. We can begin to think of it in another way.

Another way to get at this is what I call the logic of grace in Torrance's theology. What we're really talking about is the relation between divine agency and human agency in our salvation. What does God do and what do we do? There is a tendency not to think of it in terms of the realities that are involved, but to think of it in terms of logical categories, and then as Gary Deddo says, "it becomes a zero-sum game." If Christ does everything, then we do nothing and therefore we can live this lackadaisical life. Or Christ does 50% and we do 50%, and then we're back in that trap that we talked about before, where it's the quality of our faith that saves us, rather than the faithfulness of Christ.

But it's neither way. It's not that Christ does 100% and we do nothing, it's not Christ does 50-50 or 70/30 (depending on how optimistic you are about your humanity) or how you apportion that out, the real gospel is that Christ does a 100 percent and we do a 100 percent. But we only do it in Christ.

The way I help seminary students and laity think about this is to think about the time in your life when you were most profoundly aware of the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the presence of God in your life, when God's love and forgiveness were so real that you knew that you are a beloved child of God. It may have been at your conversion experience, in a worship service, or some other time. In that moment of time when you're so aware of the love of God, can you even begin to imagine going out and living a lackadaisical life? In that moment of time, living as a disciple is the easiest thing in the world. It's the most natural thing in the world. Because that is what it means to be a human being – to allow God to live God's life, Trinitarian life through us, in a way that frees our humanity. All of grace never means a diminishing of humanity. All of grace always means all of humanity.

In the same way, in the incarnation, when the second person of the Trinity becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, does it in any way diminish Jesus' humanity? Does he become

less human than all other human beings? He becomes *more* human. He's a character. He takes a whip of cords and drives the money changers out of the temple. I love John's Gospel. Jesus' first miracle according to John's Gospel, remember what it is? Turns water into wine at a wedding. Not simply wine but *wine* – six jugs that held like 28 gallons apiece. There was enough wine for quite a party.

Is it not interesting that the incarnate Son in his humanity is such a human being – more human than all of us are. God's presence in our life, the grace of God never negates our humanity – it frees our humanity. We become more personal, more human. A 100% God doesn't lead us to live a lackadaisical Christian life, it leads to the opposite. It leads to the kind of freedom in the gospel that sets us free to be in love with God and neighbor in a way that we can't otherwise.

JMF: If a person thinks about their very best friend – a person they care about, they click with, they resonate with and they have this very strong personal, best-friend relationship. The fact that you have that relationship doesn't tell you, "Since this person accepts me and likes me and respects me and we hit it off real well, I can just treat him any old crappy way I want. I can lie to him, I can deceive him, trick him and everything else." You don't think like that. It just doesn't work like that.

When you're in this kind of relationship, you care and you want to enhance and beautify and keep that relationship. When you don't, you feel badly about it and you want to go fix it. It's just an oxymoron to ask the question that since Christ has done everything for me therefore I can just go out and do whatever I want…. It means that you really don't. The Christian who really believes that doesn't think that way. The two things just simply don't go together.

EC: That was a great illustration. It shows something fundamental about our humanity. When we become transformed by the gospel, we're able to enter into those kinds of relationships with other human beings, and it shows the profundity of those relationships that the persons are constituting. Our individual personhood is not individual, it's constituted partly by the relationship of the friendship – and because it's constituted by the relationship of the friendship, anything that's an affront to that other person in the relationship diminishes that person's humanity and diminishes our own.

That's why being betrayed by a friend is the absolute, most heinous evil and painful event we experience. The problem often is we never get to the point where we're close enough in

relationship where we experience that kind of profound relationship. But you're right. When I say that human beings are also persons in relations, and ought to manifest in our relationship with one another the kind of fellowship we see between the persons of the Trinity – that's exactly the kind of thing that I mean. That illustration was great.

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Predestination and God's Power Over Evil

JMF: We'd like to talk about *predestination.* What's it all about?

EC: This is a debate that has raged through the history of the church, that's divided theologians and churches into different camps. I'm a United Methodist, so in my Wesleyan heritage, we've never been big on predestination, but I also stand with a foot in the Reformed tradition with my study of Bloesch and Torrance. The problem with predestination is that it's mentioned in the Bible, so you have to deal with it.

Part of the problem in the conversation of "double predestination" is that it has often rested in an abstract doctrine of God: a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, absolutely in control of everything. If you have that kind of God, and that kind of God knows the end from the beginning, you're almost driven to a concept of providence where everything happens under the purview of God, and double predestination is only a step away from that.

Torrance's theology is especially helpful here, because he challenges that doctrine of God at the core – asking, How do we know anything about God, about God's power, about God's election or predestination, apart from what God has revealed in Jesus Christ? And there, we find something that creates problems for double predestination.

At this point, Wesley had enough sense that when he was arguing against predestination, he said, "Whatever predestination means, it cannot mean that God, from all eternity, wills the damnation of some, because it's contrary to the character of God as depicted by the whole scope and tenor of Scripture and preeminently in Jesus Christ."

What Wesley was saying, in Torrance's words, is there can be no dark, inscrutable deity, some sinister God behind the back of Jesus Christ who secretly wills the damnation of some and not the salvation of all, which is what we see revealed in Christ's life, death and resurrection. So that kind of theological approach to thinking about double predestination, thinking about providence, is more helpful than the other way of approaching it.

JMF: Arminians, those who follow the teachings of Jacob Arminius (as opposed to Calvinists, who follow the teachings of Calvin) had somewhat of a solution to Calvin's perspective on predestination. What was that?

EC: A solution not quite as bad, but almost as bad. In the Arminian perspective (although what Arminius said is a little more complicated, but we'll talk about Arminianism as it developed). As you find it in my Wesleyan heritage, and sometimes in Wesley, grace restores an

element of human freedom so people can choose for or against the gospel. But the problem with this view is one we talked about in a previous session, that part of the chain of our salvation then rests on our human faith, our human response. We're thrown back against ourselves, and that undermines the integrity of grace.

The double predestinarians say, "This is the problem: If you don't affirm double predestination, you're thrown in one way or another into some kind of explanation of why some people are saved and some people are not, based on human experience – human response – and therefore you have an element of human self-determination in it." That becomes the weak link and creates the problem.

But this is the problem of false alternatives: either double pre-destination or an element of human freedom – freedom that is either innate or restored by grace that allows us the ability to say yes or no. Neither one of those are the option that Torrance presents; he presents a different option – I think a better one.

JMF: There's two sides of that, on the hyper-Calvinist side there's a sense that God is the Creator and author of all things; he is therefore utterly sovereign over all things; therefore nothing can happen that he did not determine ahead of time – or pre-determinism. On the Arminian side, they try to deal with that with this idea of foreknowledge. It's not that he didn't predestine everyone to be either saved or lost, but since he knows everything, the only things that can happen are the things that he foreknows, which really winds up not helping at all, not solving the problem, because you're still dealing with predeterminism in either case.

EC: That's correct, and that's why, even though Wesley is often lifted up by the Arminians as the great champion of this more open doctrine of God, Wesley's doctrine of providence was actually as rigid as Calvin's. Everything that happens is predetermined, except that small little sphere where human beings are granted an element of freedom to either say "yes" or to say "no," but beyond that everything else is predetermined.

Here's where Torrance pushes back against this position. How do these theologians, how do any of us know what God knows, what God chooses, what God's character is, how do we come to that kind of idea? How do we know what God's sovereignty is, what God's power is? Do we start with some kind of conception of power and then multiply it to the nth degree so that God is omni-powerful, God is all powerful?

JMF: Isn't that what hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism does?

EC: Yes. Torrance argues against them at this point. You see it in the history of theology at various places… Take for example Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* – if you read Thomas' *Summa*, in questions 1 through 27 Thomas first provides proofs for the existence of God and then he develops God's basic attributes, and only after that does he get around to talking about the doctrine of the Trinity – and what he says about the doctrine of the Trinity bears no relation to what he said about the One God.

The doctrine of the One God is built via what we call *via negativa*, the way of negation, negating those characteristics in our human conceptions that we can attribute to God, and then affirming the *via positiva* – the attributes of God like God's goodness. We know something about goodness, so God is all good. We know something about power, so God is all-powerful. But this is an abstract movement of thought. It's something we think up based on human experience, and try to project across the gap onto God (this is where Torrance's scientific theology is so important). It bears no relation to what God has actually revealed about who God is, about God's goodness and God's power in Jesus Christ and the gospel.

JMF: So Thomas's doctrine is totally made up. In other words [**EC:** Yes, it's mythology], we sit down and say, "What must God be like? He must be all powerful, because otherwise, what would be the point? He must know everything..." We take whatever human attribute seems good and we say, "he must be the absolute, ultimate, in that particular thing." We add it up on a page and draw a line under it and say, that equals God. Now let's take this idea of God, and we'll use that. But Torrance is going a totally different direction.

EC: Yes. Often, when we have our basic categories, and our basic ideas that are often drawn from the culture, from philosophy or whatever source, after we have those in place, then we go back and read the Bible. Then we use the concordance method of reading the Bible, and you can find individual texts that can reinforce some of that kind of interpretation of God.

The problem is, and this is where Torrance challenges it, "How can you have a doctrine of the one God over here that operates by this set of principles, this set of attributes, and then have the Triune God over here revealed in Christ's life, death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that operates by a different set of principles?

In Wesley's theology, when he talks about providence, he only talks about it in relation to the one God, but when he talks about salvation and the church, he talks about it in relation to the Triune God. But there is no Triune God and One God that are separate – the Three Persons, the

communion between the three Persons, is the One being of God, and the differentiation in the communion within the one being of God is the relations between the Persons.

The One God, and the Three Persons that are averse of one another, you can't have this kind of split in the doctrine of God. You cannot have the one doctrine of God – the One God doing one thing, and Trinitarian Persons doing another. This is scientifically untenable. Therefore Torrance says, we have to think out all these questions absolutely, rigorously, scientifically, in terms of what God has actually revealed about who God is, in Jesus Christ.

Then we end up with a very different understanding of what God's power is, a very different understanding of what God's goodness is. God's power becomes a kind of a power that we never would have thought up on our own. It becomes the power of suffering love on the cross, the power to enter into the midst of evil and overcome it from the inside, rather than a show of brute force.

That other way of thinking of God ends up being an abstract movement of thought that's done behind the back of Jesus Christ, and it bears little relation to what God has actually done.

JMF: Take for example a medieval concept of God. They know the Trinity on the one hand as a doctrine. But they operate out of this idea of a single God in heaven. (Much like the movies we see, *Oh, God!* or something, where there's one God and he's totally in charge, however he brings that about.)

If we're going to imitate and be like God, then [in that view] the king has all power to do whatever he wants, to execute his enemies, to flaunt his authority, to take advantage of everybody, all in the name of God. He's operating as God's man on earth, and that's how God would do it. Whatever he does, he has God's blessing. That kind of behavior is so completely out of kilter with the Triune God who is revealed to us in Scripture in Jesus Christ. Whatever our view of God is affects how we deal, not only in our own lives with ourselves, but especially with other people.

EC: Yes. Even in a more benign level: the idea of God as self-sufficient, as solitary, as in control, of who God is and everything else, we tend to fasten on that doctrine of God in our culture, and it reinforces our individualism. That's why the doctrine of the Trinity has not had a significant impact on Christianity in this country until relatively recently. We tended to focus far more on the doctrine of the One God, and in my own Wesleyan heritage, if you look throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, virtually all of the theologians who are

doing theology are focusing on the doctrine of the One God. At most you'll have a little section in their dogmatic theology on the doctrine of the Trinity that bears little relation to other aspects of the Trinity.

JMF: It's lip service: We know it's true, but the implications of it are never explored.

EC: Right. It leads to this dreadful notion of God that began to undermine people's faith. Let me give you a concrete example of this. I found out a couple of years ago that I have lymphoma, and for about six months it looked like it was transforming, and I thought I was going to die and probably have 14 months to live. I discovered some things about myself. As a pastor, you hold the hand of people when they're dying and when they have cancer, but you never know how you'll respond to those things until you face them yourself. Never for a moment did it run through my mind that God is out to get me, that cancer has come to me directly from the hand of God.

Yet I know another pastor, another theologian, who found out he had prostate cancer at the same time. He was a consistent Calvinist – he said, "Unless you believe that your cancer comes to you directly from the hand of God, you'll not receive the blessing that God intends for you to receive through that cancer." If I believed my lymphoma came directly from the hand of God, I would be worried. If that's the way God is, if God plays dice with our lives like that, we all ought to be worried. We won't even talk about it in some things as common as cancer!

Let's talk about it in more extreme things – child pornography, the kind of dastardly evil things, can we say, do we really want to say that everything that happens in our world happens because it's ultimately the will of God? This is where this doctrine of God leads. Ultimately, we all ought to be scared if that's the way God operates, we all ought to be worried.

JMF: You have diseases, epidemics that people die from daily by the tens of thousand – malaria… Would God have invented malaria specifically to send it to people who have never heard of him? What is the point?

EC: Very good, Mike. Fundamentally in that question, the age-old theodicy question: "If God is all powerful and God is all good, how can there be evil?" Whenever I get that question pastorally or when I'm working with seminary students, if you allow the question to be stated that way, you can never answer it, because the question already has certain presuppositions. We think we know something about what goodness is and about what God's goodness is, we think we know something about God's power and how it operates, and we think we know what evil is.

But the irony is that when we look at what God has revealed about God's power, God's goodness and about evil and Jesus Christ, we find that we don't know anything about any of those three. God's goodness turns out to be far better than we ever would have dreamed, because God, rather than simply overcoming it by a show of brute force, enters into the middle of it. God takes our diseased and alienated sinful humanity upon himself, suffers and finally dies the death that all of us will someday experience in order to set us free for fullness of life.

This is not a God who sits aloof from us, outside the universe, playing with our lives like a puppet on a string. This is a God who loves us to the uttermost, comes into the midst of our brokenness in order to redeem us. A God who even cries on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"— "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When everything is darkness and we feel forsaken, our brother Jesus, our blessed high priest, has said that [why have you forsaken me?] on our behalf on the cross.

We also learn something different about the power of God. The way God overcomes evil isn't by a show of brute force, is it? It's by suffering love. It's by entering into the midst of it. It's by using evil as the unintended way in which God finally overcomes sin and evil in our lives. The cross is the most dastardly evil event that ever took place. Yet that's the very event that God uses to redeem us, therefore canceling human evil at its most frontal, powerful, potent, negative and evil expression, there on the cross.

Furthermore, the cross shows us that we are in a whole lot more trouble than we oftentimes want to admit – particularly in our optimistic North American culture. If nothing short of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, if nothing short of the passion of God, if nothing short of the Father giving up the Son unto death, the Son offering himself as a sacrifice for sin through the power of the Holy Spirit, if only *that* can dislodge evil from our lives and set us free, it says that evil is a lot worse than what we thought, and our life is a lot more perilous than we often think.

Sometimes the reason why we want that other kind of God is that we don't want to admit just how finely perilous our condition is apart from the gospel. But thanks be to God, there is no dark and inscrutable God behind the back of Jesus Christ, and therefore when I found out about my lymphoma, it never once crossed my mind that God might be out to get me. Rather, I found Christ near at my side carrying me through it day by day by day by day.

JMF: In Ray Anderson's book *On Death and Dying,* he's talking about suffering and pain

and the evil that takes place and especially the passages in Scripture that (even in the New Testament) bring down all kinds of hell and fiery torment on the evil doer. He's explaining that, Yes, the New Testament says those things, and they're true and have to be taken seriously, but they are not said in isolation. They're said in the context of the gospel. This is how it would be and what is real <u>if</u> there were no Jesus Christ who has taken this very thing on himself and therefore, we're delivered from it. Torment doesn't have the final word. We take it seriously, and it's true and Scripture talks about it, and yet this is precisely what Jesus has done to deliver us from it.

EC: That's a crucial insight, because other than in consistent Calvinism, where Christ only dies for the elect, the problem with a lot of thinking about hell is it's double jeopardy. The church on the one hand wants to say that Christ has borne that evil, the wickedness and God's wrath against sin, but on the other hand, it wants to say, that those who turn away are still going to get it, only more.

If Christ already ontologically bore our sin and guilt, the wrath and judgment of God against the sin of the entire world, then hell cannot be thought as a place where that's going to occur again. We need to re-think the doctrine of hell and relate it to the love of God and not simply to the wrath of God. This is part of the problem of double predestination, that separates the love and wrath of God. In that view, the wrath of God is against the reprobate, and the love of God is for the elect.

If you think about hell and begin to relate it to the love of God, I think it could become a preachable doctrine again. If Christ is the reprobate, the one who has taken our sin, our guilt, our alienation, our death, and suffered in our place, then hell (whatever it is) can never be more than a testimony to what Christ has done. It cannot be a repetition or prolongation of what he accomplished on the cross. It can only point – kind of like John the Baptist's finger on the famous painting [pointing toward the Lamb of God] – it only points to the crucified. What if hell is not simply a product of God's wrath, what if it's a product of God's love?

What do we do with the sin-sick bewildered person who finally comes face-to-face with the living, loving God and Jesus Christ, and turns the other way? That's the unthinkable. This is what Torrance calls the mystery of iniquity. Not simply that God predetermines from all eternity who are going to go to hell, but why would anyone coming to know the love of God and Christ ever turn away? You can't give a reason for it. The more you try to give a reason for evil, the

more you end up explaining it away as something other than the utterly evil that it is.

What if hell is a place of refuge for the sin-sick sinner who turns the other way? Listen to this quotation from an infidel on his deathbed: "My principles have poisoned my friends. My extravagance has beggared my son. My unkindness has murdered my wife. And is there a hell, oh most gracious and Holy God? Hell is a refuge, if it hide me from your frown." What if hell is a product of God's love for those who reject Christ, where they're shielded from the unmediated presence of God in heaven, as a place of refuge for them, so that God even has a place for those who finally reject him?

I'm not giving this to you as a dogma, all I'm saying in this (and I have not a lot of energy about this interpretation, similar to C.S. Lewis's in some respect) is that hell cannot be the same punishment that Christ endures. I agree with Ray Anderson on this point. Hell cannot be left unrelated to the love of God in Christ. If there are people in hell, it isn't simply because God damns them there. It's because God loves them even while God has a place for them other than heaven. This is a different way to begin to think about hell.

JMF: Robert Capon describes hell as a place where God invites everyone to the wedding banquet. He wants everyone in the party, but some in coming in mess it up for everybody else. They can't be allowed to stay there and mess it up for everybody else, so they are thrown out. It's protection for everyone. I love C.S. Lewis' depictions of that in the *Great Divorce,* where you have the option of taking the bus to heaven anytime you want. Some decide to stay, even though they're wispy ghosts and everything is very hard in heaven, and it takes some getting used to. Some do stay, but most prefer to go on the bus ride back to hell.

Especially his depiction in the *Last Battle* (of the *Narnia Chronicles*) of those dwarfs who come through the stable door, like all the rest of creation, into Aslan's country (a metaphor for heaven), but they don't see it as heaven. They don't see it as Aslan's country – they still think they're inside that dirty stable. They're still fighting over scraps of food and poking each other, sitting in a circle blind, as it were, in the dark, even though there's a banquet in front of them, and a beautiful country around them. Their own state of mind refuses to let them see the reality of what they're actually in. They can't experience it because of their black hearts.

EC: That's very helpful, Mike. Torrance has been accused of being a universalist because of his emphasis that Christ's death is for all, and that it's objective and real, and that Christ has conquered evil and that we will never suffer the same judgment that Christ has suffered. Some

jump to a conclusion – they say, therefore all must be saved, or we fall back into the problem again of human beings contributing to it.

That's really not Torrance's position. Torrance says that Scripture seems to bear witness to the fact that some will not ultimately be saved. This is what he calls the mystery of iniquity, and he will not allow a logical explanation, because a logical explanation would undo the absolutely irrational, heinously evil character of evil. He will not allow that to be put in a logical form in a way that would undermine the radically tragic character of evil. So he is not a universalist, although he is a universalist of *hope* – that we would *wish* that all people would in the end become persons of faith. But why some don't, is the mystery of iniquity. You can't say more than that. He says every good theologian has to know when to stutter, and that's when the theologian has to stutter, at the mystery of iniquity.

JMF: Torrance talks about Christ healing not only our past and our sins and so on, but our *minds,* which are the source of our sins. Our minds have to be healed as well, and that's exactly what he does.

EC: It took me a long time to realize that Torrance means that in absolutely literal concrete terms. He thinks the one true theology is in fact the human mind of Christ, the man Jesus. What we see taking place in the early narratives in Luke, where Jesus is at the temple in Jerusalem (his parents come there for the Passover and they leave and he stays afterwards and he's asking questions of the Jewish leaders and baffling them with his answers and his questions), this is part of the man (in this case the boy) Jesus, our Lord and Savior assuming our minds and realizing real knowledge of the Triune God in our human minds.

Torrance thinks the human mind of Christ is something to be taken literally. Not only throughout Christ's earthly life, death and resurrection, but also ascended… the man Jesus with his human mind and his perfect theology is still in union and communion with the Triune God, and from that flows all good and true theology. It gets embodied in the apostolic mind through the nucleus of relations that Jesus establishes with the apostolic community, particularly the 12 apostles – mediated to us through the New Testament. So we have access to the mind of Christ only through the biblical document.

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Seeing God's Presence in Everyday Life

JMF: You are the author of *How to Read T.F. Torrance.* When we talk about an author who needs a book called "how to read," do we mean that he is so impossibly difficult to understand that you have to write a book called how to read him?

EC: It's interesting that you bring that up. Sometimes my students say, Dr. Colyer, we need a book on how to read Dr. Colyer's book on how to read T.F. Torrance (both laugh). There is some sense in which Torrance's theology is difficult. He always says that part of the reason his theology is difficult is because theology can be difficult. It's a combination of simplicity and profundity, simplicity and difficulty.

Part of it is that Torrance's writing style makes him difficult, and part is that he didn't write a systematic theology. So I wanted to bring together, in a one-volume treatment, Torrance's theology of all the main themes, as well as providing some direction to secondary literature, so it would be easier for people to be able to read Torrance's theologies.

JMF: But to be fair, how to read a given theologian, there's any number of books like that. It's not just T.F. Torrance. Virtually any important theologian has a book, how to read that theologian.

EC: Yes. The title comes from George Hunsinger's book on how to read Karl Barth.

JMF: In your book, *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, you describe him as holistic and practical. Could you elaborate on that?

EC: Torrance's holism is part of the reason for the difficulty of his theology, and yet it's one of the crucial elements of his thought. It's extraordinarily important when we talk about the Trinitarian character of Christian faith because the doctrine of the Trinity arises holistically as we indwell all of Scripture. That's one of the reasons why we often haven't seen historical-critical biblical studies generating a robust doctrine of the Trinity, because they tend to focus on the individual texts rather than how the texts bear in relation to one another.

Because holism is a difficult concept, one of the illustrations or analogies that I like to use to help people begin to get their minds around it is the magic-eye pictures. You've probably seen those; most everybody has, in our culture. You can buy books of them now. When you look at a magic eye, it at first looks like a bewildering collection of tiny figures that bear little or no relation to one another, and you can stare at it and it just seems like a bunch of little dots or pictures on a page. But if you hold the magic eye close to your face, to your nose, to your eyes,

and gradually move it away, all of a sudden a 3-D picture will come into view that's embedded in the magic eye.

Seeing that picture represents analogously what Torrance means about holism. Using an analytic or deductive approach, you can't analyze all the little figures and ever see the 3-D magic eye picture. The only way you can see it is to indwell the pictures so that your mind deals with the clues that are embedded in the picture and enables you to see the 3-D image.

Another illustration is the famous inverting spectacles. When you put on a pair of inverting spectacles, it makes the world look upside-down or right-to-left, and you wear those spectacles for eight days. At first, you're absolutely discombobulated – you can't eat, you can't drive or do anything. But after about eight days, all of a sudden, at a certain point, not by any kind of a formal process, but simply by the holistic powers of the mind interacting with this environment, all of a sudden it will reverse and you'll see things right-side-up again.

JMF: Really.

EC: Yeah, you'll see things right-side-up again. It's an example of the way in which you focus on, like in the magic eye, a massive amount of subsidiary detail in order to see the 3-D image. Analogously, something like that happens in terms of how the doctrine of the Trinity arises. You don't deduce the doctrine of the Trinity from biblical passages or statements, you indwell the Scriptures, and only when you come into contact with the love of God through the grace of Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit do you actually understand and see the doctrine of the Trinity.

Torrance's holism is an attempt to take into account the way in which so many elements in Scripture, in Christian life, bear upon the doctrine of the Trinity rather than understanding it as a rising out of Scripture by some kind of logical deduction or induction. That's part of what he's getting at when he talks about holism.

JMF: And practical.

EC: Sometimes, when Torrance talks about what he means by practical, it's not what people are expecting. They're expecting that theology has some additional task of making itself practical, showing itself relevant. When Torrance says theology is practical, he means that it's *inherently* practical. When you're talking about theology, you're talking about the love of God incarnated in Jesus Christ, assuming our broken and diseased humanity. In assuming our broken and diseased humanity, God has established an utterly practical relation to us. God has taken on

our very condition, our sin, our guilt, our alienation in order to overcome it. And so to say that theology is inherently practical is to say that God acts on our behalf in an absolutely concrete way.

To try to make theology practical *in addition to that* would be to misunderstand fundamentally the very key to what the gospel is. The gospel is essentially practical. It's God coming into our midst in order to redeem us. It doesn't need something else added to it to make it practical.

JMF: There's a difference between us coming up with a program or an idea to try to make things happen or bring about a certain kind of life in Christ and realizing that when Christ dwells in us we are, in fact, dwelling in him.

EC: Precisely. That is what Torrance means by a practical or an ontological relation that we have to God. People often view the church as providing spiritual goods and services, and when the culture no longer wants it, then we've got to think of some way for the church and the gospel to be "practical."

We've rendered the real practical character of the gospel impractical by failing to take it as seriously as we should. There's nothing we human beings or the church can ever do to establish a more practical relation with broken, diseased, sinful humanity than the one that God has already established in Christ. To enter into a relationship with Christ is the most intensely practical, theological, spiritual relation there is. There aren't any that are more practical than that, that are more transformative than that.

JMF: Doesn't that have implications for living, for everything we do? We often think of the spiritual part of life and the mundane part of life. There's some kind of barrier, and we can put all our mundane things down here, we get up and deal with our family in the morning, we have breakfast, and we get ready for work, and we go off to work, and then maybe on Wednesday night we cross the line to go to Bible study, or on Sunday we cross it and go to church. Or maybe at night we'll cross over from our regular real life down here and cross up into some period of prayer or studying the Bible. Then we go back down into our regular stuff and go out and see the family.

But really, we're talking about a holistic, practical, integrated, there's only one life, and that life is in Christ because Christ is in us. There's no other way to be, except in Christ, since Christ took humanity into himself as one of us. All of living is in the presence of Christ. All of it is

above the line, as it were. [**EC:** Yes.] There's no such thing as below the line anymore, and that means that there is meaning and value in every activity we engage in.

EC: That's an excellent way to put it, and precisely where Torrance comes out on this particular area. Part of the problem in North America, with the separation of church and state, and with viewing the church as one more provider of goods and services, that's exactly what happens: our Christian faith gets compartmentalized on Sunday morning, Wednesday evening, maybe in a time of devotion. But the problem is that it excludes Christ from all of the other aspects of our life.

On another level in Torrance's theology, holism is that there's no aspect of our life that's apart from being in Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. I race bicycles, but I take my bicycle racing as every bit as much a Christian activity as I do sitting here talking about Torrance's theology or preaching or teaching, because cycling is part of my life in Christ. It's an avenue for Christ to live Christ's life through me and to bear witness to the gospel.

One problem in our culture is that we tend to separate many aspects of our life out of what you describe as being "above the line." It's not in Christ.

Take for example our leisure activities. They're not something we think about in a Christian way. I teach a course at the seminary called redeeming the routines of ministry and life, in which we look at work and leisure in terms of this kind of participatory vision of Christian faith. There are some leisure activities that are more amenable to participating in Christ than others. There are some things that are ruled out of court that Americans do with their leisure time, like pornography on the internet, things like that, but there's a whole lot of other areas of our life that ought to be brought under the gospel.

For me, it's racing bicycles. I can worship and praise God on my time trial bike as well as I can do it in worship. It's not less valid in terms of my Christian life than what happens on Sunday morning. They are all part of the fabric of our life in Christ.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' first ministry is turning water into wine. Think about what it says about the mundane event of festivity around a wedding that our blessed Lord, according to John's Gospel, the first miracle he does, is involve himself in a wedding, and does a miracle so the wedding can continue to its *telos* [end or purpose] of celebration. In doing that, our Lord has hallowed human festivity and many areas of our life that we tend to separate off and rule out of the gospel.

So part of Torrance's holism is precisely your point. The gospel overarches every aspect of our life. Every aspect of it has to come under the purview of what it means to be in Christ.

JMF: Doesn't John's Gospel end with a fish fry on the beach? (Laughing)

EC: Yes. (Laughing)

JMF: It reminds me of a friend. They were once trying to get his grandmother to stop smoking. She had smoked her whole life, and they thought she had stopped, and he went out on the porch and she was out there in the rocking chair smoking. He said, "Grandma, what are you doing?" She said, "Jesus and I are enjoying a smoke." (Both laughing) There's the idea of "the sacrament of the present moment," which came out of medieval theology [17th-century monk Jean-Pierre de Caussade]. The idea of the sacrament of the present moment is realizing that Christ is ever-present in everything we do. To limit the sacraments to special events or rites is too restrictive (not that they aren't sacraments). A sacrament is a window into the life of God and into the presence of God. Absolutely everything we do is that, if we have the eyes to see it.

EC: Well said. When Torrance talks about Christ living his life through us and our being in Christ and the Spirit of God filling us with Christ, uniting us with Christ, that's precisely the kind of holism that he's talking about. We don't know at any given moment what Christ is going to do in and through our witness in our ministry. It's part of what makes life an adventure: We never know what's going to happen around the next corner when we're allowing Christ to live his life through us and we're practicing that kind of sacramental presence as a way of life in all aspects of our life.

JMF: Prayer is the same way. There's this sense that prayer has to be at a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain position, otherwise it's not real prayer and doesn't really count. And yet prayer has so many variations and permutations and expressions, even just appreciating the beauty of a fresh morning, or the beauty of what's going on in the household as the family comes together for a meal, and so on, are expressions of a communication with God that oftentimes are below the radar screen. We don't realize that this is what's going on, but we sense it, and we feel it, these are the times when you feel most close to God and that things are most right with God. Often it's not even a sense of focusing on that. It's just a sense of well-being because we're in tune in a way that we aren't always.

EC: This is part of what adds vitality and makes life in Christ the adventure it should be. Too often we run through life (and this can even happen with pastors in ministry, where we're

manipulating the symbols of faith, manipulating the symbols of life) by not really participating in the realities.

Some years ago I was at a scholarly conference (they're not always boring and dull spiritually, but sometimes they are) and there was a Roman Catholic priest. The rest of us were Protestants, and he quickly sized us up and he realized it was going to be a long weekend, so he decided to inject a little levity into our time together, so he offered to lead us in the Eucharist. I thought this would be a rather amusing event, for a Roman Catholic priest and scholar to lead a bunch of Protestant academic-types in the Eucharist, so I went along to see what would happen, more than to worship. But this Roman Catholic priest was a man who lived in the presence of God and who allowed Christ to live his life through him, and it was an absolutely moving time of worship.

What happened later that evening astonished me, and is such a commentary on what can happen to the Christian life, to pastors, and even to scholars. I was having a heart-to-heart conversation with another theologian and this priest about the things that really matter most, and it got to a certain point in the conversation, and the other theologian said to the priest, "I did my PhD work in one of the finest PhD programs in North America." (The person wrote a dissertation comparing and contrasting Karl Barth and Karl Rahner's doctrine of the Trinity.) The theologian said to the priest, "I know how to manipulate the symbols of the faith, but you participate in the realities of the faith and I do not."

Seldom have I heard a more honest admission of the danger of being a Christian and compartmentalizing our life. We compartmentalize it and pretty soon, we're just going through the motions of being a Christian rather than participating in the reality. What Torrance means by his holism at this point is that Christ's presence, the power of the Spirit, overshadows every aspect of our life. There is never a moment in any situation where we are set free from this glorious wonder of the God of the universe who has chosen to inhabit us and make our lives God's dwelling place, to live God's life through us, and shed abroad in this broken world something of the mystery of what it means to be a Christian.

JMF: Madeleine L'Engle was not a theologian, but she wrote a number of inspiring books about Christian living, and in one of them, *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons and Idols in Antarctica and Other Unexpected Places*, she talks about icons and how Catholics are very much into icons and Protestants typically are very much against icons. In her view, icons were not

something to be looked upon as having any value in themselves whatsoever…

EC: Yes. This is the true theology behind the icons.

JMF: …but a window, as it were, to look through to see the God who is behind every window. She was talking about many things, and on this trip she took around the Cape of Good Hope, they came close to Antarctica. She saw the penguins as icons in the way they behaved. The book was about being able to realize that we live in the presence of God all the time. Christ is not just in the presence of God, but Christ is actually living, dwelling in us all the time.

We don't often think of it that way, or we're too busy focusing on, as you said, the details of that magic eye to try to make our way, but without letting ourselves realize who we are in the presence of God and seeing that whole picture. Even with the magic eye, sometimes it takes you awhile. Sometimes it happens right away, but other times you kick yourself, you just can't seem to get it. Finally, when you do get it, it's amazing. Once you get it, you can look all over the place, you don't have to focus anything. You can keep looking everywhere and you're amazed at all the things you see, and then just as suddenly, the smallest distraction, boom, it's gone again, and you have to start all over trying to get back into that frame of mind.

EC: That's a marvelous analogy of the Christian life and how it's easy to go on manipulating the symbols rather than participating in the reality. After you do it awhile it gets easier, and if you stop practicing, if you stop doing it, then it becomes harder again.

JMF: A lot of analogies there.

EC: Yeah. There's a wonderful scene in the movie *The Chariots of Fire*, the Eric Liddell story. His sister is telling him that God has called him to be a missionary, he needs to give up this running, and he needs to go off to the mission field. And Liddell in that famous line says, "Yes, God has called me to be a missionary, but he's also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure."

JMF: Yeah.

EC: That's the way it ought to be with all aspects of our Christian life. They ought to be lived in Christ so that whether we're driving on the freeway to work, or we're enjoying something as mundane as a cup of coffee, or we're jogging or racing bicycles, or whatever might be the ordinary fabric of our life, that it's transfused with the glory and the power of the triune God, who has loved us with the love that will not let us go and has not despised our humanity, but has come into our midst as one of us in Jesus Christ in order that we might join in the party

and be able to live our lives transfigured the way Christ did in his life.

JMF: Isn't it the ultimate stress reliever.

EC: Yeah.

JMF: It's relaxing because you're not worried about the details and getting them all just right, but you're enjoying the present moment in the presence of God.

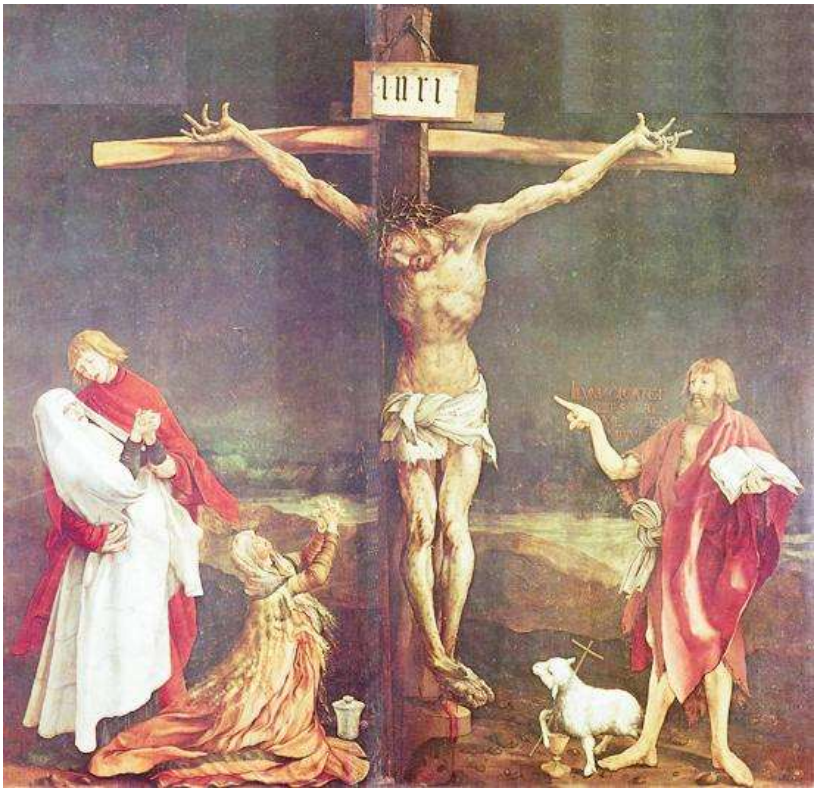
EC: A lot of Christians sometimes have difficulty entering into the sheer joy of the gospel at this level. It's almost too good to be true! (Laughs)

JMF: Yeah. As though Jesus wouldn't enjoy a baseball game, or deep sea fishing, or throwing a football or whatever.

EC: It's amusing how quickly we gloss over those passages in the New Testament that show Jesus immersed in the mundane things of life, like turning the water into wine at a wedding.

JMF: What is it that you would most like people to know about God?

EC: You saved the most difficult question for the last. I'm not a particularly visual person, so I'm tempted to point to a book or a passage, but if I wanted to leave somebody with an image (and it's too bad we don't have the picture here), Karl Barth had a famous painting in front of his desk when he wrote his *Church Dogmatics.* It was Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion,* with John the Baptist with the pointing finger.



I don't like shiny crosses, because shiny crosses don't capture for us the sheer depth and breadth and extent of the love of God in Christ. In Grunewald's painting, the gruesome pictures with Christ's contorted hands nailed, pointing up to heaven, the look of death is absolutely real. You can stare at that picture for a long time because it's so powerful.

I think that picture communicates the thing that is at the center of the gospel, that we ought to always most remember about God. This is what tells us what the heart of God is really like. You want to know the depth and the extent of the love of God, look up into the face into Grünewald's paining, his Christ hanging on the cross. That's where we have a window, according to Torrance, into the very heart of the Almighty. There will never be a dark inscrutable deity behind Christ's back that will turn out to be different, less loving and compassionate toward us, than the God we see revealed there.

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Hell: The Love and Wrath of God

JMF: We want to talk about hell today. A lot of churches will not even preach about it. In those, you never hear anybody preaching about hell. Other churches, that's pretty much what they preach about every week. So why the divide? What does Trinitarian theology have to say about hell? And how can we understand it in terms of the grace of God and the judgment of God?

EC: There has to be something amusing about inviting a United Methodist to talk about hell. When I ask my seminary students how many of them have heard sermons about hell in the United Methodist church, virtually none of them have. Hell, in many circles, has become almost an unpreachable doctrine, and therefore is not mentioned at all. In other circles, as you mentioned, hell becomes prominent. The question is, Why did hell become an unpreachable doctrine for some?

We have to go back in history and look at that. Part of it was because of the hell that was taught and preached in the church. If you go in, say, Reformed Scholasticism, particularly in the Presbyterian Church in North America in the 19th century, hell was related primarily to the wrath of God, heaven to the love of God. God loves the elect, God hates the reprobate, so you have God's attribute of love related to heaven and God's wrath related to those in hell. Hell was portrayed in very grotesque and graphic terms.

If you were going to be ordained in the Presbyterian church in America in the early part of the 19th century and you went before your presbytery and you were asked various questions, one of the questions you were asked is, "Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?" Because, if hell is the place that manifests the wrath of God to God's glory, God's numinous holiness and justice is manifested in hell, then you ought to be willing to be damned for the glory of God, so that that attribute of God can be seen — God's wrath and God's holiness. So the proper answer is *yes.*

There was a young Presbyterian who was going to be ordained, and he was asked by his presbytery if he was willing to be damned for the glory of God, and he was a hyper-Calvinist, and he said, "Yes, not only that, I am willing for this entire presbytery to be damned for the glory of God." That was *not* the correct answer.

In the hymnal at that time there was a hymn that sang that part of the glory of heaven was for the saints in heaven to watch sinners suffer in hell. That kind of depiction of hell is what

made the doctrine unpreachable. It went something like this: People who knew something of the love of God in Christ revealed on the cross, just sensed something profoundly wrong with that kind of picture — that God would so hate the reprobate that they would suffer for all eternity, and that part of the glory of heaven would be to watch the reprobates suffer in hell — maybe even one's relatives and friends — suffer there. There's something incommensurate with that, with the picture of the love of God revealed in Christ.

Because of that, hell, at least in mainline Christianity in North America, gradually slid off to the side, and the emphasis became much more on the love of God. In a lot of mainline circles, God is often portrayed as a nice God, and we're portrayed as nice people, and we should get along in the church. That doesn't work very well, either.

Part of the reason that hell became unpreachable is because it was related only to the wrath of God. This is not tenable. God's attributes are not separate. You cannot divide God's holiness and God's love, God's mercy and God's justice and wrath — God is ultimately simple — all of those attributes are integrated. We have to think about this in a different way — a way that unifies it, a way that brings hell into relation of God's love and not simply God's wrath.

JMF: How do we know that the wrath of God isn't the predominant thing and the love of God is secondary to that?

EC: This goes to how we think about the attributes of God. One of the problems, both in popular culture and in Christian circles, and even in some respects the great tradition of the church, is there's been a tendency to focus first on the attributes of the one God and only afterwards talk about the Trinity, and often God's attributes are not related to the doctrine of the Trinity. You see this in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica.* The second through the 26th question in the *Summa* deals with attempts to prove God's existence, conversations about God's attributes, and then only afterwards does Aquinas engage in any kind of conversation about the doctrine of the Trinity, and that prior discussion of the one God and God's attributes is never really integrated with the doctrine of the Trinity. That's one way of approaching the attributes of God.

If you look at the arguments, often they are developed on the basis of general revelation and a natural theology. This happens a lot of time with laity in congregations. They have some kind of concept of goodness and love, some kind of concept of knowledge, of other attributes of God, and they posit the perfection [of those qualities], and then attribute them to God. But that doesn't

work very well, because how do we know anything about God's attributes?

The place that we most preeminently know about God's attributes is in God's self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ, realized in our life by the Holy Spirit. If you want to know what God's love and holiness is like, rather than start with human experience, posit its perfection, and attribute it to God, or even do a concordance method where we look up everything the Bible has to say about holiness or love or justice in the Bible about God — the appropriate way to do that is to look through Scripture and see what God is actually revealed in Jesus Christ. There we find out that God's attributes turn out to be rather different than what we might assume they were, based on these other ways of thinking about it.

JMF: I wonder how many Christians realize that there are two totally different views of God, and a lot of times that they hold both at the same time?

EC: That's a good observation, and it goes to the heart of this problem. The real problem with it is when you have this kind of view that God hates those in hell and loves those in heaven. The problem is you end up with what we call in theology a *Deus absconditus,* a dark inscrutable deity that we don't understand, behind the back of what God had revealed in Jesus Christ. What tends to happen then is the love of God that you see in Christ gets only related to heaven, the wrath of God relates to those in hell, and that's simply not tenable. It's the same God. God's attributes cannot be divided.

The fundamental problem with the doctrine of hell that made it unpreachable is that it was only related to the wrath of God and not to the love of God. A more helpful way to think about hell is to relate it to the love of God. We don't want to get rid of the wrath of God. It's an important aspect of God, but it has to be united in a seamless way with God's love. This is what oftentimes tended not to be the case, so that you have basically two different doctrines of God — a God of love and a God of wrath — and they're not reconciled. They just sit there irreconciled, and we hope that the God of love is the one that relates to us.

This is the problem that you find in later Calvinism. The doctrine of double predestination was designed to emphasize the sovereignty of God, to give the elect the assurance that they persevere, so that they wouldn't have any kind of fear in this life. But the great irony is, is when you have a doctrine of God behind your doctrine of salvation where God's wrath and God's love are separate, you're always a little bit ill at ease wondering which God you're going to finally meet at the end.

In later Calvinism, what immediately becomes the question? "How do I know whether I'm among the elect or the reprobate?" When you look at Scripture, what does it say? "You'll know the tree by its fruit." So the very thing that Calvinism and double predestination was designed to kick out of soteriology — any kind of fear that you wouldn't persevere and you would go to hell and you wouldn't go to be with God — comes in the back door, practically, and people have to somehow assure themselves that they're among the elect. So they worked really hard to produce fruit. The very kind of legalism and works righteousness comes back in at another level, and has haunted that later Calvinism.

But the fundamental problem is these divergent doctrines of God: a God of wrath on the one side, a God of love on the other. Fundamentally, when we talk about how we really know God, if we do it through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, what we see in the cross is that God's love and God's wrath are not finally separate. They're two aspects of a single attribute that is the fundamental character of God. The love of God in Christ is patently real on the cross, but we also see God's hatred toward sin. It isn't that God loves the elect and hates the reprobate — God loves us all, but hates the sin in our life. Therefore I think we have to relate hell to the love of God.

JMF: How does hell fit into that picture?

EC: Where do we see the holiness and wrath and judgment of God against sin finally find its proper place? It's on the cross. That's where the moment of darkness and judgment occurs. When you look in the book of Revelation in chapter 5 and it talks about the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who alone can open the scroll and initiate the final process of judgment, in the next verse, what does John see? He sees a Lamb as if it was slain on the judgment throne.

There's no contradiction between the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and the Lamb of God looking like it's slain as the one who is finally going to judge us, because the final judgment isn't something different from what takes place on the cross, it's the *revelation* of what takes place on the cross and the final outworking of it. It's there on the cross that we see the wrath of God meted out against human sin, and guilt, and alienation, but it's Christ our older brother, who had assumed our broken diseased humanity, turned it back to God, and taken it into judgment against sin and guilt.

Christ is the one who bears the wrath and the judgment of God as the incarnate one, as the second person of the Trinity, not just an innocent man. It's within the relations between the

persons of the Trinity there on the cross that God's wrath and justice and holiness against human sin is dealt with ultimately in Christ our Lord. This means that whatever punishment can take place in hell, it cannot be the same punishment that Christ has already endured for human sin and guilt, alienation, there on the cross. It can only bear witness to that fact.

The other side of it is that at the same time that the cross is the judgment of God, it's also the revelation of the love of God for sinners. God loves the sinners who are in hell, and therefore we have to relate hell not only to the judgment that takes place on the cross but also the love of God that takes place on the cross.

What if hell is a *better* place for sinners who in the end, in their folly, reject the love of God in Christ and heaven? Whenever in Scripture we see a sinner, apart from the mediation of Christ in the presence of the high and holy God before whom the angels veil their faces, they're always like Isaiah in chapter 6, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I have seen the Lord on his throne. I am a man of unclean lips, I live among a people of unclean lips." What if hell isn't simply a place of punishment, what if it's a place of *refuge,* where the sinner is *shielded* from the unmediated presence of God, because they finally turned away from Christ?

Listen to the words of Altamont the Infidel on his deathbed, "My principles have poisoned my friends, my extravagance has beggared my son, my unkindness has murdered my wife, and is there a hell, O my most holy yet gracious and loving God? Hell is a refuge, if it hides me from your frown."

So we relate hell to the love of God, and it becomes not simply a place of punishment, but a place of refuge for the sinner, where the sinner, in his or her un-repentance and sin-sick folly, is shielded from the presence of God, because they would be more unhappy and uncomfortable in heaven than they would be there in hell.

JMF: It sounds like the fundamental issue that keeps a person from being able to understand grace and hell, judgment, mercy, and so on together in a healthy theological way, a biblical way, is the idea that most have of when they think of God, they think of God as a single solitary individual in heaven, some kind of a fatherly figure, whatever it is they have in their mind as fully being or whatever — but one individual, one God who does all this, who has hell and he has grace and mercy, and most do not typically think of God as a Trinity — as Father, Son, and Spirit in relation eternally. And if you don't think of God that way, you're going to have these problems understanding the relationship between hell and heaven, and so on, that you wouldn't

have if you had the thought of God in a triune way.

EC: Yes, that's true. It's part of the problem, particularly in North American culture with our individualism. The doctrine of the one God and the attributes of the one God have played a far more pivotal role in virtually all forms of Christian faith.

JMF: Then this idea of the single one God, as you were saying before, we construct ourselves by sitting down and saying, "What would he be like? Well, he has to be perfect in love. And one other thing, he has to be perfect in power, and he must absolutely know everything, so he must be omniscient, he must be omnipresent, he has to be everywhere. So whatever superlative thing we can think of, we attribute that to God, and then we construct that, raise it up, and then think that is God, and how is he going to deal with hell and heaven and so on, instead of the scriptural revelation of Father, Son, and Spirit, and it totally messes up everything.

EC: You're right. The whole theodicy question (of how can God be all good and all powerful and yet there be evil) has been such a question for North American Christians. We create the problem ourselves by the way we construct our doctrine of God. We think we know what God's power is like. We think we know what God's goodness is like, and we think we know what evil is like. So we start out with presuppositions based on our human experience, we direct those to the one God, and then we create this problem for ourselves.

When we look at what God has revealed about God's power, God's goodness, and the problem of evil on the cross, we find out that we really don't understand any one of those. What's fundamentally important in this is, how do we think about God and God's attributes? Here we have to go back to the biblical witness and look at what God has revealed.

A prime example of this is the depiction of Jesus coming back at the end of time, in final judgment. There's that wonderful bumper sticker, "Jesus is coming back, and boy is he (I won't even say it) ticked." That kind of picture of Jesus coming back as a conquering warrior, going to send the evil to hell and the righteous…going to rapture them or carry them into heaven at some point.

JMF: Isn't this what most American Christians are looking forward to, and that's their whole worldview, is that God is going to come back and smash these people I don't like?

EC: This is part of what the Jews were hoping for in a messiah when Jesus came. They wanted a political conqueror who was going to come and free Israel. There was that wonderful story in Matthew 20 where the mother of James and John comes to Jesus with a little request,

“Jesus, when you come in your glory, when you’re on the throne where you’re going to judge, would you allow these two sons of mine, James and John, one to sit on the left and one to sit on the right?” It has a little ring about it — “Jesus, James, and John.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful?

The writer or the redactor of Matthew 20 adds this interesting parenthetical insert, and I wish he would have taken about two chapters to explicate it more fully, “When the other disciples heard about this, they were indignant.” “Your mother did *what?* You want to sit *where?”*

Do you remember what Jesus does? He calls the disciples into a little circle because they have fundamentally misunderstood the character of who he is as Lord, and the fundamental character of the kingdom and how it operates. He calls them into a little circle and says, “You know how it is with the Gentile rulers.” Look at human experience. What does it mean to be a lord? You have power and authority and you exercise it over others — not unlike the many ways Christians expect Jesus is going to return. You remember what Jesus says in the text? “It will not be so with you.” Why?

Then Jesus shows us the way in which we think about the Lordship of Christ, or any other attribute for God or any other aspect of who God is. He doesn’t say that we begin with human experience and posit it as perfection, he doesn’t say, “I’m a little bit like human lords and I’m a little bit not, and this is how you adjudicate between those conflicting attributes.” That’s not how he does it. He says, “You know how it is with the Gentile rulers, they lord it over one another, but it will not be so with you.” Why? “Because the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life for ransom for many.”

Jesus takes the concept of lordship and turns it 180 degrees on its head, defines it in a radically counter-cultural way, in terms of suffering servanthood that he demonstrates throughout his ministry. In the upper room, the disciples still don’t get it. Jesus puts the towel around his waist, he washes the disciples’ feet, and when he gets to Peter, Peter doesn’t want him to do it. Peter still doesn’t understand that lordship is not lording it over one another in power. Lordship means suffering love.

When we look at the relationship between the persons of the Trinity revealed in the gospel (because we don’t have any access to the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit except what we see in the life of Jesus, that’s where we see the relations between the persons of the Trinity actually lived out and embodied, in Jesus’ life), we don’t see any kind of hierarchical

relations.

It says in John's Gospel that the Son only does the will of his Father. Do you have any sons? I've got three sons. Do your sons do your will? My sons don't always do my will.

Remember what else it says? John's Gospel says the Father entrusts all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't entrust all judgment to my sons. Indeed, even though they're adults, I have a clause in my will if something happens to me, they don't even get all of their inheritance at one time, because I don't even trust them with that.

Remember what Jesus says about the Spirit? When the Spirit comes, he'll not bear witness to himself, but he will bear witness to Jesus. What we see between the relations between the persons of the Trinity lived out in the life of Jesus is a kind of humility of mutual self-deference to the other. It's very unlike the hierarchical relations that we see between human beings. When you look at the attributes of God revealed in the gospel, revealed in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, they turn out to be very different than what we would think of if we start with our human experience and posit its "perfection" and attribute it to God.

JMF: Isn't it ironic then that the church can look at those passages and can say, you see how Israel was expecting a different kind of messiah, and so they didn't recognize Jesus when he came as messiah, so they rejected him. And yet here right now, this year, the church…at least the church in America…has an idea of what Messiah should be — somebody who's going to come back and bash all the enemies and set up the church in his glory. In other words, the view of the church is exactly what we say was wrong with the view that the Israelites had when he came the first time.

EC: It's so different than what we see in Jesus. He comes into Jerusalem, and he weeps over the city. It's interesting that when Jesus talks about the final judgment, there are all kinds of surprises. Maybe one of the surprises is the kind of Jesus who is coming back to do the judging. It's going to be the lamb looking as if it were slain on the throne, not this triumphant conquering Lord and King who is coming back to wipe people out.

JMF: The triumph being the cross itself.

EC: Yeah, the triumph being the cross itself. The interesting thing about this is that when you look at what the New Testament says about judgment, it has as much to say at least about the judgment of Christians, as it does about the judgment of those who are not. You can't simply

leave hell and not relate it to the love of God — you also have to relate heaven to the judgment of God. It says that there will be many books open. It says that some Christians will pass through the final judgment clothed in white raiment, and others will come through barely at all.

People tend to view this, that this is some kind of reward for good works, when I don't think that's the intent of those texts. What's the joy for those who receive the crown of martyrdom or the crown of glory? To lay it down at Christ's feet in praise of him. That the final judgment will entail a revealing of all things not only in non-Christians and in Christians is very clear in Scripture.

If Christians are afraid of that, though, I think it's because they misunderstand who is going to do the judging. It's our Lord and Savior who identified with us fully in our brokenness and sin, the great High Priest, it says in Hebrews 2 and 4, who is able to empathize with our weaknesses. He is going to be one who's going to judge us and therefore it will always be judgment and righteousness and holiness that's tempered in love.

JMF: A lot of this boils down to the way people interpret the Bible. Like the bumper sticker, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." The same people who believe that, will still argue over how to interpret those passages they think are settled. It lies at the heart of a lot of this, so let's talk about that next time we get together.

EC: Yeah, we should talk about Scripture and our assumptions around it and how we interpret it. Very pivotal, and it is behind all of this. One final thing I'd like to say about this whole subject of the attributes of God (because in the United Methodist church, and we don't like to talk about the wrath of God, we like to talk about God as a nice God and we're nice people): The wrath of God and the holiness of God is very important theologically and pastorally.

In one of the churches that I served, if you've been a pastor for a number of years and you have been faithful and the people know that you love them and they trust you, there are many of them that have dark secrets that they want to tell somebody, and they finally have gotten to the point where they trust you and can tell you, but they don't do it until they know you're going to go. So, the last few months before you leave oftentimes, if you've been a faithful pastor, people come out of the woodwork to talk to you about problems in their life.

A woman came to talk to me who has profoundly influenced how I think about these things, and she turned out to be a better theologian than I was at that point in my mid-20s when I was

first a pastor. It was a story of tragic abuse. When she came to my office, she couldn't even tell me; she had to write it down on paper. It's one of those things that we hear all too often today, about a woman who as a teenager was sexually abused by her father. After talking to her, I knew that I was way over my head and I wanted to refer her to a friend of mine who was a licensed psychologist/psychiatrist and a Christian.

But she had gone to a counselor earlier and had had a bad experience, and so she wouldn't go to him. I said, "I don't propose to counsel, but I'll listen to you tell your story." And so over several weeks she told me her story about the abuse that she endured. I never really understood human powerlessness until she told me her story. It started when she was about 14 or 15 and lasted until she was around 20. Tragically, her father twisted her emotionally, so that she felt like "the other woman." When her father and mother went through a divorce, she felt responsible for it. One day she said, "Pastor El, there's never been a day in my life when I didn't remember what he did to me and how I felt about it and how dirty and guilty I feel."

There was a large family, and every Memorial Day weekend, the brother and sisters would send her money and she would have to buy flowers and put them on her father's grave. She told me about the torment that she went through doing that.

You know what finally brought her healing? It wouldn't have been what I ever would have thought from everything I knew pastorally and theologically. It was the fatherhood of God and the doctrine of hell. It was the fatherhood of God, because finally it was the fatherhood of God (and here's where she was a better theologian than I was) that gave her a criterion by which to judge her father.

Instead of starting with a human father and project it onto God, which is what I thought she would do and that she never would even want to talk about God as father, no, she wanted to talk about God as father because it was the fatherhood of God revealed in the New Testament that gave her the criterion by which she could judge her father as decadent.

And it was the doctrine of hell, not because in the end she longed that her father would go there, but the doctrine of hell for her was the final testimony that we live in a moral universe and that God says an ultimate "no, not in my world will you ever do this." In other words, hell points back to the cross — that God does take seriously the sin and the brokenness and the evil of this world and deals with it objectively.

When we let go of the justice and holiness of God, those who have perpetrated heinous evil

or have had heinous evil perpetrated to them simply cannot relate to a "nice" God, because the nice God is not able to face the ugliness of the brokenness and evil that's done in this world and overcome it. She finally was able to let go of her guilt and remorse. She discovered that she was angry with her father, and she was able to let go of that, because of the fatherhood of God and because of the holiness and justice of God of which hell is a testimony pointing back to the cross.

We are wrong to get rid of the wrath of God. We're equally wrong to separate it from the love of God and to have God hate some and love others. The holiness and the love of God are, essentially, two sides of the same coin. A love of God that loves us and wants us to flourish and therefore has to say an absolute *no* to all those things that dehumanize, degrade us, all the things that we do and have had done to us that are contrary to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ on the cross.

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Dealing With Sin Among Christians

J. Michael Feazell: Everybody has a sense of justice and wants to see justice done, at least in terms of how they view justice. But it works two ways. We want to see Christ as coming back and taking care of the evil people, the oppressors, the wicked people that do so much damage to everybody else, and we kind of want to see that happen, and then yet that same sense of justice can be a real conscience and depression factor when it comes to us and the heinous things we've done and we wonder, how does God view us? Am I one of those that he's coming back to smash with ten thousands of the saints and all that? How does that come together with a right understanding of God in Scripture?

Elmer Colyer: It's interesting — a lot of times the more shrill people are in terms of other people being God's enemies and God judging them, the more it's really a projection out of the brokenness of their own life, and it's their way of dealing with it, because they don't have a God who can look at the evil in their life and still love them and forgive them — the way to do it is to project that out onto others, and then you get it out of your own system, and then but you still have this problem, these two aspects, God loving some and hating others.

We do all have a profound sense, most people (other than sociopaths) have a profound sense of justice. It's part of that sense that God has implanted in us by the presence of the Spirit, that this is a moral universe. That's part of the problem, because the line between good and evil doesn't run between nations and groups of evil, the line between good and evil runs through the heart of every one of us. In our heart of hearts, when we face the secret sins in our life that we don't talk about to one another, oftentimes we are afraid of this God, this dark inscrutable God behind the back of Christ.

I remember in another church when I was first a pastor, a similar situation… I was leaving the church and a woman came to talk to me before I left, because she had developed a trust in me. I asked her what she wanted to talk about and she said nothing, which meant she really had something, but she wasn't comfortable to talk about it. We got to talking about our high school years…

(I can't remember if I mentioned at the last time in the interview, but I was not a nice person before I became a Christian. If you think of the four or five guys in your high school most likely to fail at life, you're looking at me before I became a Christian. I was such a hellion that after I became a Christian had a call to ministry, my brother sat me down and for three hours tried to

talk me out of going into the ministry, and I'm convinced that he was far less concerned about my career decision than he was any congregation that would ever have me as a pastor, because he knew what I was really like. In my ten-year high school class reunion when we went back, and by then I was a pastor and serving a congregation, they asked me to pray before the meal. I got three words into the prayer and the entire senior class burst into hysterical laughter because they couldn't fathom me praying, let alone being a pastor. The truth of the matter is that line between good and evil runs down the center of all of us.)

In talking to this woman and talking about the brokenness in my life, she probably figured out, maybe he would understand the brokenness in my life, so she went on to tell about the fact that she was in an adulterous relationship with her husband's best friend. That wasn't the worst part of it. The worst part of it is that her guilt and her shame and remorse were causing her to reject her husband's love, and he was sensing this, and the more she pushed him away, the more he tried to reach out to her, and she realized she was destroying her marriage, and she could not break the chains of the guilt and the shame that she had.

If I had said, God is a nice God and you're really a nice person, you just need to get over this guilt and shame, and things will be fine, it wouldn't have brought her emotional spiritual healing. It's the wrath of God and the justice of God that she needs to hear as loudly as the love of God for her to be set free. She needs a God who can look at the darkest moments in her life, the most evil things that she has done, and not blink.

That's why, if we're going to be effective as pastors, we better deal with that kind of stuff in our life and be able to deal with it in others' lives, because when they come and they tell us their deep dark secrets of things they've done, if we blink and we're not able to manifest toward them both the holiness of God and also the love and acceptance of God, we won't be able to. They won't talk to us, they won't share with us.

The only thing you can do in that type of situation is take the person to the foot of the cross. This is what God thinks of what you've done. He declares it evil and sinful. It's God's final no, not in my universe will you behave this way. But at the same time Jesus, our elder brother, is the one who comes beside her, who takes her brokenness upon himself, suffers in her place, and says,

> "But I love you and I'm not going to leave you there. Therefore I forgive you and I set you free. I've objectively dealt with it. If you continue to lash yourself with sin and guilt and remorse and shame, you're trying to undo what I did on the cross. When I said 'it was

finished,' it's finished. That means it needs to be finished for you. You need to leave it there at the cross."

I put my hands on her shoulder and I said, I am your brother in Christ and minister of the gospel. I signed the sign of the cross on her forehead. I said, "In the name of Christ our Lord, as a minister of the gospel, I declare you are forgiven. Go your way and sin no more." She slumped into a puddle of tears; I had to get a bunch of Kleenexes. When she got done, she straightened up. It was as if a 1000-pound weight had fallen off her shoulders, and she went home and she was able to receive her husband's love again; she had broken it off.

The interesting thing, and this says something about the way God deals with evil both in the cross and in our lives, oftentimes God uses the fundamental brokenness, the failures of our life, the evil that's done to us in ways that we would have never expected. It was so with this woman. A few years after I left that church, I was back visiting and she said, "Pastor El! I've got to tell you the rest of the story." We got together for a cup of coffee.

She said, "About two or three years after I came to your office, when you took me to the cross and I received Christ's forgiveness, my husband started pushing me away and I couldn't figure out what was going on." Then she said, "I thought back and I said, 'I remember what this is all about.' I bet that blankety blank is cheating on me." God hasn't fully dealt with her language, so she was very colorful. She said, "You know what I did, Pastor El?"

She said, "I confronted him. I said, 'You're cheating on me, aren't you?'" He tried to deny it and eventually he came out and he said yes, that he was. She said, "You know what I did, Pastor El? I did the same thing with him that you did with me. I said, 'I got a story to tell you.'" She went back and retold her story and then she took him to the foot of the cross, put her hands on his shoulder, signed the sign of the cross on his forehead, and said, "As your wife and your sister in Christ, I declare that you are forgiven. Go your way and sin no more." She said, "You know, Pastor El? We have the most wonderful Christian marriage now, that we never would have had if we hadn't have passed through those things."

That doesn't mean that God is the author of them. They're still evil, they're still brokenness, they're not what God intends, but God uses even the brokenness and evil for our good. That's the way God overcomes evil, not by dealing with it at a distance, but entering into the midst of it on the cross, overcoming it within. The cross was the most heinously evil thing that ever took place in the history of the world — where humanity pushed God out of our world, out of our lives, up

on the cross, and crucified him. That is the very thing, the very evil of rejecting the love of God, that God uses to finally reconcile us to God so that we know that in our despicable most evil moments, when we are enemies of God and we push God out of our lives onto the cross, that's precisely where the love of God and the justice of God doesn't let us go. It both deals with our sin objectively for the evil that it is, and yet loves us with a love that will not let us go and frees it from us.

JMF: Taking that a step further, the person who goes through an experience like that, but they go and they *do* sin some more, what do they do then? How does that work for them?

EC: This is where people really get worried. It's one thing to sin before you become a Christian. But after you become a Christian and now you've tasted the glory of the coming kingdom, to go back and sin again, now "obviously" there cannot be any more room for forgiveness at this point, you know? This is the way, once again, we tend to think that there are limits to the love of God for us.

Many times we think if we'd have just have been Jesus' disciples and lived with him for three years, that would be enough for us. Well, how much did the disciples really learn? Not all that much. All of Jesus' disciples, including Peter, denied him and went the other way. In John's Gospel, Jesus restores Peter, who is absolutely broken-hearted. "Here I am, I said I would die for him, and I denied him three times. Surely there can't be forgiveness for me." But Jesus three times asks him, "Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me?" Three-fold rejection, a three-fold restoration.

In one of the questions you asked me to think about, is how has my theology changed over the years? If there's one place fundamentally that's changed it is my realization that the thing that finally sets us free from sin is when we become absolutely utterly convinced that even if we do… (We all have our secret sins, we don't share them with other people, we all have them, and we do them over and over and over again. We kind of like them, we kind of protect them and make sure we do them, and then secretly we're in turmoil and guilt because as Christians we keep doing it over and over again. We're powerless before it.)

This is a funny thing in our culture. We pride ourselves on free will, that we're able to make choices and choose things, and yet we're the most powerless of cultures, in North America. We talk about our freedom, our free will and responsibility, and yet all of the 12-step groups in our culture bear witness to the fact that we're a compulsive culture in North America. There's a 12-

step group for everything. Not only alcoholics and drugs but gambling and eating and spending. There's a 12-step group for everything. And what's the fundamental thing that you have to acknowledge if you're going to be a part of a 12-step group? "I am powerless before a habit that I cannot break, and I need a higher power (God) and a community if I'm ever going to be set free."

It's no different for Christians. Where I've changed theologically is my utter conviction that even if we sin, and we sin and we sin again, that the grace of God is always greater, because Christ has objectively dealt with even that sin. Even the sin of scorning him and sinning against his love, he took upon himself on the cross. This is why Paul says in Ephesians, "I pray that you'll understand something of the height and depth and breadth of the love of God in Christ that surpasses all understanding." We'll never get our minds around the extent of the love of God in Christ. But remember, it's not a love that overlooks the sin and the evil, it's a love that looks it in the eye, names it for what it is, and still overcomes it.

And the secret sins in my life…it's when I became utterly convinced of my powerlessness even as a Christian to overcome them, and that Christ would continually forgive me, but guess what? I found the power beginning to dissipate — because oftentimes it's the underlying fear that God is really out to get us, that there's a *deus absconditus,* that in the end it's not going to be mercy for us; it's only going to be wrath, because these attributes are separate. It's that fundamental fear that holds us in bondage. When we finally lose that fear and we realize that God's love is far greater than we ever realized, far broader and far deeper, that we find the power of sin begins to lose its hold on us, and we find freedom.

In early Methodism, discipleship always took place in small groups, because we have a hard time believing that ourselves. We believe it of other Christians, but we don't believe it of ourselves. In those small groups in early Methodism, the first question they always asked when they got together in the bands for Christians, "Do you have peace with God in Christ? Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?"

Before we can begin to be a Christian community and ever watch over one another in love, we need to make sure that we don't have a *deus absconditus* that we secretly fear. That's why in early Methodist discipline, watching over one another in love, always took place in the context of fellowship. It's only when we're absolutely convinced of the love of God in Christ and the love of our brothers and sisters that we begin to lose our fear, and we can be honest with God

and one another about the brokenness, the secret sins in our life.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all Christians had a group that they could get together on a weekly basis where Christians asked them, "Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Where have you sinned? How has God delivered you? How have you known the forgiveness of God in Christ? If you have any doubts about that, before we continue this meeting, we, your brothers and sisters, are going to convince you of the love of God in Christ, because that's the only way we can be a Christian." Then we can talk about our shortcomings.

JMF: It's hard to get into a group where you actually trust the people to not take it outside the group and tell other people, if you do say something. That becomes a barrier… Sometimes even best friends betray you that way. It's very difficult …it's one thing, if it's something everybody already knows, if you're an alcoholic, for example or something.

But if it's something that would be extremely devastating if anybody did know, it's really hard to share that with somebody else. You almost have to carry that alone with God, and until you get to the place that you're talking about, where you can see yourself in that kind of configuration with God, it seems like you're not able to forgive other people in a way that's complete and gives you freedom, until you can forgive yourself in the context of knowing who God is for you, and what God has done for you in the way that actually believes it — that you really are forgiven.

Often you hear a refrain among Christians, when somebody does something others find out about, "And he calls himself a Christian," "She calls herself a Christian." Well, yeah. How can you say that if you don't realize that you're just like that? But that's the rub, isn't it?

EC: Yeah, it is the rub. It's a good point. Part of the problem goes back to this individualism of our culture. It's safer in some respects to be an individual and bottled up with our secret sins, because we don't have to worry about that. The other side of it is, how many Americans are caught up in compulsive behaviors and end up having to be in 12-step groups? If the church were a little bit more like those 12-step groups, maybe we'd be less bottled up with all these compulsions, because we would be able to do it. But you're right, there's a risk involved in sharing. This is why, when you start small groups in the church, one of the things you have to agree on from the beginning is that there will be absolute confidentiality. What's said in the group has to stay in the group. That's the way it is with the 12-step groups. What you say in the group stays in the group.

JMF: In the 12-step groups they tend to do that because they've been burned, whereas with the church, it's like, because they're Christians it's okay to talk to another Christian, "I'm just telling you this so that you can pray about it" and that gives our conscience the ability to share something that should never be shared. Why do we get like that?

EC: We just can't be that way. This is where we need to watch over one another in love to be able to start it. The bottom line is, to start this in the church it always involves a risk, but that's the way love is. Love is risky, isn't it? Any time we're going to love… (indeed, it's not difficult — it's impossible. This is one of the wonderful things about Christian faith. If there's nothing else that happens today with all the people listening to us, I hope they get this point: Christianity isn't difficult, it's impossible. The sooner we learn that the better off we'll be.)

There's a wonderful story of Major Ian Thomas, he's the founder of the Torch Bearers…and this is the way it is with a lot of Christian workers. He became a Christian, became a whirlwind of activity for God, doing all kinds of Christian things, went on about seven years until he totally burnt himself out. He says he knelt down beside his bed in his college dorm room and he said, "Lord, for these last seven years I have served you, I've tried to be faithful to you and do it right, but I'm just worn out. I'm sorry. I just can't do this anymore."

He said he thought that Christ was going to be greatly disappointed. And Thomas says, "No sooner did I finish my prayer when I heard Christ breathe a great sigh of relief." It's as if for the last seven years, he said, "You've been trying to live a life for me that only I can live through you, and finally, I'm in business."

It is impossible to love one another this way in the church. It is impossible to keep those kinds of confidences apart from the grace of God in Christ. It's astonishing when even a few people begin to step out on the basis of the forgiveness that they have known because of the love of God in Christ, and begin to get together with other Christians and be honest, the kind of snowball effect that can have. There's nothing like openness and honesty that breeds openness and honesty. Therefore I think it's worth the risk.

The alternative to having those kinds of small groups where we can grow up together… (because remember, we're created in the image of a Trinitarian God, not the image of an individual God with attributes — we're created in the image of a Trinitarian God, where the love between the persons and the community of the persons is equally primordial with the persons themselves. This is the wonderful thing about Trinitarian Christian faith. You don't have to

choose between the good of the individual and the good of the community, because they're equally primordial in God. They have to be equally primordial in the church. We have to be concerned about the good of the Christian community and the good about the individuals. We don't have to choose between the two.) As individuals begin to step out in light of that love of God in Christ and to be vulnerable, we begin to manifest loving, forgiving relationships. The church then becomes something exciting.

I tell my seminary students, "If you have to tell the members of your congregation to go out and tell others about the gospel and invite them to church, if you have to tell them to do it and coerce them to do it, there's something wrong with the fundamental fabric of the character of Christian faith in that church, because the way evangelism happens best is when the quality of the love of God in Christ and our community together is so awesome, so profound, we cannot help but tell others. And then, you know what? Virtually any method of evangelism we use will work. Evangelism is far less about having the right technique than it is embodying a kind of a community that's transforming our lives and that we really want to invite others in. But there's a risk involved. There's always going to be a risk involved, but it's worth it.

But what's the alternative? The alternative to having that kind of Christian community is to be just where we're at. It's to have lonely Christians who are bottled up with their secret sins that they're afraid to talk to other Christians about, so they don't have the body of Christ supporting them, helping them believe the good news (because we all struggle to believe the good news), and so we end up lonely, guilt-ridden, fear-ridden, entering into something less than the fullness of life that God offers us in Christ. Wesley said it this way, "Christianity is a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it."

There's no other place in Christian life where we're more aware of our need for brothers and sisters than this fundamental problem of us continuing to sin as Christians, and our fear that grace has run out for us. There are a few Christians I've met over the years in my life as a pastor, who their danger is cheap grace. They're just going to sin it away. But the vast majority of Christians I know that are committed, their great danger is they think the grace of God is not enough for the sins that I continue to commit.

JMF: Right. It would probably be helpful for some to know that when you are disclosing to somebody else in a confidential trusting setting like that, that you don't always have to disclose *every* detail. The point is, that you're disclosing that you are in struggle with a sin of some kind,

and it isn't necessary that everybody know the details, and it isn't necessary they know the when's and where's, but the fact that you are sharing that struggle as a human being with a sin, with a personal issue.

EC: Yes. The point is, is that the community, the small group… This is why you can't do this kind of ministry in a large group. The place to do it is not Sunday morning with 100 or 50 or 75 people. You can't…

JMF: I've seen that happen. "Let's break into groups of three or four and let's confess to each other."

EC: This is one of the interesting things that in my study of Scripture and in looking at the history of renewal — that there are two equally primordial expressions of the church. The church hasn't always gotten this, particularly even Protestant churches. We tend to think of the church as the community gathered around the sacraments and the preaching of the word — the large group. But when we go back and look at the ministry of Jesus and we look at the New Testament, we see two equally primordial expressions of the church.

Even in Jesus' ministry, he taught the crowds, and we know that he had many more followers than simply the 12 apostles. We know that from Acts. It says that there were 120 who were gathered in the upper room. So there were a number, probably hundreds of other followers of Jesus. But of those, Jesus chose 12 to be with him. And it wasn't a one-way street. Remember in the garden when Jesus was tempted to the uttermost there and almost despaired? He took Peter, James, and John (the three closest disciples) with him. And of the three, only one, John, is called the beloved disciple.

So we see two expressions of the church already in the ministry of Jesus. The large group gathered around Jesus, but the small group gathered for discipleship. We see it in Acts, too. Remember in Acts 2 and 4 it says they gathered in the temple courts and praised God with glad and sincere hearts. The large group gathered for worship, but they broke bread and prayed in their homes. The small group gathered for fellowship and discipleship.

When I've looked at the history of renewal, take for example early Methodism, you find two expression of the church. The large group gathered for worship, for preaching, for sacraments, but the small groups gathered for discipleship and fellowship. You can only be a part of that kind of intimate fellowship with a limited number of people, because we're finite human beings. You simply don't have time to develop depth of relationship and trust [with a large group]. That's

absolutely crucial.

You're right, we don't have to say everything. We just have to be able to be authentic and vulnerable enough about the guilt, the remorse, and the shame in our life that we expose it to other Christians and can hear them tell us the gospel over and over and over again, and hear them manifest in how they relate to us the love of God in Christ. Manifesting that in relation to one another, that's what connection and spiritual fellowship is all about. I remember Jesus said it, "They'll know you are my disciples if you love one another." That's very important.

There may be some times in small groups where there may be some things that are not appropriate to share in terms of a particular sin in your life and the details. That may be something you need to share with one other Christian or you may need to share with a pastor. But the point is, do we have relationships with other Christians where we can be authentic and vulnerable about these fears, about this guilt, and about this shame? Unfortunately, a lot of times people find more acceptance and love and openness in a 12-step group than they find in the church. That's tragic, that it's 12-step groups that manifest this level of community more than the small groups in our church.

JMF: Even in the small group setting like you're talking about, even if you don't feel comfortable sharing something, when you hear somebody else do that, it still speaks to you on that level… That tells you, this applies to me, too, and I can receive this assurance as well along with this person.

EC: Yeah. There's something fundamentally cathartic about the confession of sins. Anybody who's ever been to a 12-step group… I've had relatives that have had drug and alcohol problems, and they've invited me to go, and one of the things I'm amazed at is how profound it is to hear people talk about their struggles and how cathartic that is for others in their own struggles, because they realize they're no longer alone in the midst of their struggle and their despair.

Simply knowing that there's another human being who somehow understands the depth and level of stuff we're going through, is part of the manifestation of the high priestly ministry of Christ in our midst. That's how Christ's ministry works. It's in a mutual ministry to one another. It isn't simply the other person who's being open to us, it's Christ who's being open to us in and through the other person. This is the problem with our individualism, the "me and Jesus" kind of thing where we think we don't need the body of Christ. The way God has put us together, wired

us as human beings and created the church, it is that we have to be in relationship with one another. It's in that relationship that we really manifest the image of God, which is Trinitarian and relational.

Jesus says all people will know you're my disciples if you love one another. In the history of renewal, whether you find it in Acts after the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, or other movements of renewal like in early Methodism in the small groups, often it was in the small groups that people came to Christ. In early Methodism the vast majority of people came to Christ not through field preaching, but in small groups, often only after they had been there a year or longer. After they had been in a small group where they were learning to pray, learning what the gospel is all about, interacting with other people who had struggled, only after a year of that process did they finally come to faith in Christ.

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Relying on Christ for Repentance

J. Michael Feazell: Let's talk about repentance. What is repentance, how do you know if you've really repented? If you don't feel you've repented, do you need to repent again? What is repentance all about?

Elmer Colyer: Repentance — the Greek root word *metanoia* basically means to change 180 degrees and face the other direction. Repentance becomes such a focus, particularly in more conservative churches that really want to honor God, because this is the focus on what we need to do if we're going to show that we want to be in a right relationship with God. If we want renewal to happen in the church, we need to repent.

One of the tragic things about this is that in the pattern of salvation, the way grace realizes itself in our life, at whatever point we make part of that something that we do in and of ourselves apart from grace, there's something we need to do to get it right in order for salvation to work or for renewal to work or whatever, that always becomes the place where we focus our energy, and it always becomes the weak link in the chain.

It's particularly tragic with repentance, because if there's anything that quickly becomes evident for Christians, is that we don't repent very well. We think we've repented, we've really changed our mind about something, and then about two days later we find out we haven't done a very good job of it, and so you have almost this ongoing cycle where people try to repent and repent and repent over and over again, and it never works very well.

JMF: So you never believe that you ever did repent, because *repent* means to change, and if you still are struggling, then you haven't repented. And until you do repent, you're not going to be forgiven.

EC: Yes. It takes us back to this point that we talked about in an earlier interview, that Christianity is not difficult – it is impossible. This refers to all aspects of Christian faith. At any point in the order of salvation where part of it becomes an autonomous act that we do on our own apart from grace, that always becomes the weak link of the chain, where we never get it right and we keep circling back around and around that particular point. This is why repentance in church has become such a problem.

The story that I used a couple years ago when I did one of these interviews, about the man from California who was walking on this ice, and crawling across on his belly because he was afraid that he was going to go through, and then a truck comes with a load of logs and goes

across the ice, and how they both had radically different experiences — one was absolutely scared and the other one was not afraid at all. The important point of the illustration is not about the quality of the faith of either one of them, it's about the quality of the ice. And Christ is thick ice. It holds us up in our weak faith. The same is true with repentance and every other aspect of the order of salvation. As soon as we turn it into something primarily that we do apart from Christ, we get our self in a whole heap of trouble, and it doesn't work very well. The bottom line is, we don't repent aright. Christ even had to do that for us.

Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, a lot of times people have a difficult time making sense of it. Why did Jesus have to be baptized – he had never sinned, there were no sins to repent of? Whose sins was he confessing and repenting of in the Jordan? It wasn't his own, it was ours… In his total identification with us, taking our diseased and sinful humanity that we never can turn back to God on our own, never rightly repent — that's part of what Christ's life and death and resurrection is all about — repenting in our place. He goes down into the Jordan confessing all of our sins — repenting for them in a way that we never repent for them aright…and he comes out and then receives the Spirit of God into the human nature of that he took from us in the incarnation.

We don't even repent aright, so Christ has to repent for us. Our repentance never can be anything but an echo of his repentance on our behalf.

This is tremendously freeing, because once we realize that we don't even repent aright, when we repent, we can repent as much as we can at that particular point in time, and not all the time be looking at our shoulder wondering whether we got it right or not. Because what actually happens when we repent — it's already the Spirit of God echoing Christ's repentance in us that leads us to that point. When we repent as much as we can at that particular moment in time, the Spirit takes our imperfect repentance, Christ seated at the right hand of the Father even now, takes our repentance, perfects it, does it right, and presents it to the Father on our behalf. So we don't need to worry about whether or not we repent aright.

This is where a lot of people misunderstand the relationship between divine agency and human agency in our salvation.

JMF: You mean what *we* have to do…

EC: …and what God has to do for us.

As my good friend Gary Deddo says, "Many Christians turn the relationship between divine

agency and human agency in salvation into a zero-sum game." So either God does 100 percent and we do nothing…so when I say "Christ repents on our behalf," that means we don't have to do anything at all…we don't have to repent… or God does part and we do part, and this is where most Christians come out, secretly (even if they don't admit it theologically), they think there's something that they've got to do in and out of themselves to contribute to their salvation, and if they don't do it right, then it's going to mess the whole thing up.

Whether it's repentance, whether it's faith, whether it's love, whatever it is at any point where they think it's something they have to do in and out of themselves, 50 percent God but this is their 50 percent or 10 percent or however they parcel it out, that becomes the weak link in the chain, where they're found in bondage.

The problem is, this is the wrong way to think about the relationship between divine agency and human agency in salvation. The best way to think about this is to go back to Jesus Christ himself. The second person of the Trinity incarnate as a human being…where we have 100 percent divine agency; the second person of the Trinity has assumed our diseased and alienated humanity…100 percent divine agency throughout Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And yet, we have a fully human Jesus, too.

In theology we talk about this as the *enhypostasis/anhypostasis* couplet. *Anhypostasis* means that there is no separate human being apart from the incarnation, in other words, if the second person of the Trinity had not become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, there never would have been a Jesus. It's only because of the incarnation, because of the virgin birth, that there is an actual Jesus. *Enhypostasis* means, *enhypostatic* is the word, in the incarnation, there is a real Jesus, a real human Jesus. Indeed, in some respects, Jesus is far more human and more of a character than we are.

This is part of the reason I love John's Gospel. Remember the miracle that Jesus does first in John's Gospel? It's the turning of water into wine. There are a lot of Christians that have a problem with this human Jesus in John's Gospel there at the wedding. First of all, he's at a wedding. The Son of Man, the Son of God Incarnate who's got all this great work to do to redeem humanity, and here he is messing around at a wedding. What's all that about?

The first miracle he does is changing the water into wine. The servants say there is no more wine, and Mary, Jesus' mother, comes to him, "They have no more wine." He rolled his eyes, you know, "Why do you involve me, woman?" He ends up changing the water into wine, five or

six stone containers that probably held about 30 gallons of wine. So that's maybe 120 to 150 gallons of wine. My entire seminary could get a little tipsy on that much wine. Jesus does this miracle to allow the celebration to continue. It says something about the profound character of his humanity.

So is there anything incompatible in Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection between 100 percent human agency and 100 percent divine agency? They're completely compatible. Why would we think that any place in the order of salvation it would be any different? God's grace, when God's grace is actively involved in our life, it doesn't in any way dehumanize us, it doesn't undermine our human agency, indeed, we become more fully human, more fully personal, more fully Mike and El than we ever were before.

To try to help people think about this, I tell my students in seminary, think about the time in your life when you were most profoundly aware of God's love and presence in your life…most profoundly aware that you were loved by God and forgiven. In that moment of time, did you somehow cease to be human when God's agency was actively involved in your life? Did you somehow turn into a robot at that moment? Weren't you more fully the human that you are, at that moment of your life, more than any other time? So you see, there's no inconsistency between divine and human agency and reality, it's in our thinking about it that we get into trouble.

The more the Spirit of God is filling us… This is what it says in Ephesians chapter 5, where being filled with the Spirit of God, the more Christ is living his life through us… Galatians 2:20, "It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God."

When the Spirit fills us and Christ is living his life through us, it's the same reality — one looked at from the perspective of the Holy Spirit's activity, one looked at from the perspective of Christ's activity, and what happens? We obey God the Father. So Christ living his life through us, the Spirit filling us, and us obeying God the Father are simply looking at the same reality from the activity of each of the persons of the Trinity. When that happens, we become more fully human, more fully personal, more fully agentic than we ever were before. In other words, it frees us. God's grace frees us for our human agency – it doesn't undermine it.

Part of the problem is that when we human beings think about free will and agency, we tend to think about it in making choices between two different things — like in the supermarket you

can choose between Rice Krispies and corn flakes. But what Christian faith means by Christian liberty is something far more complicated. If we had a piano in this room, I'd have the freedom to sit down and play the piano, but I don't know how to play the piano, and I don't read music very well. While I can plunk the keys, I do not have the liberty to play Mozart. The only way I would be able to play Mozart is if I became a different kind of human being, if I had the skills and the abilities to be able to do that. Christian liberty is more like the liberty to play Mozart than it is freedom of will to choose between A and B.

The grace of God sets us at liberty to be able to respond. There isn't an incompatibility between divine and human agency. That's why it's only when the grace of God is actively involved in our life that we can repent at all, and even when we do it imperfectly, Christ takes it and perfects it and presents it to God on our behalf. That's true of every aspect of Christian faith, whether it's faith, whether it's repentance, whether it's obedience, those are all things that are absolutely impossibilities. We do not have the human potentiality to do it apart from Christ living his life through us.

JMF: So repentance and faith are pretty much the same thing, in that in repentance, what we're doing is trusting Christ to be who he is for us. And even in that trust, we're trusting him to trust for us, in who he is for us.

EC: Right. The great irony is, it is precisely in that moment when we realize that it's not about the quality of our faith, not about the quality of our repentance, not about the quality of our obedience, but about the quality of our Savior, that we paradoxically at that moment find the freedom to be able to do it. Even though we don't do it perfectly, it's when the fear that we're not going to get it right is finally removed, because we're absolutely convinced that Christ has already done it right on our behalf in our place — not in a way that displaces our response, but a way that undergirds it and sets it free. Then, guess what? We lose the fear that we're not going to get it right, and it becomes something that's entirely natural.

Another way to explain this relation between divine and human agencies… Torrance uses it in terms of his children; I use it in terms of my son. When my sons were first trying to learn how to walk, they would grab my finger with their hands, and I would grab their hands with my hands, and I would hold them as they walked. Now, who is really holding who? They're gripping my finger, but it's not really their grip on my finger that's the controlling issue, is it? It's my grip of their fingers. It's the same way in the relationship between divine and human agency. We

really do respond in faith, but it's very imperfect and it's not the quality of our faith or any of our responses that's finally determinative, it's the quality of what Christ has already done, and God's grasp of us in Christ that never lets go.

JMF: It's Christ we're trusting, not our faith we're trusting. I've found myself needing to say that sometimes to remind myself. I have to say, I really don't have much faith here in how this is playing out. But I have to tell myself I don't need to worry about that, because Christ has enough faith for both of us. I'm trusting him, not me, so I don't need to worry about my lack of faith, he'll take care of it. Sometimes you have to just be very concrete with yourself…not everybody does, but sometimes I need to rehearse it, and so that helps me to remember it's him I'm trusting. It's not that I need enough faith, because I don't have enough faith.

EC: That's right. In my life as a pastor, my own life as a Christian, I found that almost always there's some aspect in that order of salvation, some human aspect in there where one Christian or another will attach to it — "That's what I've got to do." That always becomes that weak link they fixate on. It's always the thing they worry about that they haven't done right.

JMF: They become obsessed with it.

EC: They become obsessed with it, and it becomes the thing that messes up their Christian freedom and liberty, because they think if they don't get it right, again, it's that *deus absconditus* back there. They're not going to get their part right, the whole thing is going to collapse like a house of cards, and they're going to end up being on the outside.

JMF: Yeah, and it's like God is going to come out and throw a curse at you, and Jesus is holding him at bay as best he can. But in the end, he's really mad and he's going to get one of those lightning bolts past Jesus' catcher's mitt, and it's going to hit you.

EC: Right. It goes back to other things that we've talked about, that often the God that people most believe in, in their heart of hearts… (The thing about ultimate beliefs…it's not the ones in our head, it's the ones that go to the core of our being, and influence fundamental behavior at this level, that are really the core ones.) A lot of times what people believe in their head and how they actually behave, what their ultimate beliefs in their heart are, are not commensurate. You're right. Oftentimes behind the back of Jesus is the angry God the Father. The "one God" that they develop on the basis of taking human attributes and perfecting them and projecting them onto God. Jesus becomes the intermediary.

But when you look at the cross, what you find is that it isn't simply Jesus that identifies with

us. All the persons of the Trinity suffered there on the cross. The Father suffers, giving up the Son in the death. We have no idea what it meant…the cost God the Father paid for our redemption. All the persons are involved in it there. You can't have an angry God the Father doing something different than the Son. This is an inadequate understanding of God and an inadequate doctrine of the Trinity. This is why the doctrine of the Trinity calls that doctrine of the one God, and all of the funky attributes that go along with it, the *deus absconditus* that we're worried about, it calls it into question. Jesus, on the cross, is a window into the very heart of God. There is no different God the Father or any other God behind the back that we have to fear.

One of the interesting places this plays itself out and goes back to this whole issue of how we interpret Scripture, that we can pick up maybe in another session. It's always interesting to me the scripture that Christians fasten on as the key troubling text. Almost always they're texts about what we have to do. Those are the ones that resonate with that *deus absconditus,* resonate with that human agency having to contribute something, and so they become the primary texts that blind our eyes to what the other texts say. This is an inadequate way, this is why the concordance method of doing interpretation, just looking up what Scripture has to say about a particular theme, never works. You have to look at the entire fabric of Scripture to get it.

In John 15, Jesus says, "If you love me you will obey my commands." They forget the first part of John 15, which is what? Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a branch remains in me it will bear much fruit." Then comes the verse that we just really don't believe in our heart of hearts, "Apart from me you can do nothing." You mean there isn't *something* we can contribute on our own? Jesus seems to say there isn't, in that text.

If you look in there, the word "remain" is *meno*. If you read John's Gospel and look at everything it has to say about *meno,* it's the same word that Jesus uses in terms of the relationship between Jesus and the Father, "The Father is in me and I am in the Father." It's *meno.* Jesus says that's the same thing we're to do with him, we're to *meno.* He's to remain in us and we're to remain in him. Unless we do that, we can do nothing.

That's the absolute good news of the gospel, because that means there isn't anything in the Christian life that we ever do, have to do, ever need to do, on our own apart from what Christ has already done for us in his vicarious life, death, and resurrection. He has already done it all — not in a way that cancels our humanity, but a way that frees us. He echoes his faith, his repentance, his obedience, in us. It's when we stop worrying about the quality of our faith, our repentance,

and our obedience, guess what? It becomes easier to be able to do those things. Even then, we don't do it perfectly, and we always have to depend upon Christ our High Priest, who is at the right hand of God.

JMF: It's ironic that we obsess and fixate on our weakest point and spend most of our time worried about that, concerned about it, working on it, going through this step and that step, listening to sermons or preparing sermons on it. That distracts us from what we really need to be focused on, which is all good, because we're so focused on these areas of weakness.

EC: That's a good point. It again shows, particularly in North America, how our rugged individualism, that we're expected all along the way to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and we have the capacity to do these things, while at the same time we have all these 12-step groups of compulsive behaviors, where we have to admit that we're powerless.

We could learn from the 12-step groups. In some respects all the 12-step groups, when it says "I'm powerless before this habit" is basically echoing what Jesus says in John 15, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Apart from a higher power, apart from Christ, we cannot break the holds on our things. If Christians, if every time we get in that mode where we obsess about something and get worried about it, if we could just remember that verse and remember we are powerless apart from the grace of God in Christ, we'd be a lot better off. That's why it's not difficult to be a Christian, it's impossible. The sooner we learn it the better off we'd be.

Same thing is true with ministry. Sometimes pastors think ministry becomes their responsibility. You want to turn ministry into a drudgery, and you just think of ministry as primarily what we do for God in response to the gospel. That's not what ministry is in the New Testament. Ministry is primarily Jesus' high priestly ministry now at the right hand of God, where he is still the incarnate Savior that he was. What takes place in Christ's life, death, and resurrection isn't a passing episode. It isn't simply past.

This is why the resurrection and the ascension are so crucial to Christian faith. Christ still is the incarnate one. He still has that vicarious humanity, where he believed in our place, repented in our place, obeyed in our place throughout his life. That humanity is still right now in the presence of God. He is our Great High Priest. That's absolutely crucial, and when we lose that, we lose something fundamental.

The same is true with ministry. It's not primarily our ministry, it's primarily Christ's ministry. And insofar as we're willing to step back from any situation in ministry and

acknowledge that he's the one who has to do the work, we're a lot more effective. The more we think the burden of responsibility rests on us, that's a surefire way for pastoral burnout. Just think that some aspect or all of ministry is primarily our responsibility, not Christ's responsibility… When we know that Christ is the real minister and we're simply called to participate in his ministry, it makes ministry a joy.

Sometimes at the end of the day you can ask Christ, "What did you do for my ministry today?" If we knew what he did, we'd either be disappointed that it didn't conform to what we expected, or we'd become arrogant that he'd done so much, but sometimes Christ just says to me, "Mind your own business. I'll take care of my part. Your part is simply to allow me to work through you in each and every situation that you're in and trust that I'm doing it, without worrying all the time about the results."

JMF: Isn't that what we often do with the idea of making disciples? We get the idea that it's our job to go out and make disciples. We make the congregation feel guilt-ridden if we can, that they haven't done enough to go out and make disciples, so we turn that into a fresh kind of work that is on our shoulders — now that we've been forgiven, we have the obligation and responsibility to go out and make disciples. There's a lot of guilt associated with that.

EC: For all the pastors out there, my question for them is, how is that working for you?

JMF: Yeah, how's it going? But it seems like at the end of every week, we've got a brand new plan, a brand new program, a brand new set of steps, a brand new set of sermons to make it happen.

EC: We Methodists, we're even going to take it one step further. We don't simply do our obedience. We're shrinking so dramatically — we've lost 60,000 members a year on average since 1968, when we became the United Methodist Church. We've shrunk so dramatically that now we're encouraging people to do evangelism and to reach out because of survival. We're concerned that unless we do that, we're not going to have enough people to pay the bills.

If you want to turn people off, just have a congregation that's in survival mode. People come in the door and they smell it. You can't hide it. When you're in ministry out of fear or out of guilt [**JMF:** Or desperation.], it just doesn't work. That's why many of the programs that we try don't work. It isn't that the programs are bad in themselves, it's that we're doing them out of desperation, or we're doing them out of guilt, because we know we need to do something …

JMF: Or to pay the bills.

EC: …or to pay the bills, whatever it is. All those motives betray the gospel at the core. When I get sent by the bishop and cabinet to small, struggling congregations, I know that until I get them out of that mindset, where ministry and mission is what they do "because they have to," it's their responsibility, they're doing it out of guilt…

JMF: Or "should."

EC: Or they're doing it out of desperation, because if they don't, they'll die. Until I get them out of that mindset, no matter what program we use, it will not work. So the first thing I have to get them convinced of is that even if there's only a handful of people, elderly people (it's a dying congregation in a dying farming community, which is where I get appointed to a lot around Dubuque), they are a little missionary outpost. They are the people of God who have been claimed by Christ, entrusted with the treasure of the gospel, and simply are called on to let Christ do his work in and through them, as inadequate as they seem to the task. This is where the Gospels so helpfully illuminate for us the pattern of ministry that we ought to have.

There's that wonderful story of Jesus feeding the 5000, plus the women and the children. Jesus has taught them all day, the kids are getting restless, the disciples come and say, "Send the people away so they can get something to eat."

John's Gospel says, "Jesus said, 'you give them something eat.'" Jesus already had in mind what he was going to do. The disciples say, "It's utterly impossible. You can't feed all these people with what we've got."

The only person in that story that seems to have a clue about this is the little boy who has the five barley loaves and the two small fish. He's not stupid. He knows that they can't feed 5000 men plus the women and the children. But he knows something about who Jesus is, and so he takes the little that he has and he trusts it into the hand of Jesus and trusts that Jesus will do the rest. And Jesus does an astonishing miracle.

When we think about ministry — a struggling congregation with a handful of people — many of us who are pastors, we realize we're not the most effective pastors in the world, what could Christ ever do through us? We're a lot like those five barley loaves and two small fish. There's no way that we have the human resources and the ability to fulfill what Christ asked us to do. It's not difficult, it's impossible in ministry, too. So we lay it in the hands of Jesus, and we let him take us, and break us, and use us, and he does what's absolutely impossible. The same is true with ministry.

My word to all those pastors listening today, those persons in congregations who are maybe struggling: Focus your eyes on the one who has touched your life. Realize that he is the one who is sufficient to the task of ministry, and you're just barley loaves and fish, and place yourself in Christ's hands, and whatever program you use, you'll be a lot further ahead than if you think the responsibility primarily falls upon you.

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True Church Renewal

J. Michael Feazell: Let's talk about church renewal. It's a hot topic and a lot of churches want it, but it doesn't happen very often.

Elmer Colyer: We United Methodists, that's a very hot topic for us, and as I mentioned in one of our other interviews, it's partly because we've lost 60,000 members a year since 1968 and it's finally begun to affect us financially. So we want renewal basically to save us from going completely down the tubes. That's an immediate problem. Once your motivation for renewal is to save the dying ship or anything like that, renewal doesn't work very well.

In our culture, because we think all this stuff can be programmed, at least in our tradition, as soon as you start talking about renewal it's some kind of a program. And the track record of programs leading to renewal is not very good. The reason is because it doesn't lead to any kind of fundamental change in our life together in communities. We're going to have some kind of program that we bring in externally, and then we're going to do it and hopefully that will bring renewal, and that doesn't work very well. The fundamental reason is because renewal is not primarily something we do.

Renewal is primarily something God does, and when we think it's something *we* can program, we already have the emphasis, where renewal is rooted, and how it's going to take place, we've got it in the wrong place. We think if we can get the right program, the right people, all of that stuff right, renewal will happen. It doesn't work, because God is the author of renewal.

JMF: So what can a church do? What if a church is seeking renewal, recognizing its need for renewal, what steps ought it take?

EC: If a church is seeking renewal, it already shows that the Spirit of God is actively involved in a renewal. It's the Spirit of God that really moves us to see that the way things are, not the way they should be. There's a fundamental incongruity with who we are as Christians, who we are as the church, and what we sense the gospel is all about. So as soon as there are questions about renewal, I always become hopeful, because I assume that the Spirit of God is beginning to blow, as it were, on the embers of life that are still there in the church and getting people to begin to ask that question. When that kind of impetus of renewal begins, the one thing that we want to do as leaders is channel it in the right direction, rather than channel it towards "Now we're going to give you your program and this is going to do, so do it," which doesn't work to channel it in the right direction.

If renewal comes from God, then seeking God and praying for renewal is the first act. Indeed, prayer is the first act of the Christian life, the first act of all ministry, because it's acknowledging, as we talked about in one of our other sessions together, what Jesus says in John 15 — that "apart from me you can do nothing." Unless we abide in Christ and Christ in us, we cannot do anything, including renewal.

When you look at the history of renewal, before renewal ever took off in the church, there has always been a time where people sensed the need for renewal and the people of God began to pray for renewal. It isn't that prayer is some kind of a magic, it's that the church begins to realize that its sole hope in Christian life, its sole hope in community life, is Christ and the gospel. Renewal always has an element of returning back to first things of the gospel, returning to the core of the gospel. This is an acknowledgment of our helplessness. We can't renew ourselves. Unless the Spirit of God is at work in our midst, renewal is not going to happen.

JMF: Sometimes people who are trying to help a congregation find renewal will tell them that it's their fault that no renewal is coming, so therefore they need to pray harder and longer, and they start talking about the bowls in Revelation, and until those bowls can get filled up, God won't respond. They talk about how there's not enough real desire in the congregation. If the congregation really cared, God would respond.

I suppose it comes all the way back to when Jesus said, "People will know you are my disciples if you have love one for another," but we *don't* have love for one another. So where do we start, what do we do, and how do we learn to wait on God, and what does that mean?

EC: Those are good questions, and you're right in that those kinds of things don't work very well. My question is, anybody that's been involved in a church or any church that you've seen, how well does that work when you try to bring about renewal that way?

In the situation that I'm in at the seminary, because I've been a pastor a long time, the bishops of the surrounding annual conferences occasionally ask me to go into troubled congregations that are in dire need of renewal. This is kind of amusing, because a congregation that's used to having the bishop and cabinet appoint a pastor, when they find out they're going to get a seminary professor, it's like, "Oh my, we've been really bad now. Not only do they not have a pastor, they're going to send us a seminary professor, an egghead who doesn't know anything about the church, so we're doomed!"

When I go into a congregation, in some respects it speeds up the process, because they

already know that I don't have anything to offer them. They're not hoping that I'm going to be able to come in and solve anything – they're in really dire straits then.

There was one congregation that the bishop and cabinet asked me to serve. In my tradition, this is a sign that this is not a good place, that the bishop is sending you. When the district superintendent, who is kind of the bishop's assistant, introduces you to the congregation, and when he meets you, his hands are trembling, that's a sign that this is not going to be a good appointment. I didn't understand why his hands were trembling until I talked to some other people. In the previous meeting that they had had with the previous pastor, and the pastor parish relations (PPR) committee, and a representative from the seminary, and the district superintendent…

The pastor parish relations committee, which is a small committee that deals with the relationship between the pastor and the congregation and therefore with the bishop and cabinet, was meeting downstairs talking with the pastor and the district superintendent; the congregation was upstairs. The congregation got impatient and they started stomping their feet on the floor. This is a sign it was probably not a good appointment, either. They stomped their feet so loudly that they could no longer hold the PPR committee meeting. The PPR chair had to go up to try to quiet them down, and he came back down and said, "We've got to go up there, because they're going to tear the church apart." This was the congregation that they invited me to go to, to help bring about renewal.

They barely agreed to let me come, and they were so antagonistic toward me before they met me, they would not give me a key to the church. In our polity, the pastor has final authority for the worship of the church, and based on the discipline, I could have demanded them to give me a key. But if you do that, you already create hostility and lack of trust, and you're never going to be able to lead them. They appointed me July 1, and for the first six months, I didn't even have a key to get into the church; I had to wait for them to come to open the church.

What do you do in a congregation like this? This is a hopeless congregation. Small congregation, rural congregation, dying farming community, a small number of people who are angry at the bishop and cabinet, angry at the world. Humanly speaking, they don't have a snowball's chance in hell of being renewed. What do you do?

I don't think guilt or anything like that works. I don't think that's what begins to foster the spirit of renewal. I think it's returning to first things. You talk to them again about the love of

God in Christ. You help them remember why they're Christians in the first place. You bring them back to the verities of the faith. I had to preach about the love of God in Christ for them, and manifest love in Christ for them for six months before I got a key to the church.

It was kind of humorous. It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving and the three leaders of the church (who were not the official leaders, as sometimes happens in dysfunctional congregations…there were people off on the periphery who were the leaders, but they weren't in a leadership position)…and without even thinking about the symbolic significance of it, they jointly after church presented me with a key to the church.

After I walked out the door I went, "Yes! Jesus, we finally have our foot in the door." We built enough trust in our commonality of going back to the verities of the faith rather than looking at all the problems they were facing, because you're not going to find renewal first facing all the problems. You have to first go back to the verities of the faith. We needed to have a little conversation about that. By then we developed enough trust that I could speak the truth in love to them and basically tell them,

> "Look, you're angry, and you've got some good reasons for being angry. Do you think this is all going to foster renewal in your midst? It's not. It's only going to come from the verities of faith, and God has called you to be what? A missionary outpost here in this dying farming community. You have young families in this area who are unchurched who are going through the farming crisis (this was 15 years ago when the farming crisis was very real in this part of the country) and God has called you to be a missionary presence, a missionary outpost in here, and it's God that is going to bring renewal to you and bring renewal to these persons' lives."

It's only when we focus on the center of the gospel, and we're convinced that God is the one who brings renewal, and we begin to seek God's face and open ourselves to be renewed and to be used by God, that renewal takes place. The wonderful thing about that little congregation is they chose to change their entire frame of reference, to re-believe the gospel as they'd heard it, and to view themselves as a little missionary outpost. After I left, the bishop and cabinet appointed another pastor who helped them continue that vision, and they're never going to be a large congregation, but they're still growing, still reaching out. There are younger people coming in.

It always has to begin, rather than telling people what they're not doing, telling them what the problems are, to once again return to the verities of the faith. What is the church? Who are we as Christians? That's where we find the real joy, the real impetus for renewal — there in the verities of the faith. Once they begin to capture a vision of what it means to be the church again,

then you can go on and begin to do some changes in how you're doing things. But until they have some kind of vision for renewal, until God has recaptured their attention, all you can do is pray for them, pray for the congregation, pray for the people, the movement (in my case the entire United Methodist Church is in need of renewal), until God recaptures our attention and refocuses our lives on the verities of the gospel.

JMF: Doesn't that work pretty much the same across the board in almost everything? The gospel is good news, so when we focus on that good news of what the gospel is and what Christ has done, who we are in Christ, who he's made us to be, that bears fruit. Focusing on what's wrong (which necessarily causes you to focus on who is to blame, what steps can be taken to right the wrong and so on, or to punish the guilty or whatever, but it's a focus on negative issues…) never produces good fruit. It always comes from focusing on what is true and real, which is good, which is what the gospel is there to bring us.

EC: Yeah, and I think we often too quickly move to programs that will either bring about change inside the church or bring about change outside the church. Until they are rooted in a re-appropriation of the gospel, refocusing on the verities of the faith, programs don't work very well. Once you're re-centered on the verities of the faith, guess what? There are a variety of programs that can be used that often work well.

It goes back to, again, if we have to prod the people in the pews to go out and tell others about the gospel and invite them to church, if that's the only way we can get them to do that, and they try to do that and it usually doesn't work very well. The reason is because until we're participating in the verities of the faith, until something of that begins to manifest itself in the kind of community that we have internally, people don't want to go out and share it. What's happening in the church isn't good enough that they want to export it. I have lots of United Methodist pastors ask me about renewal and what they need to do about it, and I tell them,

> "As long as you're in the state that you're in now, you probably shouldn't try to do outreach or anything, because even if you did attract new people into the church, what you have to offer them might be a travesty of the gospel and do them more harm than good. You first need to focus once again on the verities of the faith and begin to seek God's face until that renewal begins to manifest it in the church and then move outward."

When you look at the history of renewal, it often starts with a group of people who begin to meet together and pray together to seek God's face and ask God to bring about renewal, because they know that the situation is impossible. That's why I think sometimes the congregations that I get assigned to are the ones that are the easiest to work with (even though other people don't

want to go to them), because they're already so hopeless that they know that they need something beyond them in order to bring about renewal. And it certainly ain't going to come to from this seminary professor. They're cast back upon God at that point.

JMF: There's a great quote from Mahatma Gandhi …at least attributed to him…where he was talking to group of Christian missionaries and he said to them something like, "You work too hard. If you would look at the rose, a rose, if it has fragrance, people will cross the room to smell it."

EC: That's wonderful. Watchman Nee, the famous Chinese Christian, said that, "The Christian's first purpose in life is to walk so closely with God that we carry around a sense of the presence of God in our lives that creates a hunger for God in the lives of others." That's right. That's what I'm talking about in terms of congregations.

When you look at the church in the New Testament, they didn't have some major plan for evangelism, but they were so profoundly transformed by the love of God in Christ they couldn't help but tell their neighbors and friends, and the quality of community that they had, as you read it in Acts 2 and 4, "There was no needy persons among them, for whoever had property or land sold it and brought it to the feet of the disciples." I often ask our seminary students, "If your congregation manifests that kind of community, that people are willing to make that kind of sacrifice to meet the needs of other people in the community, do you think you'd have any trouble attracting people to the church?" You wouldn't.

Even though it's always imperfect in the church, it's something about the quality of our ongoing relationship with one another and God, when we're participating in the realities, and that's taking place, that does provide us with a distinctive fragrance that the world is attracted to. Without that, simply going out and preaching the gospel doesn't work very well. Jesus said, they'll know you're my disciples (not if you preach the four spiritual laws or you knock on people's doors), if you love one another. It's very important to focus on the quality of community before we begin to try to export it to the world.

JMF: If you go out and invite somebody to church and they come into a setting where people don't love one another, they might as well be anywhere else. They might as well be down at the racetrack or at the ballgame, because what's the point? When people do love one another in a congregation, it's obvious. You walk in, you feel like the people care about each other here, and at least it strikes me this way, that when people care about each other, they tend to be having

fun. They tend to be enjoying it. And you can see that fun and that enjoyment. You see people laughing, you see them smiling, you see them having fun with each other, they get together, they enjoy one another's company, and all that makes people want to be part of that, because there are positive relationships going on, which is exactly what people are starved for. They don't have positive relationships, they want to be cared about or to belong, but in the church, unless that's going on, unless you see that, why would you want to stay? And why would you invite somebody to it?

But if you are enjoying one another, this is the gospel, isn't it? The purpose, the reason Christ came, is to heal broken relationships, but in the church, we tend to think that the gospel is all about obeying rules and following laws and making sure that we obey God. We get the idea that we're to make disciples, we've got to do this, it's a burden, it's a chore, or maybe it's a joy, whatever. But it's something we have to do, so we go out to do it. And we miss the point that we're not making disciples just to get people saved, but there's a reason to be saved… We've been saved *for* something.

EC: For community, you bet.

JMF: You're being saved from broken relationships and estrangement and alienation, to belonging, being part of the relationship Christ has with the Father in the Spirit. When that's happening, the sweet smell of the gospel is present even if it's not at a church, as far as that goes.

EC: You're right. There are a whole bunch of issues tied into that. One is the way we tend to understand the core of the gospel in North American culture, which is primarily in juridical forensic terms — that we're forgiven now and we're going to be with Jesus when we die. What gets lost is that we're not simply saved from sin, we're saved for loving relationships with God and one another. That's what we do, between the time we come back into a relationship with God and when Jesus comes back, is we're about manifesting this kind of a community and showing the world that there's a better way.

But if our understanding of the gospel is simply that we're forgiven now and we're going to be with Jesus later, then what do we do in between? Then the fundamental place of Christian community in God's plan of things manifesting love for one another to a broken world, really gets lost.

The other thing about this is, to be in this kind of relationship involves time together. This is where I think the greatest hindrance to renewal and the movement of the gospel in North

American culture today is that we're so busy consuming goods and services that we don't have time for relationships. Therefore, if we want to see renewal happen in the church, one of the first things that we can do is begin to have small groups in our church meet together to pray and seek renewal in our own life and in the life of our church and to do it together.

In the same way, John Wesley said Christianity is a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it. The same thing is true of renewal and outreach. It's not meant to be a solitary adventure, it's meant to be something we do together in community. To begin to meet together, to share deeply of life, to talk about our struggles as Christians, to pray for renewal in our own life and pray for renewal in our relationships with one another in the church, is a prelude to beginning to take that beyond the church to others.

This is one of the reasons I've often been a little wary of what they call "seeker-friendly services." There's a sense in which we want to be welcoming, and we want non-Christians who are unchurched to be able to come to the church and feel welcome, but if we in any way change the character of the community that they experience when they're there, I think we're making a fatal mistake. We're misrepresenting what the gospel can do in their lives if we don't invite them to a service, a kind of a Christian community where they experience what community is really like.

I haven't studied carefully the background of this, but I understand that Willow Creek, that big movement in the Chicago area, they were one of the ones that talked about seeker-friendly services and have done that. The idea was, people would come to seeker-friendly services and they would then be assimilated into the small group ministry of the church. I don't want to misquote them, so those of you who are on the internet, I'm sure you can go and check this out, but my understanding is they found out, guess what? People were coming to the seeker-friendly services, but they were never getting assimilated.

My question for them is that when they went to those seeker-friendly services, were they experiencing the kind of community that is a part of those small groups at Willow Creek? Because if they weren't, at those seeker-friendly services, that's probably why they weren't getting assimilated, because they were assuming that what they were doing in the seeker-friendly service is what Christian faith was all about, when really it is loving one another and manifesting that love of God in Christ in small groups as well as toward the world, that is where it's at.

JMF: Yeah, and it happens more easily in a smaller group. Most of our [GCI] churches in

the Unites States are small, they're under 50, they're under 30. And they're frustrated, they wish they were bigger. They see the Willow Creeks or they see the big church on the corner and they wish they had more members and they could do more things and they had more facilities. But it's in the relationships that you can have with the few people, because how much time do you have for 1000 people? You're still only going to have so much time. The relationships going on in a small church can be more dynamic, spiritually speaking, and more caring …

EC: Part of the problem with small congregations is a lot of times their smallness and the level of fellowship that they have can be an impediment to allowing new people to come in, because they don't know how to incorporate those new people into the fellowship. The only fellowship they have is for the people that are already there.

One of the interesting things that I see in the history of the renewal, for example, in early Methodism, is they had small groups that were designed for people who were not yet members. How many of our congregations have a small group designed particularly for people who are coming in from the outside and need to be assimilated, need to have a place where they can go for fellowship and where they can learn about Christian faith, see it embodied? We don't have that. We tend to have fellowship groups for people who are already inside the church, and then if the church is small, we have no way to incorporate those from outside the church into that small group fellowship.

So that's another thing where it's important to learn from the fact that the church has two equally primordial expressions — the large church gathered for worship, for sacraments and that kind of thing, but also the small group gathered for discipleship. I think there ought to be small groups for people wherever they're at in their faith pilgrimage, including people that are just seeking God. The Alpha program, maybe some of your pastors and congregations are familiar with that, was designed to be a small group way to reach out to non-Christians, where a Christian would invite neighbors and friends into their home over fellowship to talk about the basics of what Christian faith is all about. That has been a tremendously effective program, because it's done in the context of fellowship. That's the kind of program we can incorporate into our congregations as a way to bring new people into the church, if we had the kind of fellowship there to bring them into.

JMF: Often you meet somebody and you would like for them to come to church with you, but you don't want them to go to your local church, because you know that it would be a turnoff

for them.

EC: It's a good point. About ten years ago the district superintendent of the Dubuque District had a passion for the unchurched. We have a high level of unchurched and marginally churched people in the Dubuque area. It's about 85 percent Roman Catholic. Protestants are a small number. There are some very pious Roman Catholics, but a lot of people who grew up in Roman Catholic families are cut off from the church and unchurched. He wanted to reach out to them, so he had an idea of using this Alpha program.

I said, "All right, but what are you going to do once you bring them to Alpha? What church are you going to invite them to where they're going to be able to go, if after they get a taste of what Christian faith is all about, and be assimilated into a vibrant Christian fellowship?" That took him aback, because he had to face the fact that within his tradition, he really couldn't point to a congregation where that was taking place.

So I told him, "Maybe before we start talking about outreach, maybe we need to go back and talk about what we need to do to revitalize congregations so that we have renewal beginning to happen in an organic way, so that people like that will be able to be incorporated into congregations where it will actually work."

JMF: In that sense, renewal, and learning to love one another, has to come first, before drawing people in. And then it happens because of what's going on, without having to create programs.

EC: Yes. You have a lot better sense for your church than I do, but from talking to all of you here, I sense that the Spirit of God is already stirring here — that there is a profound longing for renewal, and that shows that the Spirit of God has already begun the work of renewal here. If we could get pastors and lay persons and small groups and congregations to begin together, to kneel down and ask God to let renewal begin with us, and ask God to come and begin to mess with our lives, and to begin to turn us into this kind of Christian community, I think we would see the Spirit of God beginning to fan those flames of renewal in the church.

One other interesting thing I have learned about studying the history of renewal is that once renewal gets started at a small level and the Spirit of God is beginning to work renewal on wider and wider scales, that renewal always has to embody itself in some kind of a form — some kind of a form that's reproducible, where you can take the renewal from one context to another and take the flame from one context to another and have it ignite again. That's what I see not

happening in North America. I see the winds of renewal in mainline Christianity in many different places, but I don't see groups that are finding a way for it to be reproducible.

For example, in the United Methodist Church, we have some large dynamic congregations with dynamic pastors who are experiencing renewal, but it's built around the personality of that lead pastor and it's not reproducible, because not everybody has the gifts and graces of that person to be able to do it. What needs to happen is average rank-and-file congregations and pastors need to somehow link together and find a way, when the Spirit of God is bringing renewal, that they can take that to other congregations and bring about renewal.

This is one of the things I see about early Methodism. Not only was the Spirit of God renewing it, but in Wesley's lifetime there were never over five to ten ordained clergy persons in the entire Methodist movement. It was all done by laity. They had to find a way for this renewal to continue to go from London to Bristol, and from Bristol to Newcastle and then out into the surrounding areas, that was done by average persons and lay persons. In some respects, in the history of Methodism, renewal has been far more effective when it's been rooted in the laity and their participation in renewal than it has been oftentimes when it's been in the clergy and from the top down.

The fact that the Spirit of God is stirring the winds of renewal makes me tremendously hopeful. If pastors and laity could begin to pray for that and then find a way to put it into a reproducible form, I think the Spirit… It isn't that the Spirit of God doesn't *want* to renew the church, the Spirit of God longs to renew the church, but we're grasping at straws in terms of some of the ways we do it — looking at programs, or as we're doing it in our tradition, doing it out of fear. We're trying to attract a few more adherents so Methodism doesn't die. Those ways of renewal are never going to work. It's not going to work until we return to the verities of the faith, that we begin to embody in a small groups where we begin to love one another, and then we find a reproducible way to take it from one place, to one place, to one place, to another.

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Theology and the Bible

Michael Morrison: We wanted to talk with you today a little bit about the relationship between the Bible and theology. I teach Bible at a seminary, you teach theology. One question that some students have: Is theology based on the Bible, or is our understanding of the Bible based on theology? Which needs to come first in our understanding?

EC: That's a great question, and I'm glad they have this on tape. A biblical scholar and a theologian sitting down at the same table and having a conversation about it! This is unusual in and of itself.

You have to have both. You have to have a theology to rightly interpret the Bible, but it can't be any theology. It has to be a theology that arises out of Scripture. So we're faced with the age-old dilemma of "the hermeneutical circle." How do you enter the hermeneutical circle, if Scripture generates the appropriate theology, but you can't rightly understand Scripture unless you have the appropriate theology?

We all begin in communities, and we're not the first Christians that started reading the Bible. Everybody already reads Scripture out of a community, and for you and for me, we're doing it as Christians who believe in the Triune God. That provides us an initial frame of reference, a theological frame of reference that allows us to read Scripture in a certain way. We ought to hold that theology loosely, in that we always allow our theology to be checked by Scripture, but it will also illuminate Scripture and enable us to interpret it in a way that we couldn't if we didn't have it. So we have to hold our theology critically, and allow Scripture to challenge it, while at the same time we use that theology in order to interpret it. It's a messy process. The church has had all kinds of heresy trials and everything else as it has debated the relationship between theology and Scripture.

MM: So there's this little back-and-forth relationship of each speaking to the other. Historically, how has that relationship developed? It changed quite a bit during the Enlightenment, for example. Has that been good? Has that helped us understand?

EC: In some respects it has been. There have been some good things and some bad things. You're right. The Enlightenment forever changed how we approach the Bible.

One of the first pieces written in the Enlightenment was Benedict Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, and he was one of the first persons to interpret the Bible as a historical text purposefully to undermine its authority, because Spinoza lived through the 30 Years War, when

Protestants and Catholics were bloodying Europe with the religious battles, and both doing what? Appealing to the Bible and its theological perspective to legitimate their warring against one another.

Spinoza, being an enlightened Jew, realized there's something funky about Christians appealing to a crucified messiah who called them to love one another and love the world, and then bloodying Europe. He was concerned that, with both sides appealing to the authority of Scripture, one of the ways he could undermine it would be to interpret the Bible as a historical text. That started a trajectory that developed in the Enlightenment, and early Enlightenment exegesis of Scripture, the historical-critical approach to Scripture, like the early history of historical theology. Both started out negative toward the church's theological way of reading Scripture. So, the first critical histories of dogma were designed to undermine it.

MM: Their goal was to take interpretation away from the church.

EC: Yes, to set it free from the prejudice, so that Scripture could be interpreted without any kind of theological prejudices. This is precisely what the problem is, though. Can anybody ever interpret the Bible without some kind of theoretical framework? The answer is no, because the Bible is already there, and you have to have certain presuppositions about what it is.

Part of the fundamental divide in the church and outside the church when it comes to interpreting the Bible is that we don't all agree on what Scripture is, and therefore we have a multitude of different ways of approaching it. In the Enlightenment, the historical-critical approach was first designed to treat Scripture not as a privileged sacred text, but like any other historical text, subject to the same rigors of historical criticism that we would subject Plato or Aristotle or anything else in history to.

MM: Instead of looking at the Bible as a word from God, they were viewing it as words from men about God.

EC: Yes. It was simply the religious theological perspective of Jews in the Old Testament and of Christians in the New Testament. There was an ongoing hope that if you could get back behind the dogma of the early church, this is where the critical dogmas, critiquing Nicea and Chalcedon as a writing out of Christianity's influence coming into contact with Greco-Roman philosophy, and that led to this high theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation. It was hoped that if you could get back, if you got back to the New Testament, apart from this dogmatic tradition of the church, that Jesus still might have something hopeful to say to modern humanity.

The problem was that scholars began to critically go back first through the early centuries of the church and cut away the theology. They began to look at the New Testament, and guess what? They found that even the Gospels are already theological texts. Being a New Testament scholar, you'll remember that great long-standing "quest for the historical Jesus" throughout the 19th century, where scholar after scholar went back, particularly to the Synoptic Gospels, tried to cut away the theology of the redactors and others that manipulated the text, to get back behind the texts to the data, the raw historical Jesus apart from any kind of theological presupposition.

When they would finally get back to the historical Jesus, cut away from the theology, they'd reconstruct the historical Jesus, every one different than the previous one, until Albert Schweitzer came along and went back and reviewed that whole history in his *Quest for the Historical Jesus,* and demonstrated the uncanny absolute miracle that every one of those scholars which he likened to looking down deep in a well, cutting away the theology of the church until it finally saw the picture of Jesus. And in every case it turned out to be a self-portrait of the scholar who did the study. Schweitzer's book put an end to the quest of the historical Jesus for a while. Now, if you remember Schweitzer's conclusion — what was Jesus?

MM: Jesus was mistaken; Schweitzer's view was *not* like himself.

EC: Yeah, that he is a first-century apocalyptic Jew, and he has nothing to say to modern humanity. Do you know the rest of the story? He was one of the most outstanding biblical scholars and theologians in the world at this time, but if Jesus is simply a first-century apocalyptic Jew who has nothing to say to modern humanity, this sort of puts us out of business in a hurry, doesn't it? You know what Schweitzer did? He gave up his position as a New Testament scholar and theologian, went back to medical school to do something worthwhile in his life.

MM: To be a missionary.

EC: To be a missionary where he would go and meet people's real needs in Africa, serving as a medical missionary. That quest for the historical Jesus had all kinds of ramifications. It led Schweitzer completely out of New Testament study and theology and into a different vocation. If Jesus is simply a first-century apocalyptic Jew and has nothing to say to us, we might as well close our book and do something else.

MM: Do something good for humanity.

EC: Exactly.

MM: You said earlier that this historical method did have some good effects – in taking theology away from the private domain of the church, perhaps?

EC: Yes. One of the good effects is that it helped the church begin to face the fact that it did have, sometimes, a tyrannical theology that it was imposing upon the text. You cannot understand the ecumenical movement and the desire of Christians to re-unify one another, apart from the Enlightenment critique of the warring character of Protestants and Catholics. The ecumenical movement didn't arise because Christians decided one day, "Jesus said we should love one another and we should clean up our act and stop having wars against one another — not only that, stop treating one another badly."

The reason the ecumenical movement began was because our disunity was such a scandal to the world, to modern Western culture — that there's something fundamentally wrong with this kind of Christianity that leads to this kind of in-fighting in the name of a Messiah who proclaimed the love of God in Christ. So it enabled the church to begin to be self-critical about its own practices and its own interpretation, that it had internal feuds within Christian faith. It was the *external* feud of the Enlightenment and the critique from the world on the church that really forced the church to face its disunity and generated the ecumenical movement.

The other side of the thing is, the Enlightenment was always a movement toward universality. Science was hoped to be the unifying rationality that could unify all various cultures. There's a kind of a movement toward universality in the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity. That led to that in Christian faith, and began to focus on the things we hold in common.

In post-modernity, where the Enlightenment itself is now being critiqued, and its so-called universal rationality has proved to be historically located and therefore as culturally conditioned as any other, we no longer hope for a universal rationality, and so now we tend to focus on what we call local realities or local communities. Ecumenicity doesn't fare well in that kind of environment. So in our post-modern world, the ecumenical movement has begun to wane. Christians, in attempting to identify what makes them distinctive, as over against the world and over against other Christians, are beginning to focus on their individual traditions again, which in some respects is tragic, that we're forgetting the ecumenical movement. That's something that Christians ought to work for — more unity.

MM: You mentioned post-modernity. Maybe you could explain briefly what that is, and has

that had a good effect on the church and our understanding of the Bible?

EC: The church always has to take into consideration the context in which it finds itself, so we have to do that. One way that post-modernity has done good is helped the church realize that it doesn't, it can't, and it doesn't have to measure up to somebody else's standard of rationality. I find it somewhat ironic that those on the theological left and those on the theological right, despite all the things they think are wrong about one another, share some characteristics in the modern period that I think are illuminating, and one of them is that both of them want to somehow speak to the universal rationality of the world and demonstrate that Christian faith is credible in light of that universal rationality. Conservatives and liberals have both been very concerned about apologetics and how we answer objections.

In post-modernity, when there's no longer a universal human rationality to appeal to, it makes apologetics difficult. Because no longer are we appealing to a single rationality and so apologetics is suffering a bit. It's less avant-garde than it used to be, and now Christians are again attempting to go back and learn its own rationality, its own discourse. The radical orthodoxy movement is an example of this in theology. The emerging church movement is an example of this, of a post-modern movement that is attempting to restate Christian faith, to live it well, and thinking that it will attract "cultured despisers of religion" without having to go and prove it to them on their grounds.

MM: They are not arguing – they're showing an example.

EC: Yes. Throughout the modern period, the Holy Grail in philosophy and theology and science has been what we call foundationalism. It's the attempt to render indubitable knowledge entirely explicit. We want a method in science and philosophy and theology that will allow us to arrive at absolutely true truth. So we're going to render the conditions of arriving at indubitable knowledge entirely explicit.

The problem is that most philosophers, most natural sciences, and many theologians now think that foundationalism is impossible. The reason is that you always have to account for one fundamental problem in the equation — a human knower who is finite and historical. How can a finite, historical human being ever render the conditions of an indubitable knowledge entirely explicit? What seems to take place is when we try to render the conditions of indubitable knowledge entirely explicit, we end in skepticism — that we finally cannot know truth with a capital T.

MM: Right. Some philosophers reach that point.

EC: The radical orthodoxy movement manifests some of that. The emerging church movement manifests some of that, and has impacted Christian faith in some helpful ways, in that it's gotten us to the point where we're not as embarrassed about talking about our ultimate beliefs, and feeling like we always have to defend the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation or the Atonement against cultured despisers of religion who want to critique it for one reason or another.

MM: Each person has somewhat a different background. They're bringing their different context when they read Scripture, so they're going to understand it in a different way. How are we to adjudicate between these different readings?

EC: It isn't simply that Christians with the Bible and theology have this problem; all human beings have this problem in whatever area of discourse they're in. Scientists have this problem. Not all scientists agree. It's a messy process by which scientific theories come to be accepted by the scientific community. When Albert Einstein posited his theory of general and special relativity, the scientific community thought he was crazy. There were only probably five or six people in the entire world that could even understand him. Many people contended that he was wrong. It was a long messy process over a number of years before Einstein's theories finally became accepted within the community of science, because they operated with a different set of presuppositions, different standards, different background, different community.

There's nobody that comes to the Bible any different. If there's anybody, no matter how critical the scholar is, who claims that he or she has a privileged "neutral" position, don't believe them, because everybody comes with presuppositions. We always start already within the knowing relation, and we have to adjust our knowledge gradually, whether in any field or discipline, as we go along.

MM: You used the word messy. This process of reading the Bible and trying to figure out what's right is messy. But we don't have time for that. We have to live right now.

EC: That's another interesting thing. The wonderful thing — this is the wonderful thing about being a human being — is that we cannot exempt ourselves from making fundamental decisions about our ultimate beliefs upon which we stake our lives, even though we don't have that absolute certainty that was the quest in the modern period of foundationalism.

We apply different standards to ourselves. When we talk about faith and religion, it's like

we want to have a higher level of certainty than we do in normal life. But anybody who's been married knows that even when you go through the process of courting and finally coming to the point where you agree to get married, do you have an absolute certainty that your marriage is going to turn out the way you hope it is going to be? You don't! And yet you stake your whole life on it. That's part of the condition of being a human being.

People like Thomas F. Torrance and Alister McGrath have begun to try to sort out all these questions of how we know God, of what we call epistemology, theory of knowledge, how we approach Scripture after the collapse of foundationalism, without falling into postmodern relativism. That's a helpful conversation. T.F. Torrance and Alister McGrath are two scholars inside a Christian faith that have gone a long way to help us, as Christians, get beyond being ashamed that we have fundamental ultimate beliefs about God, about Christ and the gospel on which we're willing to stake our life, even if we can't prove them with the kind of proof that we wanted throughout the modern period.

MM: Because everybody has beliefs of one sort or another. We've been socialized to have certain things. Can we escape that? Are we socialized to be Bible-believers?

EC: There are some scholars who think we should simply get over the idea that we can ever arrive at any kind of even approximate objectivity, and we should simply read the Bible in light of our own wish-fulfilling fantasies. If you're a hyper-postmodern, why simply do that with one sacred text? Why not "the more the merrier"? Read the Bible one day, the Koran another day – and there's something about this that doesn't work very well.

Even scholars who claim to be the most absolute relativist, who say that we never can get beyond our social/cultural horizon, and therefore the best we can do is deconstruct any of those that presume to make any kind of objective claims, I have watched them after they come out of their lectures, like in the AAR/SBL meetings, and I've noticed that when they go up to the street before they cross, they look carefully left and right. They do it several times, because no matter how subjective they view reality, they view drivers in cities like Los Angeles as having objective reality, and not only are they realists, they're critical realists. They realize they might be mistaken, and so they look twice, because they know if they're mistaken and step out, they'll probably be dead.

MM: And when they give their lecture, they hope that people understand what they've intended.

EC: That's an astute observation. If they really believe that, they should stop lecturing. So it seems that we're caught in this dilemma, that we can't have this absolute certainty that has been the paradigm in modernity, and yet human life, by its very core character, forces us to stake our lives on our ultimate beliefs. Even in something as mundane as looking at a street, we're forced to be critical realists and say, what are the best options that are available?

As Christians, when it comes to Scripture, we're not the first ones who read the Bible. We stand in a long tradition of the church. I came to faith because people in the church… I knew hardly anything about the Bible. They led me to Christ and into a relationship with God, and they told me that Scripture was a text by which we learn and grow as Christians, and I started reading the Bible with probably a very inadequate understanding of the theological framework, but nonetheless I did it within a community that already had some ultimate beliefs. I don't think we should be apologetic about that — we stand in the great tradition of the church, and we read the Bible from a theological perspective.

We don't think the Bible is a collection of sacred texts that simply reflect human perspective. We believe that the hand of God was involved in the shaping of that Scripture. Those are ultimate beliefs, and we stake our lives on it. You've staked your life on it, I'm willing to continue to do that, and up to this point it's enabled me to live fairly well. I have no reason to turn my back on that. But you're right in calling attention to the fact that we have different theological perspectives that influence how we read the Bible.

That's why, in the history of the church, whenever there's been a theological debate about a major point, it's virtually never been solved by an appeal to the Bible, because each community appeals to certain texts over other texts and therefore they simply retrench into defensive positions, and they're not able to get beyond those because of the theological framework that they bring to the table.

MM: So the church overall is a community that has grown up with Scripture and theology side by side influencing one another, and then we can be socialized in that community, read the Scripture, find congruence in terms of what it tells us about ourselves and about life. That gives us an internal experiential validation of its accuracy, at least its usefulness for us. And it describes to us a God, not necessarily the one that we were looking for, but one that's better.

EC: That's a good way to say it. In the post-modern period we spend a lot of time apologizing about the fact that we have a theological perspective, and that we have all these

different perspectives. The other side of the coin is also true. We need a perspective to be able to rightly see reality. You can't avoid this. Let me give you some examples of the way in which the human mind always has categories that it uses in seeing anything. You're familiar with Magic Eyes? They are wonderful pictures that have a maddening plurality of little detail and you look at it and you just think it's a bunch of detail.

MM: Other people say there's something in there.

EC: Yeah, they say there's a 3-D image in there. If you hold the Magic Eye picture close to your face and you gradually move it away without focusing on anything, all of a sudden you'll see a 3-D picture that the creators of the Magic Eye have hidden in the picture, in the relations between the details. What the Magic Eye shows us is that we don't simply see things with our eyes, we see them with our mind. Because two people can look at it just with their eyes and one person sees the Magic Eye and the other person doesn't.

MM: The brain has to interpret.

EC: It isn't till the brain integrates, due to the subliminal clues, integrates the pattern in the images, that we see the 3-D image. There already is form and being. There is a pattern in the Magic Eye, but there has to be an integration of form in our knowing — and one that's not innate. The mind has to create it in order for us to see it.

You could say that the Bible, if you think of it as a massive Magic Eye, is a huge mass of detail written over thousands of years, inspired by God, for us to be able to behold the reality, the verities of the gospel, the Triune God. But I don't think you can perceive the theological verities unless you indwell all of Scripture and assimilate the form that's already in Scripture and have an integration of form and knowing. The same way that you can't see the Magic Eye without some way integrating the form that's there in your mind, I don't think you can rightly understand Scripture until you have the right theological perspective. I think that's why God developed the Scripture to begin with.

Think for a moment, if we had nothing of the Bible. You don't know anything about Israel, nothing about the Passover, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, and we know none of the Old Testament, we don't have the New Testament… Jesus all of a sudden beams down into the middle of New York City, stands on the street corner, and says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." What do you think we would do with him? We would lock him up. We would think he's crazy. We would not have a clue of what he's talking

about. Our general human experience wouldn't help us very well. If we looked at what lambs are, fleecy white creatures that walk along the shore of a stream and eat grass and drink water, we wouldn't know what the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world is.

MM: Nothing to do with sin.

EC: We wouldn't know anything at all. We only know things through the categories of the mind. If to rightly know God in Christ we need to have theological categories, and we don't possess them, how is God ever going to reveal God's self to us? God has to start somewhere and take the categories that we already have and gradually mold and shape them, which is a long painful process in our lives. Just for you and me to begin to study Scripture, we spend years learning the theology of the church, learning all about biblical studies to be able to interpret the text.

Think about if we had none of that background and God was starting with us as blank tablets. All we have is a bunch of sinful people with their individual culture who know nothing accurately about God. What would God do? Wouldn't you expect that God would elect one people from all the people and begin to subject them to a molding and shaping process through history to prepare for God's final revelation in Christ so that Christ will be intelligible? Tell me a single image in the New Testament that interprets the significance of Christ that isn't partly rooted for its meaning in the Old Testament, like the Lamb of God.

When John says of Jesus, "He's the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," what holds that in place, that enables us to understand something that he's pointing towards the cross as an atonement for sin? It goes back to the entire dealing of God with the Old Testament — the election of Israel, the circumcision, to the spreading of blood over the doorposts of the house when the angel of death passes over and the Israelites are rescued from Egypt. It has to do with the temple worship and the sacrificing of lambs there every year for the sins of Israel. That provides a religious-moral theological framework that God built into the Israelites, gradually, over thousands of years. That is the presupposition of the New Testament and the coming of Christ. Without the Old Testament, we wouldn't have understood who Jesus is.

As Christians, we can't rightly understand the Old Testament apart from the New Testament. That's why you all in Grace Communion International stopped practicing many of the feasts in the Old Testament that you used to practice, because you believe now that you're under the new covenant and those things no longer hold. The Lamb of God has come! At my

United Methodist Church and at Grace Communion International, we don't sacrifice lambs anymore.

If conservative Jews could get the temple rebuilt on the place where it was meant to be in Jerusalem, what would they do? They'd restart sacrificing again, because conservative Jews don't think that that dispensation has passed away. But we as Christians think that all points forward to Christ, and that we can't accurately understand the Old Testament apart from Christ, in the same way we can't understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament.

I've already given you a huge set of ultimate beliefs that Christian faith through history has said is extraordinarily important if you're ever going to begin to read the Bible. In biblical studies today, when people do not want to allow any kind of theological unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament (they don't even call it the Old Testament anymore, they call it the Hebrew Bible), they go back and they interpret it very differently than even Jesus in the New Testament interprets it. Jesus wasn't a very good historical-critical biblical scholar in the way he interpreted the Old Testament, was he?

In closing, I want to say that as Christians, we come with a theological tradition from the communions that we're in, but we don't hold those sacrosanct over Scripture. Scripture always has to critique those and modify those, and you all in Grace Communion know that as well as any of us do. You've gone through a tremendous transition because you've taken this book seriously and you've gone back and you've indwelt it and you've read it again. You've said that this book is the one that helps us develop the right theology, and where you have been amiss you have done the hard steps, and you've changed some of your ultimate beliefs and how you go about it, and you all are a witness to the rest of the church that we ought to take Scripture that seriously, that we come to it with our theology, but we always allow it to challenge our theology to mold us and shape us. We're all imperfect theologically.

And finally, Scripture is the one place that puts us in touch with the living word of God that alone can reform the church and lead us forward in mission and theology and ministry.

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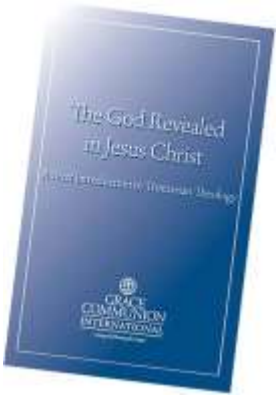
Speaking of Life…

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to www.speakingoflife.org.



Want to read more?

Readers in the United States are eligible to receive a free booklet, *The God Revealed in Jesus Christ: A Brief Introduction to Trinitarian Theology.* This booklet explains, in simple language, how all our most important questions are answered by a simple starting point: Who is God? We can be confident that God has planned something excellent for us. To have a hard copy mailed to you, phone 1-800-423-4444. Readers in other nations may read the booklet online at www.gci.org/god/revealed.

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Grace Communion Seminary

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

Grace is the essence of our lives. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ reveals God to us, grants us life in him, leads us in forgiving and being forgiven, and gives us salvation. Our Triune God and his grace and love revealed through Jesus Christ is the center of our theology.

Communion defines the relationship we have with God, Jesus, and one another (2 Corinthians 13:14). The communion of the Holy Spirit binds us with Jesus, enlivens God's love in our hearts, and unites us as followers of Jesus Christ. We live in inseparable unity in Christ in the perpetual effects of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost.

Seminary describes the scope of our educational goal. We offer graduate-level courses on the Internet. You can earn a nationally accredited master's degree entirely online, without any need to travel. We want to help you minister more effectively where you are, not to uproot you. We teach from a perspective of Trinitarian Incarnational theology. For more information, go to www.gcs.edu.

Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, www.detc.org. The Accrediting Commission of DETC is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency, and is a recognized member of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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