

Trinitarian Conversations

Volume 1: Interviews With Twelve Theologians

Ray S. Anderson, Elmer Colyer,
Gerrit Scott Dawson, Gary W. Deddo,
Christian Kettler, C. Baxter Kruger,
John E. McKenna, Jeff McSwain,
Paul Louis Metzger, Roger Newell,
Andrew Root and William Paul Young

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INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this book are edited transcripts of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International and Grace Communion Seminary. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at <https://www.gci.org/yi>.

When people speak in a conversation, 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.

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

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

Prior to June 2016, Paul Louis Metzger and Andrew Root were included in *Trinitarian Conversations, Volume 2*. They have been moved to volume 1 to make space available in volume 2 for additional interviews.

1. STARTING THEOLOGY WITH JESUS

J. Michael Feazell: Welcome to *You're Included*. With us today is Dr. Ray Anderson. [now deceased] Dr. Anderson is senior professor of theology and ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. He's author of more than 20 books, including *An Emergent Theology of Emerging Churches*, and *Judas and Jesus, Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*. Dr. Anderson is also a contributing editor for the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*.

Thank you for being with us today.

Ray Anderson: Thank you, Mike, I'm glad to be here.

JMF: We're looking forward to discussing some very interesting and important topics. I want to begin by helping our viewers understand a little bit about what theology is and what difference theology makes to the believer.

RA: You said my favorite word: *theology*. It's a scary word, to many people. But really, if you stop to think about it, it's simply a way of thinking about God in respect to who God is and how God has revealed himself to us. So *theology*, as I've often said, is reflection upon God's ministry. So ministry precedes theology.

I tell pastors that it's in the context of God's ministry that theology emerges. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath day, for example, and the legalists challenged him on that, and said, you're not supposed to do that on the Sabbath day. For Jesus,



that's what God is doing. God is working, and therefore Jesus said that human beings were not made just to keep the Sabbath in a legalistic way. The Sabbath was made for human beings, for their welfare.

That is a theological statement. Somebody could just have said, Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath, and that's a narrative. But when interpretation is given of that, so that the *work of God* interprets the *word of God*, what God does interprets what God says. The statement of that, that's theology. Jesus had no text in the Old Testament for that. The blind man who is healed is the text.

JMF: So the story tells us something about God and theology.

RA: Yes. But the responsibility of theology is to not just read and narrate the story, but it is to let the story tell us and speak to us *of who God is*. This is who God is: God cares for you. God loves you. God will do his work of healing even on the Sabbath day. That's the purpose of the Sabbath to Jesus, that's an example for me.

JMF: So everybody, it's fair to say, everybody has a theology even though they may not realize it or think about it.

RA: Yes. You cannot be a believer in Jesus Christ, without implicitly saying, I believe he is of God, I believe he was sent of God, I believe that (as Paul says) he died on the cross for me, was raised again to overcome the power of death. In reciting the creed, whatever creed one recites, the Apostle's Creed – that's a theological statement. So that the average person in the church hearing the story and confessing their own faith in Christ, they are doing theology.

JMF: So one person might have a view of God (based on how they interpret what they read in the Bible) that says, "God is angry at me and I need to try to do better to get him back on my side."

Another person may have a view that God has made things and wound up the universe, and he's way out there; now we have to just work things out for ourselves.

Another person may say, "God is full of grace and mercy and therefore it doesn't matter what I do – he will still forgive me in the end and that's why I can behave however I want."

The next person may say, "God loves me and therefore I want to please him, and live according to what I understand him to expect of me."

Everybody, each of those four, let's say (and more people may have different views), these reflect the idea that there are many different theologies on the shelf.

RA: It's almost like when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that

I am?” They thought it was a multiple-choice exam. So they came up with different possible answers: Some say you are John the Baptist raised from the dead, some say you are the prophet that Moses talked about.

They have all these kinds of answers, and each of those were theologies,



they were current theologies. Jesus probed deeper: “But who do *you* think that I am?” – you have experienced me. Peter finally dared to blurt out, “You’re the Messiah, you are the one we’ve been waiting for.” Then Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, flesh and blood does not reveal it to you, but God who is in heaven.” In other words, he said, “Peter, you’re right, but you will never know why, because that’s a revelation of God.”

But Peter wouldn’t have been right, Peter wouldn’t have been able to have that theology – you are the Son of God, you are the Messiah – apart from following him, experiencing him, and being there. Standing off at a distance, the Pharisees came to different conclusions. They said, “This man is not of God” (John 9:16). After he healed the blind man, they said, “He is not of God because he does not keep the Sabbath.” Jesus was killed on exegetical grounds. They had a Bible verse that gives them permission to kill Jesus because he violated the law. Jesus must have said, what’s going on here? God is doing this work, God is in your midst, God is working through me.

The problem that all pastors face is, not that people are waiting to hear theology, not that they’re waiting to be told to believe something. They all believed something. Every person who sits down to hear a sermon already believes something, and that belief has to be taken away and changed. That’s the real task. That’s why pastors have to be theologians, because they have to know the true theology that God has revealed. That has to enter in, in such a way that it corrects the bad theology.

JMF: So theology is wrapped up in God’s revelation of who he is, rather than any other way of deducing or coming to it, and that revelation is in the person of Christ.

RA: Yes, and in the act of God. I went through three years of theological seminary and went out and started to preach and began to preach my systematic theology notes. God is omnipotent. He can do everything. God is

omniscient, he knows everything. He's omnipresent ...

JMF: The classical...

RA: Yes, the classical doctrine of God. Some of my people hearing that, said, "That maybe true, that's easy to believe that God can do everything, but can he do *anything*? If he knows everything (you want me to say he knows everything, fine. I already sort of believe that). But what I want to hear, does he know *ME* and my small place? Does he enter into my life? Does he make a difference in my life?" I realized that the theology I had been taught didn't answer that question. I have to start all over again. I went to the Incarnation. Paul says of Jesus, in Colossians 2, "In him is the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily."

Everything that God is, is revealed to us through Jesus. That's why the Trinity is so important. People stumble at the concept of the Trinity, and say it's just a theological bit of metaphysics and doctrine, it doesn't make any difference. It makes a tremendous difference. If the one who heals and the one who weeps at the tomb of Lazarus, the one who groans with pain and agony when he is confronted with deformity, if that's not the tears of God, if that's not the *pathos* of God, then we've lost connection with that.

Then we're back to a kind of a dualism, as Thomas F. Torrance (my former teacher) liked to say, in which you separate the concept, the doctrine of God from the act and being of God. Suddenly we lost touch with that [with the reality that everything that God is, is revealed to us through Jesus]. That's why legalism and formalism and all of those things begin to "take the place" of the grace of God as a living reality.

That's why I think the Trinity is that God is both above and he is below, God is *involved*. The one who dies upon the cross has to be as fully God as the Father in heaven. Jesus says, "God, my Father, why have you forsaken me?" This has to be, not only the language of Psalm 22, the human lament of forsakenness that Jesus takes on his own lips, but it has to be that God himself has, in a sense, assumed a humanity estranged from God, so that atonement begins in Bethlehem.

I wasn't taught that in seminary. I was taught that the doctrine of the atonement began totally on the cross. It was Torrance who helped me to see. He said, you have to go back to the fact that the one who was born from the womb of Mary was born to assume the human estrangement, to assume the sentence of death, so that, in that sense, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is a dead man walking.

Can God die? No. But for God to overcome human death, God has to become human and God has to assume that human death, so that when God

the Son, the Logos (as John 1:1 says), enters in to become flesh, has in a sense, placed God from below.

In my book *The Gospel According to Judas*, my first book on Judas, I thought there is a way to get at this. If Judas is chosen by Jesus after a whole night of prayer (which we assume he prayed to make sure he made the right decision), and yet Judas, one of the 12, ends up betraying him and then in his own remorse, said, I have killed an innocent man, I have done something wrong, and in remorse he went out and killed himself. Many people say, well, that's it. Suicide is the unforgivable sin and therefore that's the end. But the gospel tells us that this Jesus who chose Judas, was betrayed by Judas, he's the final judge. He is the one who will determine the final verdict.

JMF: Most of us grow up in the church hearing sermons, reading what we might read, and we get the idea that God is out in heaven, he is out there somewhere, he looks at us, he judges us, we read the Old Testament and we see that God gets angry and so we think of God as being a judge, an angry judge who is so angry that he sends his Son to die, because somebody has to pay this price.

RA: That ends up making the Son merely the victim of God's anger.

JMF: But you're saying we need to see God as he shows himself to be in Christ as, not just the Creator, but as the Redeemer at the same time. He is not just the judge, but the judge is the one who gave himself to save.

RA: As Karl Barth says, Jesus is the judge judged in our place. It's not only that we can set the Old Testament aside and say, we don't need that anymore because we have Jesus. It's only through Jesus that we read the Old Testament aright. Torrance helped me to see that with Jesus, we can go back and see that the antecedents for everything Jesus revealed of God are already there [in the Old Testament]. The divine covenant that God made through Abraham was universal – through you, he said, all the families of the earth

will be blessed, through that seed.

The particularity of the people of Israel was not simply, it's only them and nobody else – nobody else has the chance, except they want maybe to join in with them. No, the promise to Abraham was the promise to a gentile. Abraham was a



gentile. There were no Jews yet. When Paul sees the Holy Spirit coming upon uncircumcised gentiles, he goes back to Abraham and says, there is the example of that.

In Romans Paul says, when was Abraham declared to be righteous? Before he was circumcised, or after? The answer is obvious. Abraham as a gentile was declared righteous before God by faith, through grace. Then circumcision was given as a sign of that.



That's Paul argument, that we can go back and see from the Old Testament from the very beginning we have, the grace of God is there. It's grace that enters in when humans are hopelessly estranged from God, fallen away, and it's universal, which means that through Abraham and through the grace of God everyone is included, no one is excluded from the standpoint of God's intention. But grace itself places a demand. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, grace is not cheap. Grace is not just believing a doctrine and following the rules. Grace is abiding and living in that relationship with God.

JMF: We usually think of a relationship with God as being rules...

RA: Sure. Human beings, from Adam and Eve on, thought that by somehow keeping rules they could get back into that relationship, and they misunderstood even that the sacrificial system was not a rule to be kept, but it was a way in which they could re-enter through grace. It's the grace of God that overcomes that death. The overcoming of death in the Old Testament moves forward to God assuming that death and therefore, as Barth made clear and I learned from him (and from Torrance as well), that through the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, there is a retroactive kind of theology.

We go back and see that it isn't just that the Jews were wrong and we can dispense with that. They are the ones who revealed to us God's universal promise and purpose. But the Jews of Jesus' day had torn the law out of the living community of faith and made the law a standard of correctness and became specialists in the law. Jesus said, I have come to fulfill the law, and grace.

That's why it's difficult to preach today. Because everybody enters in with

their own sense, if I just keep the rules... Perfectionism and legalism didn't start with theology. Legalism and perfectionism is a psychological effect. People think that if they somehow just do it right, that they will be accepted.

JMF: Jesus said that you search the Scriptures daily that you may find eternal life and then you refuse to come to me. [John 5:39-40]

RA: Because the Pharisees were, as I say, using Scripture to condemn Jesus, to crucify him. If he violates the Sabbath, they thought, he's not of God.

JMF: In Elmer Colyer's book *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, page 86, he comments under the subhead of "The Latin heresy: a 'gospel' of external relations." He says, "Torrance sees a growing tendency in Latin theology from the 5th century on to reject the idea that Christ assumed our sinful alienated and fallen humanity and to embrace the notion that Christ assumed a neutral or an original and perfect human nature from the virgin Mary." The book goes on to show how Torrance taught that whatever Christ did not assume, is not healed. [That is, if he did not become *real* human flesh, fallen human flesh, then he did not solve the "fallen" problem that humans have.]

RA: Torrance is quoting there the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus in the 4th century who said, what is not assumed is not healed. That was in opposition to Apollinarius, basically, who argued that the Logos of Jesus was a perfect Logos, not totally human, that Jesus was only human from the neck down, that the self was not involved. Nazianzus said, The problem is that in the self, we are under sentence of death, and *that* has to be overcome.

"The Latin heresy" comes out of the Western tradition at Rome, from Augustine and following, that began to tear apart the atonement from the actual person of Jesus and made a formula – a system – out of it, and then began to take grace as almost a commodity, so that grace became something you could control by dispensing it. The sacraments became the means by which you could dispense grace and therefore control it. The heresy that Torrance points to, is the heresy of breaking truth apart from God, so to speak.

JMF: Is it the difference between a written contract between two people and a devoted friendship between two people? In other words, if there is a contract, you work out a law, penalties, etc. if something goes wrong in the relationship. But in a devoted friendship, you can hurt the relationship, but you've got the freedom to forgive and move on together ...

RA: More than that. If a relationship (such as a marriage relationship) is

contractual, then we hold each other accountable to keeping the contract, so to speak. As long as I'm keeping my end of the contract up, you are obligated to fulfill my needs. That's hopeless. That's a form of legalism in marriage.

When I do pre-marital counseling, I talk about friendship, I say that friendship is the only human relationship that survives only when it's constantly renewed and kept alive. Husbands and wives often will end up saying things to each other in times of anger, or whatever. If they said it to a friend, they wouldn't have any friends. Friends don't have to take it. So, people will be [careful to] preserve a friendship and at the same time destroy their marriage [by being off guard].

God is more than at the level of the friend. God is the lover. God enters a relationship with Israel. Hosea said, He is the lover. He is betrayed, but God still said, I won't give you up. I won't let you go. [A friendship can be terminated by persistent offense, but God never gives up on his relationship with us; his relationship with us is not only better than a contractual relationship; it is also better than a friendship.]

So that it's true that [for many people] the legalistic, contractual aspect enters [into our relationship with God], seemingly to give us security and truth, in a sense, that we can control. But the moment we think that we control the truth, if I think I control the truth about my wife, I've destroyed something. She's always a mystery to me. She's always someone whom I have to be open to. My concepts of her have to give way to who she really is, and it's the same with our concepts of God.

C.S. Lewis had an amazing statement: "In his mercy God must destroy all our finest concepts of him." Our theology is a set of concepts that must be redeemed. Torrance said the atonement is as much the redeeming of our theology and concepts of God as it is of our sin.

JMF: I see that we are going to have to have more than one interview, because there are a number of things we've got to talk about yet.

RA: Well, that's because you get me started to talking on theology, Mike.

JMF: I need to get into your book *Judas and Jesus: Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*, but we'll save that for the next program.

RA: I'll be back.

JMF: I just want to come back to the kind of theology that Thomas Torrance and a number of other theologians are explicating from Karl Barth's theology ... I think we call it Trinitarian theology, and that is a corrective to what Torrance calls the *Latin heresy*. Could you talk about that?

RA: As Torrance often made clear in class (when I sat under his teaching in Edinburgh), Matthew 11:27 is the key verse. Most of us memorized

Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.” But he said, Matthew 11:27 is the key verse, which says, “Only the Father knows the Son, and only the Son knows the Father, and those to whom it is given.” That’s a Trinitarian statement.

Knowledge of God is self-knowledge. It’s knowledge of God that begins with the *Father knows the Son, the Son knows the Father*. How do you gain entry into that? You say, If only the Father knows the Son, then if I go to the Father, I’ll know the Son. You can’t do that, because only the Son knows the Father. So, uh, ok, I’ll go to the Son to know the Father. You can’t do that, either, because only the Father knows the Son. OK, then I’ll have to be *brought into that*. So the Holy Spirit brings me into that inter-relationship between the Son and the Father.

Torrance said, that’s where atonement takes place. Atonement didn’t just take place on the cross. Atonement takes place within the inner being of God – to God’s love and mercy. Jesus is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Jesus said, the Son is come into the world in order to assume human death, die that death, and in resurrection overcome that death so that death no longer has the power to determine human destiny. No person’s death determines their destiny. That’s the thesis of the *Judas* book. Jesus is the one who determines the destiny of Judas, not even his own action. We’ll talk about that some day.

That’s Torrance’s theology of the Trinity: atonement takes place, and a relationship is bound up in that. If you don’t have the Trinity, then God becomes an abstract set of rules or concepts, and we’re on our own – our own humanity has to, in a sense, bear the weight of worship and prayer. As it is, Jesus, in his own humanity, continues even now to be the one who prays with us and for us. Our worship is the worship of the Son to the Father (James Torrance, the brother of Tom, wrote a book on that). True worship is the worship of the Son to the Father, and we are brought into that worship. Our own humanity cannot bear the weight of authentic prayer and worship. The humanity of Christ does that.

JMF: Practically speaking then, when we pray, we ought not to be thinking, “I hope God hears my prayer.” We’re able to say with the Holy Spirit that this prayer I pray is the prayer of Christ praying *in* me, therefore I have confidence that I actually stand with Christ.

RA: That’s why, when we pray in his name, it isn’t a little magical formula to put in the end. That’s not the bank code that gets you into the automated teller. Praying in his name is to say that the Holy Spirit brings us in, so that Jesus takes our prayer and offers it up to the Father.

JMF: A recognition that we stand together with Christ and he is standing with us in all that we do in our relationship with God, gives us a freedom that is not legalistic.

RA: The legalist thinks we've got to do it right, but we can't ever do that, so we're in default from the beginning. But if Jesus has assumed our condition and has, in a sense, made it right, that's what justification and righteousness mean, he has made it right. He has made it right not as an abstract deposit in our account – he made it right by saying, come unto me and join with me, and we're going to enter into the kingdom together.

JMF: Our faith is in Christ himself, not in how well we pray.

RA: That's right. Our faith is not in something, not in doctrine, not in a concept. Faith is a relational aspect. It is trust and it is the Holy Spirit who brings us into that relationship. We're saved not by works but by faith. Faith is for Paul a synonym for Jesus. (In Galatians 3, it's interesting that Paul says, before faith came we're under the law [meaning that before Christ came, we were under the law].)

JMF: Let's hold that thought, and let's pick that up as soon as we get together. Thanks very much for being with us, Dr. Anderson.

2. GOD AND THE PRODIGAL SON

JMF: Last time we were together, we were talking about Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance, whom you studied under, and Trinitarian theology and how important that is for the walk of the average Christian.

RA: The New Testament does not use the word Trinity. But it's like every case, we have to think out the reality of the fact that Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen God." Paul said that, "In him the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily." John says, he is the divine Logos that was with God from the beginning; he has now become flesh and dwelt among us.

If we accept that as the true narrative of Jesus' life – the Incarnation – then we can answer the question, "Where is God in all of this?" Well, God is both above and below. Our God is entirely God as the one above us and the one with us. God is the one carried off into captivity, God is the one with them in their captivity. God is the one that comes out of captivity with them. But all the same time, God is the one above them.

In the New Testament, what was implicit or nascent has now come to birth, has now come into reality through Jesus, who can now say, "Everything that was intimated by the presence of Yahweh in the Old Testament is embodied in me, I am the temple, the temple is now within me, I embody the reality of God with you."

If you allow yourself to think in narrative form, like a story, then you can hold that together. The real advantage of a narrative theology is that it can hold together what otherwise would simply be paradox and we'd have to come up with one view or the other. The Trinity is a way in which the narrative of God's reality can be both the one who created the world and is sovereign above us, but is also the one that's entered in along with us.

The problem we often face is, "how do we connect the reality of our

doctrine of God with the reality of people's lives?" I say we do that in narrative form. Every person has a narrative – it's their life, it's their suffering, their losses, their pain, the questions they're raising, "Where is God in my life?" That's their narrative.

"My God, why have you forsaken me?" – that's the narrative of humanity. There's also a narrative, God says, "I hear their cry" – the Old Testament. I heard them in Egypt. I love them, and because of my love, I'm going to come with them, I'm going to redeem them, I'm going to bring them out, and they will be a sign that I love, and am willing to include all the families of the earth. There is that narrative of God's love and God's grace. The job of pastoral ministry is to connect those two narratives.

When I first became a pastor, I was called to the home of a woman, a friend of one of my members. She was in her 30s dying of cancer – terminal stage, two or three small children. Her priest had been there and prayed and she was in pain, and in a lot of anger about God. So would I go and see her? I did.

She said, "Why would God allow this to happen?" Where is God in my life? Here I am with my small children, why would God do this to me?

I was thinking and I said, "He can't do anything about it."

She said, "Don't we have to believe that God is powerful and can do anything?"

I said, "No, I guess not."

"Well then," she said, "where is God?"

I looked on the wall of her bedroom, and on there on the wall was a cross with a little figure of Jesus on it. She's Roman Catholic. I said, "There he is. He's there on the cross. He's with us. He's with us in this very room. That's how he comes to us."

"Oh, she said, I never knew that before. I never realized... that is just a cross. You mean to say that that's a sign that he is here with me now going through this with me?"

I said, "Yeah. He's been here, he's done this, he's going through what you are going through. He's experienced dying. You can do it with him, he can be with you in that."

"Oh," she said, "I can do it now."

I prayed with her. She died two weeks later.

I went back, and I said, "Ok, what have I done? I've just denied God's sovereignty and power over everything, because that's what I was taught in seminary." But her narrative of her living and dying enabled me to then look back in the tradition of the Scriptures and find that's true, that's also true,

that's where God was, he was with them in exile, he went into them with exile, and Jesus is the narrative of God's presence with us in dying.

The Trinity becomes the theological way of saying, "That's true. Everything I said is true. Because God is both God above us as Creator and Lord and God is also God with us. The Trinity is a way of simply saying, "what my narrative of faith tells me is really true." To teach the doctrine of the Trinity apart from that narrative, it just becomes a doctrine.

So that's how I think the Trinity is relevant – because it places God in our narrative, the narrative of God's life, of salvation as part of our narrative story. The task of us as pastors is to bring those narratives together. If we just preach truth about God and people's own narrative of struggle in life and faith is just left lying there, we have not connected, then we send them home without that connection.

JMF: To connect the struggle that people have when they go to church to hear the sermon, and they come away feeling more condemned than even when they got there, because they hear that God wants holiness, God wants obedience. They hear condemnation of sin – whether it's national sin or sin in this community or sins among the congregation. They're told we need to do better, we need to repent of your sins and improve. They come away with more of a sense of failure than a sense of connection with God. Trinitarian theology is a way of looking at God through Christ so that we see things as they are in our relation with God, as opposed to this...

RA: Yes, on other hand, we have to then press the point, if God has become human, what has God become in becoming human? God has become the sinner, which simply means without personal sin he still has a death nature, he's going to die of something, because he has assumed death as a consequence of original sin. What God has assumed in becoming human is to assume God-forsakenness, to assume that condition. For that to be lived out is part of the narrative of the Trinity at work, so to speak. The Trinity is the work of God, it's always something God is doing in our midst. Therefore we have to bring that into people's lives in ways that connect with them. As I say in the book on Judas, God has in fact assumed death for everyone.

Then as Karl Barth said, ALL are reconciled. Barth in an unusual way speaks of Jesus, not as the Redeemer, but as the Reconciler, that Jesus came to reconcile humanity to God. There's a good text for that in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, "God has reconciled the world to himself, no longer counting trespasses and sins against them." That's Paul, not Barth, not Torrance. God has reconciled *the world* through Christ, no longer counting their sin against them. Paul says, we become ambassadors, now you be

reconciled to God.

So Barth said, “All are reconciled, but not all are redeemed.” The Holy Spirit’s the Redeemer. Here’s where Trinitarian theology comes in. It allows us to say that God loves the whole world – God is not willing that any should perish. All are included in God’s love. No one stands outside of God’s mercy and love. Jesus came to assume humanity and death as a common human condition for everyone. All are included.

When Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “I’m crucified with Christ,” every human being can say that. Every human being is crucified with Christ. Paul said, “Nonetheless I live, and I live by the Spirit of Christ in me.” That’s Trinitarian, isn’t it? God loved the world, he sends his only begotten Son that whosoever believes Jesus as the only begotten Son has reconciled the whole world, he passed through death, destroyed the power of death. Then the Holy Spirit is the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is the one that is to transform us. Nobody gets into heaven without being redeemed. The question is, when does that happen? The case of Judas, you see, I argue that Judas was redeemed after he committed suicide.

JMF: Let me read a paragraph or two from the book, if you don’t mind.

RA: Sure. See if I still agree with it.

JMF: *Judas and Jesus: Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*. Formerly *The Gospel According to Judas* – that was the first edition. On page 116, in the voice of Judas:

The other eleven survived, despite their own misconceptions, and went on to become apostles of the risen Lord. Their calling may not serve as a model for your own calling from God. My own story is different from theirs. My calling as a disciple was indeed forfeited through my death. But my calling as a child of God’s Kingdom was restored and secured through his resurrection! I could not become his apostle, but I could become his friend (John 15:13-14). Jesus did appear to me as the resurrected Lord in the place where I believed there was no forgiveness, and he said to me, *my choosing of you counts more than your betrayal of me!* Through his grace I discovered that the calling of God by which we become children of the Kingdom does not rest upon our faith alone, but upon his faithfulness toward us.

That speaks to Trinitarian theology in the sense of our connectedness, because we’ve been made connected by God’s grace through Christ.

RA: Yes, what I did in that book, I (first of all) traced the story of Judas and Jesus (in the sense) to the very end when Judas betrays him, but then the

last chapter, I wrote that as if Judas was now writing it. It starts out, Judas says, “I never had the chance to write my gospel (that’s why I called it the gospel according to Judas – the last chapter is still called that). This is the gospel I know. Unfortunately I, in my own remorse, I killed myself. I did not have the chance for that. Now is my turn. Now I’m going to tell you. I’m going to preach the gospel to you as though ... even though I died, committed suicide, I’ve met Jesus after I died. And he’s brought me back to life, so to speak.”

I used Judas there, in a sense, as a preacher of the gospel from the dark side, the deep side. I discovered that in the narrative of people’s lives, more people identified with Judas than with Jesus. I’ve not found many people say, “I have real affinity for Jesus.” No, [I have found more people who say,] “Jesus – he’s up there, he’s perfect, I’m not. But Judas, yeah, I could have done what Judas did. I have felt that.”

After I published the first edition of this, one of my students was a chaplain at LA County Jail system. She went and visited, at that time, one of the brothers who had killed their parents – a famous trial that took place years ago. He said to her, “Do you think Judas will be in heaven?”

“Well,” she said, “that’s interesting, my professor’s written a book about that.” She got me to sign it, she took the copy into him. Later on she sent word to me and he said he wants to talk to you. So I got permission to go in and sit on the attorney’s bench. They brought him in shackled, and sat him down, shackled him to the bench, and he pulled out of his pocket a copy of *The Gospel According to Judas*. Opened it up, he had underlined it here and there and he said, “Can Judas be saved? Will God forgive the sins of Judas?”

I said, “You killed your mother and your father. You reloaded the shotgun. You blew your mother’s face away. Suppose that when you die God presents you in front of your parents and says to your parents, I give you permission to dispose of your son however you want – heaven or hell, it’s your decision. What will your parents say?”

He paused. “Boy,” he said, “that’s a tough one.” He said, “My mother will forgive me.”

I said, “Then you know that Jesus will too.”

He said, “Is that true?”

I said, “Yes. Jesus can forgive you.”

He’s still in prison and he believes that. That’s why I wrote the book. I wrote the book for people who somehow condemn themselves and feel they’ve shamed themselves. While they are not as desperate as that, still many people come to church and they carry with them a little silent guilt that’s

never taken away. They go through the liturgy of confession and they believe the gospel, but they carry with them shame and guilt.

The purpose of redemption is not just to save us, justify us, because of our faith. It's to transform us, it's to liberate us, it's to heal us from that. That's the terrible thing and the heresy of legalism. It's shaming, it's self-condemning. It's so contrary to the gospel that we need to eradicate it, we need to preach that gospel of grace.

People are afraid of that. They say, if Judas can be saved, then everybody can. Then we have this debate going on now, that Brian McLaren is involved in. He wrote the foreword for my book on *Emergent Theology*, charged with universalism – that maybe God will save everyone. If all have been reconciled, you see, you come back to the doctrine of the Trinity again.

God loves the whole world, not willing any should perish. Through Jesus Christ, the whole world had been reconciled, God no longer counts their sin against them. If God is not trying to preach against sin to people, then why are we doing that?

But, then Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, who is the Redeemer, the Holy Spirit that enters in and transforms.

Karl Barth said, "All have been justified and sanctified, *de jura* – the Latin word, *in principle*. But not all have been sanctified *de facto* – as a matter of fact. The Holy Spirit is the Redeemer. History is still open, it's not a closed book.

The question then of universalism comes, "Is it possible that even after death, there can be some redemption?" Well, there are some theologians, Forsythe, a Scottish theologian said, "There will be more people converted after death than before." He wrote that a hundred years ago. And Karl Barth says, "Be careful, don't close the book on God. We don't know whether or not God is a universalist. We can hope so. We have no right to say that. If anybody is a universalist and then eventually is going to enable everyone to be redeemed, only God can do that.

We don't encourage people to wait for that. We preach the gospel now. But we should remember that universalism is just the other side of the coin of *limited atonement*. Calvin taught limited atonement – that only those that God had elected for salvation are actually redeemed, the rest are not.

Universalism wants to say, "No, everybody is elected and redeemed." Both of them are sides of a coin that simply is minted out of human speculation, whereas the gospel of God's grace is more dynamic than that. The Holy Spirit yearns and struggles with people to bring them in. The doctrine of the Trinity saves us from universalism, at the same time arguing for the universal love of God for all, and the universal act of God through

Jesus in behalf of all.

But the Holy Spirit is the contingent factor there.

JMF: So part of the issue is that, with legalism, we are talking about absolution from sins committed, and we only think that far. Whereas with Trinitarian theology, we are talking about a relationship, in which not just forgiveness of sins committed, but a restoration of relationship, a healing of ourselves, our minds, so that sinfulness itself is healed, not just a “on-paper forgiving...”

RA: Yes, if we go through a worship service, whatever form of liturgy we have, if we have any – we confess our sins, we have sinned before you, God, and done the things we ought not to have done and so on, and then the pastor or someone will say, “I announce now, on the basis of your confession, you are now absolved and freed from all your sins.”

But people go home and they still feel the shame, the guilt. You went to a medical doctor and he said, “You have a brain tumor, but I’ve touched your head and I pronounced some words and you’re healed.” Well, you go home and you’re dead within six weeks of the brain tumor. The doctor could be sued for malpractice.

Forgiveness of sins and pronouncement of absolution without there being a transformation is spiritual malpractice. That’s a little strong. But the fact is, redemption means that we are being transformed from darkness into light.

What legalism does, it makes that conditional upon our faith. John McLeod Campbell, a Scottish theologian in the 19th century, he went out as a young preacher and he began to preach Scottish theology – except you repent, you cannot be saved. Every sermon started out: You are sinners, you need to repent of your sin, and now that you’ve repented I can offer you the gospel – the good news.

Next Sunday he said, “You may think you’ve repented enough, but you probably haven’t. So let’s repent again in order that I can pronounce the gospel to you.”

Sunday after Sunday, that’s what he was told to preach. Conditional repentance and salvation. He found out that the people were depressed, and filled with shame. So he started over again and said, “No, the good news is that Christ has not only died for us, he’s repented for us.”

He taught the doctrine of vicarious repentance – that Christ has taken up our lives and repented for us. Now the gospel is: Enter in and join that journey. He’s repented for you, he’s repenting with you, and your relations with him is now unconditional, it’s not conditioned upon your repentance....

But grace draws you into that relationship. Grace doesn’t just free you

from the law. When Jesus said to the woman in John 8 who committed adultery, “I don’t condemn you, go and sin no more” – I tell my students, supposing that in a few weeks they come back to Jesus and say, “You know that woman you let off the hook – you didn’t condemn her, she is out doing it again.”

He will say, “Bring her to me. I’m the only one that never condemned her. Then I’ll tell her, I just didn’t free her from the law, I bound her to me. Have you been discipling her?”

The gospel is not that we’re just freed from the law, to do whatever we can. No. As Paul said, we’re brought under the law of the Spirit now, in Romans 8. We’re brought into that new relationship.

It’s like a child who’s been in an orphanage. He’s redeemed from the orphanage, brought into a family. Now, the child has to learn what it is to be a member of the family. In the orphanage, he learned how to beat the system. He learned to keep the rules. He learned to manipulate the system. That’s what legalism is. It’s manipulating the system, manipulating God.

But the child brought into the family – adoption, he’s got... “No, you don’t... you can’t do that here. You must respect others at the table, you must eat when we eat, you must be part of the family life, we aren’t just here to feed you, we aren’t just here to cloth you, we’re here to make you a child of the family.” It’s going to take years.

Sanctification is like a child being adopted, brought into the family, and that’s where we are as Christians. That’s a gracious thing. Never again can you lose that.

I have an adopted grandson, and he asked his mother, it was an open adoption, so he knew he was adopted, he was two or three years old, he said to his mother (my daughter), “Someday, you and Dad are probably going to give me away, like my birth mother did.” Here’s a four-year-old saying that.

My daughter instinctively said, “We can’t do that even if we wanted to – because we took you to a judge here in Pasadena and we’ve got to sign papers and he said you can never again give him away. He belongs to you forever.”

“Oh,” he said, “Ok.” A month or two later he was with his younger brother and riding along, he said, “You better be careful. Mom and Dad can give you away, but they can’t give me away.”

That’s what adoption means spiritually, we are brought in and decisions made for us, and we’re now participating in that new family. That overcomes the threat of universalism, saying, it’s a free pass out of jail. It’s not that at all. It’s being brought in to the family.

JMF: Much of universalism has the idea that... it loses the idea that there

is a necessary connection with Christ that must take place.

RA: Redemption must take place... and if universalism is simply another – the other side of the coin – it means that now everybody is now going to be saved, and God has to save the entire world.

JMF: Regardless of what they do.

RA: That's right. Barth said, that's preposterous – on two grounds. First of all, God is not going to bring anybody into heaven that is not redeemed. Secondly, God has to free them in the end. In my book on Judas and in my other writings I say, who makes the final... If death doesn't determine our destiny, who does?

Well, it's God! How does God do that? Paul said there's a judgment seat of Christ. Two or three places Paul says, it's Jesus that's the final judge.

So as I told that man in prison, you are going to have to face Jesus someday like your mother, and if you believe that your mother has maternal instincts for you, Jesus has even stronger instincts for you. He died for you, he loved you, you can trust that. But I said, that's going to be an incredible event. Jesus makes the final judgment. I ask my students, does Jesus simply read a transcript, does he read a list of names that's handed to him, does somebody hand a list of names? "Just read the names here?"... oh no.

Jesus makes real judgment. Jesus makes decisions, eternal decisions concerning human beings after they've died. That's what Paul said, he's the judge. If everything was all decided, like Calvin said, you can have a clerk of the court read the list. We wouldn't need a judge.

We need a judge, we need somebody. We know who that judge is. The judge is the one sent by the Father to die for us – the one who has sent his Holy Spirit to bring us into that trusting relationship with him.

That's how the Trinity works here. By this narrative it's not simply an empty, formal, abstract doctrine. It can only be told as a story. That's why I use stories, I use anecdotes, because that's how the Scripture uses narrative and story to get across these points.

The prodigal son, when does the father start to love him? He loved him all the way. The son comes back and says, I'm not worthy to be your son, and he tries to repent. He thinks that I need to come back and repent, and if I repent, at least I'll be given a position as a slave in the house.

He comes back, he rehearsed his repentance speech – "Father, I've sinned against you and before heaven, I'm not worthy to be your son." When the father sees him from afar off, Jesus said, he rushes out to meet him and he interrupts his speech: forget your speech, you don't have to repent, kill the fatted calf, come on in, because my love... So the father has loved him.

There is a death and resurrection at the threshold of the father's house in that parable. The son has to die to his own self of being a servant and be born again. The son is born again, so to speak. The father has a right to do that. And in fact, the son never lost his sonship. He thought he did.

That parable is powerful, and often that story is simply told as a parable to make some point without drawing out the deep theological implications of it. If we're all prodigals, then we have a father waiting at home.

Why does the son come back to the father? If he wants just to be a servant, there are plenty of places along the way to hire himself out. What brings him back to his father to be a servant? Because there's a homing instinct, every human being has a homing instinct, and when we preach, we're preaching to that, we're trying to awaken that, we're trying to... And you don't awaken the homing instinct by condemning. You don't awaken the homing instinct in people to come back to the father by reminding them they're no good.

JMF: He knows that his father treats the slaves well, too.

RA: Yeah, at least, he is that. There is something there drawing him back. Theologically, every human being has that. They have concealed it, and sometimes they're so corrupted, it doesn't work. But you're preaching NOT to a sinner, you are preaching to a prodigal. And prodigals are not brought back by condemnation.

That's how I preach that story – that's the theological truth of it. That's why trying to make people sinners – the only people Jesus condemned as being sinners was when they are self-righteous.

JMF: In Jesus' preaching, and even in the preaching of the apostles and the few sermons we have, we find condemnation coming up only with the self-righteous, or in the sense of the execution of Jesus – a couple of comments about that in Peter or Paul, but in the context of ... that he did this for redemption, there isn't the kind of...

RA: Peter's sermon on Pentecost – you killed the Messiah, but he came to save you. God graciously gave you that. That's the good news, see. When they realize, they ask, what must we do to be saved? Well, repent! Their repentance was simply to enter into the good news – that the one you killed is your Savior. So however bad you feel about feeling that, that's already been taken care of.

Even Calvin said in his *Institutes* (and I say, even Calvin, because Calvin has been treated sometimes... so maligned), "No one can truly repent except they have received the grace of God." Repentance follows grace, doesn't precede it.

JMF: Repentance and belief are same coin ...

RA: Same, and they're part of a new relationship. I ask my students, or when I preach, I ask, "What happens the next morning after the prodigal son came back?" I'm always curious about the next mornings. What it's like after that?

I say, The prodigal son said to his father: "Father, I want to go back to the far country." The father said, "What?" The prodigal son said, "Yes, I need to go back, because I said you are a bad father. I maligned you. I said bad things about you. I want to go back and say you're a good father. I want to go back to the far country and preach the good news."

That's truly repentance. He tried, through repentance, he tried to gain entry again. It didn't work. Once he was given entry graciously, then repentance follows that. So that practical implication, that's why to me, most of my writing becomes practical theology. A theology that's not practical, that doesn't lead to that kind of preaching, it's already a twisted theology.

JMF: It removes the burden... Instead of feeling like in order for God to accept me, I must do something (and we never do it quite right or well enough and so we never feel like we are accepted), the good news is that we can know we are already accepted, we are already forgiven. Now in the knowledge and the security of that, we can go about doing those righteous things....

RA: Remember my analogy of the adopted child? The child is not simply rescued from the orphanage and given a wallet and told to go out and spend the money however you want it. The child was brought in to a family. The adoption that Paul likes to use as a metaphor there – we're adopted, we're brought back in to a family, and that means that believing is living in relationship.

Living in relationship carries with it certain things that we believe about that. The creed comes along as a way in which we affirm – yeah, this is true, what we live is true. But if you simply want it to be truth and you are not living it, it is no longer true.

That's where the postmodernism comes in. The postmodern tendency is to say modernity came out of Europe and the Enlightenment, and took truth in place of up here as an abstract kind of propositional thing. We're more interested in *meaning* than truth. If something is true that's not meaningful. People say, That's all relativism, that's purely subjective. Oh, no. The reality of God – self-revelation – if it's not meaningful to our lives, the truth of it is irrelevant.

When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," that had meaning for them. Jesus said, "Are you going to leave also, the rest of the people have

left?” Peter said, “To whom shall we go? Only you have the words of eternal life. We’re going to hang in there.”

There’s an aspect of so-called postmodernity we have to look at carefully, because aspects of it are more biblical than simply the old modernity. A lot of the theology I learned was out of modernity. Simply abstract truth and doctrine. Therefore to get back is to get back into what I call a kind of pre-modernity – get back into the biblical narrative, that’s my book on *Emergent Theology*.

JMF: In your book *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, Brian McLaren wrote the introduction, and he is well known for quite a number of books...

RA: Brian’s first book that struck a chord was *A New Kind of Christian*. It was narrative form, a story form, in which a person was having to move out of legalism into the freedom of the gospel, and that led Brian to begin to continue to pursue this line of thought that what we need here in our so-called postmodern culture is to thread our way through the labyrinth of doctrines and belief systems that separate people. We need to find some common ground of grace for that. That’s led to raising concern for people that he is not orthodox enough. But he loves Jesus, and he is concerned that we not allow these doctrinal divisions to divide us.

These things, we can talk about those. He asked me about universalism and hell. He said, I’m willing to talk with you about that, but I’m not ready to make that the litmus test for who’s a Christian. We know who a Christian is – they are the ones that are brought by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to love the Father, we know that.

JMF: In *the Emergent Church* then, how would you describe it?

RA: I picked up the term *Emergent Church* from the contemporary literature on this. But I thought, where is the biblical narrative of that? I go back to Antioch over and against Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a legalistic community. Lest you’re circumcised you cannot believe. They came up to Antioch, Paul says in Galatians, and the Christians up there, the Gentiles and the Jews were all eating together. When they came up and started preaching, no, you can’t eat with these uncircumcised gentiles. Peter withdrew; Peter wouldn’t eat with the Christian Gentiles. Paul said, even Barnabas was carried away by that false gospel.

Paul said, “I said to Peter, to his face before them all, that’s heretical, that legalism is heretical – it’s contrary to the gospel.” Antioch is the place where that gospel of freedom came out of grace. I trace that whole thing through my book *Emergent Theology* came out of Antioch in which it’s the Holy Spirit that comes through the narrative of the life of Christ, that liberates you from

that. Always under attack by the legalists from Jerusalem. I've caricatured Jerusalem a bit, but that's true, that the ones who attacked Paul attacked him by virtue of legalistic grounds – you're not keeping the Sabbath, you should be circumcised.

Paul's theology was eschatological – that is to say, the Christ that he knew was the Christ already ascended into heaven. Paul wasn't simply a witness of the historical resurrected Christ, he is a witness to the Christ who is risen and is coming. So Paul said, it's the coming Christ that's our criterion, through the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the coming Christ.

So the church is emerging – it's not emerging from the past, it's emerging from the future. That's why it's changing, and that's why the church, the last chapter in my book, is that it's about the church that's ahead of us, not just the church behind us.

To go back and say, the church should be just like it was in the first century. No, no. The church should be like what it should be in the final century – when Jesus comes, when Jesus comes here, yeah, that's what I have in mind. I want women to be free to preach. I had that in mind all along. I'm glad you finally discovered that.

I want Gentiles uncircumcised be part... circumcision is over. I'm glad you discovered that. So if you take the emerging church from the future, as Paul said, that's the biblical paradigm for that. It's not emerging out of modernity. It's emerging out of God's future.

Paul made concessions for the sake of ministry. He had Timothy circumcised because his mother was Jewish, so that will help you gain entry into the Jewish community. So in 1 Corinthians 15, Luke says they tried to get Paul to circumcise Titus. He is also a gentile. Paul said, no way. I won't circumcise Titus because to circumcise Titus is to make a concession for your legalism. I circumcised Timothy as an accommodation to the gospel.

To me, that all makes sense. But for some people, that's inconsistent, that's illogical. If Timothy has to be circumcised, so does everybody else. Paul said, no, it doesn't work that way.

Pastorally, we have to make accommodations. In Ephesus, I don't want women to teach and preach because they are carrying in with them a concept of a female deity. Other places in Rome, and Macedonia, women can teach, and Junia can be an apostle, Romans 16, no problem. But if we take certain texts out of Scripture, such as, I do not permit women to teach and have authority over men, and make that normative, we've already undercut the gospel of liberation.

Paul had to practice accommodation, so that we have people in our churches that carry with them remnants of tradition. We have to respect that

for the sake of not offending them. Paul said, I won't destroy someone's faith for the sake of eating meat. I can eat meat offered to idols, but if there are people whose conscience hurts some of them on that, I won't eat meat offered to idols. But if I'm their pastor, within a year they'll be liberated from that.

JMF: So they don't remain, we don't just leave them in that.

RA: That's right. But you have to recognize that people bring with them their own theology, and to them it's sometimes a matter of their personal identity, and we have to sometimes make accommodations for that. That's why even in the Reformation, there had to be accommodations made to the people that one time they thought the sacraments were the means of conveying salvation. So Luther said, we're going to still keep two of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, and these will be very important and the real presence of Christ is there, because we can't simply cut people off... Learning how to walk in grace, like a child being adopted, it's going to take a while.

Almost every one of our denominations has to go through that, and to have the wisdom, pastorally, is to have good theology behind you. If you don't have good theology, you're going to knee-jerk react. If you have good theology, you can say God loves everyone, Jesus has died for everyone – God is a universalist of his love. When it comes to being redeemed and joined to God, then God is very particular. God is so particular he doesn't want unredeemed people, and he has a means for redemption – through the Holy Spirit.

JMF: Yeah, if you are going to sit at the family table, you do have to learn how to...

RA: Sure, you learn the language, you learn the custom, you learn how to respect people and to live within that, so that the family has its own rules...

JMF: But we are talking about a father who is absolutely committed to your success in sitting at that table.

RA: Yes, absolutely. Therefore, even that discipline, as the Bible says, it's the discipline of the parent, and if you are being disciplined, as Hebrew says, it's a sign that you are a real child and not illegitimate. People miss that and they become antinomian, they think the law is no longer is effective, we can do whatever. Paul had to deal with that in Corinthians.

No, there is the law of Christ, and unless you interpret faith and relationship with God now in terms of that familial model, being part of the family of God – the body of Christ is that family. Families have rules, but the rules are grounded in love, not in law.

JMF: In your struggle to learn obedience, you are always embraced by God's love.

RA: Yes, and who has learned obedience better than Jesus, Hebrews 4. Though he was a son, he learned obedience. Jesus has been there, Jesus was the orphan. Jesus was brought in. Jesus has learned to live in family. He learned to be submissive to his father. If Jesus had been baptized at the age of 12 when he was out there parading all of his intellectual knowledge with the Pharisees in the temple – his mother was not impressed. Mother came back and said, where were you? You broke the family rules. Didn't you know your father... we were looking for you? Jesus said, didn't you know I should be in my Father's house? She wasn't impressed by that at all. She scolded him.

Luke said, he went back, was obedient, he didn't show up again for 18 years. Eighteen years later at the age of 30, he suddenly showed up with John the Baptist, now he's ready to be baptized. The obedience that took him from his baptism to the cross, he learned at home with his parents. Whatever obedience is required of us, we already have the obedience of Jesus to empower us. I don't have to be obedient in order to be accepted by Jesus. By the Holy Spirit I'm brought into the life of Jesus in his obedience – it empowers me, is the motive for my own.

That's difference between simply preaching legalism and conditional obedience as to the grace of Christ. The grace of Christ is not freedom from obedience, it's a gracious obedience given to us to empower us. That's Barth, that's Torrance, that's all that Torrance has tried to say – that whatever is required of us by God, has been accepted and fulfilled by us by God himself on our behalf.

3. 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 One 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.

4. 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 *festschriften* 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 clench 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.

5. 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 if 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.

6. 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.

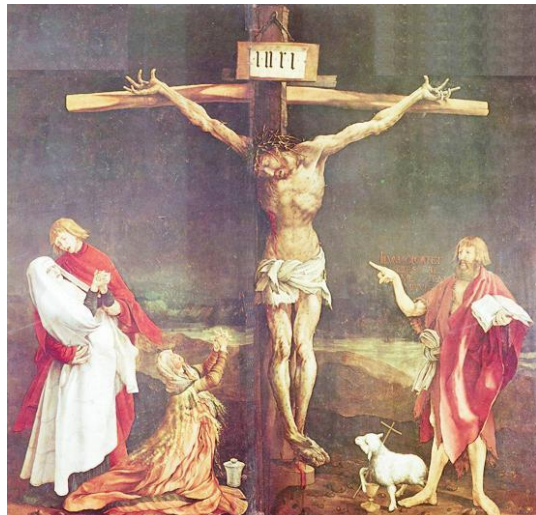
EC: It's amusing how quickly we gloss over those passages in the New Testament that show Jesus immersed in the mundane things of life, like turning the water into wine at a wedding.

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, 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 Grünewald'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 painting, 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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/anhyypostasis* couplet. *Anhyypostasis* 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.

10. 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 United 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.

11. 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 postmodernity, 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 postmodern 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 postmodernity. 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 postmodernity 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 postmodernity, 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 postmodern 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 postmodern 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.

12. JESUS IS STILL A HUMAN

JMF: Gerrit, let's begin by talking about Jesus' Incarnation and especially, his Incarnation after his death and resurrection – a lot of people think of Jesus as being God in the flesh while he's here on earth walking and talking and breathing, but once he's crucified and resurrected and ascended and at the right hand of God, we don't think of it quite the same way. We think of him, now he is fully God again, but not fully human as well. What's wrong with that?

GSD: You're right, Mike. A lot of us have a kind of “drop-in theory” of



the Incarnation – that the eternal Son of God came down among us and for 33 years he was with us, but it's kind of like he was slumming, and when he got that done with, he went back up to heaven and unzipped the skin suit and was just God again. It's hard for us to imagine how this could happen, that Jesus could go up to

heaven and still be in our flesh. We almost get a kind “Monty Python” cartoon feeling of Jesus going up on the clouds like a Rembrandt painting, waving his hand and saying, “goodbye” and taking off on a heavenly space ship. We know in our bones that it can't be that, so we just wonder how could Jesus still be in the flesh and have gone to heaven to the right hand of God. And yet, if we have this drop-in view of the Incarnation, we miss out on so much of the good stuff. We miss out on the rest of the story.

JMF: What are the implications of that? If Jesus continues to be God in

the flesh for us now, how does that change our life as a Christian?

GSD: It's really important. The first thing to think about is that it means that Jesus' history goes on. It's not just that he died and he rose and that's it. But by ascending into heaven, he is still continuing to be the God-man. He's still holding our humanity, next to his God-head, he's still uniting himself to us. That has huge implications for us.

On one hand, you think about our eternal life. Paul writes in Philippians 3:20 and 21 that he will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. The Christian hope of resurrection in the body, of eternal life to come, that you still get to be you, and I still get to be me, is all grounded in the fact that Jesus retains his body – resurrected, transformed, glorified – but still, as John Knox said, the self-same body in which he was crucified, dead, buried and risen, is the same body he ascended in. In terms of what happens to us in the future, that's really important.

Another implication is that it has to do with our salvation. Often we think of our salvation as simply a transaction that occurred on the cross, and that's true – Christ took our sins upon himself, particularly on the cross when the sin of the world was upon him. But a deeper understanding, a full biblical understanding, is that Jesus himself is our atonement, he is the one who reconciles God and humanity by being, in himself, the one who brings those two together. So our atonement continues because Christ's Incarnation continues.

JMF: We're having a moment-by-moment, everyday, continuing, intimate relationship with him, and the implications of that for how we live...

GSD: It's wonderful to think that we have a man in heaven, because Christ has gone up to enter the holy of holies to the Father's right hand, but he hasn't gone just as a spirit – he's gone taking our humanity, like Star Trek used to say, "To boldly go where no man has gone before" – he's really done it. As the ancient fathers used to say, "Now dust sits on the throne of heaven." Jesus has gone to the Father's right hand taking us with him. In his person, we have direct access to the throne of God.

JMF: You mentioned the holy of holies, and you're referring to ancient Israel and to the Tabernacle at first and then later the Temple, and once a year, the High Priest (only once a year, the High Priest) is able to go in there. In your book, you draw an analogy between that and Christ's ascending. Can you elaborate on that?

GSD: Sure. The ritual of atonement on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would prepare to bring a sacrifice on behalf of all the people. As you look at the details of that in Exodus and Leviticus, you note that the High Priest would get dressed with a breastplate that has inscribed upon it the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. That, in a sense, meant that he was writing onto his very heart the names of God's people and he was, in a sense, bearing all of Israel with him as he prepared to go in to

the holy of holies.

He would go in on that day, he would first prepare himself by washing, putting on the ritual garments, and then by offering a sacrifice of sin for himself and his family and then finally offering a sacrifice of sin on behalf of the people and he would bring the blood of the goat into the holy of holies, sprinkle it on the mercy seat and thereby make intercession, confessing the people's sins, acting in their name and on their behalf. When it was done, he would come out and place his hands on the scapegoat – the other goat that carried away the sins of the people, and he would bless them and declared them to be forgiven. In that one day, the High Priest enacted an atonement that God had provided for the people by acting on behalf of the people bringing their sins to God and acting on behalf of God, the Lord Yahweh, bringing his forgiveness to the people.

The parallels with Jesus are almost breathtaking to think about. The idea is that Jesus, in fulfilling the office of our High Priest, got dressed in a garment, and that garment was our flesh. He dressed in our humanity, and just as the High Priest carried the names of the people over his heart, Jesus, in wearing our flesh, wrote the name of all humanity into himself. He bore us in himself. He didn't have to go into the Temple, but in going to the cross, Jesus became both the priest and the victim. He was the offerer of the sacrifice, but that sacrifice was himself. And so Jesus, in making that perfect atonement, then was able to go into the holy of holies bearing our humanity.

Now, the priest would come out from the holy of holies and bless the people. Jesus has not yet returned from the Father's immediate presence, he is in heaven and we are waiting for his return. Nevertheless, he's blessed us because he sent the Holy Spirit of the Father, passed to him the Blessed Spirit, whom he poured out upon us, who unites us to Jesus and causes us then, in him, to have direct access to the throne of God.

JMF: What are the implications of the ascension in terms of Jesus being Lord?

GSD: In his ascension Jesus has triumphed, in his resurrection he broke the power of death. But if it just ended there, Jesus would have had to either die again, like Lazarus did, or he'd still be somewhere in the world that we could go to him and talk to him, but we'll have to journey to him and he would only be limited in the access that people would have. The ascension is necessary to complete that story: that Jesus rose went up to heaven, and that signals his triumph as Lord and King of all. He is now the one, as Revelation tells us, who holds the keys of death and Hades in his hands, he is the Lord of the kings of earth – as Revelation tells us. He is the ruler of all things. That means that we have a pretty high claim on who Jesus is and an understanding that all knowledge of God now centers in the person of Christ. All truth about who God is, is shown to us in the face of Jesus Christ.

JMF: You mentioned the clothing that he takes as being our humanity,

as a high priest going into the holy of holies in the ascension, returning to the right hand of the Father. Are you implying that he's taking sinful human flesh, that he didn't take perfect, sinless flesh, but our actual human condition on himself?

GSD: In the Incarnation, Jesus was born of Mary, and received in that, since he came from the seed of Adam's race, the race that had fallen. Within the Virgin's womb, he was joined with the Holy Spirit to become both God and man. So he took to himself that which we really are, it was a real humanity. He took it in union with the Holy Spirit, so it was a humanity he wore sinlessly. But often, we tend to think of Jesus as a kind of superman – that he wasn't really touched with mortal frailty like the rest of us are, that he didn't really know what it's like to live in this broken world, to live among people who feel like God has forsaken them, to know the difficulty of temptation. But Scripture teaches that Jesus truly was tempted in all points as we are. He really could have gone into sin. He really knew what it was to wrestle against temptation. He knew how it is to be with us in a lost and forsaken humanity which he wore in perfect holiness and sinlessness.

JMF: The fact that he took on a real humanity, our real humanity, how does that speak to an individual who is a sinner, like you and me and like everybody else listening to the program, at our worst moment when we want to go to the throne of grace, but we feel so unworthy that we'd rather just go bury our head in the pillow, how does that speak to us?

GSD: The implications are very strong, for we are the lost and wandering sheep, we're the prodigal children and feel that we've wandered way outside of the Father's grace and care. But the good news in the Incarnation is that our Father loved us so much that he sent his Son all the way into the world, all the way into our humanity where we are, sent to find us in our lost and forsaken condition and to join himself to us in the midst of our brokenness, our lostness and to heal us from within. He didn't just come to tell us that we ought to be better, he didn't even come just with news that God sort of likes us, he came to say, "I love you so much, I will become what you are and heal that from the inside out by joining it to myself, by cleansing it, by offering to God the obedience that you owe to him but you can't give on your own – I will do that from inside your humanity. I will live the relationship of love and fidelity that I have with my Father from all eternity, I'll do that now from within your midst, and if you are then joined to me partaking of me, you can have that intimacy too."

So the comfort there is, often people think that Jesus is so far above me, so superhuman that we look for another mediator, we look for another advocate. We might pray to a saint, or ask someone that we know as holy to try to help us. In reality, we have the most wonderful human being of all. A man who was touched with our infirmities, who knows in his own flesh and bone, how it is us who says, "I am taking your cause even now to my Father.

I love you so much that I not only became what you are and healed it, but I kept it joined to me into eternity.” I think Barth says that in the ascension, we realize that Jesus’ flesh is a garment which he does not put off. It’s a choice that God made to hold us to himself that he will never let go.

JMF: Don’t a lot of us want to wait until we are behaving better and we feel better about ourselves before we’ll go to the Father, go to prayer... in other words, we put it off until we can just get a little bit more righteous. With the idea that if we are a little more righteous, God is more likely to hear our prayer.

GSD: Sure. Our adversary wants to keep whispering to us that you’re not worthy yet, you’re not ready yet, God doesn’t want you yet. We feel like we have to compose our own righteousness. The news about that is both horrible and terrific. The horrible news is, if I had all eternity in myself to try to get myself together, I couldn’t do it. I cannot, on my own, ever be worthy of God’s love. I can never have a claim on him that says, “Now you must bless me and pay attention to me because I have achieved righteousness.” It’s not just in me. My sinful nature brings me down and will forever.

But the terrific news is that Christ has done what I could not do for myself. He’s lived that life of obedience and communion with the Father and joined to him, in him is the most marvelous acceptance in worthiness. Calvin and the Reformers always tell us, “Don’t look at yourself, look away from yourself and look to Jesus.” My standing with God is never in myself, it’s in Christ. He’s the worthy one, he’s the righteous one. The news is, as we hear the word proclaimed, the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus so that all that is his becomes ours, and we can rejoice in that. When the accuser comes and says (as our friend Baxter Kruger likes to quote), “You’re not worthy, you’re not good enough, you’re not smart enough.” We don’t answer him and say, “Oh yes, I am. Look at this day, and that day.” We answer him by saying, “Look at Jesus, look at my advocate – he is worthy and by the power of his Spirit, I am in him.” That’s a huge comfort to me.

JMF: So in one sense, he is even more ready to hear us and wanting us present when we feel the worst.

GSD: Absolutely. You know the wonderful Christmas hymn “Joy to the World” says he comes to make his blessings known as “far as the curse is found.” Jesus has come to dig underneath the thorn of the curse that came upon us when Adam and Eve were cursed, to dig it out and remake our humanity, and when we are in the far country, we may know that we have one who’s come on the great search and rescue mission for us. He’s come to find his lost sheep, to carry us on his shoulders all the way back up to his Father’s throne.

That’s where the ascension ties this all together. He didn’t just restore us to kind of a neutral place to say, “I took care of your past sins, now you’ve got a clean slate, try to do as well as you can.” He says, “I want to take you

beyond this earth all the way into the heavenlies, where you can be seated with me, and all that I have is yours.” The great church fathers have said that, “What we lost in Adam, we’ve gained even more in Christ.” In taking our humanity back to the Father, he’s given us every spiritual blessing.

JMF: We don’t have a lot of confidence in that, especially as a pastor you will know that often what we do is think, “If I could get enough people praying for me, especially righteous people – people I consider to be pretty good standing with God, if I could get enough of them praying for me, then God would finally hear those prayers and move on my behalf and do something to help me in my situation.” We discount the fact that our prayers matter because we know our situation, our sins, and our weaknesses. We figure our prayers don’t matter, so we want to amass prayer, like you mentioned prayers of saints, if we believe that saints pray for us, who are dead or just people we know – our other pastors. We’d like to go to the church and ask, “Could you get the congregation to pray for me?” Or in the case of a denomination, you want the whole denomination praying for you. As many righteous voices as possible. What could you say to someone to help them understand that God wants to hear from them?

GSD: The most important thing to say is, from 1 John, that we have an advocate before the Father, even Jesus Christ the Righteous One. Or go to Hebrews chapter 7, to realize that Jesus ever lives to intercede for us. We have an advocate who is praying for us right now. He’s gone into heaven to prepare a place for us. And part of that preparation is, he’s constantly presenting our case before his Father, saying, “Father, this one is in me and I have cleansed him and I am laboring with you and the Blessed Holy Spirit to conform him more and more to our image. But I present my righteousness on his behalf.”

JMF: So there is no such thing as us praying on our own by ourselves.

GSD: That’s correct. Calvin was very strong on this. If we think we can approach God in our own strength, we are lost. But in Christ, when we come in Christ, we are immediately in the presence of the Father.

JMF: Tom Torrance talks about how our prayers are a participation in the prayers of Christ on our behalf. It’s not us praying that God the Father is going to hear a prayer from us, because we know our prayers are kind of poor prayers most of the time. But we can have confidence that our prayers being taken up by Christ redeemed and healed and presented to the Father as *his* prayer.

GSD: Absolutely. The Torrances were strong in saying, we want to pray, we try to pray, but we can’t pray and we despair. But when we look away from ourselves to Jesus, we see that he is praying in our name and on our behalf. He’s taking our pitiful prayers, he’s cleansing them and making them as his own, offering them to his Father, and the Father who delights to answer the prayers of the Son, he has been blessing us back through the Son

in the power of the Holy Spirit. So our prayers are getting a whole lot farther than we might ever think if we just came on our own righteousness or worthiness.

JMF: As a pastor, there are things you want your congregation to hear about, know about. If there were one, let say, piece of advice or let's say, maybe even a wish list that you could give all pastors, that you wish everybody could hear from their pastors from week to week, what would it be?

GSD: The concept of the wonderful exchange that Calvin spoke about is something that always moves me, particularly when I meet my congregation at the communion table. In a sense, speaking in Christ's name as we offer the bread and the cup which become, through the Holy Spirit, his body and his blood, we're saying to our people, "Here is the great exchange."

In some sense, God is the all-time most extravagant and worst trader. Because what he does is he says, "I want to swap you, trade me your sin and will trade you my holiness. Trade me your anxiety, give that to me, and I will give you back my peace. Trade me your doubt and I will give you my faith on your behalf." We come to that table of grace, and the wonderful exchange occurs whereby Christ asks for what is ours – pitiful, sin-stained, lost, confused, doubting – and he takes it all to himself as precious. He drinks it in that cup of wrath that he drank on our behalf and then slides the cup back to us and we find that it's filled with the wonderful wine of communion. He gives back to us forgiveness and grace and healing. If our people could understand that when we meet Jesus, he is trading his life for our death, his forgiveness for our sin, I think we'd be transformed.

JMF: Most of the time when people go to church, they're coming away with the idea that I'm not good enough, I'd better behave better or God is going to reject me.

GSD: Often that would be the sin, in some sense, of the conservative churches – which would be to pile upon us more "shoulds" and "oughts" that only make us cast back upon ourselves, and we can't bear that up. If we could hear how Christ has taken our burdens from us and taken all of that away from us, and that living in him we may leave the church skipping and dancing and rejoicing – that the word from the Lord is, "I have included you in my grace, I have included you in my fellowship, I want you to rejoice in the eternal life I have for you." Church might be a very different place.

The other thing that happens is the opposite, and that's that we come to church hoping to get a little help so we can continue to manage God on our own terms and be comforted in the life we've chosen for ourselves. A lot of mainstream America wants to view God as the one who's supposed to help me live out the life I've dreamed for myself.

JMF: Kind of a health-wealth gospel approach?

GSD: In some sense, or just that my high achievement, my constant business, my pressing... is really what counts. And God must be pleased with

me if I'm living the good life.

JMF: So you're looking at a validation of whatever your lifestyle happens to be.

GSD: Exactly. There's a sense in which coming to hear of the all-embracing grace of Jesus de-validates the list that I've stacked up to say, "Look, I'm a good person, I live the good life, I got educated, I travel, my house is looking prettier. You should value me." And the gospel says, "None of that matters." Not only does your sin not keep you from God, but your righteousness also doesn't count before God. It's all in Christ.

In that sense, the news of the ascended Christ who has this new humanity for us is a challenge to contemporary American life. Because it says, not only are you relieved of the burden if you can't get there by yourself, but you are commanded to stop *trying* to get there by yourself. Our idolatry, that I'm the one who achieves, and makes, and creates my life, is torn down by a Lord who says, all of the grace is in me. You've got to leave off yourself and find it in Christ.

JMF: Is there also a sense that God is blessing me and must be with me, since things are going well for me. Since I'm making enough money and I'm doing well and I've accumulated physical things around me and a certain amount of security and so on, therefore, I must be doing something right. I hear this, if things are going well, you must be doing something right, since God is bringing these blessings to you.

GSD: Sure. It's a very easy way to think. In my heart of hearts I probably think that, too. If I'm healthy, it's because God has favored me, and if I have means, it's because I must be living a pretty good life...

JMF: And the opposite is, if something bad happens, or a loss or a tragedy of some kind, I must have done something wrong, because God has brought this upon me to punish me.

GSD: Exactly. As we're talking, our nation is in some pretty uncertain economic times, and people are being drawn up short, realizing maybe I'm not favored after all, is God against me, have I somehow sinned? In the Western church, we've got this all confused. We don't expect that suffering is the normal state of life in this world. But the fact is, we are called to join the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as well as the fellowship of his resurrection.

When we are fulfilling the mission in the ascended Christ held on to our humanity, which means this is the world that he loves and died for, it also means he's sent the church into this very same world to give our lives the way as he did, to care for his poor, to bring about justice for the oppressed, to share this gospel even when sometimes people are hostile to it. We often think, my job is, I've been blessed and I've been saved and I know this grace, so I just get my little pile of blessings and withdraw and be comfortable and suffering should never touch me. But the truth is, all of God's greatest

servants suffered not because he was cursing them, but because they joined the fellowship of love's suffering. Love suffers for the sake of the least and the lost, and we're called to that.

JMF: We've got about ten seconds left, so could I ask you to just give our viewers one thing you'd like them to know about God in that ten seconds.

GSD: The greatest thing to know about God is that he loves you enough to become what you are and to hold that in himself forever. The Incarnation goes on and on, which means Christ has a hold of you into eternity.

13. CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

JMF: What are the biggest challenges facing Western Christianity today?

GSD: I think the challenges are huge, because the church in the West has been on the decline for some time. Theologically speaking, one of the challenges that we face is a kind of prevailing pluralism – that [although] most people in America still believe in God, they figure that there are many paths to get to that one God. One of the biggest negatives about Christianity [in their view] is our insistence that salvation is in Christ alone, and that Jesus uniquely shows us who God is. People almost instinctively see that as mean-spirited, exclusive, harsh and forbidding.

JMF: How do we balance that with the fact of the wideness of the grace of God and his desire to include and bring to himself every human being?

GSD: That's the challenge – because we have the most all-inclusive love story of any religion that's ever been on the face of the earth – the news of this wonderful world-reaching embrace of our God coming to us in Jesus Christ, and yet we are saying that because God has shown himself to be *this* way – this is who he is – so we have an *exclusive* revelation that has an all-*inclusive* embrace. As we face those challenges, we've got to be sure that we communicate the love, even as we are insisting on the truth.

JMF: God loves everyone – he sent Christ because he loves the world, and Christ says, if I'm lifted up, I'll draw all men to myself, and God does not let anybody slip through the cracks, and he's fully interested in every human being – and yet we have a role to play. How do we balance the fact of our call to evangelism, to call people to faith in Christ, and the fact that God's better at that than we are, and isn't going to abandon someone because we don't get to them in our evangelistic efforts... How do we balance that?

GSD: That's a wonderful question, and it has far-reaching implications for the mission of the church as a whole – because the ministry is not my

ministry or your ministry, it's Christ's ministry. The world is going not where *I* make it go, but where the Lord Jesus makes it go. So on one hand, we relax, in that we realize that God is working his purposes out – that even if I can't figure out a perfect answer to the question of “what about the person in the farthest reaches of the earth who's never heard of Jesus – does he, or does he not make a profession of faith?” – the impossible theological questions like that, we trust that God has a plan for it. God who loved us enough to join us to himself forever to die for us, as you said, is not going to let anyone slip through the cracks accidentally. No one's going to be left out by some kind of divine amnesia.

At the same time, we know that Christ sent the church into the world. He said, “all authority has been given to me, now therefore *go* and make disciples of the world.” We know that not everyone accepts this message, tragically. The mystery of iniquity is that, faced with the most wonderful news in the universe, we sometimes turn from it.

I guess that because of Christ's sovereignty and the reach of his grace, the burden is not on me to try to convince you to believe. My task is to bear witness, to say, “This is who I've seen Jesus to be, and this is what he has done in me. This is who Christ is according to the Scriptures; this is who he's been in our lives. Now I hope the Holy Spirit is creating faith in you. I hope that you want to embrace that.” Then I leave it, with all prayer and sincerity, in the hands of the Holy Spirit to create that faith in the listener – because that's his work.

JMF: Sometimes our presentation of the gospel, of who Christ is and what he's done for us, is poor. Sometimes it's very good, other times it's pretty poor. Some of our presentations are downright nasty and leave a bad impression. Is it fair for us to think that a person who doesn't respond to the gospel, even though they've heard it, and perhaps sometimes very badly and they're put off by it because of the behavior, the approach of us evangelicals sometimes... (For example, surveys have shown that people would rather live next door to a used-car salesman, or a drug dealer, let's say, than an evangelical Christian, simply because they'll get less pain from the others. That doesn't speak well of the way evangelicals are perceived, in terms of judgmentalism, pushiness, and so on. That isn't a correct, right picture of Christ, it isn't a proper presentation of the gospel.) But are we saying that God has a way, because his goal is to draw everyone to himself, of overcoming our short-comings and weaknesses in evangelistic presentation?

GSD: There's a lot in that, and it ties back to this difficulty that we have with an all-inclusive love of Christ who's revealed himself exclusively in Christ Jesus. Much of that depends on our realizing that our job is not salesmanship to religious consumers. Our job is to love in Christ's name, and to bear witness to what he has done. That changes the whole dynamic. There were times in my early life as a Christian when I felt like it was my burden to

share a tract with every person I met, and if I didn't do that, they might be going to hell and it would be my fault. That was a very young faith that didn't have much trust in the sovereignty of God.

Maybe the sharing of those tracts played some role in someone's salvation. Maybe it became a roadblock for some that the Lord had to overcome in different ways. The point is, I don't have to try to convince perfectly content pagans that they should buy my religious product. The reality is, is that hurting and broken people – all of whom are facing mortality and frailty, broken relationships, a sense of guilt, a sense of not being able to measure up even by their own standards – to them I'm sent with marvelous healing news that calls people out of darkness and into light. It's much different than trying to sell a religious product.

JMF: Henri Nouwen wrote a fascinating book called *The Wounded Healer* in which he helps pastors see past the need to feel that they're perfect, in presenting some kind of perfection to the people they're trying to help, but identifying with them on a level of realizing that they are as broken as the people they're trying to help – isn't that true of the church as well, in terms of evangelism?

GSD: It certainly is. I worked for a pastor who used to pray to the one who took his thorns and wore them as a crown – the idea that Jesus who ascended gloriously, as we've been talking about, yet, as the hymn says, "has rich wounds, yet visible above." Christ understood our humanity and he was pierced for our iniquities and he is constant unto our suffering. He is a ready friend to us as we recognize that we're not perfect.

If you look at the ministry of Jesus, you know that towards the Pharisees and the scribes, he was often very hard – that was toward those who felt like they were sufficiently righteous, who would not reveal their weaknesses or admit their sins. But to the broken, to the outcast, to the disgraced who were penitent and longing for his forgiveness, he came with all grace and acceptance. The Lord is ever enfolding our woundedness into his healing. What that means for ministry is that we minister, as Dan Allender has said, as "*those who lead with a limp*." We don't have to hide our faults because we've been taken up by the one who has taken our humanity, embraced it and healed it. So we trust in that compassion of Jesus Christ.

My friend Andrew Purvis, who was a student of Tom Torrance in Edinburgh, likes to talk with his ministerial students about this subject. He'll often get a student to stand in front of him with his arms out as if he were preaching the gospel and he were conducting ministry. Andrew comes up behind him, he usually takes a rather robust student, grabs him by the shoulders and shoves him out of the way, and says, "Look, buddy, it's not your ministry, it's Christ's ministry. If I'm representing Christ, come here and I'll put my arm around you and you can join me in what I'm already doing." That's a graphic, but apt illustration for how ministry is done. As the church,

we want to find out what Jesus is up to. How is he working, and do we participate in that? Not, “What great things can I design for the Lord to tell him how to reach the world better than he can?”

JMF: On one side we have an enthusiasm for doing the work of ministry and for getting involved in what we perceive Christ is doing, and on the other side, isn’t there a sort of a rest, or a peace – in other words, not a sense of frantic busy-ness in order to get the job done, but more of a peaceful entering into the work of Christ?

GSD: That’s a good way to say it. It’s a peaceful engagement. The church is often been prone to a couple of errors. One error is to withdraw from the world, to say, “We have been saved and called apart and we don’t want to be stained by the world and we’re waiting for Jesus to return, so we’ll just separate ourselves.” That takes us out of being any good to anyone else, takes us out of sharing the love of Christ with others and basically sidelines the church.

But another error the church has made is to say, “We will make the kingdom happen on God’s behalf. If the church can triumph, then God triumphs.” Instead of serving, we start dominating. Instead of giving, we start lording it over, and that has only created resentment for us. Sadly, there’s a third error that the church has made, which is a capitulation with the world. We have our religion and we like it on Sundays but generally, we’re not very distinguished from the world.

Where the gospel sends us in this kind of peaceful engagement that you brought up, is to a place where we are for the world by being different from the world because we belong to the Lord Jesus and different values. We’re against the world, by being for the world, because we’re bringing the all-inclusive love of Christ to them, even in their sin and rebellion.

Douglas Farrow is a wonderful professor at McGill University. He talks about how the church is in a wrestling match with the world. Because Jesus hasn’t given up on the world, he hasn’t given up on humanity, because he took our humanity in his ascension and bears it, we as the church, never give up on the world. We can’t simply be dissolved into it, nor can we withdraw. We have to engage the world with this servant, wounded love of Christ.

JMF: You’re the editor of a book called *An Introduction to Torrance’s Theology*. How did you come to be associated with that project?

GSD: It was lots of fun. I’ve been a follower of both Tom and James Torrance for years, and it was their work that really changed my life and reignited my ministry. When I moved to the church in Baton Rouge, I came to a church that has a wonderful devotion to the incarnate Savior, that loves the Scriptures and always wants to go deeper into Christ. Since I was new, they were willing to hear some new ideas, and I suggested that we have a conference, and that we call it *Discovering the Incarnate Savior of the World* – a chance to bring in some scholars to talk about this kind of theology – about

the Father who loves the Son, after he sends his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem us and to save us.

They went for it, and so we were able to contact a number of scholars in the Torrance tradition from around the country and even around the world, to come to Baton Rouge and talk about this theology. It was so much fun because I think it was the largest assembling of scholars in the Torrance tradition that had ever occurred all in one place. We spent a couple of days with about 200 participants studying and discussing and rejoicing in the incarnate Savior of the world.

JMF: How did that lead to the book?

GSD: After the conference, we realized that we had heard some really wonderful presentations, and the participants agreed to let us publish those, if we could find a publisher. I was able to ask a couple of others who weren't at the symposium – including Baxter Kruger, whom you had on this show as well – if they would contribute essays to the project. We submitted that to T. & T. Clark, who'd published most of Tom Torrance's major work, and I'm delighted to say they were eager to publish it. We ended up with a pretty good book that takes a look at Torrance's Christology.

JMF: What are some of the major themes in the book that you felt best about when you saw it finally published?

GSD: The focus was on Christology, which is the study of Jesus Christ and who he is. Each of the participants from different angles was looking at the bigness, the hugeness of what it means that God came to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. I took a look at the atonement and the wonderful Torrance emphasis on the fact that the atonement is not just an external transaction where God pays the tab for our sins – and he certainly does that. He does legally take away the burden of our sins. But it's deeper than that – the atonement is the way in which God reconciles us to himself by healing our humanity from the inside out. We all emphasized that and rejoiced in it.

JMF: Speaking of the idea of payment for sins – isn't that where most people tend to stop?

GSD: We do stop there. We figure that my sins are like a financial debt. I've accumulated this amount of obligation to God, and I discover that my creditors are calling my hand, and I don't have enough spiritual capital to pay my debt. I'm in over my head, and so Jesus on the cross has paid the bill, he's picked up the tab, so to speak.

That's wonderful in the sense that he brings us back to neutral – the penalty is paid. But what that doesn't deal with is the fact that I'm a profligate spender. Pay my bills today and if I don't change from the inside out, I'll be in debt again in a week. In the spiritual sense, it means that Jesus takes away the legal problem of my sins, but it doesn't change my heart or my humanity that's sinful, then I haven't really been touched. Then the curved-in self, the

darkened heart, the clouded mind – all of that are still there untouched. I'm not really redeemed from the inside out.

JMF: So we keep working on the effects rather than the cause when that's your primary focus?

GSD: I keep trying to work harder so I don't get into more debt, but I find that I'm inevitably behind. If I have to be the one that ultimately proves my worth to God and even if the external part of my sins has been paid for, I still am lost.

JMF: I've worked with many people, as I'm sure you have as a pastor who find themselves in that spiral – it's a constant focus on remembering what all your sins are in order to get them all repented for, because there is this fear that if I don't repent for every single sin, if I leave one out, God won't forgive me for that particular one and therefore I've got to continually be rehearsing my tracks, looking over my shoulders, figuring out what to repent of and make sure I... It becomes a legal exchange as the focus of my whole relationship with God – just find a way to get this debt off my back ...

GSD: It's terribly burdensome. It's full of guilt and it also tends to make a constant self-focus, "How am I doing? How am I doing?" What we need is the news that all of your sins – past, present, and future – have all been paid for in Jesus Christ. But even more, your humanity has been re-made in him. In Christ you and I can become a new creation. In Christ, he sets his own Spirit within me that causes me to want to live in communion with him. He puts his life in me so that I begin to think and act and live in wonderful communion with the Lord Jesus Christ – not by looking more and more at myself and try to make myself better, but by looking to Jesus, trusting in him to be a new creation, to participate in his new humanity, and thereby, in one sense, to live free from the burden of sin.

Not that I stop doing good things. No, he sends me on a mission to love and care for the world even to the point of laying down my life. But not to justify myself. I'm already justified in Christ. Not to try to fix my rotten heart, which in itself is always rotten, but simply to receive the new heart, the new life that he's given me.

JMF: I'm often asked, if what you're saying is true that God has made me a new creation in Christ and that my sins are forgiven (past, present, and future) and there's a new heart, then if that's true already, then what's my motivation for wanting to go out of my way to live like a Christian, because after all, isn't it easier not to live like Christian than it is to live like a Christian?

GSD: It is difficult to live as a Christian and difficult to live in that knowledge. But the motivation is love. It's the fact that you know different kinds of people that you meet in your life – some who are critical and judgmental and quick to point out your faults and others – you don't tend to

want to visit with them as much as when you know there's someone who wants to embrace you and welcome you, to host you and to bless you – you tend to want to be with them.

When we truly understand that the Lord Jesus is blessing us with his forgiveness and his new humanity, that's where I want to be – I don't want to live stuck in myself. My sins are really my attempts to try to find a better life than the one God has for me. Sin isn't really fun in the long run. It's destructive. Living apart from the graciousness of my Father doesn't really get me where I want to go.

JMF: So it's actually easier to live in Christ, than it is not to live in Christ.

GSD: It's certainly more peaceful – there's always a struggle between my old self and the new self in Christ to try to get my mind to look away from my inner self and look to Jesus. It's not simple, but it's much more joyful.

JMF: Walking with Christ is, after all, walking with Christ. If we're a new creation and we belong to him, then the issue is a relationship with him – a relationship of love. It isn't even a question, is it – of what is my motivation – because when you are in a relationship of love with someone, you're in relationship of love with someone – that is the motivation in itself.

GSD: Exactly, and love and communion is what I'm seeking – it's what all of us are seeking in our deepest hearts – this relationship of total acceptance and forgiveness, purpose, delight and everlasting life.

JMF: So to ask the question is to misunderstand the point.

GSD: Exactly. You don't ask that question if you're experiencing the communion.

14. THE ETERNAL INCARNATION

JMF: In your book, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation*, what is Christ's continuing Incarnation, and what was the need for such a book?

GSD: More than a decade ago, I had become fascinated with the person of Jesus Christ, partly through being reintroduced to the theology of Thomas and James Torrance, and I found myself yearning more and more to explore the bigness and the wonder of the Savior that we have. I was drawn then to try to find out which angle would be best for exploring Christ, and I realized that the ascension of Jesus provides a fresh look at the very ancient story.

The ascension of Christ is a kind of hinge on which the entire story of the mediator turns. For instance, we think of Jesus as being our Prophet, our Priest, and our King. When he was among us and in his days in Nazareth and Jerusalem, he was a prophet speaking God's word to us. It was after his ascension though, when he withdrew from us, that he became a prophet in a different way. Now by the sending of his Holy Spirit, who caused the apostles to write down the words of the New Testament, and through living in our hearts, Jesus continues to speak, but not just out of his location in Jerusalem, but from heaven to us.

In his role as a priest, Jesus fulfilled that in his death on the cross, dying to take away the sins of the world, but after his ascension, he became a priest in a new way. He appears before the throne of the Father to intercede for us and to offer his life on our behalf and to continue to prepare a place for us.

Third, as the King, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he had conquered death, but it was with his ascension that he was truly honored as the Lord of all. So all the work of Jesus hinged on the ascension.

JMF: As individuals 2000 years later, we relate to the ascended Jesus. How is that connected with his time on earth in terms of how it affects us today?

GSD: That's where the fact of the continuing Incarnation is so important. As we've mentioned, people think that God only became a human for a little while he was with us those 33 years that Jesus was here. But in fact, Scripture and traditions of all believers have taught for centuries that Jesus *remained* incarnate. He did not kind of unzip his humanity and take it off, he remained wedded to our humanity.

That's wonderful news for us because it means that the same Jesus who gathered the little children in his arms and touched them and blessed them, the same Jesus who accepted the tears of the sinful woman and pronounced forgiveness to her, the same Jesus who was willing to touch someone with a terrible disease and to heal them, that's the same Jesus that we relate to now. He still has the memory of walking among us on this earth. He still has our

flesh. He's still the Jesus that we meet in the Gospels.

JMF: How does that impact us when we're in the depths of our own humanity and we're feeling like we're not connected with God, where do we find the wherewithal to go ahead and take the step of returning to God, like the prodigal son, as opposed to the fear that most of us feel when we feel disconnected because of sin?

GSD: To know his true humanity, that he is both fully God but fully human in the way that we are human, that when the Son of God came to us, as the Torrances love to say, he penetrated into our lost and forsaken condition, or as Douglas Sparrow says, he pursued us all the way to the place of our fallenness. Not just abstractly in some philosophical sense – he did it by becoming what we are, taking up real humanity, he truly embraced us.

Because he keeps that humanity, he remains the one who knows what it's like to be tempted. He knows what it's like to have suffered. He knows what it's like to have struggled in our humanity. So we can trust him that he's no stranger to what we're feeling. But also because that redemption was real, because he truly became what we are to renew us and to save us in our real humanity (not some abstract kind of superman humanity), then we don't have to be afraid that he's so disappointed in our sin or so surprised by it that he's ready to cut us off. He knows how it is with us. What he has redeemed is what we really are.

JMF: There's a memory passage a lot of people have in Isaiah that "your sins have separated you from me." How do you relate "your sins have separated you from me" with what you're just describing in terms of our relationship with Christ through the ascension?

GSD: A helpful distinction here is between union and communion. A great theologian from the 17th century, John Owen, talked about this. Our union with Christ was established first in Christ's union with us. As we've said, he took up our humanity and joined himself to it. Our union with Christ also includes the way in which the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ so that we are united inseparably with him.

JMF: That includes every human being.

GSD: It does, and it doesn't, in the sense that Christ's union with our humanity causes him to extend to all human beings his great welcome and redemption of love. The union that we have with Christ through the Holy Spirit comes as the blessed Spirit awakens us to life, creates faith in us, and joins us to Jesus. That happens at different stages along people's lives. When you've been united to Christ in the Holy Spirit, that union is forever. We are included in all that he has done for us. Our sins are removed, we can't surprise God by our sin, we can't mar his redemption, we can't change it.

But experientially speaking, we can affect our *communion* with him. Our union is untouchable. Christ has established that, in his union with us, in the great work of his redemption. It's all done. But my communion with him, it's

affected if I wander into the far country knowingly and willingly, then I close off my relationship with the Father and I get miserable. When I fail to pray to him or fail to read the Scriptures or partake of the sacraments or join in the fellowship of the believers, I get lonely and miserable. It's not because my union has been affected, but my sense of communion.

The way back from the far country isn't to think, I've got to get saved all over again. I'm already saved in Christ. I simply need to remember that my Father is waiting there, watching down the foreign road with arms open wide for me to return to the awareness of what he's already given me in Jesus Christ.

JMF: So the continuing Incarnation has many implications for us as individual believers.

GSD: Sure. One of the most important ones is to realize that God is not done with us yet or with this world. The fact that he still holds our flesh in eternal union with himself indicates that this is not a throw-away world. This is the world that he loves. We are the people that he died to redeem. This is the field where he is working.

Thinking of field, there's a wonderful passage in Jeremiah where on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem, when the Babylonians are coming to conquer the people, the Lord tells Jeremiah to purchase a field. Now talk about a bad real-estate investment, right before your country is about to be overrun, you go and buy land that's about to become worthless. But it was a sign that the Lord was still invested in Jerusalem, still invested in his people. Jeremiah bought that field against the day or in hope for the day when the people would return.

There's a sense in which Jesus bought the "field" of our flesh. He holds it now in heaven for the day when he will return and this world's redemption will be fully worked out, and the world will be made new and set right. Tertullian talked about the double pledge that the ascension gives us, and most of us who have studied the New Testament know about Ephesians 1, where the Spirit in our hearts is the guarantee or the down payment for our hope that we have of being united to Christ in heaven. Tertullian adds that the body of Jesus in heaven is the partner pledge – that because he's holding our flesh in heaven, it's the down payment that we will not live some airy spiritual existence only, but we will be embodied in a full glorified resurrection body. Jesus is the pledge of that.

JMF: We go to church and hear things like this preached, and it sounds exciting and wonderful, and yet deep inside we're feeling, yeah, but I'm pitiful and I'm still a sinner, and where does that leave me? We want to throw our hands up and say, if God's so great and all this is still wonderful, why do I feel so rotten?

GSD: Exactly. For us as preachers and theologians, the bigger a picture we paint of Jesus, then the more accountable our people hold us to say, why

isn't this working in my life? Why isn't this transforming me? We have to ask, what is blocking my experience of this reality that Christ has already established? What keeps me from it, besides that fact that we're tired most of the time and we're mortal and we have all kinds of mood swings, and that's just normal.

We can think about it along two lines, succinctly, ignorance and obstinance. One: I don't experience enough of God because I don't know enough of who he is, I have a distorted view. The other is: in spite of the fact that I've been redeemed and included in Christ, I still have my old will. I still have the part of me that wants to run away and try to be God myself or run away and do what I want to do like a petulant child. So between these two, of not really expanding my mind enough to see who Christ is, and then of still clinging to self-will, I tend to fall into missing the treasure that I have.

So what can be done about that? It's wonderful that the Lord did not call us in abstraction or as isolated individuals. We are called the body of Christ for a reason, and we are joined to his body and we are connected to one another and we need each other. I have a guy that comes to a Bible study on Tuesday mornings. He goes to several studies, and he says, "I know that if I don't get with other Christians, I won't pray and I won't read my Bible. I'm not here because I'm so holy, I go to all these Bible studies because I'm *not* holy and I need the encouragement."

The Lord left us the sacraments, particularly regular Communion, and the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, churches classically called it, a means whereby he particularly helps us experience what he's done for us. It says the bread is broken and the cup is passed that I tend to get a fuller sense of the wonder of my forgiveness.

One other piece to this concerns the way in which we express the love of Christ in the world. I don't experience so much of God inside me if I'm not moving out to share his love with others through works of love and through sharing the gospel. It's like a river that gets dammed up, and if that water has no place to go, it gets stagnant. So too, Christians weren't meant to receive all these blessings just for ourselves to stop, we're meant to go on. So, often I experience spiritual growth by doing service for others.

JMF: You mentioned a distorted view of God that we can have as individuals. In your book *Jesus Ascended*, on page 91, you mention the doctrine of the ascension keeps us from collapsing our understanding of the person of Christ into any of the Christological distortions of the present age. What are some of those Christological distortions of the present age?

GSD: The current Christological distortions are just the ancient distortions returned. From the beginning, people have wondered, who is this Jesus who was among us who did things that no one has ever done, who taught like no one had ever taught, who even rose from the dead? As we have struggled to say how he is both God and man, we've tended sometimes to

get a little out of focus.

One of those heresies was called Docetism, and that's the idea that Jesus wasn't really a man, he was just *appearing* to be a man; he was like a ghost, almost like a holographic projection of God. The church continually had to say, no, this really was a man come among us. Docetism tends to be the Christological distortion that occurs often among more conservative believers today. We have such a high view of Jesus that we almost forget that he was really a man. We think of him as a superman, as Jesus who didn't really touch our lives, and we tend to see him as disconnected from who we are. We're always combating that in the church to remind people that no, this is a God who is fully human who really knows who and how we are.

Another Christological distortion from the ancient days that has recurred is called Adoptionism. That's the idea that Jesus was a great guy, God the Father looked down and said, "You're so good, I think I'll adopt you as my special son," so that Jesus was just a man who kind of got promoted. He wasn't really God come among us, the real God in our midst, he was just a guy who happened to access the God within him more than usual. That's a distortion we see today a lot more among liberal Christians. It's the idea that Christ is more of a principle or a spiritual idea and Jesus just got it better than most, and if we try to get it like he did, we can become spiritual.

JMF: The idea there, as far as it affects us, is how do we achieve the same thing Christ did by following his example, and we turn the gospel into that.

GSD: Exactly. That puts the full burden and weight on me again. Instead of having a Jesus who is God among us, who can lend me his aid and work to transform me, I've got to try to be like Jesus, which is impossible even in the best of circumstances.

JMF: Backing up to the ghostly Jesus that conservatives tend to see, doesn't it result in the same thing? Kind of an...I need to emulate Jesus, I need to measure up to what he did, and that becomes how we relate to God, instead of in terms of the real ascension that you were talking about?

GSD: Yes. We get disconnected from Jesus. If he just *appeared* to be a human, then he never really became what I am. He never really redeemed what is my humanity. He's so much God, so high above me, that I can never attain to it. I can try, but I'm reaching up for him, I'm grasping for him, but it's an impossibly high standard, because he never really was human in this heresy, he just appeared to be. That happens when we think of Jesus as so superhuman that we no longer realize how closely we can relate to him.

The doctrine of the continuous union with our humanity that the ascension gives us reminds us that not only did he become fully human, but he *remains* fully human, as well as fully God, still able to connect to us.

JMF: In *Jesus Ascended*, you use the example of *Les Misérables* of Jean Valjean and Marius as an illustration of the ascension.

GSD: That was in the section on Jesus as our High Priest and thinking through how in his ascension, Jesus is taking our humanity up to the Father, and how he's continuing to intercede for us. If you saw the stage adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel or maybe you had to read it in high school when you were younger, you remember that it's a story about Jean Valjean, who was a kind of every-man character who, though he had been wrongly accused of stealing in his youth, is set free and rises to become the mayor of a town and actually adopts a young girl named Cosette because her mother has died of an illness.

He's this wonderful father figure concerned to care for her, but because of his shadowy past he doesn't want anyone to know about her, and he keeps her cloistered away till he realizes one day that Cosette has fallen in love with a man she met out in town named Marius. Jean Valjean realizes that his daughter's happiness lies in communion with this man that she has met. Well, as things happen, the ill-fated French Revolution occurs and Marius has gone to fight and in the process of that fight, he is severely wounded.

Jean Valjean is there at the barricades, and in a very poignant scene you see him pick up the wounded Marius, put him on his back, and then open up a grate and descend into the city's sewers. There, he escapes from the soldiers who are coming after them and he strides through the filth and the wreckage that is floating in the sewers of Paris in order to rise up in another place and bring Marius to a physician who can heal him and ultimately restore him to Cosette, his love.

It struck me what a wonderful example that is, and in some sense an allegory of Christ's priesthood for realizing that we are mortally wounded as humans by our sin and our estrangement from the Father. Jesus, in a sense, came down to where we are and picked up our humanity as he took it as his own and he made his way against the filth and the sewage of this world, striding against the sin and the violence and the anger and the distortions, he carried our ruined humanity all the way up to the healing place, into the heavenlies, where now he is preparing a place for us where we can be in communion with him.

JMF: Having a sense of the ascension and where Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, ascended, taking our humanity as it really is with him, having healed it and redeemed it can't help but bring a great hope to us as sinners if we are able to face it and recognize ourselves as sinners.

GSD: It's a wonderful hope, because our life is in heaven with Christ and God. Now obviously, you and I are not yet in heaven, as nice as this place is, we haven't quite arrived. Yet spiritually, the Scripture says we're located in heaven with Christ. So we're living now our days among earth as citizens of heaven. There's a sense in which we take great comfort from the fact that

our heavenly hope is secure and we're making our way through this world as his agents, as those who are bringing the news of another life and another country to a very weary and broken world.

JMF: Most of the time, many of us feel like Marius on Jean Valjean's back. We don't feel like Jean Valjean, we feel wounded and near death, spiritually speaking, and helpless.

GSD: Sure. That's where it's so important that as we hear the wonderful story of the gospel and all its grandeur all the way through from his birth to his ministry to his death, resurrection, and ascension, we find ourselves located in the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit's job is to come and fill us to give us the life of Christ in our presence and experience, so that we live now with the life of heaven to come flowing through us in the present moment. That's a weird kind of time-warp thing to say, but the goal that we're on our way to, actually becomes present in our experience through the work of the Holy Spirit.

How does that happen? How do we experience that? That's where our participation and our faith makes a big difference. We can't simply sit here like rocks and say, "Okay God, now give me the joy of heaven." But as we worship, as we pray, as we faithfully study, as we fellowship, as we serve, and as we ask for the Holy Spirit to keep doing his work of, "Bring the heavenly life of Jesus into my present experience, Lord continue to transform me," he promises that he will do that. He will pour out his Spirit upon us.

JMF: So our life in Christ is not something that we're always going to feel some kind of glorious heaven-opened-light-shining-down wonderful moment. It's actually lived out in the midst of the struggles of day-to-day life and the messiness of real relationships and the ups and downs.

GSD: Absolutely. The fact that we have this joy, Jesus said in John 16, "In a little while you will see me again and my joy will be with you and no one can take that joy from you," the joy of the fact that he overcame death. It didn't mean the disciples weren't going to suffer. As much as we know from history, they all died pretty miserable deaths and lived under a great deal of persecution.

But our joy is not dependent on circumstances. It's not even dependent on our moods and feelings. There's a sense of joy that I have in the knowledge of all that Christ has done on my behalf, that is a constant peace that underlies circumstances of life even if I have to go through physical suffering, even if I have to go through broken relationships, even if some tragic accidents happen to those whom I love. Even in the midst of wars and tumults, the difference for the Christian is this deep, deep peace and recognition of what Christ has accomplished. Even when I'm not feeling it, not feeling happy and lighthearted, that's where faith believes and it clings to

the fact that this is reality. The world's reality, its brokenness, is not the truest thing. At the deepest levels, all is well.

JMF: That makes such a huge difference for believers who are serious about their Christian lives, because we don't experience great highs all the time, and we can go around trying to pretend that we do, to appear righteous and close to God, thinking that that's what should be happening, so we can put on a façade as though everything is wonderful and everything is great, when everything isn't and there are tragedies and sorrows and pains. But this deeper level you're talking about is something that we're able to see more clearly when we better understand Christ as a real human who has taken a real life up in his ascension to the Father.

GSD: When Paul commands the Philippians in chapter 4 to rejoice, it's not about a feeling, it's about an activity. Rejoicing in that sense means saying to myself or saying to others even in the teeth of suffering and even in walking through the valley of the shadow of death saying, "Nevertheless, Jesus reigns." "Nevertheless, Christ is Lord, nevertheless, he has gone up into heaven and is there in my name and on my behalf. My sins are forgiven and I cannot be taken away from him, so I rejoice and praise you even in the midst of my tears."

The phrase that you often hear young people saying today, "whatever," is their way of detaching from something that they don't like that happens to them. They say, "It doesn't matter. Whatever." John Calvin had a wonderful sermon where his refrain wasn't "whatever," but "what of it," and the fact that while we care about what's going on in life, there's something so much truer that we can face circumstances and say, "What of it?"

In this sermon I'm thinking of, which happened to be an ascension sermon, Calvin was saying, "This world is filled with troubles and the devils assault us at every moment, but what of it? Christ Jesus reigns in heaven and sends me his power now. This world is full of temptations and often I am weak, but what of it? Christ is in heaven and he is strong and he is strong on my behalf." I think when we realize that we can replace the "whatever" or even the crushingness of life with the, "What of it? No matter what is thrown my way, Christ reigns and he holds me, then I know at the deepest levels all is well and all will be well."

JMF: In the couple of minutes we have left, let's talk about how that affects mission. Our sense of being able to have joy in the face of whatever we are facing, how does that affect our responsibility in terms of Christian mission?

GSD: In the same way that the ascension gives us the joy when things are going wrong to know that Christ is reigning, the fact that in his ascension Jesus holds onto his humanity indicates his great concern for this world and

for his little ones. It's the ascended Jesus that gives the church her mission. He's the one who sends us into the world and says, "What you do to the least of these, you have done to me."

Augustine has a wonderful quote where he says, "Christ is in heaven glorious as God, but here he is needy and is poor. So worship him as God in heaven, but love him by loving his poor." Isn't that wonderful? There's the church's whole mission. Worship above to Christ who is God, serve Christ in his poor, Christ who is man here below.

15. JESUS IS ALWAYS AHEAD OF US

JMF: I have your book here, *Discovering Jesus, Awakening to God*, and on page 19 you said, “You have dared to hope that the real God is more than an angry rule-giver or some benign force of positivity. Our hearts long for...” You list a number of things and one of them is, “A God who knows us utterly, loves us passionately, and transforms us continually.” I had to think how freeing it would be if everyone knew God that way.

GSD: We all have a yearning to know God. It’s in us from the very beginning, but a lot of us have had some bad experiences in churches and with God’s people, and a lot of us have some distorted views about God. Some of us think that God is always out to get us and that he’s just never pleased with anything that we do. Others of us think that God is no bigger than what I can find inside myself. Both those conceptions of God leave us still yearning for a real experience of the real God.

JMF: Don’t many people feel like a God like you’re describing and bringing out here in *Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God* (and you’re writing to Christians, for the most part) – don’t people feel that a God like that is too good to be true?

GSD: I think we do. Some of that’s from our upbringing, where being a Christian is more about being *good* than it is about being in a relationship with God. When we read the New Testament and go to the Gospel stories, we see this God who comes among us and knows us utterly. Think of Jesus meeting the woman at the well, and her response is, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did.” Not that Jesus gave her a chronological list of all the events in her life, but that he so spoke the truth of who she was, in love, that she felt as if she were utterly and finally, finally known.

JMF: In this book, you go through Gospel story after gospel story to help illustrate that Jesus is presenting us with the kind of God that you’re talking about. He knows us completely and thoroughly and loves us unconditionally in spite of what he knows about us, which is far more than even the worst we know about ourselves, and he loves us unconditionally anyway.

GSD: Absolutely. That’s the God we meet in the Gospels. Encountering Jesus freshly, really picking up the Gospel stories again, and saying, “Who is this Jesus who was encountering people? How did he meet them? How did he touch them? Is it possible that that could also happen to me?”

Our belief as Christians is that the Scriptures are not a dead document, but they are a living witness to the person of Jesus Christ. Because we believe that Jesus is still alive, that he’s even now at the right hand of the Father

praying for us and interceding for us, we believe that he still speaks to us. Often not audibly, but through his word. When he sends his Spirit, and the word is read, and we see that these Scriptures were written not just for the people then, but for us today, it gets exciting because we realize maybe God will meet us in the same way that he was meeting others when he came to us as Jesus.

JMF: Being encountered by a God who knows us thoroughly, loves us unconditionally, but he doesn't leave it with just that. He does love us in spite of what he knows about us, and that love is unconditional, but he doesn't leave us in that sinful condition – he also is the God who transforms us continually.

GSD: Absolutely. We see that in Jesus, in the way he called people to himself. For instance, in this book we talk some about the calling of the first disciples, where Jesus asked these fishers who fished all night long and are tired and they haven't caught anything and they're putting away their nets, he asked them, "Could you put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch?"

All the fishers knew that the fish were caught in shallow waters and they were caught at night, not in the day. But Peter says, "Well, all right, at your word I'll do what you're saying even though you're not a fisher." Suddenly, they catch so many fish in those nets that the boats are threatening to be swamped. It's a moment where the dreams of a fisherman are all coming true. What does a fisher dream about but the great catch?

What's so striking about this Gospel story is that Peter, in the midst of the biggest catch of his life and career, doesn't care a bit about it. He falls down on his knees in the boat and he says, "Depart from me, oh Lord, for I am a sinful man." What happened to Peter is he suddenly realized he was in contact with someone more than a man. Someone who was God himself come among us. He had that problem that we often have, and that's realizing that if I'm in the presence of the Holy One, I'm in a lot of trouble because I'm sinful, because I'm weak, because I've done wrong things.

But it's right here that Jesus meets him, and the first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "Do not be afraid." He doesn't reject Peter, he doesn't deny the fact that Peter is a sinner, he knows that we're sinners, but he's not there to condemn Simon Peter, he's there to say, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people." And from that moment, Peter left his nets, left the greatest catch of his life on the shore, and went off and followed Jesus.

So Jesus met him where he was, told a sinner that he was forgiven, and then moved him on into a greater adventure. He said, "I can fulfill all your

worldly dreams of a great catch, but I know what you're really after, something of greater significance. Come follow me, and let's see what happens when we bring this love and this grace to sinners."

He still does that for us today. We have times, perhaps, in the middle of our lives where we've achieved highly in our careers, and we realize, "This is not what I want to do. I need something more." Christ might say, "Come follow me." Not that you necessarily leave your job, but that the focus of your life changes and he calls us to something more.

JMF: The beauty of this story that speaks to everybody, whether you've been successful in life or whether you've been a complete washout, or, as most people, a pendulum between the two, when Peter recognizes that this is something greater than he's ever seen before, God has encountered him in some way and he immediately sees himself as a sinner and admits that: "Depart from me – I'm a sinful man," he doesn't really mean "depart from me" – he means "I'm not worthy."

But Jesus immediately tells him not to be afraid and immediately takes up fellowship with him, and that speaks so much to our human condition at every level, whether we're experiencing a wonderful thing or whether we're experiencing a very fearful thing or we're walking through a period of facing our sinfulness for whatever reason.

Sometimes in the middle of a tragedy, where we feel like, this came upon me because of my own stupidity and my own selfishness and I've been going the wrong way and I'm going to reap the fruit of that...even at that kind of a moment to realize that Christ is coming to us, extending his fellowship to us, that makes life something new and different from what it was, or would be, without him.

GSD: It does. To say, do not be afraid. We think about that wonderful story where Jesus comes walking on the water to the disciples in the middle of the night, and they're terrified (even though they've been longing for him) because they think he's a ghost, because, after all, who's ever walked on water?

The first words out of his mouth are, in Greek, *ego emei*: "I am. Do not be afraid." That's really an emblem for the presence of God with us in Jesus Christ, as he arrives in our midst with all of this power and all of his revelation and speaks first to say, "I'm here, do not be afraid." It's not, "I'm here, get worried because I've come to condemn you," it's not, "I'm here, you aren't adequate, you're going to be kicked out," but, "I'm here, be at peace. In me you have forgiveness and grace."

JMF: Many people have the idea that Christianity is about a relationship

with the law or with rules, that it's about not doing this but doing that and praying so many hours a day or minutes a day, whatever the case may be in terms of rule-keeping. And then to find out that Christianity really is about a personal relationship with somebody who already loves you and has already done what is necessary to save you from all those things that destroy and hurt you, it changes the whole complexion of what being a Christian is all about. All of this judgementalism toward one another, and all the burden of rule-keeping that you can never measure up to, is transformed in one instant when you see God for who Christ reveals him to be.

GSD: It's incredibly freeing. Maybe we can talk about another Gospel story that illustrates that. Remember in Luke 7 where Jesus has been invited to dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee? In those days those dinners were kind of open affairs. People from the city would come and almost watch a prominent dinner unfold. The Gospel story tells us that a woman of the city who was a sinner, which means she had done some notorious sin, came and stood behind Jesus, and she brought with her that alabaster flask of very expensive ointment. She broke the flask open and began to pour it on his feet and too she began weeping, and the tears and the ointment mingled together, and she wet his feet with her tears and she wiped them with her hair.

JMF: Just to make it clear to people who might be listening, they would have been reclining on a bench so that he could be propped up on an elbow facing the table...

GSD: Right. With his feet out to the side. She didn't have to crawl under the table ...

JMF: As a kid I always imagined it that way and thought, "how could that work? She's crawling under the table?"

GSD: But still, it would have been a scandalous act, because a woman had her hair uncovered, and it's quite distracting if somebody is weeping behind you. Simon the Pharisee is indignant about this, and he says, in his mind, how could Jesus accept the love of such a sinner? If he knew who she was and realized she's awful?

Jesus gives a little mini-parable to this teacher of the law, a parable so obvious as to have been insulting to him. He says, Simon, if two men had a debt and one owed the equivalent of \$50 and one owed the equivalent of \$500 and you forgave them both, who will be the more grateful, who will love you more?

That's so obvious anybody could get that, and Simon says begrudgingly, "I suppose the one who owed the most," and Jesus says, "Exactly. This

woman loves so much because she's been forgiven so much." And we note that he's never spoken a word to her before. He simply declared her forgiveness already.

Simon saw her and wanted to remind her of all her sins and all the laws that she had broken. Jesus saw her and just by his presence was accepting her and forgiving her. Not that her sins were excused, but that he was recognizing her need and that he loved her.

He then lifts her up and says, "Go your way, your faith has made you well." He didn't have to say to her, by the way, "sin no more." She understood that. He had forgiven and accepted her, and so she loved much.

So too in Christianity. When we leave off legalism, the idea that we have to appease an angry God or somehow have enough achievements to impress God, and enter into a relationship of a God who already loves us and has already forgiven us in Christ, then it becomes not about law, but about love. We are ardent and desirous to come to him and unburden ourselves, even to weep over our mistakes and our sins not out of fear, but out of desire to have him heal us and reconnect us.

JMF: It even affects the way we view the events that happen to us in the course of life. If something good happens we think, "God must be blessing me because I did something good." Or if a bad thing happens, we think conversely, "God must be punishing me because I did something bad." And because there's always something bad that we've done, we're always waiting for the moment when the bad thing will happen that God will punish us with.

GSD: Right.

JMF: It prevents us from being able to think of a relationship with God where we can meet every circumstance with "Christ is with me in this present moment and I can proceed knowing that he is with me, that he loves me, and even if I bungle it, he will love me anyway, and I may have to struggle my way through it, but he's not going to leave me or forsake me." Even as we go through it, he will continue to love me and he will continually help me to become more like him in the course of it.

GSD: The problem is, even though we're Christians, we live as if we're living by karma, the idea that if you do something bad it's going to come around and get you in equal measure. The rock singer, Bono, from the group U-2 that's so popular, noted that it was a transformation for him when he realized that the universe works not by karma but by grace. That the God of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself, is not about karma, making sure everything is handed out according to what we deserve, which would be bad news, but that it's about grace. Because one person has taken our sins upon himself,

has paid the price not only at the external level, but in the depths of the depths he's taken our lost and forsaken condition, made it his own, and healed it so that he can return to us grace in exchange for our letting go of our sin and our guilt. It's fabulous.

JMF: As you go through the various Gospel stories in here that you cite as you walk through the four Gospels, is there one that stands out particularly that really touched you in a special way?

GSD: I wanted to talk some toward the end of the book, bringing up the story of Peter's reinstatement. We talked about Simon Peter, who was called to Jesus when he was fishing. After the resurrection, when Jesus wasn't with them all the time, and at the end of John's Gospel, Simon Peter and his friends have gone fishing again. Jesus is on the beach cooking them breakfast.

He tells them, he calls to them to put their nets over on the other side and they catch, the Gospel tells us, 153 large fish. Suddenly they realized, this is déjà vu! We've been here before. This must be the Lord. And they come running in with great joy to see the Lord.

That's when we have this encounter between Simon Peter and Jesus that's recalling his terrible denials. Peter must have still be smarting over that, that the night of Jesus' betrayal, three times he denied knowing him after promising he'd die for him.

So Jesus pulls him aside and he says, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?" Peter says, "Well, Lord, you know I love you." And he asks him again, "Do you love me?" A third time, "Do you love me?" Simon Peter says, "Lord, you know all things, you know I love you." Jesus says, "Then feed my sheep."

That story is the background for one of the most beautiful chapters, to me, in all of Scripture, which is in Peter's first letter, chapter 1, where he's writing to Christians who are under persecution, have been scattered, and are having a difficult time. He says, "In this hope you rejoice, even though you've been suffering for a while, but that the genuineness of your faith might be proved. For though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of joy."

A long time ago, when I was struggling a lot with guilt and legalism, I was reading that passage and I was thinking, how does Peter know that? He'd never met those people. He's never met me. How can he declare, "Though you have not seen him, you love him"?

Then it occurred to me. It was like the scales fell off. What if I simply accepted that I *am* what God declares me to be? What if I simply accepted

that I *have* what he's declared that I have? And I thought, I *do* love him. I don't have to fish around inside myself for my feelings, to see if I've done enough good works, to see if I've prayed enough and had enough quiet times. It's a fact. I *do* love him. His Spirit is within me. It's a fact. He's given himself to me, and I believe in him.

So for me, that was transformative. To realize that it wasn't about my achieving anything, but my receiving what he had already declared to be true about me. It changed my life.

JMF: To accept what he has already said about you is true, this is something that's a fact whether you believe it or not.

GSD: The beauty of it for me was to realize that. In Peter's words, he declared to these people he'd never seen, "Though you have not seen him, you love him." He was describing a reality that they could simply receive and live into. To know that, even before I have turned toward Jesus Christ, he has already turned toward me. Even before I've confessed my sins, he has already atoned for them in his cross and resurrection and ascension. Even before I have grasped ahold of him in faith, which I must do, he has already grasped ahold of me.

It's the most marvelous and freeing experience to realize that even the faith that I have in him is his gift. He's supplying everything to me. I grow and change and obey and live now based on what he has done, not on what I'm able to whomp up as my own spiritual experience and hope that if I really worship hard enough or pray hard enough I'll get some kind of spiritual experience. Rather, this is a resting in what he's already provided, and receiving it.

JMF: There's a real *you* that he's already made you to be, that you really haven't even seen yet in its fullness. Isn't it Colossians that speaks of the fact that we are already sealed with him in heavenly places. That new creation that we are, is not something that we see every day. We see...

GSD: The glass darkly.

JMF: Yeah. The down and dirty that we know we are.

GSD: I like 1 John 3, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared to us. But we know that we will be like him, for then we will see him just as he is."

JMF: That's when we can see ourselves as he's actually made us to be.

GSD: Right.

JMF: And not only ourselves, but we can see others as he's made them to be as well. This is something that we struggle with, isn't it, that we see others as people who are in our way and people who are causing us trouble?

We don't see them as the new creation in Christ he's made them to be.

GSD: Exactly. C.S. Lewis talks about the fact that if we could see others as what they will be when they're fully glorified, the new lives in heaven, we would be tempted now to fall down and worship them. He says we're surrounded by people who would potentially be gods and goddesses to us if we saw them as they really are. My sight is so poor that now I see you as the guy who cut me off in traffic, and what I need to do is see myself and to see you in Christ as one who's been redeemed and transformed, glorified, and is on his way to full realization of that.

JMF: That is a source of great hope, when we realize that the future we have when we are actually glorified and with Christ, the relationships that we will be able to have that now are so strained (and in some cases even broken) can be completely renewed and made fresh and be good and real.

GSD: Which is a real incentive now, because if I'm going to have to deal with you for the rest of eternity, I might as well start forgiving you and loving you and getting along with you now, because we're going to have a lot of time together.

JMF: Or stay away from you now, since we'll be together for a long time (laughing).

GSD: That's right. We'll have plenty of time for that later (laughing).

JMF: Is there a project that you're currently involved in that you can tell us about?

GSD: I'm working a bit on this whole question of, if Jesus is so great, then why am I so pitiful still? It occurs to me the more I probe and consider all that Christ is, and the more theology tells us how great is his salvation and how wonderful are his ways, I want to know why is it that I am, and people whom I pastor, are not seeing more transformation? Why are we not more vividly alive and joyous with this reality? Is it because the reality isn't true?

I don't think that's the case. I believe it with all my heart that this is who Jesus is. Something is happening that is causing a clog in the pipeline. It's keeping us from living out, living in, the reality of what Christ has achieved for us.

JMF: Can you give us any clues as to how you're going to resolve that?

GSD: I wish I could tell you how exactly how to do it, we'd all be more successful. But it's a real question where we turn to the ancient traditions of the church of Jesus Christ and the whole concept of spiritual ascension. How is it that I live now with the hope and the power of what is yet to come? I think that we'll find that it's as devastatingly simple as asking the Lord to do in me all that he has promised, and offering myself as a living sacrifice to him,

not to gain his merit, not to win his approval, but to be available for his use.

JMF: Like you were just talking about, you're really asking to be able to live in the reality of who he has already made you to be in Christ.

GSD: Exactly. One of the ancient spiritual masters talked about how great a ship is moored at a dock by such a thin rope. For us we have this great ship, the hope of the gospel, but these little pieces that we refuse to release, often wanting to hang onto my own little bit of righteousness, my own achievement before God, or my own pet sins, can kind of hold back the whole ship from leaving the harbor and sailing the seas.

The ancient paths have always been about affirmation and negation. Negatively saying no to the old life and positively saying yes to the new life. I think John Calvin encourages us to direct all our attention away from ourselves and toward Christ. The surest way to sink my ship is to take a look at myself, either to consider how great I am, which is false, or how wretched I am, which in Christ isn't so, and get caught in that web of self. But the discipline of knowing about, looking at, and worshiping Jesus, I think is what seems to lead to transformation.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. Gerrit Dawson, pastor of First Presbyterian church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Thanks for being with us.

16. WHO IS GOD?

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

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

JMF: And those are the people who like it.

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



Sometimes theological questions have to do with why things are the way they are? or why they go the way they do. They surround the "what," "why," "how," "where," "when" questions.

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

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

JMF: That's a relational question.

GD: It's very relational. It means who is God in himself, and also who is God in relationship to me, and who am I in relationship to God? It has to do with the whole of reality, and therefore it is personal. Who? – it has to do

with identity. Who is this One that we're talking about? And what does it have to do with who I am? It's much more concrete, it's much more personal, it has to do with interaction.

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

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

They consider that. "Well, some say, 'Elijah,' and some say, 'the Prophet,' some say, 'John the Baptist' – this and that."

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

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

JMF: He gives a great answer.

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

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

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

death, he's going to exclude Jesus himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

names and labels, but hang on to an erroneous content?

The Pharisees had the same problem. They understood God in terms of their ascertained view of the law. When Jesus comes, the question is, will they hang on to their view of the law and interpret Jesus in terms of the law? Or will they let Jesus be the one who interprets the law? When it comes to the Sabbath, we have the same problem – they believe Jesus is violating the Sabbath when he heals or allows the disciples to pluck their wheat or heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus’ response is, I am the Sabbath. I’m the one who created it. I’m here to interpret to you what that’s all about. So don’t interpret me in terms of the law. Interpret the law in terms of me. I’m the source, I’m the creator of it. I’m here to tell you what it’s really all about. And not only to tell you, but to *be* that Sabbath.

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

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

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

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

So, theology is the “who” question, and the first response is to ask, “Who is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ?” That’s the God we want to know. Any theological reflection has the central question, and Jesus himself is the first,

central, most concrete, personal and direct answer. It's God's own reply. If you want to know who I am, then this is where to look. It is dealing with who God is in Jesus Christ. That's the central question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Kind of like my relationship with God.

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

that part of the covenant. First announced to Abraham and made clear.

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

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

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

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

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

17. GOD'S PLAN TO SHARE HIS LOVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

toward us if we believe in Jesus and then he will say, “Ok, now, I love you.”

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

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

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

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

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

Now, it’s not God – we can’t return that love in exactly the same way. But it could be loved by God. And so creation is the overflow of the fellowship and communion of God. To create that which is not God, and yet love it in the same way, with the same love – so God creates that. So creation is created

for the purpose and the end and aim of fellowship and communion – to be together with God and to belong to God. This is why God says to Israel, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” It is for that fellowship, communion and love that the Father, Son, and Spirit have had from all eternity – they extend that, to that which is not God – which is amazing!

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

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

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

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

GD: When the relationship is broken off, it needs to be restored. But it needs to be restored from the inside out – or all the way down to the bottom of our very being. When the relationship is broken off, it affects our very

nature, our very being. God opposes that. God opposes whatever opposes his good purposes, for us to be in right relationship with God, to enjoy that fellowship and communion that is a reflection of the fellowship and communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So God says, “No” to whatever resists his eternal good purposes for his creation.

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Then this union is true of all human beings, whether they’re believers or not. What is the difference in the way this union plays out between a believer and unbeliever?

GD: We have to go all the way back to creation. As the apostle Paul reminds us, everything was created from the Father through the Son, and everything is through the Son, for the Son, and to the Son, from all eternity.

Creation belongs to God by virtue of creation, whether people recognize it or not. No human life takes place without God giving it life. We don't have life in ourselves. The life we have, even of those who are resisting God, is coming from God. God is lending them life. We belong to God by virtue of creation.

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

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

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

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

Now, will we participate in that right relationship? Will we trust that God has reconciled himself, that he has nothing against us, because it's all been

made right by God himself through the Son and in the Spirit? God offers his word of reconciliation – you are forgiven, you are atoned... because God loves...

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

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

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

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

JMF: Every believer was once an unbeliever.

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

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

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

In the power of the Spirit, as we submit to that, we repent and we believe to receive the gift that's already there for us. When we repent, we are admitting our guilt, but it is God's forgiveness. He doesn't say, "If you repent then I forgive you." He says, "I forgive you, so repent."

"The kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus says, "so repent." Peter preached in Acts the whole work of God from Creation through Redemption, and then those listening said, "What then shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent."

Repenting is receiving the gift of the completed work of Christ for us. That represents the mind of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To deny that the Father and Son are of one mind and purpose, is to deny the divinity of Christ, is to tear apart God and make three Gods differently. No, Jesus shows us the Father and takes us to the Spirit. The whole God is the redeeming, atoning, and forgiving God, and in the power of the Spirit, we receive that.

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

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

JMF: There's a certain rest in that.

GD: Absolutely.

18. THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL

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

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

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

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

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

to do it. But given who God is, I don't know how they could, or how they should. We cannot put a limit on God's grace. It won't be because he has changed his mind about them. His mind has been made up in Jesus Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

GD: We're again dealing with both the "who" question and then the

“how.” The “how” question is more difficult to answer, probably because Scripture doesn’t explain all that. So we have to go with the “who” question. If God is consistent with who he is, and there is no God behind the God except in Jesus Christ, it means God will use all his God-ness to rescue his children, who belong to him and he is reconciled to them.

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

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

JMF: And can exceed our feeble attempts.

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

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

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

JMF: What if they rejected a false Christ?

GD: If they rejected a falsehood, they wouldn’t be condemned. God knows our hearts. We are limited in that.

JMF: Right. Which of us has a full, perfect and complete understanding?

We're relying entirely on Jesus' acceptance of *us* – we're not relying on our acceptance of him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To think of salvation as a relationship, then it needs to be a right relationship. We belong to God by virtue of creation and redemption. Now the question is, will we live as if that's the case? Wouldn't it be silly for a couple to come together, to go through the marriage ceremony, and to pledge their eternal love for each other and then say, "Now, since we're married, there's no point in living together." No, the point of being married *is* to live together.

Our belonging to God, through Christ, Creator, Redeemer, and Perfecter

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

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

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

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

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

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

We’re living into a reality, we’re not creating a new reality — that’s been done in Christ — we’re living up into the reality, or there are some people who are resisting the reality. But nobody’s changing the reality. We either affirm the reality, or we’re living in denial of the reality. That’s our choice.

Sometimes we think our choice is to create an alternative reality. No, that would make us God. We're not. Our only choice, and the choice that God gives us is, we're to live in the reality that God has established and created for us, out of his goodness, holiness, mercy, and grace.

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

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

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

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

sin is... the greatest sin is to reject grace. God opposes that which opposes his good, loving purposes. If God did not oppose that which threatened and opposed his good creation, his purposes, God would not be loving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

19. KARL BARTH AND HIS THEOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: Barth was so grasped by this and saw its importance that he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

continues.

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

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

JMF: So, a holiness focus.

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

JMF: Again, he’s a fixer of a problem.

GD: Right, of a moral order.

JMF: So he’s not at the heart and foundation of the theology. [**GD:** Right.] He’s a factor...

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

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

JMF: So if that’s the focus of your theology, you read Scriptures with that in mind, you order your life with that in mind, that’s the kind of preaching

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

GD: And judgmental about yourself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

in having more areas of our lives being contractually run.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Barth's focus on this, in drawing theology back to a focus on Christ

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

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

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

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

JMF: What sort of sources?

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

They were into ideals, like the ideal of resurrection as a general idea. The

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

20. IS IT HARD TO BE SAVED?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: One way to look at it is, it's actually *impossible* for anyone to be saved in and of themselves. It is only possible in and through Christ. There is no possibility for anyone in any other way. I don't think the difficulty of the way is the main point of that particular text. Notice it says "disobey the gospel." The gospel is the announcement of the good news of the reconciling work of God in Christ. To *obey* it is to trust it and follow in its way. This isn't setting up a kind of legalism, which when we hear the word *obedience* we often think that's what is play here. It's obedience to the gospel, which means our hearts follow along with the gospel, and therefore follow Christ, in his way.

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

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

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

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

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

But when we read the Word of God, we're in an entirely different situation, because we know who it's coming from. When you read a letter from someone you know very well, as you're reading through, do you know how sometimes you can hear their voice? You know exactly how they would say that phrase? What they would say, how they would say it, and what they would mean. That provides the larger context for understanding any sentence or even any word. Coming to Scripture is very much like that, because God has made himself known in Christ in no uncertain terms. God in person in

time and space, flesh and blood. We have to remember that when we're dealing with any passage of Scripture, Old Testament, New Testament, whose Scripture it is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: That's the point. We tend to think that if we resist God, God gives up on us. We've probably experienced that. If we resist others and the good things they're trying to give us, sometimes they give up. But that's not true in

the case of God. He is committed to us in body and soul, that is, in Jesus Christ. And that covenant, now fulfilled, is irrevocable. He is our Lord, he is our Savior.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: We're very interested in the Christian life as the current benefits. And indeed, there are. Those are the benefits of being in Christ and following Christ in our daily lives, we find healing from when we are sinned against and freedom from it. As the Spirit leads us, we become more like Christ.

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

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

GD: John 17 is one of my favorite passages. But one important thing is you can't stop at that verse and try to figure out what it means, because in

the end, he is praying that through his disciples there would be many who would believe through their word. He is anticipating you and me and others.

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

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

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

In the end there is only one – the chosen one, the anointed one – Jesus Christ himself. He chooses the one not to reject, but to bless the many. That’s what he’s anticipated. If you read the entire chapter of John 17, he’s praying for the disciples on behalf of the world.

21. WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

In some ways, you could describe a life filled with that grace, and with that giving and receiving to it, as some kind of "rules." You could say it looks

like this, it looks like that. You could make a list from it, but the list could never be exhaustive, and it would never show you the true heart of the relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: That passage is describing what might or *could* happen, and it's a warning passage, given so that it *doesn't* happen. But there is a warning. It's

important to remember what the object of God's wrath and judgment is. The object is sin in his creatures, who belong to him, created in Christ (Paul tells us), through Christ, and for Christ. We all bear the image through our creation, the image of the Son in us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

deal with that sin, when we think we can't come to him because we're not worthy to come to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

with God and wanting to stay in the middle.

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: And sin carries its own consequences, because that's what makes it sin. If you put your foot in the lawnmower, then it will cut your foot, so you

want to avoid doing that, just as we want to avoid sin, because it has negative consequences. Christ came to deliver us from a life that produces negative consequences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

When we resist that, we're gumming up the whole works. Another simple image could be: we're putting water in the gas tank of this vehicle that takes

us to Christ to live in his very heart. God is not interested in seeing us go through that, much like parents watching their children resist good things from time to time. God wants us to live in the fullness of that relationship, even now, to its fullest.

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

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

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

22. PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: Very much so. As Christ comes, he calls us to join him, but to join

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, love is ministry. But that ministry is to enable us to grow up, and in the growing up, that means to give more freely and fully of who we are and what we are, and to receive more freely from another all the life that they

have to give us in this great gift exchange. Our growing up is this greater freedom, greater joy, and greater depth (maybe even greater creativity) as to how to pass on God's love for us to someone else, to be a channel of his blessing, and that's our perfection. In the end, who has this, where we are going? We're becoming like Christ, we're growing up in Christ. We can sum it: as we grow, we become like Christ in his loving communion.

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

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

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

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

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

MM: You talked about how we are to love perfectly, and I don't see that in myself — that's a frustration for me. You talked about how Christ wants

to cut sin out of our lives and my frustration is, why isn't he doing that faster? How does my understanding of Christ help me deal with my own limitations?

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

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

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

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

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

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

tone or in content, it's very devastating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christian motivation for doing things is faith, hope and love. Faith in God, hope in what God is doing, and the love of God for us. Trusting in those. These create a different kind of motivational framework. Paul works this way. He says in Philippians 1:6, "Work out your own salvation." Wow!

Why would we ever want to take up that? That's impossible, it's just crazy. Why do we do that? Paul goes on and tell us. "Work out your own salvation..." Why? "Because God is completing a work in us. He is working out to do and to will according to his good purpose."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

we want to take people down that road.

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

23. WHAT IS JESUS DOING IN OUR SANCTIFICATION?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What was going on with me is, Christ loved me, Christ forgave me, Christ saved me, but after that I had to somehow figure out how to do his ministry. That was putting me down a path of spiritual burnout. That's the final thing that led me back to say, "Let's look at this whole thing again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

So how do we understand the distinction, now that we've grasped that they're together, they can't be separated, they are one in Christ? A helpful way to think about it is to say that “we are justified” means we are put right, in right relationship with God. It initiates the Christian life, when we realize that we have been made right with God. Some people talk about a right

standing, a right identity. We belong to Christ. All of what we are, all of what we will be, all of what we have been. It all belongs to Christ. That's our essential identity, the beginning point. That's justification.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MM: You talk about how we are shaped to conform to Christ. It

reminded me of the phrase “what would Jesus do?” Is this an accurate description of the way we are to live? We’re thinking “what would Jesus do?”

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

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

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

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

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

GD: One of the points of theology is going through Scripture and finding different ways of talking about who Jesus is. It gets down to the bottom of what his heart is, what his mind is, what his purpose is, what his ways are. As we see who he is and what he’s done for us, what he’s doing through us, then we want to be with him. Obedience is a fellowship with Christ, so that as I see the things he’s doing, I want to do those things. I want to get involved. Or as I hear about the things that he has no interest in, then I don’t want to be involved in those things, because he’s not there and he’s not doing that.

The whole of Christian life is fellowship with Christ. Our obedience is getting involved in the things he’s doing and in the way he’s doing them. So if Jesus is concerned about the poor, I am, because I want to be where Jesus is and involved in the things he’s doing. If he’s bringing people to repentance and faith and hope in God, I want to be involved in those things, because

those are the things he's doing. God, graciously, can figure out ways for me to get involved, which is even more... He's got things for me to do that point to who he is and what he's up to.

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

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

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

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

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

MM: Because he tells us to.

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

There's another part to depend on there, to move us to the Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me.” What does that mean in terms of the Great Commission? It means anywhere you go in the world, even out of the world in the heavens, Jesus' authority is

operating there already. He is the cosmic Lord, so you can't go anywhere and not find his authority already operating there.

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

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

GD: Yes. His purpose is being worked out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We come alongside a person to try to identify the work of God in their

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

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

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

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

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

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

GD: Good.

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

sure, but they might not like that idea at first.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MM: Oh yes, I enjoy it.

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

really going to enjoy that sunset, what needs to happen? It's simple, isn't it?

MM: Open the window.

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

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

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

24. THE IMPORTANCE OF JESUS' HUMANITY

JMF: Most people are turned off by the word *theology*, and people in some churches don't even want their pastors to take a theology course – they're afraid it will corrupt them and turn them away from the Bible, and yet on this program we're talking about a specific kind of theology – *Trinitarian theology*. What difference does it make, and how does that apply to the average believer, and why should we care?

Christian Kettler: “Theol-ogy” is what we believe about God, we're saying that what we believe about God makes a difference. What would be more important? The word sounds technical, but literally it means a study of God – we spend a great deal of time studying other things for our professions, whatever they may be – a great deal of time and money. Why not give a little bit of energy (actually we should give it as much energy as we can) to the study of God? That's what theology, at its best, is about. And Trinitarian theology says that who this God is – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is important – that your kind of theology should say something about who God has revealed himself to be.

JMF: Don't all theologies talk about who God is and who God has revealed himself to be? How does Trinitarian theology differ?



CK: The church has almost always confessed God as Trinity. But our problem is we haven't asked ourselves, what are the implications of that? We just assume, “Someone believes in the Trinity – they are orthodox Christians.” That's the end of discussion. And the Trinity often becomes just a discussion of “How can one be three?” or “How do you deal with a logical conundrum?” – rather than looking at the Bible, what the Bible says, for example in the Gospel of John, about a relationship in God himself, between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. At its depth and height, the Trinity says that God is love, and reveals what love in God means.

Love could mean a lot of things – very sentimental and superficial. What Christians say about “God is love” often ends up being that. The Trinity says, “No. Love begins with God's very being in his relationship from all eternity

– from the Father and Son, through the Spirit. You see that portrayed in the Gospel of John, in the life of Jesus, his relationship with the Father, his dependence upon the Father and his promise of the Holy Spirit. It's a question of the implications of who God has revealed himself to be.



JMF: We bog down in trying to talk about the Trinity – because we want to get the doctrine across to Christians – in counting, it's a numbers game. How is three one, like you said, and how is one three? That doesn't make sense, and we go down that path. You're saying that's not the path. The path is a biblical path of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and God's relationship with us.

CK: It gets at the heart of what we mean when we say, "God is love." Every Christian would say, "Yes, that's important." But what do we mean about love? That's when we look at a relationship of love, not just an idea of love. That's what the Trinity is all about in the Bible, in this relationship between the Father, and the Son, through the Spirit – this mutual relationship.

The Trinity means that God is love, and every Christian believes that. But love is not simply an abstract idea or a sentimental feeling – it's this relationship between the Father and the Son, through the Spirit. There's a richness in God. God is not simply an abstract being up there in heaven – and not just a sovereign, not just a good buddy. God is in a relationship of love himself, between the Father and Son through the Spirit. There are tremendous implications of that for that church, that we need to draw out the implications.

JMF: What you said is so telling, because even though Christians are Trinitarians (they believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, they accept it), when they think of God, they don't think of the Trinity. They don't think of Father, Son, the Holy Spirit – they think of one solitary human-like figure up in the sky with a beard or powerful or whatever, some superman-kind of figure. Even when we say "God is love," they picture a single solitary individual who loves us. But they're not thinking about a love relationship between Father, Son and Spirit...

CK: Exactly, and that colors how we view love. We often think of love as

what *I* get out of it. I want to be loved, and all of us want to be loved. But we often don't see that love, first of all, is giving. Giving is in God's very being from all eternity – the Father and the Son are involved in a relationship of giving to one another, through the Spirit. Love isn't something God just decided to do one day because we messed it up, now what – got to love these people. Love is something that is in God's eternal being. It's not something accidental to God, but essential. That's exciting. It puts a different dynamic and richness into our understanding of love – what can be more practical?

JMF: We often use terms when we talk about Trinitarian theology – we describe it with terms like “Christ-centered Trinitarian theology.” How does that work with ...

CK: That's essential, because the only way we know of the Trinity is through Jesus Christ. It's because of his revelation, his Incarnation. It's the Incarnation of the Son that reveals God to be Father. This is how we know God to be Father, not from our ideas of father. But we get into big trouble if we try to force our ideas of fatherhood upon God. They may be very good experiences, they may be very bad experiences. Either way, that's a bad theological method. Rather, we need to allow *God* to define what he means when he speaks of himself as Father. And we know that through the Son. It's through the Son's relationship with the Father.

The Incarnation and God in Jesus Christ is absolutely essential for us to know God the Father and know the Spirit, because the Father sends the Spirit through the Son. The Son promises the Spirit to be with us, to be our helper, to be the power of presence of Jesus Christ after his ascension. So it's through the Son that we know of the Spirit as well. We can get to all sorts of problems when we develop experiences of the Holy Spirit, or theology of the Holy Spirit, divorced from Christ. And some groups do.

JMF: We use the term *Christ-centered* Trinitarian theology, and we also call it an *incarnational theology*. You mentioned the term *Incarnation*, Christ became one of us, draws us into the relationship he shares with the Father. In that way Trinitarian theology has a focus very different from most theologies.

CK: Yes. It's not saying that this is a new theology with new revelation. This is something that all Christians confess. The problem is that often the church hasn't seen the implications of God as Trinity, the implications of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. That's what a lot of us are seeing today. It's very exciting. It's not a new gospel. It's not a new idea. But it's building upon what the church has always confessed but failed to act upon, failed to think through, and to be a generally Trinitarian incarnational church and have a Trinitarian incarnational ministry.

JMF: That's why we're here, to talk about more of those implications. One of them has to do with the title of your book, *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*. "*The God Who Believes*" is an interesting title. Can you tell us about that?

CK: We often think of faith and belief in terms of something that *we* do. Often it that "grace" is what God did. He did 50% of it, now it's up to us to have the faith part, the belief part. The Bible says something very different. It says that God isn't just on one side, he is on both sides. He is on the first action of grace and revelation. But in Jesus Christ, he has also become the one who responds, the one who believes.

The New Testament speaks of Jesus having faith. When I read the four Gospels, the entirety of the Gospel narrative is a story of Jesus' trust in the Father. Shouldn't it affect how we view faith? I think the New Testament also elaborates on that, particularly in the letter to Hebrews ... that the basis of our faith is in the fact that first of all, Jesus believes in our place and on our behalf. Faith isn't simply something "we have to work up enough faith." Often we don't have enough faith.

JMF: Usually we think in terms of trying to emulate or imitate the faith of Christ. We hear in sermons, the pastor would say, "Look at this faith Christ had. That's the kind of faith we need to have." Instead of looking at Christ as who he is for us.

CK: Yes, we should imitate Christ, but what comes before that is our participation in Christ, our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit, and therefore our union with his faith ...

JMF: And that union isn't something we work up.

CK: Exactly. It's something given to us by grace. That's the implications of the faith that Jesus has already had in the Father, that we through the Spirit then participate, and therefore faith isn't something that is simply a burden and for people who are plagued with doubts. That's a part of my audience for the book. Often the response we give to them is, "You just need to have more faith." That's the problem I have in the first place. I don't have enough faith. As James Torrance used to put it, "We throw people back upon themselves."

We need to re-think that because of who Jesus Christ is. Yes, he is God, he is fully God. Make no mistake about that. But he is also fully human. That includes faith, and his faith becomes the foundation, the ground for our faith. It doesn't mean that we don't have to believe. No, quite the contrary: it's the fact that because Jesus has believed, there's the imperative for us to join with him through the Spirit, in his faith. That can be a tremendous relief (it has

been for me), to think of that when I struggle with doubts, the death of my faith, and questions I have, and if these questions aren't resolved, am I no longer a Christian? Often Christians will play with that terribly.

When I counsel people, I say, "Look to Jesus, look to his faith. You may not feel very faithful right now. It may be difficult, if not impossible for you to believe. But look to his faith, to uphold you, to support you in your times of doubt." It brings a tremendous amount of release and relief to people.

JMF: So it's fair to say that Jesus is believing for us, and therefore we're trusting him to be full of faith in our place...

CK: Exactly. When it comes down to it after my death, it depends upon what Jesus believes about God. That's a solid rock on which I stand. Not what I believe about God. Because my beliefs can come and go. [**JMF:** Right.] But to place your faith in Jesus' faith, is the foundation that the New Testament really calls us to. But often the church has emphasized, no, faith is your part. God has done this part, 50%, and now the other 50%...

JMF: That's how it's usually said. [**CK:** And that's tragic.] Then, we know our faith waivers or is weak, and so we're thrown back into doubt and frustration.

CK: Exactly. That's a tremendous tragedy when we just throw people back upon themselves.

JMF: So their trust should be in Christ himself, not in our faith.

CK: Right. Yes, faith is in Christ. In the Reformation, Luther made a great deal about that. But Christ is both God and human. Yes, he is God, but he is also human, and therefore he has faith. As the centurion at the cross said, he trusts in God, let God deliver him. He was saying that, "Yes, this one trusts in God." And he trusts in God even in the moment of the cross.

JMF: You wrote this book in what year? [**CK:** 2005.] What led up to wanting to give your attention to this project?

CK: It goes back to my studies at Fuller Seminary, where I met Thomas Torrance, the famous Scottish theologian, and I was able to be his teaching assistant. That was a life-transforming experience, and I became more and more familiar with Torrance's theology. One aspect of that is what he calls the vicarious humanity of Christ – it's not just Christ's death that's vicarious – the atonement for us, but it's the entirety of his humanity that is atoning. This captured me so much and became so transforming for me personally, I wanted to explore this more, and so I did my PhD dissertation on the vicarious humanity of Christ and its implications for contemporary views of salvation. There's so much more on this that needs to be unpacked, that I decided to devote my scholarly pursuits to drawing out those implications.

JMF: As you got into the vicarious humanity of Christ, what struck you or moved you along and kept you excited?

CK: It was a personal and pastoral thing, and wrestling with my own faith. I came from a point as a young Christian of wanting to reconcile faith and reason. Apologetics – the studies of the defense of the faith – became important to me. But the more I studied, then the more anxious I got, the more insecure I felt. What if I didn't consider this objection of faith... or maybe I missed that objection. It became a great trial of insecurity for me.

Karl Barth's theology was very helpful at this point. He was the mentor to Thomas Torrance. That question, how Christian apologetics went about trying to find external evidences for God... [Barth said] "if we know God, it's only through God's grace," and that became very liberating. The vicarious humanity of Christ doctrine built on that, because it said, "Yes, my trust is in Christ." But then, who is Jesus Christ? What do you do with his humanity? His humanity is, as you said, not just something to imitate, because if we just said, "Be like Jesus," we look in the mirror and realize we're not like Jesus, and we just become frustrated.

But the vicarious humanity means that he represents us, and he takes our place, in every aspect of our lives. My former professor Geoffrey Bromiley used to say that the problem with evangelicals is they say they believe in a substitutionary atonement – that Christ died for our sins, but we don't really believe in it enough. We're not radical enough about the substitutionary atonement. It's not just that Christ paid the penalty for our sins. He did. But often evangelicals stop at that point, and the atonement therefore has little relevance for their lives. No, the substitutionary atonement means that Christ's humanity took the place of every aspect of our humanity.

In a way, that's threatening to us. It's why some people fight against it. Because we want that one little aspect of our life – a religious niche that we control, that we still are sovereign over. But the claim of the gospel is that God claims our entire life, and that's what the vicarious humanity of Christ is about. The atonement reaches into every aspect, every nook and cranny of our humanity, because Christ took on the entirety of our humanity. Even though that appears to be threatening at first, ultimately it's just liberating – it's the essence of the gospel, being in Christ. It's why Paul so much talks about being "in Christ," a man in Christ – because it is only in this union with Christ that we really have hope, for now and in the life to come.

JMF: If that's true for us, or that's true for me, then one of the reasons I might have trouble wanting to accept that will be that it would be true for the guy across the street that I don't like, who does a lot of things that I don't like or agree with. It's true for him, too.

CK: Right. There are implications that are beyond my own piety but extends to how I treat others, to ethics and so forth, that the humanity of Christ means that the Word became the flesh of all people. The Word became flesh, John says in his first chapter. It doesn't say that the Word became Christian flesh of those who believed. No. The Word became the flesh of all people.

In that context of John, it's the context in which he came into the world – the true light came into the world, but the world knew him not, the world rejected him. The important thing is that the Word became the flesh of all people, and therefore we have to view other people in a different way now. That person is loved by God. That cantankerous neighbor Harry that we can't stand – our approach to him has to be as one who is already loved by God. Not as one who just has the potential to be loved by God – that's how we often are in evangelism. We view people as just potential converts. That's a wrong kind of evangelism. The gospel evangelism says that they are already loved in Christ. That's a theological issue, and that's why theology is important, to get at the nature of the gospel, who God is, who Christ is – that affects how we then minister as a church in the world.

JMF: Typically, we'll take the worst example that springs to mind and we say, "God can't possibly love, let's say, Adolph Hitler – you're saying that God loves everyone unconditionally and he's done this in Christ for everyone. But what about Adolph Hitler, surely God doesn't love Adolph Hitler."

CK: Right. It's one thing to say that "God loves everyone." It's another thing to say what they *do* with that love... because we're not talking about universalism, that everyone is going to be saved. We're saying that God's love, nonetheless, is unconditional to all. Jesus loved his enemies, and the moral implication of the gospel is for us to love our enemies. That is something that we can do only through the Holy Spirit. That is impossible, but that's what we are called to do, because God is doing that and has done that. But that doesn't necessarily mean that people are ultimately saved because of it.

JMF: There's a response to love – love does go two ways, and if it doesn't, if it's forced – if God were to make people (which doesn't even make sense) love him, in response to his love – then it would not even be love, would it?

CK: A coercive God is not a loving God. In any loving relationship, if there is coercion, it is not a loving relationship. What's ironic is that those who say that some are predestined to be saved – that's a coercive relationship, that God's going to choose A, B, and C and not choose X, Y, and Z. That's just as coercive as saying that God is going to make the entire world love him

– what is called *universalism*.

The predestination doctrine and universalism (that's something that T. F. Torrance points out) are similar, in that they both have a kind of determinism, a coercion to them – which is the opposite of the biblical portrayal of the love God has for Israel, for example. God unconditionally pledges himself to Israel, not because they're better or superior to other people in the world – but simply because God chooses to love them. They unfortunately rebel and reject that, but God continues to love them, continues to pursue them. That's the story of the Old Testament, in a nutshell.

JMF: It's a story that many parents experience [**CK:** Oh, yes.] We love our children and yet for whatever reason they become anti-parents, and rebellious, and they go away in a direction of life that is destructive and harmful. They cut themselves off – the parent continues to love and would welcome them home, and yet they have no intention of coming home (at least, not in any kind of a loving way). That doesn't change the fact that they belong to the parent, that they are the parent's child, and the parent never ceases to love them.

CK: For some reason people have this idea that there is a sin I can do, or do enough sins – then God will have nothing more to do with me. That's a pernicious theology. We need to call that theology on the carpet and say, “no, that's wrong.” That's not the unconditional grace of God that we see portrayed in the Bible, and most of all in Jesus Christ.

JMF: That's often done with the passage about the so-called unpardonable sin, that all manner of sin will be forgiven except blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Maybe you can comment on that just as we conclude...

CK: I don't think anybody really knows what the unpardonable sin is. I don't think it's our purpose to know what that is. Our purpose is to bear witness to Jesus Christ who spoke that. Remember, that saying is not said by just anyone. It's said by Jesus Christ. That means we go to him for refuge. We realize that, yes, it's only in him, faith in him that I have any hope. Then, whether I blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is obviously a ...

JMF: Isn't the only way we can come to understand, trust, and know Christ, is with the Holy Spirit? Rejecting the Spirit's witness to Christ is rejecting the only salvation there is. It isn't the question of somebody saying certain words, and God says, that's it.

CK: That's a pernicious myth we have, that God's love is conditioned by what we do, what we say, that we really are in control. Ironically, we think that that is freedom. That's not freedom – that's slavery. The true freedom is to be in obedience to the Father, and that's what we see in Jesus Christ – the only one who can do that, however, is Jesus Christ – only in Christ do we see

freedom and obedience come together.

In our experience, we seek to be free, and that's big for Americans, it's big for the post-Enlightenment person. Freedom is our mentor. But we also know there are times to be obedient, and certainly we've seen times in the 20th century when entire nations have become obedient to demonic forces. We have trouble putting together freedom and obedience.

The only person who's ever put those two together is Jesus Christ. When we read the Gospels, the story of Christ is a human being who perfectly puts together his freedom (Jesus was the most free person of all), but he also was the most obedient to the Father. He puts those together, and in our union with him, that becomes the basis for our new humanity, in participating by faith in his humanity.

JMF: We have rest.

CK: Exactly. That's exciting – it means we don't have to be burdened by “Am I doing enough for God?” or “If I do enough for God, if I'm obedient enough, maybe I'll lose this freedom.” That's what we often think, and so we are afraid of actually becoming more committed to Christ – I might lose this freedom. No, Jesus Christ puts that freedom and obedience together.

25. THE ACTUALITY OF SALVATION

JMF: In your book, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*, what is the connection between the reality of salvation and the vicarious humanity of Christ?

CK: It's part of a personal odyssey, I guess, in the sense that I always try to think in terms of "where is the reality of Christ in the world today?" Our world does not seem to be very Christ-like; it's filled with so much innocent suffering, needless war, strife. So how can Christians meaningfully talk about salvation?

The more I thought about it, and truthfully, looking at it biblically, it seems to me that obviously it's in Christ. There is no salvation apart from Christ. He's not just the means of salvation – he's the *substance* of salvation. Looking to him is where salvation is, not looking at the church necessarily, not looking at political or religious forces in the world, but looking at him.

JMF: When you say he is the substance of salvation, he is the salvation itself.

CK: Exactly.

JMF: How does that play out?

CK: This is where the vicarious humanity of Christ becomes important, in that his response to the Father is the saving and atoning reality of salvation. Around us is so much chaos (and so much that is less than salvation) that we only find a source of salvation when we look at him, and particularly in his humanity, in which he provides the perfect and obedient response to the Father that we have been unable to present – not just in paying the penalty for our sins, although he does that, but in the entirety of his life and the entirety of his faith and obedience to the Father. That is done for us, on our behalf, and it takes our place, because we're not able to be that obedient. We're not able to be that faithful. In him, we see the reality of salvation. Not in our own religiosity, our own spirituality, our own spiritual formation. Not in the world's religions, certainly not in political forces, but simply in him.

JMF: Most Christians think that salvation has to do with measuring up to a certain level of morality or righteousness or holiness. It's a goal to achieve by measuring up to a certain level of obedience. But you're saying that's not what it is at all.

CK: That ends up bypassing Jesus Christ. Often we say yes, we confess Jesus is Lord, he's God, and he is! But we forget that he is truly human, and in his humanity he was perfectly faithful and obedient to the Father. In that movement of faithfulness, that was an atoning movement for us in our place.

He lives the life, in other words, that we have been unable to live.

So salvation shouldn't be seen as just a goal for me to be religious and good. Quite the contrary. It's a goal that Jesus Christ has already done for us, that he invites us to enter in by his grace through the power of the Spirit and to participate in his faith and obedience. That's where the reality of salvation is. Not in me and my religiosity and my spirituality. That's where we often go astray.

JMF: In the New Testament and with Paul, you find the term "in Christ," being "in Christ," dozens of times. What is he driving at?

CK: For Paul, what other theologians have called "union with Christ" was at the center of his theology. Some people suggest it's not justification by faith that is the center of Paul's theology, but union with Christ.

James Stewart was a Scottish scholar of a previous generation who wrote a wonderful book about Paul simply entitled *A Man in Christ*. A man in Christ. That means it's a location. It's a place. Paul saw himself not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, not in the needless suffering and in the sin and evil of the Roman Empire, but located in Christ. So then he could go out into that Empire and bear witness to Christ. Through that reality, salvation came to people in the midst of a world that often appears to be so lost.

JMF: When we say Christ became human for us, we don't mean he just did something that then we take to ourselves if we choose to...

CK: Right...

JMF: What he did transformed us. The passage in John, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself." That's reality.

CK: Right. There's a union with Christ that has already happened. That is part of the gift of grace. That's what grace is about. Grace isn't just an infusion of some spiritual power. It's the reality of the person of Jesus Christ himself taking our place – taking our place in all our attempts to be good, religious, and moral people. We can't be religious enough, we can't be moral enough, and we do not have the answers. It's only abiding in Christ, and that's why Christ talks about "abide in me," "remain in me." That's all part of being "located in Christ" motif all throughout the New Testament.

JMF: So union with Christ is a reality. Like you say in the title of the book, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*, we're not talking about what we often get (at least I did) growing up at church. You get a sense of, "You need to get in step with Christ so you can be on the road to salvation." You're talking about a union with Christ that Paul and John are writing about that is already true.

CK: Already true. Already a reality.

JMF: We're participating with what *is*, not trying to bring about something.

CK: Yeah. We think in terms of potential, not actuality. The gospel is about actuality, not just about a potential, a possibility. But we always think in terms of possibility and potential, and the potential to be a good Christian, a potential for salvation. But the actuality is already there in Christ. We need to *respond* to the reality, through the actuality, and not try to bring it in ourselves.

JMF: Isn't that why the gospel is good news, as opposed to hopeful, possibly, if-you-do-well-enough news?

CK: Right. That just becomes a curse on people. It's a burden that's unbearable.

JMF: You're director of the Master of Arts in Christian Ministry program at Friends University in Wichita. What are some of the newer challenges your students are facing in their work in Christian ministry?

CK: There are many challenges in a postmodern context, in which much change is taking place in the church and in the world. In terms of spiritual formation, for example, the church is awakened to the need to be intentional about the Christian life without being legalistic. Our students want to become those who can equip others in spiritual formation.

One of the most popular tracks in our program is the track in spiritual formation, in which we have courses in spiritual direction and biblical and historical and theological foundations of spirituality, the relationship of spirituality in ministry, and to be able to equip people for that in the everyday work-a-day world and not just equip them to become monks, as was the case for centuries. (If you're really going to be a spiritual person in those days, you become a monk or a nun or something like that.) Today's movement in spiritual formation realizes that that's the privilege of all Christians.

But it's a new kind of language, and it's easy to go into a new kind of legalism. The old legalism was "don't smoke or chew or go with girls who do" or go to movies or something like that. The new legalism could become "make sure you do all the spiritual disciplines, prayer, Bible-reading, fasting." But the best teachers of spiritual disciplines are those who say they are not to be a burden of legalism but an opportunity to increase your experience of this union with Christ, to develop this love relationship with God. As Ray Anderson says, spiritual disciplines shouldn't be seen as just body-building, but as preparing for ministry and for Christian life. It's not to be seen as an end in itself, as often has been the case. But that's a challenge.

There are challenges along the lines of just being a Christian in the world

and equipping people to do that. In our program we're fortunate to have a format that has a great number of lay-people in it. We meet one night a week, and it's a two-year program. They take one course at a time, so they can integrate the theology and biblical studies, and whatever else they're learning in the classroom, with what they're doing in the world, in their job, in their family, and in the church throughout the rest of the week. There's a great hunger for that, but not many good models out there in how to do that.

Often, traditional seminary and theological education is just to train someone to be a pastor, and that's it. That has changed. In our multi-tasking culture, we realize the terror and the burden of being a multi-tasking pastor, a pastor who's expected to have *all* the gifts of the body of Christ. Fortunately, the church has awakened to the importance of different spiritual gifts and seen increasing that should be true for leadership. There will be some who have gifts for counseling, but maybe not gifts for preaching.

There needs to be a new model of staff of ministry. In a way, our little program has responded to that in providing different tracks – spiritual formation, biblical studies, family ministry, contemporary worship in the arts – that meet particular gifts, realizing that no Christian leader is able to have all the gifts that we used to expect a typical pastor to have. Hopefully that will free pastors to use the gifts that God has given them and not try to be the entire body of Christ themselves.

JMF: Just as an aside, Friends University is not a Friends denominational university.

CK: Right. It's not controlled by the Quakers. It was started by the Friends in 1890, but it hasn't been officially Quaker since the '30s. It's an interdenominational Christian university. I'm Presbyterian; we have Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, you name it, it's on our faculty and certainly among our students, who represent every denomination, race, gender, clergy, lay. We have quite a diversity within a common Christian commitment.

JMF: Getting back to what you were saying before, about one of the courses and living out your Christianity in everyday life, let's talk about that. You work in an office, you go to your office every day. What are some of the ways that you live out your Christianity in the office?

CK: It's got to begin with my colleagues and my students. For all of us, we can talk about how much we should love the world, but it's first of all that "love your neighbor" means literally "your neighbor," the person you're in proximity with. Karl Barth has a wonderful section in his *Church Dogmatics* on neighbors near and far in his ethics. He takes very seriously that love needs proximity. He uses those words: "love needs proximity."

Therefore, my first responsibility is to that faculty colleague, that maybe we don't get along on every issue. Maybe we're violently opposed to each other on some big faculty issue which is not big to anyone except us. He's the person I'm called to love. Or that student – the student who seems to be cantankerous over every great idea I have and who is difficult to relate to.

We transfer this to all of us, whether it be in the workplace or the family, the importance of love needing proximity. The church needs to see ourselves increasingly to equip people for that. There's no use in making broad generalizations about the world and social concern and evangelism if we can't equip people to love those we're near to. Then we can begin to take this one step beyond. That is a practical Christianity that we need to cultivate and develop. It's what we see in the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus.

JMF: St. Francis said, "Always preach the gospel. If necessary, use words." A lot of times, Christians make themselves odious on the job or on the softball team or whatever by constantly wanting to evangelize everybody without living out.... Don't we sometimes have a line we draw? Up here is spiritual life, and down here is day-to-day mundane life. We think if we're going to be Christian anywhere, we have to do "spiritual" things like ask people if they love Jesus and bring out a pamphlet or tract or something and try to go over it with them during the lunch hour, forgetting that Christ is all of life. Everything. Loving a person isn't confronting them over things they're not prepared for, but loving them like friends love friends, and being a regular human being like Christ was everywhere he went.

CK: That was the first moment of the Incarnation, of solidarity with sinners and publicans – Jesus sitting at table with sinners and publicans. It's that first moment of presence rather than simply bowling them over with words. The words came later, but the first movement of the gospel is solidarity. The second movement is being conformed to the image of his Son. That is what I call the double movement of the Incarnation, of a "God to human beings" movement, and "from human beings to God."

It's very theological and it's very much the Incarnation, but it's related to the presence of Christians in the world, who first have that movement of solidarity, friendship, relationship, and to be able to earn the right to speak the word, or else the words become just chattering. They become what Thomas Torrance calls the devastating effect of dualistic thinking in our society: of separating the words, the actual speech, from **the Word**, Jesus Christ. We think when we just have the language going on, it's okay. No. Christ may not be with that language unless we bring them together at the right time, led by the Spirit.

JMF: *Being* always contains the gospel, whereas words don't always, even though they may mouth the right tone.

CK: Exactly. They could just be chattering speech rather than the reflection of God's presence. That's always the temptation of religion, and unfortunately Christianity can get into that as well, and be dehumanizing. It's the opposite of the Incarnation, which is the ultimate humanizing action, in which God takes upon himself our humanity, humanizing us. But often we treat people in a dehumanizing religious way, and we forget that Jesus came, and his greatest critics were the religious people of his time.

Religion has insidious temptation for Christians that we have to constantly check ourselves against, because the world will give us that religious niche. The religious people will be over here in the corner, and we can do our own little thing and have our own little barriers and contexts in which we can accept people. But it's when we say that the Word became flesh, that embraces culture, that does not simply destroy culture, that can be threatening to the world, but they're also threatened by genuine love, presence and acceptance. That's when the gospel becomes the most revolutionary to people. All of us who experience Christ have experienced something like that. It's sad that often the church presents another face.

JMF: The gospel is bound up in friendship, isn't it? When you see a true friendship, there is Christ at work, even though the words may not be used. After all, there is no good thing that doesn't come from God. People can respond to you as a Christian once you're already their friend. A lot of Christians are afraid to make friends. They'll be friends with people at church, but they're afraid to have real friendships for the sake of the friendship.

CK: That's the dualism between the religious and the secular world, which is tragic, in that the Incarnation says something very different. Jesus sat at table with sinners and publicans. He risks that he would not be considered to be the perfect religious person. He took the risk of love. Christians need to take that risk in associating with people, making friends, as you say, in the world, not being afraid to do that. Part of being a Christian is to take those risks.

We can do so as Jesus did because he constantly was in dependence on the Father. If we're not in dependence on the Father, we can become changed by the world. We shouldn't make any bones about it: the world will change us if we allow it. But in dependence on the Father, Jesus was able to sit at table with sinners and publicans. That's when the gospel became life-changing, because there was an integration: a word and presence in the very person of Jesus. The church, later on, was the most successful when it bore

witness to that reality and didn't live that dualistic existence that religion so often tempts people to get into.

JMF: It seems like that dualistic approach can turn people into a project. You say, "My neighbor or this fellow at work...I want to present the gospel to him, therefore I'll (in essence) pretend to be his friend... Of course I'll try to be friends with him, but I'm not doing it because he's worth befriending or because I want to make a friend of him, it's because I want to do my gospel sales job at the end."

CK: That's tragic. It's phony, and people catch that. That's what's ironic about it. Most people say, "It's obvious you're not interested in me. I'm just a potential convert for you. I'm a non-Christian." What terrible language! We need to stop talking about non-Christians. No. These are men and women, boys and girls who are made in the image of God, who are loved already by Jesus Christ.

JMF: And if everybody is being drawn to Christ because, as he said, "If I'm lifted up, I will draw all men to myself," we're all on that journey. Some have come to the place on the journey where they have come to know Christ in a personal way, but everybody else is also on the journey, whether they've come to that point or not.

CK: One of my best friends is a Jewish agnostic poet of some renown. That relationship has been an interesting gift from God, as it's reminded me of our shared humanity in Jesus Christ, even though he is not aware of it yet. That's the only difference. Through that friendship, that's the best witness I can give to him. Do we have disagreements about major issues of values? You better believe it. Is it difficult at times for me? Yes. But the Lord constantly reminds me, "This is the kind of genuine evangelism that's based on accepting people for who they are, seeking to be their friend, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest." We forget about the place of the Holy Spirit in evangelism. Jesus said very plainly that "the Spirit will testify of me." The Spirit works with our hearts.

Evangelism isn't our project. Friendship is important. Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, but friends." The Quakers have it right there. We need to take that seriously. Friendship is not just among the religious people or the church or the congregation or denomination, but among the entirety of humanity. The Word became flesh to all human beings – all men and women, boys and girls.

JMF: Friendships, all relationships, are not static. They are up and down and messy. All we have to do is look at Jacob, and his walk with God was very messy, sometimes close, sometimes selfish, sometimes greedy. God is

always faithful on his side, we're not always faithful on our side, and yet he keeps us as his friends anyway. Abraham's father of the faithful, and yet some major examples of lack of faith in Scripture are attributed to Abraham. David. You name it. All the walks are messy. A little honesty shows us that our own walk with God is a messy one.

CK: That is a powerful witness in itself, if I'm honest about who I am and I'm not trying to cover up my failures and weaknesses and trying to be too much of a goody-goody Christian (that just communicates phoniness). When I communicate my own weakness, my own doubts (as I talk about in the book), that makes the gospel more real to people who haven't accepted Christ yet.

That's what theology needs to do in addressing things like doubt, despair, loneliness, anxiety, those universal human issues of existential crisis, and realize the gospel, the Word becoming flesh, goes deeply into those issues whether you're a Christian or not a Christian. It speaks deeply at the problems that all of us share.

JMF: Issues of real life as opposed to some plastic, fake, pretend idealism that we like to put forward while we're at church.

CK: Yeah. The religious issue of when the tribulation will take place is obviously silly compared to questions of despair and anxiety and loneliness. Just think of a world that is so lonely and that we don't see the implications of the gospel for that loneliness, and we're talking about when the millennium might come. That's just silly, but it's been a fault of the church and the theologians. The theologians need to address the existential issues.

But the church also needs to think about these existential issues theologically, according to the gospel, and not just according to pop psychology. That's what I'm trying to do in these books I'm working on, *The God Who Believes*, and the next one, *The God Who Rejoices*, on joy and despair, on how can we have joy in the midst of despair. What is joy? How does the gospel speak to despair in life? That's where the gospel makes a difference.

JMF: That's the whole point of Trinitarian theology – a theology that focuses on who God is in a relationship of love. God is love, Father, Son, and Spirit loving one another...bringing humanity and Christ into that love relationship. That is where real life is touched, as opposed to just some kind of list of religious things to do or not do, or things to believe and not believe. It's real living in Christ, as Paul said.

CK: Yeah. The Trinity is, as one book puts it, is concerned of "persons in communion." It's a book by Alan Torrance. *Persons in Communion* – that's a beautiful title. That's what the Trinity is about. God is in relationship

himself, and therefore he's concerned about those relational issues in our lives, in our families - with spouses, with sons and daughters, in society, issues between races, issues of reconciliation.

The gospel is relational, but it's not a pop psychology just to feel nice and warm and fuzzy about each other, but really gain the bedrock of who we are. The gospel addresses this at the deepest level and the widest expanse of our humanity.

The next book I'll be working on is *The God Who Answers*, on the implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ for creation and our understanding of humanity. Who do we understand human beings to be? Do we understand them according to our self-understanding? That's pretty limited. Or, does Jesus Christ in his humanity tell us something about what it means to be human – especially at those issues of great concern and existential crisis like doubt and despair and loneliness?

JMF: Life seems to be made of small spaces in between doubt and despair and loneliness.

CK: Exactly. We often avoid them. They're too difficult to deal with. That's often another problem that theology has, that even in the church, people assume these are issues that are too difficult to deal with. Nobody has the answers, so I'm just not going to think about them. It could be God, it could be who Jesus Christ is, it could be my own loneliness, my own despair, my own anxiety, my own dealing with my death. So I'm just not going to think about that. We simply turn on the TV or the video game or the cell phone. You name it. We have technological gadgets to keep our minds off our own dilemma and also off God.

This is what Kierkegaard called unconscious despair. There's one despair being depressed about losing your job, for example, and that definitely is an occasion despair, but there's another kind of despair, which is not knowing you're in despair. Kierkegaard, a great Danish theologian, calls this "unconscious despair." This is the most dangerous despair, Kierkegaard says, because it doesn't recognize the despair we have that is lying within, that we try to mask over with activities to stay busy.

Some of the worst culprits are people in the church keeping busy with church activities, committees, projects, you name it, so we don't have to look at ourselves and also not to look at God. That's what Kierkegaard calls unconscious despair, and I think he's very perceptive there. We need to see that the gospel addresses us at our deepest and widest point. This is where Christ taking upon the entirety of our humanity, including our fears and our anxieties and our loneliness and despair, becomes so important.

26. THE THREE-FOLD WORD OF GOD

JMF: You teach potential ministers. What would you like to see pastors giving more attention to in their sermons?

CK: Preaching is in a state of crisis. Our postmodern culture hates the word. We like the visual. We like the video image. We're a visual culture, and we don't like the word *preaching*. The great age of wonderful pulpit giants sending forth their message with their glorious intones, and people catching onto every little word, is gone. It's a challenge for the church to continue to have preaching.

Many churches have abandoned preaching as an essential part of worship, but I don't think the church should do that. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the speech of God, and the preaching is the word of God, part of the word of God.

Karl Barth was famous for saying that there's a three-fold word of God. Most of all, Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the living Word of God, but Scripture is also the written word of God, dependent upon Jesus Christ. Third, proclamation – preaching – is the word of God, again dependent upon Scripture and ultimately upon the living Jesus Christ, but to be taken seriously as the word of God as well. It's the way in which the message of Scripture about Jesus Christ is made real today with that congregation.

We need to re-discover a place where preaching that takes seriously the tensions with the postmodern culture, that takes seriously the importance of the visual, perhaps, as well as the audible, but moreover sees preaching as not just sharing interesting stories or trying to be relevant, but a context in which God himself, through our fallibility, the great fallibility of preachers, nonetheless speaks his word that bears witness to Jesus Christ, and have confidence in that, and have joy in that.

I've been preaching regularly as a part of a preaching time of Church of the Savior, an independent church in Wichita. That's been a great joy for me and essential for me as a theologian. Preaching was always a challenge for me.

What set me free in recent years has been to realize that first I need to realize the word of God to *me*, to Chris Kettler, that week, in the midst of all my struggles, whatever they might be. As simple as that may seem, it became very profound for me and changed my preaching, when I first addressed the text of scripture to me. I found that strangely enough, I'm not that different from other people. I may have a PhD, but beyond that, I struggle with the same things other people struggle with, and it really changed my preaching.

We need to encourage preachers to not be afraid to allow the word to

speaking to them first, and to self-disclose to some appropriate extent in their sermon. I often share things of my hobbies, my love for the Los Angeles Dodgers, or collecting old comic books from the '40s, or Bob Dylan, and my congregation will say they know a lot about Bob Dylan now. But even if they're not fans of Dylan or the Dodgers or whatever, they appreciate that human contact because they have their own passions.

I allow my passions to be met by the word of God and I share that with others. That's been liberating for me, and has been a great boon to my preaching. The church as a whole has to take seriously that passion in the midst of the challenges of postmodern culture, and have the confidence that God is speaking, and see that as essential as the rest of the worship service.

JMF: A lot of preaching that isn't effective tends to be full of platitudes and easy solutions and "you should be's" and this sort of thing. It sounds like you're talking more of an honest, a reality kind of preaching, about what we're really like, and what God has to say to us and for us in that context.

CK: Exactly. One doesn't need to leave the Bible to do that. In our church we go through a book of the Bible, expository preaching. We find that the Bible speaks to those existential personal needs and passions very strongly, and often becomes a critique of the platitudes, as you've mentioned, the moralisms, ethical exhortations that often people take out of the Bible apart from the larger context of the gospel story and the reality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

In that context, there's an exhortation, but it comes on the basis of grace, the gracious revelation of God in Christ. Preaching is to be that witness. It beats deeply into our own passions and needs, but ultimately it's the witness of Jesus Christ to those passions and needs, and therefore not just interesting stories or cute comments on the week's news events.

JMF: A lot of people today are finding Christianity and the church irrelevant. What do you see as some of the causes of that?

CK: The causes are profound. When you mentioned postmodern culture, I think in terms of the culture becoming much more skeptical of any claims of truth. That's one aspect of it. But more often, the church's desperate attempt to try to become relevant becomes phony and superficial to the world. When we try to be the best entertainer in town, we always fail, because Hollywood can always do it better.

When we fail to realize that there is a uniqueness of the church and of its calling and its worship, and that ultimately we are to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his love and grace, that brings a relevance that the world cannot meet. If we have confidence in that, that what we are saying and preaching

and doing is not just trying to be relevant in our culture, so that the culture has a place for the church, but that it's really the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ that we joyfully are involved in, *that* is something that makes itself relevant. We don't need to *make* God relevant.

JMF: There's something you wrote that I wanted to read and ask you to comment on. You said,

Christocentric theology demands that we take existential issues in humanity seriously. [Which is what we've just been talking about.] Too often the concern of theology has been about the precise relationship between the deity and the humanity of Christ without delving deeply into the radical implications of the Word that became flesh for the world of despair, guilt, shame, weakness, loneliness, anxiety, and doubt, which is where most of us live a good deal of the time. Popular theology such as in the *Left Behind* novels still reflect the kind of theological mindset that obsesses over the time of the great tribulation at the end of the world and ignores our own personal tribulations of loneliness, despair, and doubt.

Could you talk about that a little bit in terms of the vicarious humanity of Christ?

CK: To be Christo-centric, to be centered in Christ, all Christians want that. But often the church fails at being Christo-centric, in that often it doesn't remember that the Word became flesh. That is the flesh of doubt, despair, loneliness, anxiety, those things you mentioned, the place that we live.

JMF: We don't think of Christ that way, though.

CK: No. It's because we are heretics, in a sense, that we may say, Christ is God, and he's human, but we often pay attention simply to his deity, which we should, but it's wrong. We're heretics when we don't equally pay attention to his humanity. Deity *and* humanity. Often, the humanity is not seen in terms of a humanity that takes our place and is on our behalf. It's seen only as, well, we should be like Jesus in his humanity.

JMF: As a role model.

CK: Yeah. What would Jesus do? That ultimately leads to frustration, because we're not like Jesus. We try to be like Jesus, and we're not like Jesus, rather than seeing that in the New Testament the humanity of Christ is presented as living a life vicariously, that is, in our place, on our behalf, the life that we've been unable to live. He goes before us and invites us through

the Spirit to join with him.

That is a different way of looking at the humanity of Christ and it is an invitation to look at the humanity of Christ in a vicarious sense. It has tremendous implications for issues like doubt and despair and loneliness and anxiety, in which often we feel guilty as Christians that we feel any doubt or despair or anxiety. We think we shouldn't be feeling these things as Christians.

We felt the doubt and the guilt in the first place, and we don't want to 'fess up to them. Theologically, we might end up dealing with side issues, like when the tribulation's going to take place, rather than allowing the word to address us deeply where we are at. Often, the church doesn't allow you to be honest with those feelings. You're not supposed to have those doubts, despair, anxiety, if you're a Christian, and particularly a leader.

That's because of our inadequate Christology, our view of Christ. We don't take the vicarious humanity of Christ seriously – that Christ has taken upon himself that despair, he's taken upon that doubt, he's taken upon that anxiety. That's what we hear from the cross, when Jesus says in those cryptic words, a prayer to God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I think Jesus is praying that on our behalf. He is taking our despair and bringing it to the Father, and in doing so, healing it. We are not alone in that despair. We are not alone in our aloneness. We may still be lonely, but we're not lonely alone. Jesus is lonely with us.

That's extremely important for us to see, how close the humanity of Christ relates to our humanity. That's why this, what seems to be abstract talk about vicarious humanity, is really very personal talk. Christ's humanity is so close to us. We're in union with him. We hear him crying out for us, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" when we've gone through a loss of a loved one, or other travails in life in which we've questioned the presence or even existence of God. Jesus cries that prayer on the cross, praying from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But he prays, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." There's despair on the cross, but there's also joy.

JMF: That's the way Psalm 22 ends up as well.

CK: Exactly. Some scholars suggest that perhaps Jesus recited the rest of Psalm 22. In effect, with "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," he's saying that.

JMF: Let's shift gears to the Old Testament for a minute. Sometimes it is thought that grace gets invented in the New Testament, but then there's the idea that in order to read the Old Testament, we should reinterpret it in

the light of Christ. But the Old Testament is the word that emerges out of who Christ is from the very beginning in its very roots. It isn't just a prequel or a tack-on to the New Testament.

CK: Karl Barth used to say that in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, you have one covenant of grace from Genesis to Revelation. It isn't that there are two covenants, the Old Testament is a covenant of works, as some people say, and then in the New Testament you finally get to grace.

No, just think of Genesis chapter 1. The very act of creation is by God's work. It's an act of grace. The very fact that you and I exist at this moment, is simply because of grace. God didn't *need* to create us; he simply did so out of love. Genesis is written by the people who experienced the exodus, the act of grace that the people of Israel experienced in being liberated from Egypt. It's that grace that happened first in Exodus chapter 3. The law, the 10 commandments, wasn't given until Exodus 20.

Grace always comes before law throughout the Bible. There is a place for law, that is, God's commands, but they're always seen in terms of the prior reality of grace and should never be separated from grace. That's when legalism comes in, when Christians say, I've been saved by grace, but now they live in a life of legalism. That's because they've left grace behind as they pursued law.

That's not true in terms of how God revealed law to be and how grace is seen throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Israel is seen as the preparation, the way in which we are prepared to interpret the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Thomas Torrance has a wonderful book entitled *The Mediation of Christ*, and the point of that book is that Israel gives us tools to understand Christ, and God's gracious relationship with Israel is a way in which language is developed, through the sacrificial system and other ways in Israel's experience, to understand grace.

Grace is there in the Old Testament, and we cannot understand the Incarnation apart from Israel, apart from the Old Testament. Otherwise we end up interpreting Jesus according to what we want Jesus to be. We are tempted to do that all the time, and church history is filled with examples of that. We need to interpret Jesus in light of Old Testament, in light of Israel, in light of the Jews. Again, it's one covenant of grace from Genesis to Revelation, including God's grace toward Israel.

JMF: In that light, I'm always struck by Jesus' conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and it says he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and then it says, "This is what the Scriptures say,

that on the third day..." And yet, the Scriptures don't say that. But he says that that's what they really say, that's what they're really about, is a testimony to him.

CK: Right. What happens then with the Incarnation, with the coming of Christ, he interprets the Old Testament. He helps us see the Old Testament. Israel is preparing us for Christ, but then Christ goes back and helps us see him in that preparation. That's what the early church, the early followers, were able to see in their reading of the Old Testament. They could never give up on the Old Testament.

There was a heresy when a man named Marcion said, "the Old Testament is the book of the angry God, but the New Testament is about the God of grace and love." The church saw the terrible error in that. Unfortunately, there have been practical Marcionites throughout the history of the church, in which we may say we believe the Old Testament is the word of God, but we really don't give it much attention. Or when we do, we end up separating it from Christ. Or just like you say, interpret it as a prequel, but not really as connected with Christ.

But when you read the New Testament, you see the early church gathering together, huddling together. What are they doing? They're reading the Old Testament and seeing Jesus Christ in there. They see how essential it is for them to go back to the Scriptures and to understand Christ. We should do that today in the church, and not be afraid of the Old Testament as this book of law and the wrath of God, but to see the grace of God, particularly the grace of God extended toward an Israel that is constantly rebelling against God throughout the Old Testament. God is continually pursuing Israel. Even when they have to go into exile in Babylon, God is still there with them. That's a story of love and grace that's there in the Old Testament and helps prepare us for the supreme act of God's love in the Incarnation.

JMF: Isn't the story of Israel my story, and your story?

CK: Exactly.

JMF: We're constantly running away from God, and he's constantly pursuing us. We're constantly rebelling in one way or another or falling fall short in one way or another of what he would like us to be, and yet he never gives up.

CK: He never lets us go. He never let Israel go. That's Paul's point in Romans: Israel's rebellion did not invalidate the promises of God. Paul makes that point, and we often forget that and seem to just to see the Old Testament as cute stories that teach children in Sunday school. No. They're absolutely essential for us in understanding Christ. We need to constantly go back to

school with Israel, as Thomas Torrance used to say.

JMF: Hosea 11, “How can I give you up?”

CK: Hosea is a wonderful picture of God’s covenant love, of love that doesn’t give up. Sometimes Hosea is said to be the gospel in the Old Testament.

JMF: Going all the way back to Genesis 1, we have the creation, and Christ is involved right there from the very beginning. We spend our time spinning the wheels on whether there’s a creation or whether there’s evolution and never the twain shall meet, rather than seeing a theology of creation rooted in the vicarious humanity of Christ.

CK: Yeah. Again, the creation story is told by the Hebrews who experienced the Exodus, who experienced redemption and salvation. They saw the integral relationship of salvation and creation. When you get to the New Testament, Paul and John and New Testament writers see this very strongly, that the same God who created is the God who redeemed, and there’s a dynamic relationship between Christ and creation. Paul in Colossians is profound on this, “Through him all things were created.”

Redemption and salvation is not just an afterthought of God’s. It’s not just an emergency thing, because grace is in the very act of creation; creation is an act of grace. We need to see God’s covenant there, as Karl Barth used to say, a covenant very much integrated with creation. The covenant is the basis of creation, and that covenant is God’s pledge with us. That is in the very being of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity. There is that covenant love between the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit.

Covenant is not just a new thing God thought up one day, “we’ve got to do this to save these people.” No. It’s an essential part of his being in this relationship between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. The Son is incarnate in Jesus Christ, and it’s in him that we see the restoration of creation.

Creation is not simply to be destroyed or ignored for the sake of some spiritual reality. No. Jesus Christ is the Word who became flesh. What he wants to do is have a new creation. It’s new! But it’s still a creation. There is that continuity between salvation and creation. Therefore, when we consider Jesus Christ, he is not the one who simply is to rescue us from creation, as in some theologies, but he’s the one who brings us into a new creation.

We are new creations in Christ, Paul says, and Jesus Christ is now the true image of God. Human beings were created in the image of God; he has taken our place. We find our true being reflecting the image of God in our participation in Christ. That very strong teaching in Genesis 1 about humans

being made in the image of God is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We can't understand being made in the image of God apart from Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, some theologies say, first we put together a doctrine of creation, the image of God and so forth, that everyone shares, and then we bring in "the fall," and that's why we then need redemption. Christ just becomes the answer to our predicament. He certainly *is* that, but that's inadequate to understand the place of Christ before creation as a reflection of the eternal being of God as love, this relationship between the Father and Son and the Spirit.

This is something that Paul solved profoundly in the letter to the Colossians. The first chapter of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and through him all things were made." That integration of Christ and creation was extremely important. We need to recover that in the church for practical issues, in how we relate to nature, how we relate to the world as a whole, and not just to see the world as something that is evil. "For God so loved *the world*," John says. John is very cognizant of that world as the world that Christ embraces and doesn't discourage.

JMF: Christ is both Creator and Redeemer of the creation, also the judge and the advocate, the defense attorney, all at once and identified with him. He draws us into himself. So from the very beginning, it sounds like you're saying, we are wrapped up in the creation, and therefore in the love relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit. That's our very purpose for being.

CK: Right. Christ becomes not simply an answer or a band-aid, but the fulfillment of what it means to be human. The early church fathers saw this very early in the second century and Karl Barth, in the more recent years, has seen that it's through Christ that we understand Adam. It's not that Christ is the solution to Adam's problem. That is not seeing that the covenant of grace really extends from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Christ is there.

JMF: In the few minutes we have left, you mentioned you are a Bob Dylan fan, and you know a lot about Bob Dylan. I've only in the last 10 years or so began to really get into Bob Dylan, but I'm a neophyte compared to what you were telling me. There's a reason that you are drawn to him, and there are certain theological implications and gospel implications of some of Bob Dylan's lyrics and so on. Could you spend a minute or two on that?

CK: I've written this book called *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*... Looking at this basic existential issue, can we have joy. How do we have joy in the midst of despair that all of us feel? I began the book by relating the story of myself as a very lonely alienated teenager in the Wichita Southeast High School library. Almost every day

when I could get away from class, I would go in the library, put on the earphones, and I had my copy of Bob Dylan's album *Blonde on Blonde*, put it on... What he was saying through his music was a music of pathos. The song, "stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again," I'd play it over and over again because that's how I felt as a teenager.

Dylan was able to be honest about the pathos, the suffering that we feel as human beings. "How does it feel to be on your own, no direction home" is a famous song, *Like a Rolling Stone*. In dealing with relationships, he would cut to the quick, and there would be no monkey business. In Dylan's gravelly voice, he would say things that I was unable to say as a lonely teenager.

Even as a much older adult, that's still the case. He's still able to say those things. To me, it's the cry for God, ultimately. Dylan realized that at one point in his life, in the early '80s, with the *Slow Train* album, and he still does, to some extent. In a recent interview, somebody asked him how he felt about all these musicians who always give praise to God on their records, and Dylan said, "Well, you've got to give credit where credit is due."

The rest of his songs are that identification with our pain, and that's the first movement of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, his solidarity with us. That's what I think I see in Dylan the most. Then through that solidarity, to that first step, there's an openness for that second step of being lifted up, to be conformed to the image of his Son. That's when you get some sense of hope and joy in Dylan.

In his latest album, *Together Through Life*, he has a wonderful song called *Feel Like a Change Is Coming On*, in which, here's the 67-year-old Bob Dylan in his gravelly coarse voice still having a wistful hope... He talks about having "the blood of the land in my voice." Some people suggested, maybe he's really saying blood of the *lamb*. That brings us back to the gospel, and the nature of the gospel is it's crying to people who need to be loved, to realize that the most basic need in life is to be loved, and to realize our problems in loving relationships. We need help in that. Dylan has always sensed that.

With all the accolades and praise he gets and hero-worship, he doesn't buy into that. There's always a sense in which, you better be careful, love can turn on you, even the closest relationships or human relationships, they can fail. He's very aware of that, and that makes him humble, a humble singer and writer in my opinion, but also an honest one. He gets to the core of being human.

27. THE MINISTRY OF RAY ANDERSON

This program is offered in tribute to the life and work of Dr. Ray S. Anderson (1925-2009), former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary.

JMF: You just finished a book about Ray Anderson. I'd like to talk about that. The title is *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*. How did you first come to know Ray?

Christian Kettler: Ray was one of God's great gifts in my life. I was a student at Fuller Seminary. Seminary students are a weird breed. They're supposed to be training for ministry, but they're actually still in the process of wrestling through life's issues and trying to really know God's grace. You usually go to a lot of academic classrooms – you go to biblical studies, church history and so forth, and you try to translate it into your life somehow.

A friend of mine recommended that I take a course from Ray Anderson, and I quickly found out that this man wasn't just teaching about grace. He was *presenting* grace, and I quickly found out that this was a life-changing experience for me. What Ray does, what's so amazing is that, we think that it would be self-evident that theology and ministry should go hand in hand. But when you go to a typical seminary, that's not the case. You have the biblical

studies department over here, you have the church history department over here, you have the ministry department over here, preaching, and never the twain shall meet.

Ray was the professor who was a one-man department – professor of Theology and Ministry. He went to both faculty



meetings, Theology and Ministry, but really he was himself a one department, because he's a unique individual. He was a pastor for ten years before he went on for his PhD under Thomas Torrance in Scotland and developed an understanding of a Christo-centric Trinitarian theology in a vital dialogue with the ministry of the church. He's made a tremendous contribution that way in relating theology with ministry more than anyone I know of. He has written a succession of books throughout the years that are very profound, provocative, and controversial.

I realized that more people needed to know about Ray, and so last year I sat down and began to write this book, a kind of what I call to my friends, “Ray Lite” – it hardly catches the exuberance and excitement and creativity of his theology. It’s trying to just introduce people to some of Ray’s thoughts and invite them to get into Ray, reading Ray – I think they would be very much rewarded in doing so.

JMF: There are any number of directions you could take in introducing someone like Ray. What direction did you go?

CK: The subtitle of the book is *Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology* to communicate that. In different ways Ray sought to bring them together. Then I proceed through some traditional doctrines – doctrine of God, humanity, Christ and salvation, the church, Holy Spirit, last things... but then look at them in terms of Ray’s unique take upon them, and how he reflected on them in his teaching as well as in his books. You’re constantly seeing that he refuses to have a theology that does not meet the test of being in the local congregation – meeting people where they are at, with all their crazy-quilt of problems and questions and frustrations, and realizing that if theology means anything, it’s going to meet people where they’re at.

The only kind of theology that really does that is a Christo-centric Trinitarian theology – one that takes seriously first of all that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ – it’s not just the possibility, it’s not just a religious quest, but it’s a reality that we thankfully and humbly receive by faith. That revelation is of the Triune God, the God who is in a relationship of love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s seeing how that works out in terms of the ministry of the church, realizing that the ministry of the church is not our ministry. We often think that ministry is our part. God has done his part in Christ. Now it’s our part, as the ministry. That’s a terrible, terrible theology, and it bears terrible fruit in practice, because we end up creating our own ministries, our own agendas.

No, there is one continuing ministry, and that’s the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ continues to minister. Ray has written about that in many forms, and developed a Trinitarian theology of ministry that reflects a continuing ministry of Jesus Christ. He wrote a wonderful essay in the beginning of a book entitled *Theological Foundations for Ministry* – the introductory essay is titled “A Theology for Ministry,” in which he set out that agenda. It challenges theologians. This is not a case of a theologian saying to lay people, “You ought to read more theology.” No, it’s quite the opposite. It’s saying that the ministry is the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Ministry always precedes theology. But this is not simply to say that whatever is pragmatic, whatever is practical, then you shape your theology on

that basis. No. The ministry, remember, is the ministry of Jesus Christ. That precedes the theology, and that should shape the theology. Theology should never be distant from ministry. Sadly, in theological education, distance is almost the rule instead of the exception – with separated departments, and the biblical scholars never talk to the theologians or never talk to the ministry people.

Ray is trying to break that apart. He's been a tremendous influence on generations of students at Fuller Seminary. I just noticed at Fuller they have a plaque now that says his name: "The Ray Anderson Classroom," for the encouragement he gave to doctor of ministry students. Ray was the theological adviser to the doctor of ministry program at Fuller for many years. He was the champion for that program. A lot of his colleagues were saying, "What's this doctor of ministry? A doctor is supposed to be for PhD's, not for ministry people." And the ministry people were saying, "Why do I need another degree?"

Ray said, "We need to equip ministers, pastors, after their Master of Divinity degrees, to go on, to continue to learn at the highest level possible. He became the champion for these doctor of ministry students, and they appreciated that, even though he challenged them all the time with some very challenging theology. He did that for all of his students at Fuller, and some students don't know what to make of it.

I have a good friend who's a black pastor in Atlanta and a musician who said to me that he took one course from Ray Anderson and he thought afterwards "Either this man is a genius or he's insane." He is that much of a creative individual in his lectures, in his presence in the classroom. As I thought back on that, on my own experience, that many of us come into that classroom desperate for the grace of God, and Ray bore witness to that grace. I'm forever thankful to that. Fortunately, we have his books that communicate that grace as well, and I want to encourage people to dig into

that... knowing it's going to be challenging, but there's a great reward in reading it.

JMF: His relentless tenacity in not letting go of grace and the reality of our union with Christ and communion with Christ as who we are, come through so movingly in his book



The Gospel According to Judas. You don't hear people talking about *The Gospel According to Judas* or even much focus on Judas, but in this book, Ray did take Judas as an example of who we all are. It was so moving...

CK: The subtitle was *Is There a Limit to God's Grace?*, which may seem strange, but unfortunately for most of us, "Yes," we'd say, "There is a limit to God's grace." But why do we say that? He questions that in terms of the person of Jesus and Judas, and presents an imaginary dialogue after Jesus' death between Jesus and Judas. What would Jesus say to Judas? What would Judas say to Jesus? In a sense, would Judas refuse, not understand that he is forgiven? Or do we have to condemn Judas to perdition?

We all need a scapegoat. Ray explores this tendency we have, whether in church or business or family, to always want to have a scapegoat. We needed to have somebody to blame things on. In a sense he suggests for the disciples it was Judas – he's the one. But Peter denied Christ, too. We think, well, Judas demonstrates that there is a limit to God's grace. There is so far that you can go with this grace business or else you just hit license, and people would do whatever they want to. And so, Judas is a good example.

Ray challenges that and suggests, maybe there isn't a limit... maybe Jesus really did forgive Judas. What would that mean? What does that say about grace? It would mean that if Jesus can forgive Judas, he can forgive me. That even though I fail him over and over and over and over again, that he can forgive me. In effect, there is no limit to God's grace. We are the ones who put limits to God's grace. God doesn't. It's a very powerful message about forgiveness that's received a lot of readership from inmates in jails – many inmates convicted of murder wrote to Ray and say they read his book – "can God forgive me?" It's a challenge for all of us to really rethink our theology and practice of forgiveness. Do we really believe in forgiveness, do we really believe in grace?

JMF: It's an honesty question, isn't it? Often we hide ourselves from our own knowledge of ourselves as being sinners.

CK: Yeah, we need to pretend we're not sinners, and then we come out as phonies. Or else it just becomes a repeated wallowing in the fact that we are sinners. Not that first of all that we're objects of grace. Our failings never



deny that – as was true for Israel in the Old Testament. God’s grace doesn’t let us go – that becomes the motivation for us to seek him, rather than try to appease him.

It’s because he won’t let us go that we’re motivated to love him – and to serve him, and that’s absolutely the difference in motivation. It’s the kind of motivation you find in the New Testament. When Paul in Ephesians spends three chapters talking about our blessings in heavenly places in Jesus Christ, because we’ve been chosen, been given every spiritual blessing in Christ, it goes on for three chapters. Then with chapter 4, he says, “therefore, walk in a manner worthy of the calling you’ve received, because all this is who you are.

Ephesians 1-3 is indicative... [**JMF**: Is already so...] then, the imperative comes based upon that. It isn’t that the imperative is the basis for you to be accepted. It’s the opposite.

JMF: Like his letter to Titus – for his grace... that teaches you.

CK: Yeah. For the grace of God has appeared ... exhorting us to renounce sin. [Titus 2:11-12]

JMF: The grace comes first [**CK**: Exactly], and in the context of the grace, we’re able then to move forward ...

CK: That’s a constant theme, which Ray got very much with Karl Barth, and Thomas Torrance, his mentor, and also from his own experience as a pastor – which he saw that many people had been wounded by the church. For most of his time as a professor at Fuller Seminary, he had a little church, meeting in a school multi-purpose building – Harbor Fellowship. It attracted about 20, 30 people a week. They didn’t have any programs, so if people wanted programs, they’d leave the church. It became kind of a half-way house for people who’ve been burned by the church. They came to this little group – just gathering together, hearing the word of God, sharing communion, and Ray preaching a very simple yet profound sermon, and people were healed. They were able then to go back to the other churches. This little community of grace, if you will.

Ray lives that. He’s lived that theology in the church, as well as writing about it. You see that in his writings much more than any other theologian I know. He never has ceased to be a pastor. There are plenty of professors in seminaries that used to be pastors and probably were failures at being a pastor. But then they went on to get their degrees and became a seminary professor. Ray Anderson never ceased to being a pastor. To the students of Fuller, his door was always open in his office – unheard of among seminary professors. You can walk in with a need. With the people at Harbor Fellowship he continued to preach the word and minister to them during the

week. Particularly with the D.Min. students, mentoring them. Coming back, he used to say that they would come back anesthetized to theology by their own seminary training. Theology was irrelevant to them as a pastor. He had to help them work again at theology and ministry, and that became such a moving experience to a whole generation of D.Min. students.

JMF: A book you used in your classes, as well as one that I feel is very helpful and encouraging is *Dancing with Wolves While Feeding the Sheep* [**CK:** Yeah, wonderful title] – *Musings of a Maverick Theologian*...

CK: The wolves are faculty colleagues who had trouble accepting Ray and his theology of ministry. But he still wanted to tend the sheep. He saw himself as a maverick theologian. This is a remarkable little book that consists of questions. Questions that people are asking, that lay people have asked – but nonetheless are profound, theological questions:

- Will Judas be in heaven?
- Is Jesus an evangelical?
- What do you say at the graveside of a suicide?

It's very profound, practical, important questions. One chapter is remarkable – Does Jesus think of things today? It's a question that gets to a very important point. As we read Scripture, is Jesus reading Scripture along with us? Or has he left the building and given us the Bible because he's not around anymore? What kind of theology is that? Practically, that often *is* our theology.

But it's really a strange view of Scripture that thinks that we could read Scripture without Jesus. When we think of the road to Emmaus and Jesus himself had to explain to disciples where the



Scriptures spoke of him. Ray plays with that a little bit in how we use and abuse the Bible and often don't read it in a Christo-centric way – in terms of all Scripture bears witness to Christ. The chapters are very provocative (and mischievous in some ways) but very helpful in the end.

JMF: I hope your book will move some people toward wanting to be more familiar with some of Ray's books.

CK: That's the purpose. This is just to give them a taste of Anderson and some of his insights here and there, and to move them into reading his books,

because I think there's such a rich reward in reading Ray.

JMF: Many people may not know that Ray played part of a role early on in the transformation of the Worldwide Church of God, in the early stages after the transformation, of being a support and a help to many of our pastors, and attending many of our pastors' conferences and speaking at them, encouraging our pastors.

CK: Ray's always been able to connect with pastors, because he never ceased to be a pastor. The same time, he's a world-class top-flight theologian who will challenge you academically and intellectually as much as you want to be challenged. He's that rare individual who does both.

JMF: We had the opportunity to interview him two times on this program.

CK: Right, those were wonderful interviews, too. I commend them to the audience.

JMF: A couple of your books focused on some of these same themes that you were first introduced to with Ray, and one of them is this one – *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*. And your forthcoming one – *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*.

CK: Because of Anderson's influence, I increasingly saw that theology didn't need to be restricted to an ivory tower, and deal only with abstract, arcane or irrelevant issues. But theology at its best is taking the gospel and applying it radically to our struggles in our lives – such as doubt and despair and guilt and anxiety and loneliness. Ray's Christocentric theology reminded me that the solution needs to be constantly to go back to Jesus Christ. Maybe our Christology hasn't been healthy or strong enough.

Through the work of Ray's mentor T.F. Torrance, I encountered this doctrine on the vicarious humanity of Christ. It says that the atonement is not just restricted to Christ paying the penalty for our sins. He did that. But it's not just his death that's vicarious in our place. *His entire humanity* takes our place. It very much came out of Ray's pastoral theology that I became intrigued with dealing with these issues – but also his profound Christocentric theology and the influence of the doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ, which has so much potential for us having a Christocentric theology of ministry. Often when people talk about theology of ministry, it's just trying to be practical, or just become more skilled at being a preacher or a counselor or a church-growth strategist or whatever. No. It's got to be a theology that drives us back to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and to the Triune God whom Jesus Christ reveals. Because otherwise we're just trying to do our best to do some crowd management in the church – or as Dallas Willard

says, just do sin management.

JMF: Sin management, yes, that's right.

CK: Rather, we do sin management if we don't have that robust Christocentric Trinitarian theology. It's so encouraging to me when I hear what you folks are doing at Grace Communion International in drawing up the implications of a Trinitarian theology for the ministry of the church. That's really the future, and it's an exciting future in doing that.

JMF: I appreciate that.

Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, about the painting. On the newer cover, there's Rembrandt's painting of the return of the prodigal son, and then Nouwen goes through every aspect of that painting as it captures the pathos of who we are in Christ and the fact that we are held by his arms after everything we are and everything we've done, he's made us new in himself and won't let us go. It's an embrace of absolute, unconditional love despite who we are, and it speaks to the vicarious humanity of Christ – who he is for us, that he's made us to be in our rest and our comfort that comes of that. Because it seems like as you wrote about joy and despair, there's so much despair. That's where we're coming from.

CK: We see ourselves as just in despair, yes, God help me, but [we think] God is still distant from that. Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* [volume IV.2, page 21] has a wonderful section – his exegesis of the prodigal son, do you know it? **JMF:** No.] It's fantastic, it's called in a section, titled “the way of the Son of God into the far country.” He sees Jesus as the prodigal son. He's the one who goes into the far country of our humanity, our despair, our doubts and so forth... taking upon our humanity, then is embraced by the Father. So we're not left alone in our doubts and despairs and anxieties. The Incarnation means God is taking upon our humanity – that humanity is the humanity now, as it is now, filled with doubts and despair and anxiety. It's a fascinating way of looking at the prodigal son. **JMF:** A comforting picture.] Exactly, but very much connected with Nouwen's emphasis and the Rembrandt painting.

JMF: One question we'd like to ask everybody at least at some point in an interview: If there is one thing you want people to know about God, what would it be?

CK: God is love. Christians always say that God is love. But we know that God is love because God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the significance of the Trinity, that God himself is in a relationship of love from all eternity, and that is made known, made manifest in the Incarnation. So when we speak of the love of God, we're not talking about something that is a feeling or sentimentality or something abstract, or even *our* ideas of love. Love is at the center of who God is in this relationship between the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. That's why the Trinity is so essential for the church.

JMF: And that's the heart of the Trinitarian theology, which this program is all about.

CK: Exactly. It means that God is love – and that means relationship in God himself that he then has shared with us in Jesus Christ.



28. JESUS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS: A DISCUSSION WITH C. BAXTER KRUGER AND STEVE HORN

J. Michael Feazell: We're delighted to have with us in our round-table discussion Dr. C. Baxter Kruger, president of Perichoresis, an international non-profit ministry. He is joined by his assistant Steve Horn. Let's go around the table and introduce our panel.

Joseph Tkach [JWT], current president of our denomination.

John McKenna [JM], doctrinal adviser to our denomination.

Mike Morrison [MM], managing editor of *Christian Odyssey* magazine.

Steve Horn [SH], Dr. Kruger's assistant.

Baxter Kruger [CBK], husband of Beth.

JMF: Thanks everybody, let's begin by talking about all the people in the Old Testament... many of them are the heroes of the Bible, and yet they lived before Christ came and consequently never heard of Christ, never named the name of Christ, what happens to those people? Are they in hell? I've heard that said.

CBK: If you ask me the direct question, I would say that there are two concepts that are important, and this is where your theology bursts the wineskins of our present conception. The first one is the concept of *prolepsis*, which is there are certain things that happened on the basis of something that has not yet been historically realized. Paul says that God winks at the transgressions committed in the old times because he knew that the sacrifice of Jesus was coming. In essence he's saying God was relating to Israel and to the world at large on the basis of the relationship that he would have with them in the future in the person of Jesus.

That's one thing. The other is that Paul says, I think deliberately, that, not only are all things created in and through, and by and for the Son of God, but he says *Jesus*, and he has in view there the incarnate Son. Just in the mind-boggling idea, basically what we're saying is that Adam and Eve and everyone after them came into being, by the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. What they knew of that, how much they understood of that, how they could process that, I don't know, but for me, I do not believe that any person will ever wake up on the other side and meet Jesus and say, "Who are you?"

Jesus is the one who knows how people respond to him. Everybody in the history of every religion wants to be the one in the position to say, this is what constitutes a response to Jesus. But he is the only one in that position.

Paul says in Colossians that the gospel has been proclaimed to all creation, in heaven and on earth. He is pushing the envelope that way, and that relationship has been there, and is being revealed in some way that makes sense to people, and Jesus is the one who's relating and having that. That's about as far as I can go there.

JMF: What are the implications of that for loved ones, relatives, all people in far-away places who perhaps never heard the gospel or perhaps never heard it in a way that properly represented it, and therefore verbally accepted it ...

CBK: Well, who *has* heard the gospel properly presented since Jesus preached? The good news is that Jesus is the one who has established relationship with the human race. He has done that. That is not dependent upon the church, that is not dependent upon our faith. The Father's Son has established relationship with each of us, in his Spirit. He is addressing us and we are responding. The place of the Christian church is to be a witness to that relationship, to help people know who it is that they are in relationship with – what this is about – what their time and their history is about. The church is to bear a witness and to be a fellowship of light that brings light on what's really going on. It's not Allah, it's Jesus. It's our job to stand up and unpack and proclaim that as the truth, not something we create, but as the truth it is, that he has established.

I think that it is really important for us to recognize that we give up judgment on who's in, who's out and what constitutes that. Jesus has established a relationship with the entire cosmos – in his own Incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Everyone, at some level, is aware of that. They may not be able to call him Jesus, because maybe they grew up in a fundamentalist church where Jesus was so small and so mean-spirited that the only thing that they could do is run from that conception because it was so non-human. They are embracing life, and I don't think that when they are embracing life, they are embracing non-Jesus. They are trying to find Jesus in the dark. It's the job of the Christian church to say, "This is what's going on here. You're trying to embrace the real Jesus." You help people see who that is.

JT: One of the key verses in all this incarnational talk that we've had today is one you've alluded to numerous times, that all things are created for him and by him and consist in him. I think one of the most misunderstood issues is this notion that if you die before you hear Jesus' name and have the chance to accept him as your Savior, that it's all over. Somehow, God is handcuffed and you're destined to go to hell for eternity and have eternal torment. What

it overlooks is the fact that God is sovereign and he is not a prisoner of his sovereignty, he has a freedom, and since he created all things, and all things live and consist for him, by him and in him, we're not really dead till he says we're dead.

CBK: I think about Lazarus, he's dead four days, comes back to life, and (the Gospel of John was apparently written by the apostle) you think, "John, why didn't you interview Lazarus? This guy's been dead four days? For John, he's like, "Why interview Lazarus when we've got to talk to Jesus? Here's what we're looking at when we're going to meet on the other side – it's right here in front of us." The revelation of who God is, and what God intends, and has planned and has accomplished, is the person of Jesus and his union with us. That's what we come to on the other side.

JMF: Jesus conquered death, and in him, we're conquerors of death as well.

SH: One who was slain from before the foundation of the world, that's what I'm thinking about. We keep bringing this forward into a time in history as if that's important.

JMF: As if God is bound by time...

SH: This is *before* the foundation.

JM: Perhaps we could remember that he came in the fullness of time. How are you going to flesh out the significance of the fullness of time without understanding that he is the Lord of time? He is the Lord of time past, he is the Lord of time present, he is the Lord of time future. He is the Lord of time. He is the judge and Savior of all time. When you're asking questions about how he relates himself to time, you're asking big questions, and you need to get the answers from the Lord of time.

This concept of prolepsis that Baxter is talking about, I see Moses' confession already operating with the concept of prolepsis. He's doing it like this: Because the Lord bailed the people of God out of Egypt, I can confess the one who created the heavens and the earth in the beginning. It's in the light of redemption that you understand creation. That is fundamental to what the meaning of prolepsis is. Nobody understands the Creator without the redemption of the Creator, and this Creator is the redeemer of all time.

CBK: and the Revealer.

JM: The Son of God, pre-incarnate, is just as time-full (and I think that's what you are thinking of) as the incarnate Son of God – it's just a different kind of time, isn't it?

SH: Some of the actions in the Old Testament particularly, several things were counted as righteousness. If you take the definition of righteousness as being in right relationship – that was what was basically given to them where

they were. We just happen to be coming along in the time to where God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the entire cosmos – and a period of time that was written about, we saw that happen in history – we were operating in that particular point in history.

CBK: The basis of the covenant relationship with Israel was the circumcision, and it happened to Israel in the flesh of Jesus. It all pointed forward to him. The old covenant was a covenant in Christ, which he was destined to come and fulfill for them and in their behalf, and we're on the other side of that covenant fulfilled, but just the same thing, we're participating in that.

JMF: It was for “today” the today of Joshua. Today where God meets us – wherever and whenever God meets us – it is the “today.”

MM: It was all pointing forward.

SH: All the language of the prophets pointing towards the Messiah...

JM: And the Messiah is the son of David. “I’ll never take my *hesed* – my grace – from off of your house like I took it from off of the house of Saul. In this way, you will be my son and I will be your father.” In that Father-son relationship is something new. Nobody before David is going to have this ... Moses didn’t have this kind of relationship with the Lord God, with the great I AM the Lord God is. He chose in his freedom in the time of the monarchy to give this relationship to David. That promise to David is Messianic hope. The messianic David is the grace of God by virtue of the fact that God was free to choose to do this for the sake of fulfilling his promise in covenant with his people in his creation. That’s why you can talk about Jesus come in the fullness of time – the promise kept the righteousness of God.

CBK: I was thinking a while ago about this that Moses – somebody was talking about that Moses – and with David too, it’s the Spirit of Christ that inspired the prophets, who inspired Moses. It’s not like in the Old Testament the Spirit is caught off guard with the Incarnation. The Incarnation is what’s planned before the foundation of the world, so Genesis, the covenant with Abraham and with Israel, and with Israel, with the human race, is not only a foreshadowing but it’s patterned after the new covenant. It is not yet historically realized. This is just baby steps, and it’s going to be fulfilled in Jesus, and once it’s fulfilled in Jesus, then we go back and we see that relation that God has had with all peoples all the time in Christ but there was no way to see that during that great darkness.

JMF: Preparation.

CBK: Preparation, fulfillment, now revelation – in the Spirit.

JMF: The matrix.

CBK: Yeah, we're in the matrix.

JM: I like even this trajectory that we are talking about, that it has typological significance. When Jesus says, "they wrote about me," he's not saying, Moses knew me, and wrote about me. He's saying Moses wrote of God in such a way that he spoke of me even if he didn't know it. All the prophets said that way.

JMF: 1 Peter 1:10.

JM: Yeah, the prophets ... they don't have any idea what they're writing about and probably St. Paul and St. Peter had very little idea that they were writing Scripture – they were writing letters, that's all they were doing.

CBK: They were doing their best they could to write about Jesus and didn't realize what it meant.

JM: Well, who makes it Scripture? The one to whom they were bearing witness – Jesus, because he is who he is.

MM: The Old Testament was an unfinished story. It's a tremendous story and you just wonder where is it going, where is it going? Until Jesus comes along. Ah, this was what it was all pointing to.

JM: And nobody liked it.

CBK: The players didn't like it, but the thing is, the real author of Scripture knew that even though the players didn't, and he counted all the players' rejection of their own messiah to accomplish reconciliation, and the real players in the story had no clue. We were talking last night about, that Caiaphas was the only high priest in the whole history of Israel that did his job. He offered up the one acceptable sacrifice – and he did it for the wrong reason. He did it to save himself and the people, and he was doing that. That's a picture of how God is a great chess player. It's just three-dimensional chess, and he's way ahead of what we think is going on. And it's revealed to us in Jesus. Then we get it. There's the purpose of God in creation – it's the union between humanity and Christ.

JMF: Barth talks of the debt of gratitude we owe the Jews for bringing about exactly what they were intended to bring about ...

CBK: T.F. Torrance calls it "the womb of the Incarnation," which is just a fantastic [image?].

JT: I think it is vital to understand it in this context that you're now presenting, because I've met Christians and non-Christians who have a very different view – in fact, they might look first at the angelic creation and see that a third rebelled, and so Plan A failed. Then he creates Adam and Eve, and humanity falls, Plan B fails, and so now we come to the Incarnation, and now we are already to Plan C, God has failed a couple of times.

CBK: Yeah, Israel failed,... The incarnate Son and the relationship that he has with his Father and the Spirit and the human race and all of creation in himself, that union, that covenant relationship – between the Father, Son, and Spirit and the human race and creation, that is not an after-thought that God quickly thought of after – Adam fails, my creation fell, I’ve got to come up with another one – that is Plan A – in the light of which we now understand what’s going on with creation, and we now understand what the calling of Israel is about. We now understand what the calling of the church is about.

SH: To use your analogy with a three-dimensional chess board, when God created everything, he had checkmate.

JM: I was surprised that you’d be like in either four or ten, eleven dimensions.

JT: However many dimensions there are, checkmate in all.

CBK: That’s the beauty – Jesus is the light of the cosmos – not just the light of the Christian church. He’s not only the one in and through and by whom are all things, but FOR him. Here, in this person, and in the relationship between – God on the one side and the human race in another that exists in his very identity – here we see what God is up to from all eternity. This is the revelation, this is the unfolding of what’s been hidden and we could not conceive of. That’s a Christological hermeneutic – that’s the truth of all truths, that’s the way to think as a Christian.

JM: Every time you are going to read covenant renewal in the Old Testament, you are asked not only to read God with his people, but the creation is always asked, called upon, to bear witness to what he is doing with his people. God never just bears witness to himself, between himself and his people. He always says, “Heaven, come over here and look at this. Earth, come over here and listen to this, because I’m speaking with my people and you’re my witness.” The creation, the cosmos, is always a part of every covenant renewal you’ll ever read throughout the whole Bible.

JMF: God enters into covenant relationship with Israel numerous times in the Old Testament “that all nations might know that I am the Lord.”

JM: Yeah, that’s very important.

MM: To be a light to the nations.

CBK: Cause Israel did what the Calvinists do, and what the church typically does, which is “we’re in and you’re out, and this is for us, and God loves us and does not love everybody else.” He says, no, I’m calling you Abraham, I will bless you, I’m going to protect you, and I love you, and through you I’m going to reach the world.

JMF: One of the stated purposes of Perichoresis under your supervision is recovering a relational vision that reflects the union of the triune God, the human race, and all creation, in Christ. Promotes healing for relationships, marriages and families, and establishes a framework for international relations. That is a tall order, and yet it accurately reflects what the gospel is all about.

CBK: It looks like, if it's a goal, it's a tall order. How in the world are you going to do that? But if it's a reflection of the international relation that's established in Jesus, of the healing for all relationships – marriage and family and racial, and sexual – if it's a Christological statement, then it's not a tall order, something that's been accomplished that's not being revealed. The more you focus on Jesus in terms of, he is the Father's Son and the Anointed One, and he is the one in, through, and by him all things are created, the more you focus on his identity, the more you realize, he is the point of union – he is the point of relationships. And he's already accomplished it in himself in his own person.

Now comes our education, our coming to realize that these divisions that we create because of our own insecurities, and anxieties, and darkness, are false divisions. We have a responsibility – a global responsibility, too, because the cosmos is bound up in Jesus' relationship with us. I'm a part of Jesus' relationship with you, and with people in Australia or India or Russia, this is of a piece IN Christ. That warrants as a framework that says, "Wait a minute. We've got to re-think things here." Because it's easy just to say global and national divisions and religious divisions and even in the Christian church, a couple of thousands of denominations within the Christian community, within the Protestant community. But underneath that there is a oneness that we have in Jesus, and that's why Paul says, "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Because the unity... don't create it, it's there in Christ. Preserve it. Stay focused on that, and that liberates you from recognizing people or nations according to the flesh.

JT: That leads to a question that we get asked when we're talking about the Incarnation and all that it implies, and how we participate in the divine nature – some will level the accusation that we're just teaching a form of universalism. How do you answer that?

CBK: I wish I could. I wish and pray that the whole human race comes to see the truth. I have my doubts about certain denominations, but I am not a doctrinal universalist. I am a hopeful universalist. The world is reconciled to Christ, we're included in the family, Jesus has established a relationship with all of us. He sent the Holy Spirit to enlighten us, and it is possible for us

to say consistently again, and again, and again – even indefinitely – say, “no, I’m going to live in my own world. I’m going to live in the way that I see things, the way that I see God. I’ve got my theology, I’ve got my vision of God, I’ve got my vision of the world, I’ve got my vision of what Jesus did, and I am god. My vision is what counts, and Jesus, you line up with me and everybody in the planet line up with me.”

That creates chaos and conflict and internal pain, and it’s possible for that to be an indefinite position. But God never changes, and this is important, that what we do (or do not do) does not have the capacity to change the being of God or his relationship with us that he has established. We’re not talking about changing God from being a Father back into being a judge. We’re talking about the fact the he has bound himself in relationship with us. That is never changing – the Spirit is haunting us and trying to enlighten us, and that’s the state of things.

Now, how it comes out? We’re not in a position to say with any kind of dogmatic reference. It’s theoretically possible that no one would get it, no one would see. It’s theoretically possible that almost everyone, or even indeed all, will come to see. There are people that I respect, George McDonald and Thomas Erskine among them, great thinking Christian godly men, that the love of the Father poured forth from both of them. They both were committed universalists. They just believe that the love of the Father was going to win, it was just impossible not to. I think, that’s probably ... that’s good.

But I just can’t say that. So, I’m not a universalist, but I understand why people who are operating out of a legal framework can only hear me saying that, because for them, if you pray to receive Jesus, then you’ve got a ticket to heaven and you’re going. And if everybody’s got a ticket, then everybody’s going to go to heaven. But the plain fact is that there are people who don’t want to go. They may have a ticket and the trip paid for, but they don’t want to participate in it. It’s not going away, it’s a very miserable form of existence.

JMF: C.S.Lewis’ book, *The Great Divorce* ... [**CBK:** Fantastic book.] talks about that.

JT: That was a nice turn of phrase the way you’ve explained that, they have a paid ticket in their pocket but they don’t want to use it.

CBK: In C.S. Lewis’s image, the door of heaven is always open, and even the door of hell, and maybe it’s the same door. It’s not “we died, and God goes back into being God, and forget this Father, Son, Spirit stuff, and forget this covenant relationship. Sorry, all that’s over, you had your chance, now it’s gone in flames.” It’s covenant relationship, and where are you in the

journey? Whether you see or whether you don't see, you're not changing God in this.

JT: I think you will agree with me, it's almost an odd question about "are you a universalist" because when I look at the early church fathers, they all wrote with a hope that everyone

CBK: They believed in a cosmic Jesus. They believed that Jesus is the one who has reconciled the cosmos, and so they were looking for the manifestation and the revelation of that, and they wanted to participate in the unveiling of that. Our Jesus in the West today is (for Pete's sake), without the church he can't even have a voice. It's like we make Jesus Lord of our lives – who's lord, then? The announcement is he is Lord, he has come and established a relationship with us; therefore quit living in your own world and come live with him in his. Walk with him. Let him disciple you. Let him teach you about the Father.

29. HOW DO WE GET ENOUGH FAITH?

JT: Working pastorally, we’ve met people who have ups and downs in their lives, and when they have the downs, they always feel like such a failure, that they were just not faithful enough, and they didn’t have enough faith. When they better understand this incarnational theology, they have a whole different context in which they’re living. Unfortunately, with the proliferation of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel, many people are trying to work up enough faith, and then the fall is very painful and great when they realize they haven’t worked up enough faith. Perhaps you can comment on the difference between living in the faith of Jesus as opposed to working up your own faith.

CBK: That’s the difference between religion and Christianity. Every religion in the world is going to tell you that you have to build a relationship with God, or maintain a relationship with God – here is how you do that, go do it.

Christianity says, no one knows the Father but the Son. Jesus says, come to me and you can share in my relationship with the Father, which means I’m the true believer, and I will share my faith with you, and you can participate in my relationship with the Father, and that’s an easy thing, he says. My yoke is easy, my load is light. I’m not like the Pharisees, who are going to keep lists upon list upon list of things you’ve got to be doing to entertain and maintain some sort of relationship with this invisible God.

To me, the greatest news in the world is ... there’s a singer/songwriter back in, I think he’s originally from Alabama – named Pierce Pettis – one of the, just brilliant singer/songwriters of our time, but he’s got a song called “God believes in you.” One of the lines says, when you feel so ashamed that you could die, God believes in you.

For me, the news is that, not only does the Father, Son, and Spirit believe in me, believe in us, but they’ve established a relationship with us, and with me and with all of us across the world. And so it’s not about us working up something in order to get into a relationship. Faith is a discovery that Jesus has established a relationship with us, and it’s a discovery that commands me to stop my own false religious believing and pretense, and to rest in the reality of that relationship. It’s a discovery that summons me to acknowledge it by reckoning on it – and beginning to live and participate with his mind, with him. It was great relief there.

JM: I think one of the most comforting aspects of this kind of confession for me has been that Jesus Christ has repented for me. That I do not have to

dig down into the depths of my own being to find a proper repentance before God, because Christ does that for me. To me, I can only catch one little minnow, but I'm a fisher of men because of who Jesus is.

CBK: How could you repent without knowing what sin really is? We're not even in a position to say how bad have we actually done in our own self-effort. Only Jesus is in a position to say, "this is what the mess is," and he receives the Father's love in the middle of that for us.

JMF: Don't we often see our own sin and sinfulness way down the line, after we've been Christians a long time? We tend to think, I'm worse now than ever, it seems to me, and it's probably because we can see what sin is better, the longer we walk with Christ.

CBK: There are several dimensions, there's one that I want to point out there and that is, my friend, Bruce Wauchope, in Australia, he's done a series called "The gospel and mental health" that's available in our website. But one of the things that he points out is that, as we come to know that we are accepted, truly just accepted as we are, only then do we start letting out stuff that we've been keeping hidden and suppressed and in a closet. That's when we begin to be healed – only in the light of our acceptance can we even acknowledge that this is going on, let alone come forward with it. So he says quite often, the gospel is news about acceptance in Jesus, everything starts falling apart in people's lives, because they are no longer trying to hold it all together. They let it come forward, and that's where real healing starts.

JT: That's freeing. The legalist can't see this, because he's wearing not just thick glasses, but welder's glasses, and they're comparing themselves to this list of rules. They misunderstand the context of Jesus' ministry, or John the Baptist's ministry, when they talk about repenting. All they do is heap up a larger and ever-growing burden of guilt on themselves.

JMF: They have to try all the harder to hold everything together.

SH: If you're not seeing yourself in Christ, who else is going to hold it together? It's going to get dumped in your lap every time. So to me, the whole paradigm of talking about sin goes far deeper than the ten commandments or the legal models. He goes all the way into you not seeing, and you denying who you are in Christ, and what has been accomplished in and through his death, burial and resurrection.

JMF: It leaves you with deep depression or hypocrisy or both.

JM: It took no other than Christ to show me how much I hated him. Only he could show me that. No one else can show us how much we hate who God is, except God.

CBK: Only then, by revealing the relationship that God has with us, that

he won't let us go. He's accepted us.

JM: That's why we say ... He's a very merciful God.

SH: We started out talking about the faith issue, seeing that participating in Jesus' faith, he is the one who has the relationship with the Father. He is the one who knows the Father. He is the one who actively participates in the love of the Father and the Spirit. He shares that with us. He shares everything that there is with us. So he is sharing our faith.

I used to read that Scripture, "If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to that mountain 'be removed,' and it falls into the ocean." I read it and read it and kept trying to conjure it up. Finally I read it one day, and I felt so stupid, because after a while the way I read it was, it says, "you don't have it. You don't have the faith of a mustard seed. Jesus is the one who's got all the faith." He shared it with us through grace, that's what saved us, and took a lot of the pressure off.

JMF: So I don't have to depend on the quality and level of my faith to know that I'm saved.

SH: No more than you do for your own salvation. It's not up to you, it's a finished work.

CBK: Who has ever moved beyond "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief," I mean, honestly? Would that not be the apostle Paul's last confession? Or the great Athanasius? Isn't it "Lord I believe, help my unbelief"? I see it, I want it, and so you tell me the difference between looking at it ourselves, as Steve was saying, independent, outside of union with Christ, outside of his faith and faithfulness. We are trying to put our quantity of faith over here to see if it qualifies to get an exchange miracle, if we flex it enough. That independent faith is to say, no, Jesus is the one that moves mountains, and when we participate in him, we find ourselves getting water because he says "get water," and he is going to transform it into wine. We don't do that, he does that. He's the transformer.

MM: I was thinking about how people want to get other people saved, and yet those other people are already saved. Maybe it's more of an educational process than a saving process?

CBK: We have to rethink – because you're thinking it about this way – you cannot be lost if you don't belong. Salvation has to be rethought in the light of the fact that Jesus has a relationship with us. I had this discussion with a Calvinist at the American Academy of Religion in New Orleans out on Royal Street. I was going to eat supper and he followed me and he was arguing with me all the way. We got out in the middle – it was Canal Street, which is a boulevard – and he said: "Surely you don't believe that all these

people out here in New Orleans are in Christ.”

I just looked at him and said, “Well, of course I do. I mean, how else did they get here?”

He said: God made them.

I said: *Which* God made them?

He said, “God.”

I said, “*Which* God?”

He said, “I don’t know what you mean – God’s common grace?”

I said, “Which God, what’s his name?”

He wouldn’t say it. He wouldn’t say, Father, Son and Spirit, because that would have meant that there is a relationship that Jesus has with all these people in New Orleans whether they prayed the prayer or even are one of the elect... So he’s gonna hide behind the notion of common grace – and some generic common grace that the Father relates to people behind the back of Jesus – as opposed to seeing that all things come into being in and through Jesus and now he has lifted us up, all of us, into this relation.

Now we can talk about getting saved – getting saved is what Jesus did for us; now we can talk about our *experience* of that. And where are we in our journey of understanding?

The first encounter that I had that I remember was in college, and I was at a camp, and boy, it was very powerful and I thought, “this is fantastic.” Everybody tells me “you got saved.” I thought, “I got saved.” Then I had another encounter that was even better, three years down the road and, well, what was that? They said, you get a second blessing. Ok, a second blessing.

Then I had a really huge one in Scotland with J.B. Torrance teaching, and I’m going, I didn’t know how to categorize it, and he is the one who said to me, “you have many, many experiences in your life. Don’t build your theology on experience – your salvation happened in Jesus. It unfolds in your life relationally. There are moments of great insight and liberation and clarity. There are moments like that, but those are not when you get from outside of Jesus into Jesus. That’s revelation. That’s clarification. You used the word “education,” which is a fantastic word. Education means to draw out.

MM: Jesus *announced* his good news. He didn’t ask, “Is this true or not?” Rather, he announced it as a fact.

CBK: Again, and again, the gospel is not an invitation, it’s a declaration of reality – I am the Lord your God, I am the light of the cosmos. Follow me and you won’t walk in the dark, you’ll be in the light. Again and again and again, it’s not an invitation, it’s a declaration of reality. That declaration summons us to change our view of reality and come and participate. And the

kingdom's here.

JM: I remember one day at Fuller Seminary, Tom Torrance was being haunted by Evangelical born-again people, and they wanted to know, “when were you born again?” I can tell you, I was born again in 1972, because of some experience I had in San Francisco. Everybody was after Tom because could they do the same, they could say, I was born again in such and such a date and such and such a time. When they asked that question to Professor Torrance, he said, “Well, it was around A.D. 30.”

CBK: In Jesus' resurrection.

JT: That triggers another area that I think we should ask you to comment upon. It's interesting how quickly Christianity can be turned into a religion – of lists of rules, and things to do or another way of saying it – making a formula out of Christianity. Something that's ever growing in popularity in the United States, and I'm afraid it's one of the worst things that the United States exports outside its country, is this health, wealth, prosperity gospel – if you just do these right things, have the right amount of faith, you'll be wearing a Rolex watch in just a matter of months and driving a new Lexus – maybe you could comment on that.

CBK: Everything that happened to Jesus and his apostles. You can't have a vision of the gospel that excludes what's happened to the apostles and to Jesus himself. I think God wants us whole and complete, and we are in Jesus – and that unfolds in history – and it includes our death. The experience of our salvation, the unfolding of it includes our death.

I have this conversation with a friend back home who says, “Baxter, you teach that everything is bound up in Jesus, and if it's bound up in Jesus, then all we've got to do is believe enough, and if we believe enough, it will all unfold.”

I said, “You're right. If we believed with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, then the truth in Jesus will be set free. What you're excluding is the journey, and the journey is our life, which includes our death. That's when we learn it.”

We learn it when we die – that we're not the Lord, we don't have the power of life, we never did, and we've always participated in Jesus. One thing that needs to be on the table is that, that suffering is part of the way in which we can participate in the faith of Christ – as he'd learned the things who he was (Hebrews 5) through the things that he suffered.

The second thing that I think is important is that, he is the one who tells us what we are supposed to believe, what we are supposed to do. That's not in our control. There were servants sitting around when Jesus commanded

these servants to get water, he transformed it into wine. The next day, they went out – “we’re gonna get water.” So they get water, get more water, get more water. But that’s not what Jesus is doing. He’s the only one who transforms it into wine – he calls the shots.

That’s why the Lazarus story is important. It says explicitly in John 11, “Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick” and it says, he stayed where he was two more days. It was like a two-days journey. After four days the man has been dead, the sisters come out and said, “If you would’ve been here, our brother wouldn’t have died.” He says, this has been done for the revelation for the Son of Man. This suffering, this not getting the Rolex, this struggle, this man died and was rotting, he went through that, that family went through that, for the revelation of Jesus Christ. We’ve got to have a place for that obviously biblical story in our theology.

JMF: Jesus said, I’ve come that they might have life and have it more abundantly. We want to interpret the word “abundantly” as Rolexes and Lexuses – abundance of possessions. What we possess, our position, prestige, power – that’s not the abundant life. When you boil it down, what people really want, what people really need and what constitutes abundance in life, ask any rich person who’s never have a love relationship, who’s never had anybody care about them and love them and has never loved anyone – we need and want love – that’s abundance. People would trade all the riches they have for somebody who loves them, cares for them, to feel accepted and know that they’re beloved. This is abundant life.

CBK: Jesus, when he defines eternal life – this is eternal life, that they may know you. Knowing the Father and this Father’s heart (which is what you’re saying), knowing his love for us produces an unearthly assurance within our souls, a peace and a hope that is life. It has an infinite variety of expressions. It may include giving your own life for the benefit of another person. That abundant life is not just... that’s an American invention, only recently did anybody think about anything like that – only in a materialist world would anybody dream of that.

Abundant life is knowing the Father’s heart and experiencing his lavish love. Today, whether that’s in Los Angeles, or in Australia, or wherever it is – and in the midst of our lives and relationship. In the freedom that comes from knowing I am assured in my soul, with that unearthly assurance, now therefore I’m not self-centered. In this moment I’m living in assurance and therefore I can be other-centered like the Father, Son and Spirit, and I can be there for my family, be there for my friends, for their benefit – that’s the rippling of the river of living water. That’s the kingdom, the way of being in

life with the Father, Son and Spirit. The abundance of their way of life comes into expression in us through assurance. That's it, that's what we want.

JMF: Giving ourselves away entirely and receiving ourselves back from God and from one another – totally different sense of abundance from the way we've defined it.

SH: One of the things interesting to me about the grace of God is that he would give you the desires of your heart, so to me, there's nothing that would preclude anyone from wanting to have riches and health and all of the other stuff – Paul said, what good is it then if I gain everything but I don't have Christ? That's kind of strong language to me. You can probably pray yourself into a million bucks. So what? I've seen more miserable wealthy people than I care to even speak about right now. They have all the money in the world.

CBK: And what freedom and beauty it is when do have a Rolex, so you can give it to somebody else.

JMF: Exactly – even Abraham was a rich man for his age, a wealthy man. And yet this wasn't what defined him. It's not what made him be who he was and successful.

JM: We must be talking about life in the new creation – the new heavens and the new earth as the new children of the kingdom, that's where life is ultimately very abundant.

CBK: "Wherein dwelleth right relationship."

JMF: "How difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus told the disciples after the encounter with the wealthy man who couldn't let go of his possessions. But even so, they said, "who can be saved then?" "With God all things are possible. Even this, a camel going through the eye of the needle, God can even do that." He does do that – save rich people and poor people alike, there's no difference when we're in Christ.

CBK: To come back to what I call the unearthly assurance, the longer I live ... that is the real gift of the gospel to us. It takes the pressure off. It helps me to see that I am loved, and have been loved and I am accepted and I'm included just like I am right now today. So I can let go of stuff – to strive – even striving of earnest prayer to get a Rolex watch. Whatever it is, you can let go of that and just be. That leaves you not in self-centered mode, not in narcissistic mode, not in frantic mode, but in the calmed mode where you're free to give of yourself for others – which creates fellowship, and that life of the kingdom has an inbreaking, it expresses itself.

SH: The question is, what makes you whole and complete and in need of nothing? To me that's the real question.

JM: Having no need, to be nothing.

MM: Reminds me of Paul in prison in Philippians. He is in prison what does he talk about? He says he wants to know Christ and his sufferings and also the power of his resurrection. He knows that one is on the path toward the other. He is not even praying his way out of prison, he's just assured of, that if he dies, he will go to be with the Lord, that's all that counted.

CBK: There was a George Wishart in the Reformation right before ... he was a guy that evidently was preaching when John Knox was converted or came to the light, or whatever you want to call it. But Wishart was also burned at the stake and he was down in a well in St. Andrews (and there's a marquee out there marking it in the road) and he was singing. It was one of those wells ... basically a foot around it goes down, at the bottom it's five feet. You've got enough room to stretch out there, but that's it. He was singing down there, and people that listened to him all came to faith, because they could not figure out how in the world this guy was having a good time. Then that even was sort of idolized: that's what *we* are supposed to do.

He was experiencing the Father's care for him as a person in the midst of that trauma. And it was light. Other people say, What is going on here? This is beautiful. You wouldn't want to say to him he did not have abundant life in that moment. He didn't have freedom, he didn't have a Rolex watch, or any other kind of watch, for that matter. He was living in his own mess because of where he was and could not get out, but nevertheless the Lord met him there. It was something very real and very deep and very beautiful about it, I guarantee he would not have given up a million years for exchange somewhere else.

SH: Idolatry, comes to my mind also. Praying for prosperity.

CBK: I think your question is...Steve, what constitutes being whole and complete and in need of nothing? For me the only answer is that we know the Father as Jesus knows the Father.

JT: And the only way we can do that is through Jesus himself.

JM: If we read John 17 in his prayer for us, not only for his disciples but those who will believe (through his disciples) in him, that the Father and the Son in the Spirit share with those who believe in Christ is abundant life. It is life forever, it is the new creation. Though the history of the church can deny this answer to this prayer of oneness, "that they maybe one, Father, as we are one" – though the history of the church may deny it, the church can't deny it. The church of Jesus Christ is one with the Father, of the Son, in the Spirit.

30. PERICHORESIS AND SHARING IN GOD'S LIFE

JMF: We've never covered *perichoresis* as a word, and what does it mean, and why is your ministry named Perichoresis?

C. Baxter Kruger: We just wanted to figure out what would be the hardest thing to actually pull off in the universe [laughter].... So we just figure a name like that... No.

Oh, goodness. The word means, technically, mutual indwelling. What attracted me to it early on was the way in which the early church was grappling to explain how the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit works, and how can there be three in one. For me, to come to see Jesus as the Father's Son, as the Anointed One and the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created, and to say and to speak the name of Jesus Christ is to say Trinity, and humanity, and creation are not separated but bound together in relationship.

I started thinking, Steve and I were talking about this, we were excited about this, like, how do we talk about this person *Jesus* in this way? Then we talked about the idea of starting a nonprofit ministry that was essentially Christologically focused, helping people recover the early church's vision, and we were talking about how do you summarize this in one word. We talked about "Immanuel," we talked about "union," both of which are great words that summarized what we were talking about, but those are words that are used all the time.

I said my favorite theological term forever is *perichoresis*. It's just right at it. It's saying it all in one word. It says union without loss of personal distinction. It says Father, Son, Spirit relationship – oneness but not enmeshment. It's just a classic word, and I was naïve enough to think that a word like that would not be a marketing problem. The interesting thing about it is, it's not a marketing problem with the younger generation. They love stuff like that. They just love words like that.

We'd backed into it there, but the other thing I think is interesting about the word is as we march historically, the old divisions between science and religion – or at least some of those parts of division are beginning to, not fall away, but we're having conversations – and it seems to me that there is a lot of scientists out there who're trying to come to some concept of how things can be united and yet remain what they are without being psychologically enmeshed or absorbed. I think that word and the concept of Perichoresis is going to be very much the forefront as we move into the third Christian

millennium, and in terms of the larger discussion.

JMF: In the description of the ministry of Perichoresis, you have written that you have established critical dialogue with scientists, with doctors, lawyers, counselors, and teachers, and provided a relational theological vision for a new integration – overcoming the inherited divisions between those disciplines.

CBK: Yes. That’s again a Christological affirmation. Once you see that Jesus is not just one individual and a sea of individuals that are unrelated, but he is actually the one in, and through, and by and for whom all things are created and are sustained. Then in him, in the person of Jesus, you’re talking about the point of unity. You’re talking about the one who holds it together, and so that gives us a whole new vantage point for international politics, a whole new vantage point for law and justice and what are we trying to do, and who are the people that we’re involved with.

Instead of recognizing people according to the flesh, like Paul says, don’t recognize people according ... he doesn’t recognize people according to the flesh. Paul said, “one died, therefore all died.” All our divisions, and all the ways that we recognize and honor one another is out – there’s only people bound up in Christ and the giftedness in that. That’s the way we look at people. That revolutionizes the way we go about our relationships, it gives us a framework to know that I’m not ever going to meet a person in the planet [including the Calvinist] who is not included, and is not a joint heir with me, and a participant in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. To know that’s who I’m dealing with radically changes the way that I approach... (or theoretically, radically changes, and we still fall to our own prejudices, thanks), but it gives us a foundation for a new dialogue.

Then when you talk about that in terms of economic theory, for example, where did our current American economic theory come from? It came from some philosophy. Some guy or group of guys’ way of thinking about the nature of economics. Thinking now in Christ that we are bound together in this relationship, we now have the responsibility to live in the unity of our relationship together. That changes some of the dynamics and what pushes our economy and the way we value different things. These are all implications. What I found is the more I proclaim this Jesus, the more I’ve got economists or physicists, or scientists. Or psychologists and all, and so when they see something of the implications for their field, immediately the want to have a dialogue, and that’s what’s beginning to happen.

JMF: Physicists and paleontologists, we tend to, as Christians, limit our dialogue to “creation vs. evolution,” and it’s a stark kind of a dialogue that draws lines in the sand, God against the evolutionist and that sort of thing.

But what you're talking about supersedes and transcends that kind of thinking.

CBK: It's like a shift in paradigm – it's like the Augustine-Pelagius battle – you're either Augustinian or you're gonna go to the Pelagian framework. But both of those are operating out of the same framework – they are both operating out of failed understanding of objective union – that Jesus has established a relationship with us, that he did that prior to our vote. The whole discussion has now got to be changed. In the same way, when you see in Jesus Christ that he is the one that established a relationship with us and with the whole cosmos, it is integrated in his own being, in his own person and his relation with the Father and Spirit. Now we've got a new paradigm or a way in which we can begin to think differently about some of these things, and not necessarily assume division – but begin to think, well, let's explore this.

Let's think through (for example) Boethius, shortly after Augustine's time, came forward with a definition of "*person*." He said that a *person* is an individual substance of a rational nature. Ever since then, that's been the reigning concept of *person* in the Western world. Our educational system is established on that basis – an individual substance of a rational order, rational nature.

Let's redefine *person* in the light of Christ. A *person* is one who exists in union with Christ and therefore in communion with the Father and Spirit, in communion with one another and in communion with creation. So you can be an individual and not a person, because a person is when you are participating in the relationship in which you exist. So you've got a very different concept.

What it means for me to be a person involves my relationship, in Christ, with the whole cosmos, with the environment, with the water, with ecology, with everything and not just in my backyard, so to speak, but in a global and cosmic level. Just that one little thing changes radically some of the implications. We ought to think about lots of things. That's where we are right now in recovering the gospel of the ancient church – we've got a lot of work to do. We've got to re-think tons of things, and that's where we need help. Thank goodness, we are a long way from being the only people on the planet who are wrestling with this. This is going on all over the place.

SH: Perichoresis is also a term used by the early church to describe and to talk about the Trinity. When you start to see that (I used to teach this, mind you, at a place called Harbor House with crack addicts and drug addicts)...the way we talk about the *mutual indwelling*, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mutually dwell in each other to the degree that they function as

one – in relationship. Because we were trying to move away from a legal framework into one that showed them a loving Father rather than a condemning Father.

MM: Historically, the word *perichoresis* has been used for relationships within the Trinity, but from what I hear you saying, it's like we are also invited into this relationship, too. Are we participating in *perichoresis*?

SH: And we function perichoretically when we do it. Absolutely. It's almost like the butterfly effect.

CBK: It is a Trinitarian way of being, and we belong to that way of being, and we're not going to function properly or be happy or prosperous when we're living in a way that is alien to that way of being. It's a fundamental word because it helps us to understand in marriage, how you can be one and yet not lose yourself in that co-dependent enmeshment, the boundaries that are established are real, but you've got one-ness.

SH: Separate and distinct but yet one.

MM: We've been invited to the party.

CBK: Well, it's even stronger than invited to the party. We're being told we're AT the party. We're included in the party.

MM: So we can either have fun, or we can choose not to.

CBK: Or you can stay and fight to stay outside and watch from a distance.

SH: You can certainly choose to participate or not to participate. You're not going to escape the consequences of either side.

JMF: But there is no other way of existing or being, apart from this perichoretic relationship that God in himself has created through Father, Son, and Spirit and in which all the cosmos exists, including us, no other way of being.

SH: Amen. We move, we breathe, and we have our being.

CBK: It's almost like you would say, ok, is it thinkable that this God who exists in this way, as Father, Son, and Spirit, in this perichoretic relation in which there is one-ness but no loss of personal identity – is it conceivable that this God would think up another way of being and wire the universe in that way? What we have revealed in Christ is ... this is who we are, this is who God is, this is the way the cosmos is wired. That's why Jesus did miracles. Because, it's made for him. It's built after the blueprints or the pattern of his own relationship with the Father and the Spirit. When he spoke, it was made to respond to him in that way.

JMF: Everything that exists then comes out of, as a product of God's love.

CBK: Relational love is the Father, Son, and Spirit, it's been called into being and sustained in and out of that. It has its stamp on it. This is where I

think the theory comes forward. If we're going to understand the nature of things or how they work, then, here's the blueprint. We're looking at the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship, we won't understand who we are and what we're made for, in what existence we have – here it is, this is the nature of the relationship. It's other-centered, self-sacrificial, love, mutual delight, self-giving, for the benefit of the other – that's the way things are made and they function like that.

JMF: But how do we think of ourselves, we don't think of ourselves that way. Typically, at our heart-level we think of ourselves in negative terms. We see our failures ...

CBK: Individual substances that are totally depraved!

JMF: We see ourselves as ugly, worthless on the outside, unlovable ...

SH: And independent ... functioning on our own and we have life within ourselves and we can produce that. What do I need with God?

JMF: Or at least we can struggle to produce it.

SH: In our fallen minds we think we can. It's only through the quickening of the Holy Spirit that we get convicted to conversion to have a renewing of the mind to see that we never brought anything to the party in the first place.

JMF: But there is a healing in that, in fact, this is all about healing.

JM: There's an aspect to this that I think we should pay some attention to. The perichoretic relationship between the divine and human natures of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ is one kind of perichoresis. Perichoresis of the divine and human nature in the person of Christ is not the same as the perichoresis between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the Trinity.

CBK: That's correct. That's why basically the former was dropped as the Trinitarian view of perichoresis emerged historically; the other Christological kind of moved to the background.

SH: Because of our fallen minds.

JM: I believe that we have to learn to integrate them and distinguish them – that there is a perichoretic relationship between the perichoresis in the Incarnation and the perichoresis of the Trinity. I believe this is important for the relationship to physics, to science. Because the divine and human natures, the divine nature of the Word of God, is spaceless and timeless. When the Word of God becomes flesh, what has been living eternally (and I like to use the ... whatever space and time are a reflection of, in eternity, so that I can say un-created space-time) has made room and time for itself in the Incarnation. So now, in this one person – which is why you cannot use Boethian terms – in this one person you have space-time, having been created by God for God, as a man, in relationship with the un-created space and the un-created time that God is, as triune.

CBK: That's another dimension of the word, the meaning of the word perichoresis: *make room* for another within you own space/time.

JM: You have inherent in this perichoresis, the way that transcendence and empiricism belong to one another.

CBK: You got a hold of something. Someone's got a hold you right there. I cannot quite get it, but I smell it.

JT: Let's bring it to a level that maybe people can grapple with by asking a really difficult question. If we are partakers of the divine nature, and I believe we are, and if all the world, all the people – whether they are witting or unwitting of their participation, how do you explain in human history events like the Holocaust?

CBK: Something of that enormous proportion, and pain and suffering, needs a deep and detailed answer, but there are basic things to be said. How do you explain the failure of the church? To me, the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not a computer life. Jesus is not programmed to love his Father. He's three persons in relationship, and that life is one that involves (to speak anthropomorphically) mind, heart and will of each of the three persons. It involves the choice, and so the life of God does not exist as a pre-programmed thing. It exists as a relationship that's real. Each person is real to the other person.

If the goal is adoption, if the goal is to create something that is not, and then bring that to participate in this Trinitarian life, then one of the things that has to be built into it, is our own distinct mind, heart, and will. Because otherwise we're just computers with Christological software, we're robots, and that's not the point. So that will and that choice is there. We're included in this relationship now. To participate, we must choose to do so in ongoing relational basis.

But to me, that is the crack in the door that allows in the snake. Because we can, in our own distinct mind, hearts and will, (although we're united with the Father, Son, and Spirit and share in that life), we can, in our distinction, become very confused and very dark. In our darkness and confusion, we can act out, live out of that, and do harm to ourselves and to one another, individually, and corporately, and to the cosmos. The Holocaust is the extreme example of that. But any form of murder, any form of where we are acting out of our confusion and darkness which ultimately is not us – do not belong to us as God's creatures, it comes from the evil one – that's another discussion.

The other thing I want to put over the top of that is, in no way taking away from the pain that the Jewish people suffered, not only there but throughout their history, the other thing is, this beautiful scene in the Lord

of the Rings, when they're in the tunnel, and Gandalf is leading them through the darkness and they go across this bridge and this demon creature comes up with fire and it's lapping at them, the bridge is falling in and Gandalf walks out and he slams the staff onto the ground and says, "you shall not pass." Everything shakes, and the demon goes back down...

When I saw that, I thought, what God has done is that he has this stake in the ground as the death of Jesus. He is saying, here on this side is the human freedom. In your darkness you can do this, and this, and this, and you can do this to my creation, and you can do this to yourself and to other people. But I'm taking responsibility for your freedom and I'm putting an end to the consequences of it. At the end of this we have resurrection, where things are restored, and so we get back what was lost. You know, the Lord restores the years that the locusts devoured (in Joel's prophecy). We get that back in the resurrection, so God is wonderfully taking responsibility for giving it to us and taking responsibility for it at the same time.

In the midst of that, we have to live with the consequences of our own darkness and what we do to one another and to the creation. We've got environmental tragedies going on around us right now that's going to create a lot of trauma for a lot of people around the world. What the Jews went through is unthinkable. What any person that's been murdered, the rippling implications and consequences of that for the family.

Now, what God has said is, it's not enough just for me to punish the murderer, what I'm going to do, what I'm after is to restore the life of the one who's murdered and to restore the relationship between the murderer and the one who is murdered, and bring both sides of the family back into one-ness and right relationship. That's the vision of heaven, and the kingdom of heaven. Through Jesus' death and resurrection he's put an end to the implication, the eternal implications of the holocaust and is restored there. How you work that out, I don't know.

JMF: Forgiveness. A person who has experienced something like that finds it very difficult. How on earth can you forgive somebody who kills your child? And yet in Christ we're talking about God himself, taking on himself the consequences, the pain, the suffering of that, handing back life and restoration in such a way that forgiveness really does become possible.

CBK: He shares his forgiving heart with us, just like he shares his love with us. That's the only possibility of forgiving someone who has created such a grievous problem for us and our lives and our families, is that, the love and forgiveness of the Father is given to us by Jesus, and we can choose to participate in that or participate in the darkness over here, which is to retaliate and to demand retribution ...

JMF: ... which is the spiral of human history.

MM: What about people who can't forgive God, you know, not just the murderer ...

SH: I was thinking about that, too, when you were talking about people who have had things happen to them. I like the line from whatever movie I saw and it says, Jesus might forgive you, but I'm never going to do it. I'm never going to forgive you. There are people who carry that kind of anger around that we're not required...

MM: They've been hurt so bad ...

SH: We're not really required to do that. That kind of anger crucifies us on the inside. They will take you to your grave. We're really not, I don't think we're required to do that, not until you're good and ready to do it. People have a lot of guilt in themselves, other stuff like that.

JMF: The beauty is that, as with our faith, as with everything else that forgiveness already exists in Christ, we simply have not gotten to the place where we can see that and receive it for what it is – receive the healing that will come from it. Robert Capon talks about it in his books... he has one story in one of his books about it's kind of a gangster scene where there is a hit-man and one of the gangsters is [what did they call it], snuffed or rubbed out, [there's a word for it] and he shows how in Christ in the end, the snuffer and the snuffee are able to sit down together in the kingdom and have a drink together and be restored in relationship in spite of everything that took place between them.

Beautiful picture, very difficult, of course, if not impossible for us to enter into immediately, but through the death and resurrection of Christ, which we all have to experience eventually, we're all going to die and there is only one way to die, there is only kind of death that exists, and that is the death of Christ and only one thing comes of that death, is the resurrection of Christ into which we have no choice but to enter – whether we receive it like the [dwarves] of Narnia, or whether we going to receive it like the children of Narnia...

SH: When John was talking earlier about the perichoretic relationship that exists in the Trinity, mutual indwelling functioning as one, and that is different than what we experience, I totally agree. I still have to think that, that's definitely going on and it is shared with us – we just can't see it. What we don't have is the pair of glasses, it's the understanding, it's the fallen mind, it's whatever you want to call it (besides sinful human nature – because I hate that terminology), but I do know that, that perichoretic thing is going on with us. Jesus is in us, he lives in us, we mutually indwell in him. The glory of it is that, we see it, we get a glimpse of it on this side, but we will see it in totality

on the other side.

JM: Live forever as a child of God is bound up with his eternity.

SH: That's true. Inescapably so.

JM: You could have perished, I mean, you could be nothing. But he said, no.... There are many, many testimonies, I think three or four I've seen myself, where people come out of the Holocaust, I think Corrie Ten Boom gave one... I've seen Jews who have met their keepers, their prison guards, and they have had to, just because they can't live with this anger, and they found forgiveness. How do they find that kind of forgiveness?

MM: They reject the name Jesus, but that's the real source.

CBK: Jesus is really not into getting credit, you know. He's really not worried about his ... He's more worried us living the life.

JMF: I read a book, I don't even remember the name of the book or whether it was fiction or what it was, but at the end of the book, it typically reads, the end. This one said, the beginning. I think part of what we're trying to say is that the gospel tells us, even to ourselves personally, regardless of how well we know ourselves and our sins and our sinfulness [the way we know ourselves best], we have not come to the last page of our story yet. For one thing, in terms of all of our history of our pain, and our suffering and our experiences that bind us and tear us down and we have not come to the end of the story where we see ourselves as we were created, and as we really exist in Christ as good and beautiful and part of a perfect creation. When we come to that end, last page, then we see ourselves that way, we've really come to the beginning.

JM: That's *Till We Have Faces* ... [reference to a C.S. Lewis book]. We're gonna have a face at last...

SH: You're not going to be looking at a smoky mirror ...

JT: It takes one more question, since we are about to run out of time, and that is, speak for these last few minutes, some eschatology here, you've got the popularity of books like *Left Behind*, and people looking for a second return of Jesus and... Speak to this culmination of all reconciliation ...

CBK: My golden rule on eschatology is: whatever we say about the *last things*, we must not assume the absence of Jesus Christ today. We're talking about the second coming, we cannot assume that it means he is not here now. He *is* here now. He said, I'm not going to leave you orphaned, I'm going to comfort you, you're going to discover you're in my Father and I'm in you, that's what's real. So to me, eschatology is largely about repentance and the conversion of our minds. It's about the restoration of proper seeing and sight. Jesus is not absent, the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not absent. The kingdom of heaven is not absent, but we're like the dwarves in Narnia. We

are sitting in our worlds, our own relationships, we are oblivious to what is really happening. Eschatology is the second, and third, and fourth, and fifth, and sixth coming of Jesus to reveal himself to us in our darkness, and it's we who are in the dark, as Jesus says, we're the ones that are getting light.

That's the process that involves history in space and time, just like it takes some time for a person to go from being a baby, to those hard years of adolescence, and then they're close to adult-teen years where they know everything about everything, and everybody around them is really stupid. Then they begin to learn, wait a minute, I don't know so much. Then they begin to learn some things for real. And that process it takes time. You can't have 42 years of experience given to you by reading one book.

So history is the time and space given to human race by the Father, Son, and the Spirit to get to grips, to live out their own theories on who we think God is, and the way we think this works, to kill ourselves, to maim and destroy someone – it's the space and time God has given to us today so that we can come on the tutelage of the Spirit to see who we really are in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and choose personally and willfully to participate in that with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength, because we've experienced evil, we've experienced the chaos, we've experienced the darkness and we don't want it. We don't want any more to do with it. That's almost inconceivable to think that, but that's what human history is about – it's the education of the human race.

JMF: Thank you so much for being with us again, Dr. Kruger, and thanks Steve, thanks to everyone in the panel.

31. SEEING THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS AND US

JMF: Before we get started, I've got to ask about Mediator Lures, and I'd like to see one.

CBK: Well, I brought one, surprise, surprise. This is one of 14 colors, my favorite, which is the Christmas bream [a type of fish], green and red. I've loved fishing since I was a little boy. My mother's favorite picture of me is staring down a cane pole after the picnic was over and everybody was back in the car. My dad had come down twice to get me and I would not leave. I stood there until I caught the fish. They had to wait in the car for like an hour, an hour and a half.

I always loved fishing, I always loved the idea of fishing lures, I love making things with my hands, woodworking – things like that. I dragged the Christmas tree out to the front street to be picked by the garbage one day and literally and simply I heard the Lord say, cut off a piece of cedar and make a lure. I always wanted to have a lure that looked like a real bream. I cut off a piece and the whole process started – it's probably 12 or 15 years in the making now, 12,000 hours, just all the free time I would come up with, trying... how do you make the thing shine, how do you make it work, what about the tail. Steve Horn, my friend, he is involved, he would spend hours working on it, and one thing led to another over a period of time.

Finally got 'em where I can make them by hand, and I would give them to my friends, but nobody would fish with it. They'd put them on the wall –



as art. And so I thought, maybe we can get this into plastic in a production lure. We finally did that about two months ago, and so I handed it out to some of my friends, and they would not fish with those. So I finally decided, what we have here is not just a great fishing lure, but we actually have more of a collectible. So that's what I do – I make them. They're hand-crafted and I sign a number of them in very limited quantities. I fish with them, but most people just put them in cases and put them in their homes, office or that sort of thing.

JMF: One of the things you've talked about in your books and in your lectures has to do with fishing, baseball, all the fun things of life – that these are all NOT separate from being a Christian, that Christianity involves everything we do, and all of us.

CBK: One of the disasters of the modern Western tradition is the separation of sacred and secular. When you begin with the proper vision of Jesus Christ, you realize that this Incarnation thing is for real – that God (the Father, Son, Holy Spirit) has no interest whatsoever in drawing us into a non-human relationship. God became human. The Son of the Father became flesh and established a relationship with us. Through the vast majority, the sum of God's time on earth, he was a carpenter. He wasn't even involved in "ministry." I'd dare say, he'd built more tables than he preached sermons.

We've got to recover this vision – the point of Christianity is not to escape our humanity, the point of it is to see the Trinitarian life is being given to us and the way that this is expressed is in and through our ordinary human experience – I mean from making fishing lures ...

My daughter-in-law came out one day years ago and she just stood there and watched me paint one of these lures, and she said to me: "Dad, how did you come up with the idea of doing this? How did you do the tails, how did you do the colors, how did you do the eyes, how did you get the scales, how did you think this up?"

It was probably one of two times in my life where I got it right the first time. I just said, "Laura, I've got a friend who loves to fish. Every time I get around my friend he shares his ideas with me, and nothing thrills him more than for me to carve his ideas into being."

She said: "Do I know your friend?"

I said, "Sure, you do."

"Is it Steve Horn? Is it Clayton James?"

And I said, "No."

"Who is it?"

"This friend loves flowers, and cooking, and crawfish boils, and music

and laughter and dancing and fellowship and music and soccer.”

She said, “Who are we talking about?”

I wish I would have had this recorded, because it was absolutely precious. It was a confession of faith. She said, “You’re talking about Jesus, aren’t you?” It was a confession of faith by a daughter of the Bible belt where “this is almost too good to be true.” She knew it was true. She knew Jesus is involved in our humanity – that’s where our humanity comes from – it’s from the Father, the Son, and Spirit.

I said, “Laura, when you sit down and play music and you feel the joy of that – what I want you to understand is that music doesn’t start with you. It’s not your music. It starts from the Father, Son, and Spirit – that’s where harmony comes from. They share it with you and you get to express it. I get to express it in being a lure-maker, or a theologian or a dad, or a friend, or a baseball coach – or just having coffee with friends. It’s the way in which God lives out the Trinitarian life in and through us, in and through our human experience. When we recover that, we get our humanity back.”

That’s one of the things that’s destroyed the Western Church. People are bored sick with it. Who wants to go and be involved in a thing where we leave our humanity at the door? I remembered distinctly as a child in a Presbyterian church (which I loved when I was growing up – I didn’t mind going to church at all. I loved it.) But one thing that bothered me from day one is I can remember my dad and my best friend’s dad, named Tuck Williams – who had the most distinctive laugh in the world, they would stay outside of the building as long as possible (and most all of them smoked in those days), and they would smoke their last cigarette and my aunt Polly played the organ and she hit a certain part in her interlude and all the men outside knew that was time to go to church. I can remember looking back and watching them step over the threshold and they all changed. I could hear them laughing, and they stepped inside, and they went in their “we’re-going-to-worship-God” mode. They got real serious, real earnest, real artificial. I thought, “There is something disastrously wrong here.” As if God is embarrassed by our laughter. As if the Father, Son, and Spirit didn’t come up with laughter.

Part of my journey in my life is to connect the dots between the humanity of riding bikes, our romance, our sex, our making lures, our inventing dishes (food, I mean) – understanding how God relates to that. Incarnation is staring us in the face and I think, “Where have we been? What have we been talking about for 2,000 years? This should be the message that we proclaim from the rooftops all the time.”

JMF: You've written about the "ultimate lie." What is the ultimate lie?

CBK: In one word, the ultimate lie is "separation." Underneath every religion and philosophy in the world is the lie of "separation" – that the human race is separated from God. Then it becomes a matter of "OK, how do we get back to God, or how do we get God to us?" Now we have a series of variations on a theme: "How do we get across the divide from where we are to God, or how do we get God to bless us here?"

JMF: Rules?

CBK: Rules, faith, repentance, works, crystals, charms, I mean, you name it: prayers, you can make a list over here of all the things human beings must do to get to God. That creates a very powerful group in the middle who decides what this is. You look at the idea that separation – I think it's a flat-out denial of Jesus Christ and the Incarnation! God is come to us. God has embraced us in Jesus. Why are we talking about separation? It's like we're going to pretend that there's no Incarnation, and that Christianity is just a variation on this theme, so what we're going to do to get across the great divide to God is that we're going to believe in Jesus. Or we're going to have a special kind of repentance that's different from all the other religions or philosophies.

I'm thinking, "Wait a minute. The news is not that we can get to God. The news is not that we can receive Jesus – an absent Jesus – into our lives. The stunning news of the gospel is that Jesus has received us into *his* life. He's received us into his fellowship in his life with the Father and the Spirit. That's been done and that's who we are.

We don't start with separation, we start with *union*. Now we have to rethink everything in the universe, because we have built into our default settings – as fallen people, and those who are influenced profoundly by Greek philosophy – we have our default settings of separation, separation, separation.

JMF: We are not worthy...

CBK: We are not worthy, we're not good enough, we're not going to make it, a whole series of those kick in, and so you ask a person who they are, you ask any person in the United States of America. "Are you good?" There is not one person you will get who will say, "I am good."

I say, if you can't stand in a mirror in your bathroom and look yourself in the face and say "my name – and I am good, with the goodness of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, because I do not exist alone." There is no just Baxter. The only Baxter there is, is the Baxter who exists in Jesus in his relationship with me. So in the core of my being, is not that old Calvinist doctrine of total

depravity – at the core of my being is Jesus Christ “union-ed” with me and with us in the world, and I am good with their goodness. I am good with the goodness of the Father, Son, and Spirit and their beauty.

The next question is: If that’s true (and it is), or *since* that’s true, why is my life still a mess? That’s where we’ve got to think through a whole new way of talking about what sin is, which is NOT new! It’s the early church – it’s John, it’s Paul. We’ve been trapped in Augustinian dualism – it’s been handed down to us...

JMF: What’s an Augustinian dualism?

CBK: OK, I’ll give you the Cliff notes.

JMF: Yeah, that’s what we need.

CBK: The first thing we need to talk about is that the early church – in the time of the apostles and right after that – the thing that they knew for sure, that they were prepared to (and did) die for – was, whatever else we say, the man Jesus Christ is God. We know this is the Lord – we’re not giving this up. That’s number one.

Number two, they realized that Jesus prayed to the one he called Father and they realized he was anointed in the Holy Spirit – and that there is a relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit. They were not trying to develop a doctrine of the Trinity – they started catching an enormous flak from the Greeks and the Jews, being accused of polytheism and tri-theism and things like that. So the early church began to develop its understanding and it said: “We are not giving up on the deity and humanity of Christ” and so, what’s his relation with the Father, what’s his relation with the Spirit? – and they worked out the doctrine of the Trinity. They came to see, over against the Jewish view of oneness and over against the Greeks’ view of the indivisibility of the thing called God or the ONE – the early church came to realize that the deepest truth about God is this relationship with the Father, Son, the Holy Spirit.

It’s not sad, it’s not boring, it’s not religious, it’s not dead – it’s alive, it’s creative, it’s other-centered, it’s about acceptance, in the light, and life and love, and it’s beautiful – and that’s what’s fundamental about the being of God. So if you peel back the onion of divine being, so to speak, and you come to the core of God-ness – you find relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Augustine knew that, and so he’s got this beautiful treatise on the Trinity that he wrote, but he was also steeped in Neo-Platonism and the premise of Neo-Platonism.

Just hang with me, this is important. The premise of Neo-Platonism is: whatever else you say of God – or The One – it’s indivisible. There is an

essence at the bottom of this thing or behind it all that is indivisible. So it can't be relational. Augustine is trying to develop a Christian vision, at the same time maintain his Neo-Platonism – and so what he offers to the Western Tradition is really two Gods. You got the Father, Son, and Spirit, and then you got the deeper truth about the being of God. Just like through a back door – beyond the Trinity. What being is this essence of God? What is the deepest truth about God – it's not relationship. What is it? For Augustine, it had to be absolute, total sovereignty. For the rest of the Western tradition, steeped as it was in Roman law and jurisprudence, it became a legal view of holiness.

I don't mind saying that the holiness of God is the deepest truth about God – but what I mean by holiness is a Trinitarian vision. Holiness is the utter uniqueness and the beauty and the goodness and the rightness of their relationship – that is the whole essence – is the wholeness of the relation, and their love, and their mutual passion and delight.

JMF: You've called that the "great dance."

CBK: Yeah. I tried to find a similar phrase to talk about that, and "the great dance" is an ancient phrase that you find in the church. C.S. Lewis uses it a couple of times in some of his books, and I thought that's what we can use to describe, in a snapshot, the life of God. It's a great dance, it's not boring and sad – it's not self-centered, it's not narcissistic, it's not about separation – it's about fellowship, and communion, and love.

But then you've got this thing over here that's deeper than that. You say, if we just stayed there – if we just stayed with Irenaeus and Athanasius and gone with the Trinity through our history, then the next thing we would realize was that, "MAN, this relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit – now, I know why Paul says we are predestined to adoption as sons and daughters." It makes perfect sense. If God is like this, then adoption is the main point, and off we go and running. Our challenge for listeners is go find books in the Western tradition that have been written on the subject of "adoption" – in 1500 years – and compare that with the books that have been written on "justification."

The apostle Paul said that the Father's eternal purpose for us is to include us in this relationship. We don't have 1500 years of discussion about this. Why not? Because over here [on one side] the "deepest" truth of God is holiness – not Trinitarian holiness, not relational holiness, but holiness conceived in terms of moral law and jurisprudence.

JMF: And that concept of God separates us from God – now we've got to find a way to get there, so we use Jesus as the bridge that we walk across

to get there.

CBK: There you go. Off we go, and our “family conversation” for 1500-some-odd years talking about the Holy God (which is true, God is holy) but not *that* kind of “Holy” – holy in this [on other side] relational way. When Jesus says, “Be ye holy as God is holy,” he’s not talking about this stainless-steel, antiseptic, squeaky-clean, boring kind of holy. He’s talking about “be whole,” be relationally together, be one, be in fellowship and communion, be unique in this. But over here [on the first side] we’ve got this holiness of God: stainless steel, moral rectitude, perfection – this God then calls the shots for the entire discussion.

JMF: That’s just a concept, a Greek idea... That isn’t what the scriptural revelation of God is.

CBK: Well, we’ve gone and found Bible verses to support it. That’s why we’ve never even thought about the stunning news. How stunning is it, that the only reason the human race exists is to be included in the Trinitarian life of God. I want to talk about that. I want a conversation about that. Give me 1500 years to talk about “adoption.” And let’s bring that into “this is the vision of God – as Father, Son, and Spirit” as opposed to “God is the stainless steel, holy God who’s not interested in relationship at all.”

JMF: That gets into all these areas that you’re involved with – scientists, doctors, lawyers, counselors, teachers – all these various expressions of human life and thought, energy, development, technology – all of that is wrapped up in who we are, who has God has made us to be – the whole cosmos.

CBK: We have not talked about the real foundation for what we are talking about here. We’re talking about some good implications – but the real foundation of this is WHO Jesus is. Who is this person Jesus Christ?

What has happened to us is that we think of Jesus as a typical American individual – he lived, he died, he rose again, he did things for us, out of grace and love. But Jesus, when we go to the New Testament – the first thing you find is Jesus is the Father’s only Son. That’s the shocker. That’s the mind-blowing thing. That’s why the apostle Paul begins every one of his epistles with the reference “to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The mind-boggling thing about Jesus was not his power or his miracles, or even his courage to confront the system. Prophets did that. The mind-boggling thing about Jesus in the New Testament in the first instance is he is the one who has this relation with the one he calls Father – Abba, Father – and he is the recipient of “thou art my beloved Son in whom my soul delights.” This is unique, this is unparalleled biblically. Jesus addresses God

as Father, there is no reference in the Old Testament, there is no reference in any of the ancient literature that we know about – to this day that we found – where any individual ever called God “Father.” Jesus calls him, “my Father,” and the Father calls him “my Son.”

And so point one: Who is Jesus? He is the Father’s true Son. The second thing that’s stunning about Jesus is: He is the Anointed One – the long-awaited Anointed One. He alone in biblical history is anointed with the Holy Spirit without measure as a permanent gift. So what do you make of this? He is the Father’s Son, and Anointed One, and so that’s where the church has led over its pilgrimage to see that this is not something that the invisible holy God back here just arbitrarily decided one day, “I’m going to be super gracious, oh, it’s Jesus and Mary – this is revelation to us in our darkness of our character, in the way of being of God (as Father, Son, Spirit) from all eternity.

JMF: We usually hear that presented as kind of an after-thought. God created a perfect world, sin entered and God said, “What am I going to do about this?” So he sends...

CBK: Plan B. Jesus becomes Plan B. The final point in terms of the larger picture, the third thing we see in the New Testament, in terms of answering the question “Who is Jesus” is he is the one in and through and by and for him all things were created and are sustained. The presentation of the New Testament to us is that Jesus is a Person who exists in three relationships: relation with the Father, relation with the Spirit, and relation with the whole creation. The question is: when this Son, this Father’s Son, this Anointed One became a human being, did he break ties, did he become the classic American individualist – all alone? Or, did he come in his relation with his Father? Did he come in his anointing with the Spirit? And did he come in his connection with the whole human race and the whole creation?

The Christian answer to that is “Jesus held on and brought all of this together in himself.” He is the point of relationships; he is the point of view. So if you’re going to speak the “name of Jesus Christ” biblically and in the tradition of the apostles, you’re saying “Trinity,” and you’re saying “humanity,” and you’re saying, “cosmos.” You’re saying that the Triune God and the human race and the universe are not separated, but bound together in relationship – that’s who Jesus is!

To deny his relation with his Father would mean Jesus has relation with us, but he has not included us in his relation with his Father. But no, that is not true. He is in relation with his Father, he is anointed, he’s brought all of this together – and so that becomes what I call the truth of all truths – that’s

our Christian heritage, that's how to think as a Christian – is to start there. When you speak Jesus' name, you say, "No separation," you say, "union," you say "covenant relationship" forever. Now we can re-think everything we thought we knew, in the light of Jesus.

JMF: There is a concept in the Christian preaching, what you typically hear is, you're a sinner, you're separated from God, you do this or that, and then God will accept you. You're saying that this is not the place to start at all.

CBK: Jesus is not a footnote to Adam, in his Fall. The apostle Paul says that we're predestined to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. That's before the fall – that's before creation. That adoption is the purpose of God for creation, and our adoption through Jesus Christ was the plan from the get-go, from the beginning. We've made the Fall the central thing of which God is relating to, when the central thing that God is relating to is actually the Incarnation and the accomplishment of our adoption in Jesus Christ – that's the point. Now we're going to re-read the Old Testament and creation in the light of the fact that Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, is coming to establish a relationship with us, who are basically dirt. We are going to go from non-being, from dirt, to the right hand of God, we cannot do any of that – the Father's Son can do it, and that's what he is going to do. He is going to anoint dirt with the Holy Spirit – that's the plan from the very beginning.

We can see that the Fall is not the thing that sets God's agenda. What sets the Father's agenda is his purpose for us in Christ. The Fall means it's going to be a bloody mess. It's going to be loud crying and tears, as Hebrews 5 puts it. It's going to hurt. This is a quagmire of darkness and chaos and pain and brutality, and Jesus is going to suffer. In the genius of the Father, Son, and Spirit, they take our human response of rejection of God – rejection of Jesus, abuse, trauma, universal total rejection (with the possible exception of the three Marys and John the apostle, but basically, total universal rejection) and establishes a relationship between the Father and the human race at its very worst – and includes that broken human race in this Trinitarian life. That's at the heart of the gospel.

Now we can go back and understand what sin is. Now we can go back and talk about faith and repentance, and heaven and hell, and what the church is, what the distinction between the church and the world is, eschatology, election. Because what's happened in Jesus Christ, what has happened in his Incarnation is not plan B, that the Father thought up real quick after Adam botched it. Jesus is the eternal Word of God. Jesus Christ as the Father's Son

incarnate, as the Anointed One, as the one in whom he has gathered the human race – this Jesus is the eternal Word of God, this is the Alpha and the Omega, this is not Plan B, this is Plan A. This is the first and only Word and the first and only plan.

Now we have a hermeneutic as Christians on how to address and re-think everything that we thought we knew. That's our calling as Christians – to take this Jesus Christ seriously.

JMF: In the light of that, how would you present the gospel? Let's say you have a two-minute presentation of what is the gospel, the heart and core of the gospel, how would you put it?

CBK: Slight variations. In quick conversations, I just say you belong to the Father, Son and the Spirit, you always have and you always will.

JMF: So that's the starting place?

CBK: You start off with *you*. You start off with the relationship that Jesus Christ has established with the human race. It's real. Our problem is... (I take these [thick-lens eye glasses] with me everywhere I go.) [Put on eye-glasses] Our problem is we just cannot see it. It makes no religious sense to us. It didn't make any sense to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were looking over at Jesus and saying, "Jesus, your vision of God is wrong." That's what we do. That's what's sin is. Sin is saying to Jesus, "Your vision of the Father, and your vision of the Spirit, and your vision of the relationship that you've established between the Father and the Spirit and the human race is just unfit – it's wrong. Jesus, you need to repent." Sin is insisting that Jesus Christ repent and change his mind and his vision, and come and line up with us in our darkness.

Jesus says, I have come into the world as light so that you may not remain in the dark [remove glasses] but will see what is – what he has established in himself. So in terms of proclaiming the gospel, I want to make sure that people understand that you don't begin with separation. Jesus has established a relationship with you and he called you to walk in it. He says, you can live in this [put on glasses] and you can insist on imposing your vision on the world, on your wife and children and people around you or even on your own denomination if you choose. But it's going to be miserable as hell because it's not real. What's real is the world [remove glasses] that the Father, Son, and Spirit has established.

So faith is saying to Jesus, I want to participate in your way of seeing things, not my way [put on glasses]. And repent and say, Jesus, rip these things off [remove glasses] quick, and reconstruct my basic vision, reconstruct my mind, renew it thoroughly, here it is, I don't want to see things

the way I see them anymore. I want to see things the way you see, I want to live with you in your world, I want to participate in your relationship with the Father, and your relationship with the Spirit, and your relationship with the human race and your relationship with the cosmos.

JMF: So repentance is seeing things the way they really are, it isn't changing something that makes God change toward you.

CBK: Exactly, it's *metanoia* [the Greek word for repentance, meaning "change of mind"]. It is a radical change of the way we perceive God, the way we perceive ourselves, the way we preserve the cosmos. It's a radical reorientation. Be transformed in your experience of life by the renewal of your mind, by the renewal of the way you see things.

If you want to live in this [put on glasses] world, with its vision of God as the stainless-steel holy version, and we are all sinners and broken and we can't get to God and God doesn't want us anyway. But Jesus is there and has opened the path – if we want to live in that world, we can live in that world.

But what Jesus is saying, No, come to me, come to me if you are heavy laden and I will show [remove glasses] you who the Father is, and you can live in my relationship with my Father with me. You can live in my anointing with the Spirit. You don't have to achieve this, I *give* this, I've included you in this.

That's the dogfight of human history. If Jesus is not Plan B, as he is Plan A, then that gives me as a theologian a basic three-fold structure to human history: We've got creation or the beginning or preparation. You've got fulfillment in Jesus in his person, and now you've got revelation. So human history is a time in which God is creating space and place for us to be, to live out our theories, to insist on our way [wear glasses] and to suffer the consequences, so that we could come to know [remove glasses] as a race who God really is, who we really are and learn to participate in it, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It takes time. If you're a parent, you know it takes time for your children to come and see some things.

JMF: The doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of really understanding who we are in Christ, but it's a doctrine that just kind of sits on the shelf – it's not really put forward, we don't take it seriously...

CBK: Isn't that the saddest thing in the world, that the doctrine of the Trinity has been marginalized? The most beautiful thing in the universe – is the way the Father loves his Son, and way the Son loves the Father, in the fellowship of the Spirit and that great dance of life, that beauty, that goodness, that other-centric love and care is put over some religious insurance manual that nobody wants talks about.

JMF: It's always there in the Statement of Faith and the Statement of Beliefs, there is always the statement that we believe that God is three in one and so on, and yet it's not central to teaching, and what you are talking about here as our part in this relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit having been brought into it, this doesn't...

CBK: The Spirit is calling the church to repentance, to change its basic mind and to come back to its original vision, because the whole Augustinian split – that's one problem that gets introduced, but when we don't see that God is Father, Son, and Spirit (and that's the truest truth about God, there is nothing deeper than that relationship), then we're often running in a family conversation that's going to lead us over here [motion to a spot] into separation, into this fear-based model, that's going to crucify us all on the inside, making us a relational disaster. We come back here [another spot] and start, we then see that relationship is what the whole thing is all about. We're going to be having a relational theological discussion that integrates our humanity and our life from the very beginning, and adoption is going to be a main thing, and the question how do we live this up? How do we live this up globally?

The church is called to be the place, the fellowship, the group of people – within the world of darkness, that group of people raises its hands and says, Jesus, you have your way with my mind here. You come and teach us, you transform the way we see things, and we want to work out the economic, the environmental, the ecological, the relational, the international, the political, the scientific, the cosmic implications of who you are Jesus Christ – as the Father's Son, as the Anointed One, as the one who's drawn the human race and cosmos together to himself, we want to think out the implications of that, we want to see what it means for our marriage, we want to see what it means for the economic theory, we want to see what it means for the environment. We're going to throw everything we have into that, because we believe that if we think through a marital or relational understanding in the light of Christ, we're not afraid that it's going to lead us into a divorce problem, or fragmentation of relationship problem. We believe that it's going to lead us into wholeness. We're not afraid to say that Jesus is the one in whom all things are held together.

Let's think that through – why are we afraid? The church is afraid now because we've been backed in the corner. We've been backed in the corner because we've lost the vision of Jesus that has been handed on to us by the apostles. Recovering that, we end up having this thing – many people might perceive it arrogance, but it's really the apostolic swagger. My friend David

Upshaw talks about this thing called the apostolic swagger. They knew, they *knew* that Jesus was not a theory. He was not just another Platonic form. They knew that this is the one in and through and by whom and for him all things were created and are all things held together. They knew that if we follow him with our minds and hearts, this is going to bring healing and wholeness to us, this is going to liberate us. They were not afraid. They gave their life joyfully in the service of that revelation.

32. JESUS HAS UNITED HIMSELF TO US

JMF: Your PhD degree is from King's College, Aberdeen, and you were mentored by Professor James B. Torrance. Would you talk about that?

CBK: J.B. (as we called him – he preferred to be called James, but all his students called him JB) was a father figure to many of us that studied. There were a group of Americans that were there at that time back in the late '80s. I did my doctoral dissertation on the subject of the knowledge of God in the theology of T.F. Torrance. But JB was my professor. TF had retired by those days, and JB was just wonderful. Just to be able to go and listen to him lecture – this was at the end of his career, so he was fantastic. My wife and I basically hawked everything we had, just to go have the opportunity of studying with him.

JMF: You wound up taking over his classes after he retired, didn't you?

CBK: Yeah, that was a tremendous privilege and a very fearful undertaking, but the university did not hire a replacement for JB that one year. That left Trevor Hart to teach theology by himself, and so he asked Dante Mail (who was a friend of ours) to stay for a few months and teach, and then he asked me to come behind them and teach; then I realized what he was asking me to teach was JB's classes. So I stayed there for two years and taught his



classes.

I remembered the first day walking into his class, and that was at the other side of the podium and lectern, and I was saying, "What are you doing here?"

There's so much history there: that building was built in 1495, about the time Columbus was discovering America – that building was there and theology was being taught there. **[JMF: Wow.]** And it was a remarkable experience for me.

Then we decided it was time for us to move back the United States. It's a bit colder in Scotland than it is in Mississippi. Five years of freezing is enough, so we moved back to the United States and worked as associate pastor for a while. In that process we realized that what we need to be doing, what I need

to be doing, was writing and teaching in a wider format. Steve Horn, David Upshaw, Clayton James and myself got together and decided we're going to have a go at a non-profit ministry that did just that, that wrote books and did lectures and put on conferences, and let's see what happens.

JMF: Your focus is unique. Could you talk about that?

CBK: You mean theological focus? "Unique" is an interesting word – in some ways I would say "Yes," but I don't want to say "unique" in the sense of not part of mainstream historic Christianity.

In studying T.F. Torrance, you have to learn Athanasius and Irenaeus and Hilary and the two Gregorys and Basil and the early church's theology. You have to learn Barth, you have to learn Calvin and Luther, because those were so formative to his thinking. So what I have to say is not unique in the sense that it's part of all of that conversation. Every theologian wants to make a contribution to the church – contribution to the way we see things. Not necessarily original and un-thought of, but one that is "on the basis of." [i.e., building on previous work]

Integrating our humanity with our salvation in Christ is one of the areas where I think there's a unique flavor. It sounds very much like a Southern version of what the Reformation and Athanasius and early church were on about. It's sort of my take on it, because for me religion is never to be separated from our humanity. I hear what the fathers in ancient and modern times are saying about Jesus' relationship with us and his union with us.

My question is always been, "Well, I see that. I see that he's united himself with us as a gift of grace and this is who we are. What does that mean? And what does that look like? Does that mean we have to give up motherhood and fatherhood and fishing? Does that mean we give up life?" I struggled with some of that early on in my childhood because I felt like there was a gap between God/church and my humanity, and I knew it was wrong.

So in the fathers and in Torrance and in Barth and in the Reformation – the reformers, I realized that there is an integration here, and so I think to do something unique about us is holding on to that magnificent powerful vision of Jesus Christ's union with the human race – is something that he did, and is something that is real. We are turning the page and saying, Now here's what it looks like as we live it out. It works its way out in our human expression, in our motherhood, in our fatherhood and making lures, and being a teacher, and being a janitor, running a bread route.

Years ago I was teaching in the central United States, and this young student picked me up. It's flat in that part of the country, and we were passing farm after farm after farm and there were tractors and farmers. This young

student, we were talking and I asked him, “What are you going to do when you finish school?”

He said he’s going to go to seminary.

I said, you’re going to be a pastor?

He said, “Yeah, I’m gonna be a pastor.”

I said, “What would you say to that farmer on that tractor right over there, about the way Jesus Christ relates to his farming?”

The young student said, “Well, I never thought about that.”

I said, “He’s gonna be in your congregation, and that man gives 70 hours a week to farming. His family gives their father and husband for 70 hours a week to farming, their whole family tradition is bound up in farming, and so you don’t know how Jesus relates to what he is and what he does as a human being.”

He said, “I haven’t really thought about that.”

I said, “Why would you expect him to want to come to church? You’re not showing him how Jesus is related to his whole existence.”

And I said, “Isn’t it striking that you will go home tonight...” and I said, “are you married?”

He said, “Yeah, I’m married.”

I said, you’re going to go home tonight and you’re going to eat supper, right?”

He said, “Yeah.”

I said, “What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you sit down at the meal?”

He said, “We’re going to pray.”

I said, “What are you going to do?”

He said, “We’ll thank God for the food.”

I said, “Why? He did not grow the food.” I was being facetious because, yes, the Father provided food through the farmer – the farmer’s participating in the Father’s provision through the Son and in the Spirit, and this is holy and beautiful and good, it’s not secular. It’s the way we participate.

This young student said, “I never thought about that.”

I said, “Now you can honor the farmer for who he is, and his family. It’s not just the farmer, he is one who participates in the way the Father provides food...”

JMF: And the farmer needs to know that.

CBK: Yes! He needs to live in the dignity of it over and against our culture, which says “Money, prestige, power, position, gives dignity.” No. Dignity comes from what we’re participating in.

The servants got water for Jesus. He transformed it into wine. We can't do that. The farmer can make the things grow. But he participates, and Jesus is the one who makes it grow. He's the good shepherd. He's the bread of life. We need to learn to relate to people in Christ, in who they are in Christ, and take off our sort of glasses – flesh glasses which says, it's segmented according to money and prestige and power and position and education.

If you want to talk something unique, it's not unique in the sense that it is biblical and Jewish right down the line for centuries. But it's been lost in any kind of meaningful way. We can now begin to see our humanity for what it is. There is no such thing as just human. There is no independent self. There is no just human person. It's us bound up in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and life comes to expression in our ordinary human life.

JMF: In a marriage, or say, a person is a doctor or a scientist, or a lawyer or a factory worker or a fisherman, if his eyes are open to that, how does it change how he goes about what he is doing?

CBK: Let me give you a story. I was on a plane many years ago, flying from Dallas to Seattle, Washington. And I think it was Seattle, maybe in Portland. It was the first time I had flown in that part of the country and I had never seen the Rocky Mountains, so I deliberately got a ticket booked on the side of the plane; window seat. We got on the plane, and every other seat in the plane was empty, everybody had space, and I thought, this is going to be great. The plane backed out and stopped and pulled forward, and the door opened and on the plane came this guy who looks like Indiana Jones. He's got leather hat, leather backpack, jacket, the whole nine yards, and he was walking back and I thought, I know exactly where the man's going to sit. Sure enough, he walked back 30 rows and sat next to me. There was a young lady, I believe on the other side.

He introduced himself as a systematic micro-evolutionary biologist. He was coming back from a research trip in the Caribbean, and he was all concerned about plants, all concerned about plants becoming extinct. He had a list of plants and the Latin names of plants that we've already lost, some that we're losing, what we must do to save them. He was going on and on about this. Then he started a little bit about evolution.

Somewhere over Idaho, I think, he said, "What do you do?"

I said, "I'm a theologian."

He said, "I guess you want to talk about evolution."

I said, "No, I don't care about evolution. But I've got a question."

He said, "What's your question?"

I said, "Where did you get your passion for plants?"

He said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "Was your Uncle Freddie a botanist, I mean, your mother a botanist? Did you just decide one day you're going to be passionate about plants? You're a grown man, you know their Latin names, Latin names of plants that are no longer extinct, you're concerned about their future, you want to see them flourish not die. Where did that come from?"

He said, "I never thought about it."

So I pull out my napkin – he's got his diagrams – and drew three circles, and I said, Father, Son, and Spirit. I said there's only one man, there is only one person in this universe that cares about plants, because they belong to his Father – his name is Jesus. And Jesus is not going to care about those plants without our participation. He's put his passion for his Father's plants inside of you, you've been toiling around in the Caribbean participating in his passion for his Father's creation and its care, and its flourishing. And you don't know who you are.

The first thing he said was, "If that's the truth, why haven't I ever been told about that?"

I said, "You just were. You just were told."

In that moment you could see the difference, because until that moment, he thought *he* was doing that. It was his passion, and by God, it was his idea and it was his energy and he was doing this, and he was proud of what he thought he was doing in his own strength as a human being. And in that second, the light of Christ dawned, he saw himself for who he really was. He's part of something much larger.

He said, "I'm not even sure I believe in God."

I said, "The most important thing is whether or not God believes in you. He does, and he's sharing his life with you, and that's who you are. If you can come to see that and believe in Jesus, then you can give yourself to participate not in a prideful look-at-me-I'm-better-than-you way, because he's going to make everybody in other departments feel "less than" because they're not botanists, they're just theologians or whatever. But you can participate in this in a much more personal way where you can give yourself to be a part of this and include the way in which Jesus is doing a lot other things."

That's a simple illustration to me of how that begins to work out. Pride is gone in a sense of, I want to participate, Jesus, in what you are doing here. Show me more, what am I missing, what are you doing with these plants. You're the one that's in resurrection and you're bringing these plants back, what do we do, how does that work? And you give yourself to participate in a much more intelligent and clear and less prideful and sanctimonious way.

JMF: Typically, when you go to church, you hear a sermon, you come away feeling discouraged or even worried about your relationship with God, because what you hear at church is, “Here’s ten commandments.” You not only hear “ten commandments,” but then Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself, love the Lord with all your heart and all your mind,” and all. And you feel like, “I don’t do that,” and you feel condemned because you know you don’t measure up to what you’re hearing you’re supposed to be doing – and that’s where you learn about God and about what you’re supposed to be doing. We don’t hear this. Why is that?

CBK: Can I tell another story, is that all right?

JMF: Go ahead.

CBK: This is my all-time favorite. This is a true story that happened when my son was... he’s now 19, he’s six-foot-five and he looks down on his father with great delight, but anyway he was 6 or 7 at that time. I was sitting in the den in our house on Saturday afternoon sorting through junk mail getting rid of them, watching a football game. He peered around the corner, 6 or 7 years old – face paint, camouflaged, plastic knife, guns, the whole nine yards, and one of his buddies was with him. The next thing I knew, there’s two camouflaged blurs that just came flying through the air and hit me, and we started horsing around and laughing and we end up on the floor in a pile of laughter.

Right in the middle of that, I felt the Lord saying, “Baxter, pay attention. There’s something huge happening here that’s very important.” I’m just scratching my head thinking, “A dad, his son horsing around on the floor, Saturday afternoon, it’s got to be going on all over the planet, what’s the big deal?”

Little by little it began to dawn on me... I did not even really know this other little boy. If you replay the story and you take my son out for a moment, and he’s back in the back of the house and this other little boy walks in the den camouflaged, the same outfit, he looks at me, he’s never seen me, I’ve never seen him. I don’t even know his name, he didn’t know my name. Presumably, he would have thought I was Mr. Kruger. But the last thing he’s going to do is come flying through the air and engage me in that kind of intimate play.

But the fact was, my son was there, and did know me. He knew that I loved him, he knew that I liked him, and that I wanted him, he knew my acceptance. In the freedom of that knowledge of my acceptance and that knowledge of who he was and my love for him, he did the most natural thing in the world, which was to engage me. The stunning miracle was that, I saw

my son's freedom with me, my son's knowledge of my heart rubbed off on that other little boy. He got to feel it and taste it and experience it with us. It wasn't his, but he got to share in it with us. It not only rubbed off on him, it was in him and he functioned from it. So to me, the Lord was saying, "That's the gospel."

The gospel is the news, and my son in the equation would be Jesus. The gospel is the news that we have a place in Jesus' relationship with his Father and in the Spirit he's sharing his own emotions, his own life, his own sense of his Father's presence – he wants us to live in it.

Religion would be when the boy suddenly gets... a whisper comes along and says, "But you're really not a part." So the boy steps over here, and he starts thinking, "How can have a relationship with God like... or to use the analogy, how can I have a relationship with Mr. Kruger like his son does?" And he starts writing down things that he can do that look like our relationship. The fact is, he is included in it, but he's choosing to carve out his own relationship with me rather than to participate. Every religion starts out with that separation, and it is going to prescribe things that you can do to have a relationship with God, when the New Testament is saying the stunning news is that Jesus has come to bring us and to receive us into his life and that's who we are and he wants us to participate – bear his fruit, fruit of his relationship with his Father.

That's the simplest story, but man, is it huge in its implications. We back out and we insist on having our own path to God, our own relationship to God the way we want it, the way we think it ought to work, the way we read the New Testament, and we're going to go at it that way. When the whole time, we've been included in this Son's relationship with his Father. Somehow we get to thinking that dirt can somehow climb into the being of the Trinity. Somehow that we who are fashioned out of the ground, can do something to achieve the Holy Spirit – the one single special Spirit in the universe. We're going to do something to achieve that. That's where religion – it's just a constant striving to create a relationship that really is already there and given to us, and it's the function of darkness and blindness.

JMF: In most preaching, what I hear all the time is, you are separated from God, you're a sinner, we've got to help people know that they're sinners and cut off from God and then show them the way. The way is, you say the sinner's prayer, let's say, or you start believing and now God will change his mind toward you. It's the old Jonathan Edwards ... the hanging over the throne...**[CBK:** Oh, oh, in the pit of hell dangling like a spider's web over...]
of an angry God, if you do x, y, or z (have faith, repent, change your ways,

etc.), then God will change his mind toward you, apply the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on your behalf – that’s how the gospel is most often presented.

CBK: You want to know why the church is dead and dying? I mean, that’s not the gospel.

JMF: Give me a one or two-minute gospel presentation that...

CBK: The Incarnation means that God has come... the Father has sent his Son to establish a relationship with us. Did Jesus establish a relationship with us, or not? Is he the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world or not?

I’ve grown up here in the same kind of preaching you’re talking about. It’s a much larger discussion, but it’s a product of Augustinian dualism, then the Western tradition, and legalism. The gospel is the news is that the Father’s SON – the Anointed One – has come to us and established a relationship with us. We’re like my son’s buddy – we’re included in it, and we don’t know who we are, so I’m not trying to get anyone to Jesus. I’m not trying to get anyone into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has done that – he’s bigger than we are, he’s bigger than Adam, he’s bigger than the church. He’s the one who embraced the human race in his own life, death, and resurrection and ascension.

Our role is to announce the good news. Not to say, “It’s possible to have good news.” Our role is to say, this is who you are. You too belong. You’re in this. You’re included in this. In that moment of announcement of the light... or in that moment of revelation, where we suddenly see that we’re already included, not separated, not trying to figure out how to climb my way back to God, that produces, as my friend Bruce Wauchope says, “That produces mental illness.” Striving, all kinds of fragmentation, and our soul is in fear. It doesn’t produce relationship.

But when we see who we are, we discover reality that we don’t create. That the Father, Son, and Spirit have created, in relation with us, we discover it, and at that moment we’re called to believe. Are we going to believe in this reality or in... (I carry my glasses with me, because this is the issue.) Are we going to believe in the way *we* see things (and that’s the little boy backing off and saying, “I’m going to do it my way”), or are we going to say when the light comes, “Man, now I see who I am.”

When you see who you are – that you’re included in this relationship, here’s one of the things that happens. You then begin to know for the first time, what it means to be a sinner. Now that I see that I’m included in that relationship, what a fool I’ve been trying to create my own. How proud I’ve been of what I have created and maintained in my own strength, and that’s

where the gospel reveals to us what sin is.

JMF: So the starting place of the gospel is that the truth that you're already included.

CBK: Yes, the starting of the gospel is Jesus Christ, and he is the one who has a relationship with the Father, he's the Anointed One, he's the one who has the relationship with us and in him, in his existence, in his person – all of us are bound together in that relation – that's the starting point, and that's the light of life that Jesus talks about.

When you see this in this light, you know the light of life, you won't walk in the darkness – that's the truth that sets us free (John 14:20). In that day you will know that I am in my Father, you're in me – you're not outside, you're going to see that you're in me and I'm in you.

That's the truth that sets us free from the illusions of our religion, and illusions of our own ideas which we keep trying to impose upon God, I mean the Father, Son, and Spirit. What's ironic is that in laying out the gospel presentation as we've done in the modern evangelical (and I stress modern evangelical) approach – laying it out the way that we do: we start off with a holiness of God and a sin – that we became sinners and there has to be some sort of a sacrifice. We have defined sin there out of our darkness.

Jesus says, "No one knows the Father but the Son." We who don't know the Father have come up with a definition of sin over here, and we're going to figure out how Jesus solves that problem. But we're blind! Even our doctrine of sin is a blind doctrine of sin. We need the life of Jesus Christ to help us to see the problem, so we can't start with the problem.

We start with the truth of who we are in Christ, that shines light on the darkness and we suddenly say, "Oh, now I can begin to see what sin is – sin is our not receiving the Father's love. Sin is believing that I'm separated from God and figuring out a way to carve my own way back. Sin is me insisting that God live in my world with me, rather than me living in the embrace of the Father. He loves me, he calls me to receive his love, now I can see who I really am. Now I can see what a mess I have made of my life and why. Now I can see what my future is.

JMF: That's very different from religion, that is also very different from universalism.

CBK: Yes, universalism ... I get accused of this a lot. You can understand if you've grown up in this other model, then the other model says, if you've done the contract, if you've had the deal and closed the deal with Jesus, then you're going to heaven.

So if everybody is included then, everybody's going to heaven. But the biblical notion of heaven is relationship. Jesus says, "This is eternal life." Not

that you go to a place and have a seat in the auditorium and can watch the big show. Eternal life is knowing the Father. Eternal death is living without knowing the Father. It's relational.

Universalism is this idea that says, it's the counterpart to Calvinism and its double predestination sort of thing which says, there are a selected number of elect and they will irresistibly be brought to know the truth and set free by it. Universalism is just extending that sort of irresistible grace kind of doctrine that says, everybody's included and everybody's going to be brought to see it, and that's that, it doesn't matter.

That's not at all what I'm saying. That's not at all what the Scripture is saying. Jesus says, he is the light of the cosmos, not all the Christian church. He says, he takes away the sin *of the world* – the cosmos, not just the sin of the believers. What happens in Jesus is the Father has come searching for us in the far country of our blindness and darkness and has established a relationship with us, and he will never let us go. That is the truth about the whole cosmos. Every person on the planet, Jesus Christ is in relationship with them – that's what he's done.

As we hear about it, we have to make a decision: which world am I going to live in? The New Testament says even the people who chose to live here are already included, they're just insisting on imposing their way of relating to Jesus onto Jesus rather than saying, "Take my mind and turn it around, I want to live in your world with you, your way. I want to participate."

So the New Testament leaves it, in my interpretation, the New Testament says it's possible for people to sit, who are included in this relationship, people who are not only loved by the Father, but now Jesus has established a relationship with them – it's possible for them to live in their own world although they're part of this relationship indefinitely. That's where we ended. You can't go any further than that.

I've got younger people who have come along and who have studied Barth and Torrance and George McDonald and they want to make a doctrine, they want to say, "Oh, everybody's going to be saved." George McDonald did that, and so did Thomas Erskine. C.S. Lewis didn't. He said, "No, we have to stop and say that..."

My hope is, I think it'd be the greatest in the universe if everybody came to see the truth and be set free by... and I hope for that, and I pray for that. But I cannot say that, that's exactly what will happen, because that would be to deny our freedom as human beings. That would mean all we are is computers with Christological software. We're not persons in relationship, we're just computers, and we are being programmed by God, and that's not the way it is.

Universalism is a hope. I mean, who wouldn't want... don't you want to see everyone come to know the truth and be set free by it? Well of course we do, that's our heart's desire. That's not something we created, that's the desire of the Father, Son, and Spirit. But can we make a doctrine out of that? No way, the New Testament won't allow us to do it, and even the gospel as we see it in Jesus won't allow us to do it. It's possible for us to live in our darkness.

But that darkness is chosen, and it's chosen again, and again, and again. We refuse... Jesus is able to break through our darkness and reveal the truth to us, and that creates a crisis. What am I going to believe? Which world am I going to believe? Which world am I going to live in? Which Baxter? I'm the one that's making that decision. He doesn't give up. But it's possible for me, for us to say, "Were going to continue to live in this goofy world that we've created in our own heads – as being the real world."

33. THE THEOLOGY OF PAUL YOUNG'S BOOK *THE SHACK*

JMF: Since you've been here last, you've been doing some traveling (among many other things) with Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, and giving some seminars with him. Could you tell us what's going on?

CBK: The first time we met was with the Worldwide Church of God meeting in Virginia two and a half years ago, and we became friends and we started talking. The way we met was through Tim Brassell emailing Paul, and telling Paul that I had written the theology that goes with *The Shack*.

JMF: Tim, being one of our pastors.

CBK: One of your pastors in Portsmouth, Virginia. Then Paul picked up that phone and calls me. I'm like, "I can't believe you're calling me, I mean everybody in the world wants to talk to you." But we talked and we became soulmates quickly as we realized we were on the same page. Then we started doing some seminars and things like that together, and we did a tour of Australia through our network – Perichoresis network down there, and we've done several seminars together. Recently, I've been asked to do more lectures on the "Theology of *The Shack*" or things like that. It just sort of evolved and happened, and it's been beautiful. He's a fantastic man. I love to spend time with him.

JMF: We've had Paul on our program and talked about *The Shack* and some of the concepts of God that are so earth-shaking for many people who read it. People either love it, or they hate it. How do you account for that?

CBK: I think the scene where Papa comes out and embraces Mackenzie Allen Phillips and the way it's set up, I think that right across the Western world, we all have two different Gods. One is the God of our constructs in our mind, and the other is the God that we know in the depths of our soul. This God here [in the heart] is the Father, Son, and Spirit, and love and grace and goodness. And this God here [in the heart] that we know loves us more than we love our own kids.

But that does not fit the theological constructs that we've been hearing – the doctrine of Atonement fights against this view, this knowing of God. When that scene happens in *The Shack*... Actually, Mackenzie Allen Phillips goes to the shack three times. The first time was to find the remains of his daughter. The second time he goes to meet Papa, but the Western God is what he is thinking was going to happen, and that God never shows up. He ends up shaking his fist in that scene and says, "I hate you and that's it, done, not doing that." That's the whole Western legalistic ogre God who watches

us from a distance, more interested in whether we keep rules and relationship, and then he leaves and he rejects that God. “I don’t want anything else to do with that.”

He walks back to the Jeep and the whole world changes. He goes back and again he raises his fist. It’s to knock on the door and he doesn’t even get to knock – the door flies open and there’s Papa and lifts him off the ground. That scene speaks right here [the heart] to everybody on the planet. They know somewhere in here, that’s the truth about God.

But it just goes “bzzzztt!!” to all of our constructs. It creates a crisis. Right there in the opening scene, everybody wants to be there, but people who have a lot invested in this God [in the head] are seriously threatened by the awareness that people have here that this is good, this is beautiful. Who doesn’t want to be embraced? The news is – that’s the truth, we’re all embraced like that. That’s the gospel.

JMF: This concept of God being the far-away judge, we’re uncertain of how he feels about us, where does that come from?

CBK: It’s the construct of the fallen mind. It’s Adam and Eve in the bushes, guilty, ashamed, afraid... and they project that fear and that guilt and that shame onto the Lord’s face. They tar the Father’s face with the brush of their own anxiety, and they create a mythological deity.

JMF: Isn’t that pretty much the way all of the ... if you go back all through ancient history, that’s the idea of religion and the gods, and the gods who are in the elements and the gods in the sky – there’s always this sense of... you don’t know what they are going to do next. They’re like us, they’re unpredictable, you’ve got to urge them or get ...

CBK: You’ve got to twist their arms somehow because they’re not *for* you. That’s the projection of the fallen mind onto God creating the image... Someone in Australia (I can’t remember who it was) said, “God created us in his image and we’ve been returning the favor ever since.” That’s the tarring of the Father’s face with the brush of our own pain and struggle and anxiety and guilt. The perfect philosophical expression of that is in Greek philosophy, and as it emerges in neoplatonic philosophy, where you have God as the one that’s removed – infinitely removed – from the earth, because this is matter, and matter is broken and sinful. This God is removed and isolated, so pure and self-contained and non-relational that this God is beyond being known and can’t even feel anything that happens here.

That’s the origin of the Western mindset on God. Then you throw into that: legalism, so this distant, removed God is, in his innermost essence, holy in a legally defined way – moral rectitude, purity in that way as opposed to

“holy” as a Trinitarian concept, which is about the singularity, beauty and goodness of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. You’ve got two Gods.

JMF: That gives us this idea, this huge gulf between God and us. Then in the evangelism training you are taught, you have to explain to people there’s a huge gulf between them and God. [**CBK:** Yeah, because Jesus hasn’t come.] Now you can get him to become this bridge for you “if you say the sinner’s prayer with me right now.” He will be the bridge and you can get across to God.

CBK: To me that’s just like pure neoplatonic philosophy coming in, because it denies, in the first instance, it’s as if the Incarnation hasn’t even happened. One of the ways around that for me is I like to put it this way: The gospel is not the news that you can receive Jesus into your life. The gospel is the news that the Father’s Son himself, who’s face to face with the Father, who’s anointed in the Holy Spirit, became a human being and *he* has received us into *his* life.

One is the Greek philosophical construct of separation and somehow, Jesus has done something and there’s a bridge and we can get back across because this God is too pure to even look at us.

Whereas the Trinitarian model is the Father, Son, and Spirit share life, and they’re passionate about our inclusion and Jesus has come, as the early church teaches – Irenaeus is a great example: “Our beloved Lord Jesus Christ became what we are in order to bring us to be what he is.” Athanasius: “The Son of God became the Son of Man to make us sons of God...” because the point is to share that Trinitarian life with us.

In the Greek model, this is bad, Incarnation may be real but not really. In this model of the gospel, the Trinitarian gospel: Jesus becomes not only human, which is unthinkable on that other model – he becomes flesh, he becomes what we are and enters into our brokenness and darkness in order that the life that he shares with his Father and the Holy Spirit, could become as much as ours by way of experience as it is his own.

JMF: Isn’t that exactly what he says in John when he talks about, “I and the Father are one” and he says, “we are one with each other in him, we’re one with him, he’s one with the Father, therefore we’re one with the Father in him.” It’s been there all along.

CBK: But it doesn’t fit the great construct because there’s separation, there’s distance and un-approachability, and this god is so pure that in no way could he get entangled with humanity and matter – because that’s all so broken and so fallen. So even though we hear Incarnation, it just kind of

moves out, we don't pay much attention to it. We don't underline those passages. What in the universe could be more shocking and stunning and beautiful than the fact that the Father's Son himself – the one who is face-to-face with the Father, who dwells in his bosom, the one who is anointed with the Holy Spirit himself, becomes a human being to be with us? Is there any news more fantastic than that in the universe?

Why have we not seen it to be the point of emphasis? It's because of the influence of the Greek model. That's beginning to die down, it's beginning to come in conflict... and books like *The Shack*, without doing any theology, without making any theological statement – that scene, you got two Gods, and that creates a crisis in us, because we know both Gods. Once you see the scene, you think, this has got to be resolved. That's going to be difficult, and that's where the crisis is in the book.

People love it here, but it, "Oh, no, that means... what about all this that I've been taught? What about all this that I thought was 'gospel' – it doesn't fit." I'm not talking about some sort of intuition here, I'm talking about a revelation of the Holy Spirit to us that this is the truth, this is who God is. It's who *you* are. That's the crisis in the book that it creates in the very beginning. It's a beautiful crisis, liberating crisis.

JMF: It also raises the issue of justice and fairness and all this sort of thing, in the sense that this God of the academics that we have – the God on paper that we... with the gulf and all that, and who we have to become atoned for by behaving better after we make our decision and all that. There's a sense that the bad guys need to be punished and cut off from God. But in *The Shack*, we are talking about a God who is presented in the Gospels who has already forgiven everyone in Christ. It raises this issue of: "How can it be that all the bad people, like in the book, the murderer of Mackenzie's daughter, how can that person be loved by God and be embraced...?"

CBK: He and Mackenzie, too, because we don't know exactly what he did to his dad, but it was not good.

JMF: Yeah, and so there's a chapter on judgment where there's a seat, and the Holy Spirit comes to talk about that topic with Mackenzie. That gets into this issue and resolves it, and many find that tremendously liberating because it speaks right to the gospel. But there are those... you can go to websites that take great exception, and find that horribly wrong and contrary to anything godly and righteous, because the bad guys seem to be getting away with something.

CBK: The first thing I would want to say there, my professor of theology J.B. Torrance, used to say all the time: "Forgiveness is logically prior to

repentance and faith.” In the modern West, we’ve packaged it like: forgiveness is possible *if* these things line up, if you receive, if you pray... To me, forgiveness was instantaneous – Father, Son, and Spirit forgave Adam and Eve and forgave us. It’s not a question of their forgiveness, it’s a question of how are they going to reach us so that we *know* we are forgiven and we can begin to have real relationship with them?

The Bible is about how God does the impossible – how the Father, Son, and Spirit reaches us in our blindness, our projections and our darkness. And how far are they willing to go in order to meet us ALL – not just the broken folks. In Jesus, they’ve come (the Father, Son, and Spirit have come) to meet us. This is what I’ve been working on a good bit in the last couple of years since we’ve last talked – in seeing the reconciling work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is the deliberate, willful, submission of Jesus Christ to our bone-headed, wrong-headed religious judgmental darkness. He could obliterate us, he could call the angels, but he doesn’t. What he does is he bows to suffer – not from God’s wrath, not from his Father’s wrath, and not from the Holy Spirit’s abandonment. He bows to suffer from *our* curse, our wrath, our rage and our venting. We made him a scapegoat and we damned him and we did it to him publicly in the most humiliating way possible. And he said, “Okay.”

In accepting us as we really are – in our brokenness and in that wrath, he has established a relationship with the human race – all of us, at our very worst. And he brought Papa and the Holy Spirit with him. So it’s not a question to me, “Is this person forgiven? Is that person forgiven? What about bad people...?”

What has happened is the entire human race, in its blind rage, has been met by Jesus and Papa and the Holy Spirit, and it’s inside and it’s seeking to come out. That’s forgiveness – he’s found a way to reach us. Now, the question is: where are we in our journey – because we’re still blind, all of us. We’re still broken.

That’s part of what Paul is getting at, is helping people, in that moment realizing, “If you put yourself in the seat of judgment, then you got to make decision about who’s going to be forgiven, who’s going to be included, who’s going to hell, who’s going to heaven.” When he puts you in that seat, you think we’re not... he confronts you in the book with the fact that we love our children better than our theology allows us to let God love us.

A sweeping panoramic from the other side sees the Father, Son, and Spirit coming to build a relationship with us in the midst of our darkness and sin and pain, and they set up shop right there and then seek to help us come to know that. That’s what is one of the things that’s underneath all the way

through the book. People are unprepared for that because they've got a construct – separation, Greek philosophical deity, with Bible verses to “prove” that it's right, separation – Jesus is the bridge, only those people who've walked across that bridge are included and loved and forgiven. If you've got that kind of construct, then what we're talking about here makes no sense. It's like, how can that be, how can God be this good? You can't just say, “God forgives us.” No, but you can say to your daughter, “I forgive you, without payment.” Do you love your daughter better than the Father loves us?

Are you participating in love in the Father, Son, and Spirit? J.B. used to say that all the time, “God commands us to forgive sin seven times seven times. Are we supposed to be better than the Lord? Or is he not telling us the way he is?”

JMF: Colossians points out that “once you were alienated in your minds.” Not alienated *from God's side*, but alienated in *your* minds. He just got finished in that passage talking about what he's done... reconciling everybody, all things whether things on heaven or things on earth and all that. And then once you're alienated... not alienated, but alienated *in your minds*.

CBK: That's right. And some translations use the word “separation” there, like in Ephesians 4:17 it says: “Don't be like the pagans, don't walk around in the dark, now you know who God is and who you are, walk in that.” Jesus is saying, “I'll meet you in your pain, I'll meet you in your brokenness, I'll meet you in your sin. Walk with me. Just walk with me, trust me a little bit and let's walk together. Let me share my life with you.” And you can begin to let go of some things.

I thought Paul [Young] did a great job in that conversation by backing Mackenzie up and said, “Wait a minute, if we cut off this guy, the murderer, then we have to go back – probably cut off his dad, go back, cut off... and then you start cutting people off and squashing them before they are... and there are millions of people here that are never even born.

It puts you in that quandary where you think, wait a minute, God deals with us in our darkness. That's the only group he has got to deal with. He meets us in our pain and he's saying, “Walk with me.” He's saying that to the Christian community, too. “Come on, walk with me.” The one who walks with me, he says, “I am the light of the entire cosmos. It's who I am, it's who you are in me. Walk with me, and the one who walks with me, this one will never, ever walk in the darkness but shall have the light of life.”

These ones don't come to know what this whole thing is about. That's the distinction between the Christian community and the world – or the

believing and unbelieving. The Christian community say, “I want to walk with Jesus, I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know *how* to continue in your Word. You’ve got to disciple me. But I know that you’ve got something here that I want to participate in.”

The other part of the world is saying, “No, it’s not there.” That’s where they are in their experience, and the Holy Spirit keeps walking with us. “I’m going to find a way to reveal” – and this I love – the Holy Spirit is determined to find a way to reveal Jesus, not simply to the world, not simply to a person, but to reveal Jesus *in* them. So they’d encounter Jesus in their own pain and darkness and struggle. And from there, healing and life begins to work its way out.

JMF: How do you find the reaction, response... People who come to the seminars that you’ve held are coming because they’re excited about the book, but how do they respond personally when you talk to them?

CBK: One of the most beautiful things to watch is when Paul Young tells the story behind the story – which is, to me, way more fascinating and beautiful than the book. People weep and people cry and people feel loved, they feel accepted, they feel moved. There may be a handful of people somewhere in the room who are angry. But by and large, they’re being saved from their darkness and confusion and it’s like an evangelistic meeting as he shares his life and story.

There’s conflict, but what I’ve experienced is overwhelming love and excitement. People saying, “Yes, yes, yes. This is what I know. Tell me more. Don’t stop, don’t leave, let’s keep talking.” Their tears are flowing because they’ve heard him express the fact that they’ve been through this horrible sadness, they too have, and they haven’t been allowed to talk about this. But this guy is talking about it. He’s talking about a God who knows about it.

One of my favorite scenes in the book that I think speaks directly to what you’re saying, both in terms of Christ, is saying in terms of response, is the scene where Mackenzie is in the garden with Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, and they’re digging stuff up. The garden is Mackenzie’s soul and his brokenness. So without theological argument, Paul has set up a scene where the Holy Spirit is now inside Mackenzie’s brokenness and darkness because he came with Jesus and Papa. The Holy Spirit is not bothered, not put off, not “I can’t look at this,” but is able to embrace in freedom Mackenzie at his very worse. And then Papa comes walking the down the path with the sack lunch. It just screams acceptance, and that is something that people feel, and it opens their soul. So much stuff gets to come out and they love it.

When I had the chance to be with him, to see him speak and see him

unfold his life's story, it's like an evangelistic meeting. People are being liberated from their darkness and being able to accept themselves and accept others ... "This is fantastic, this is the truth, this is the way God really is." Paul Young tells a story which you know the story, your listeners know it from other interviews with him. That sense of acceptance is like whoo, man, tears... Most of the time that I've been able to teach and do seminars and things alongside with that or with that, people are so excited they can hardly sit still. "Just tell me more, tell me more." They've never heard this thing about the Trinity. "Nobody's ever told me about that doctrine. Where did this come from, where is that in the Bible? I believe you, but where is it? Let's look." It's like, you've got to be kidding, that is so unbelievable. You could speak for three days and never move.

JMF: Once people get their minds around that, then that's all you see in the Scriptures anymore. Verses and passages that you've read your whole life, all of a sudden you see them in a new light. You see what they're actually saying to you, and it changes everything.

CBK: Funny how the Bible changes like that, isn't it? You underline all the wrong verses. You think, "Why did I underline that? I missed this whole section here."

JMF: Yeah, that [verse] tells me what that one was saying.

CBK: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was face-to-face with God. And the Word became flesh, meeting us in our crap and darkness, and we saw it and we got to experience its fullness in our darkness. That's the gospel. Right there in the first part of John. Once you see that, it's everywhere in the New Testament.

JMF: You're working on a book on the topic of theology of *The Shack* in which you go into a lot of these things, is that something that we can look forward to fairly soon?

CBK: Probably not in a matter of weeks or months, because I'm working on another book, and three-quarters of the way through – this is a novel and it's pretty interesting, pretty racy. I've done lectures on the theology of *The Shack*. I'm getting the recordings from two different places and I'm going to get someone to transcribe that. Then I'll sit down and take the time and work through and add and develop and edit that. But the basic research and ideas of the theology of *The Shack* that I've been wanting to do are all in place, and I've already sort of done a test drive on it. It's been lecture format and interaction.

I will get all that put together and then hole up somewhere and write it, and of course (just because of my friendship with Paul) I would never want

to produce anything that he was not pleased with on one level. Although there are places in the book where he and I disagree about things, they're not major issues. I'm still a theologian, after all. There are some places I want to quibble with him a little bit. But by and large I absolutely love every single thing in the book. I don't like the first four chapters. I mean it's kind of brutal, because you'd smell what's coming and nobody wants to read that scene. But from Papa on, it's just off the charts.

So I want to help people see what's going on, and I also want to help them understand that what's being said here about God – may be new to us, but it's actually the early church's. It's what launched the early church. If it's new to us, we've been lost over here in Augustinian captivity. I read *The Shack* as Athanasius in the early church shouting across the centuries saying, "Come on back home, boys and girls. This is the way God really is, and you know it!" But be willing to repent, have your mind reconstructed to allow the truth of what's being said here, and the truth of what was said in the early church, come together.

34. WHO ARE WE IN JESUS CHRIST?

JMF: The last time we got together, we talked a little bit about your book *The Great Dance*, but one thing I wanted to focus on this time is a lady that you quoted from C.S. Lewis called Mrs. Fidget. And you mentioned: “One of my favorite characters in C.S. Lewis’ writings is the lady by the name of Mrs. Fidget.”

This woman so characterizes not only somebody we all know, probably, but also ourselves in so many ways, that she’s a great character to talk about.... On page 78, for those who want to pull the book out and start reading:

I’m thinking of Mrs. Fidget [Lewis writes], who died a few months ago. It is really astonishing how her family have brightened up. Mrs. Fidget very often said that she lived for her family. And it was not untrue. Everybody in the neighbourhood knew it. “She lives for her family,” they said; “what a wife and mother!” She did all the washing; true, she did it badly, and they could have afforded to send it out to a laundry, and they frequently begged her not to do it. But she did. There was always a hot lunch for anyone who was at home and always a hot meal at night (even in midsummer). They implored her not to do this. They protested almost with tears in their eyes (and with truth) that they liked cold meals. It made no difference. She was living for her family.

For Mrs. Fidget, as she so often said, would “work her fingers to the bone” for her family. They couldn’t stop her. Nor could they, being decent people, quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn’t want done.

And you say, the problem of Mrs. Fidget was not marriage, not relationships, not motherhood – the problem of Mrs. Fidget was the way she saw herself. Let’s talk about that.

CBK: ... Identity. I talk about it sometimes in terms of the “I Am NOTs” –believing “I am not special,” “I am not included,” “I am not good enough,” “I’m not worthy,” “I’m not important,” “I’m not beautiful,” “I’m not saved,” “I’m not reconciled,” “I’m not adopted.” We have those whispers within us. They ultimately have their origin in evil, where they come through people. We believe we’re not special, and then we have to find a way to *become* special. I believe I’m not important but I will find a way that I can become important

– and that’s what Mrs. Fidget does.

I think she’s a perfect illustration of so much that goes on in our life. She chose an ideal of motherhood and that, if she could attain that ideal, then she would be special. She wanted it to look like she really cared about her family, but in the end, what she really cared about was she attaining her ideal of motherhood. Lewis is brilliant in how she sees the whole family is actually brightened up after the woman died because she was putting so much pressure on them to help her fulfill her idea of motherhood, which had nothing to do with real relationships at all – it wasn’t what her family wanted.

So it’s – I am not, I can be, if I can get this.. and then you can fill in the blank in how we take people and maybe even whole denominations, or nations – into our “I am not” and our “self-salvation” scheme. It can get really messy and lots of stuff can be poisoned.

JMF: Relationships is what the gospel is all about, not doing stuff, list of rules, all that sort of things that we like to impose on ourselves to help ourselves feel better... measuring... we like to measure how well we’re doing – we forget all about the fact we’re talking about relationships – whole purpose of life in the restoration that we have in Christ is for restored relationships.

CBK: Real relationships which means you encounter the other person in what they want, in what they care about is important to you, not just what you want them to care about but what they actually care about, where they are in their journey. That’s what the way Jesus met us in the incarnation. He’s come to become what we are to meet us where we actually are in our journey.

The Mrs. Fidget story helps us with another problem that comes out of this conversation which is the whole vexed discussion of universalism, because here you have a woman who actually IS special. She actually is loved – by the Father Son and Spirit – she is included. But since she doesn’t know it, and she doesn’t believe it, then she’s going to invent an alternative kingdom and demand that her children participate with her in her wrong-headed kingdom – which is going to poison them and eventually kill her, and destroys.

So is she included? Yes. Is she important? Yes. Is she adopted? Yes. Is she special? Yes. Does she know it? No, and because she doesn’t, she goes out to create an importance that she can see, which is an illusion, which brings poison into the equation.

Mrs. Fidget-ism can continue on for all eternity – theoretically speaking. It seems to me like this is what we all do. Sometimes I think of sin as looking dead at Jesus and saying: “Jesus you’re wrong about your Father, you’re

wrong about me, wrong about the human race and about our being included. So Jesus, what I want you to do stop believing what you believe about the Father and the Holy Spirit and about who we are – change your mind, which is repentance, and I want you to believe in me and in my vision.” We do that with God, we do that with our husbands, our wives, our family, our friends, our churches. We are always imposing our agenda over the top of what’s real, that is present but we can’t see it – we can’t receive it yet. So Mrs. Fidget is multi-layered, as she’s used in that book; we can go in lots of different directions with it.

JMF: It reminds you what Jesus said when he’s talking about forgiveness, which is often taken as a condition for salvation, that if you will forgive your brother then God will forgive you, and if you have not forgiven your brother, God will not forgive you. But that’s really a statement about relationships, like you’re talking about.

CBK: How can you be forgiven and not try to forgive others – it’s like people ask me about universalism, about the sheep and the goats, and I’m like – hang on a minute here, people that ask about the sheep and the goats as if this is a huge issue are really telling you that they’re goats, because I don’t know any sheep that care about people being excluded or not included in that sense.

The sheep hear the voice of Jesus and they love it and the people who are forgiven by the Father they have their souls baptized with hope – they want everybody to experience this. And so the sheep wants all the goats to be included and to see it, to experience it. We just get it convoluted. Jesus has brought the Father’s forgiveness to us as we know it. He who is forgiven much, loves much. The one sees how much they have been loved and forgiven now has capacity for mercy and compassion that flows out of them. That’s the way I look at that passage.

JMF: A lot of people see God as angry at them or at least withholding any kind of love for them until they’ve measured up, until they’ve done enough good stuff. This idea conflicts with the God we find who’s revealed in Christ in the Scriptures. How does a person go about holding two totally conflicting views of God together?

CBK: The entire world – especially the Western world – has two different doctrines of God. One is Greek philosophy – that God who is distant, removed, totally detached, unapproachable, other-worldly, not interested, we’ve taken that into the world of legalism and add legalism to that detached... This God is watching us (as intrinsically bad) watching us and keeping tabs but he doesn’t really care about us, as much as we are keeping

his rules – that’s built into the fabric of the fallen man and through Greek philosophy it spread itself across the whole world.

JMF: So the rules come first, he makes rules and they need somebody to keep them and so he made us.

CBK: And we’re just completely distanced. And he’s up there unapproachable. Then you discover in the face of Jesus the Father-Son relationship and the role and the place and the beauty of the Holy Spirit in that relationship and you realize that the incarnation is shouting to us that God is not unapproachable – he intends to be known and to share that Trinitarian life with us. That why he became human.

I snagged this book a minute ago from your library because of what Irenaeus says in the early church – he says: “Our Lord Jesus Christ who did through his transcendent love become what we are, that he might bring us to be, even what he is in himself.” One God is infinitely removed, unapproachable, not interested, excepting rules and regulations. The other God is: I’m coming to become what you are because I want you to share in what I am. So you’re going to get to be sons and daughters with me and my Father. You’re gonna get included in my anointing in the Holy Spirit. You’re gonna get to be a part of my relationship with all creation. So you’ve got two different Gods running in our minds and in our hearts from the very beginning in the West and most people don’t even think about that.

JMF: I’ve known a lot of people even combine those two in a sense of taking that false view of God as a distant uninterested or unapproachable God and actually project that onto the Father and Jesus is the good guy who fixes and patches things up and he keeps the Father in the background so that...

CBK: As long as we hang with Jesus we’re okay, but if he goes to the bathroom from the playground, we’re toast, because the Father really doesn’t like us. But Jesus twisted his arms in some way so he might get us in the back door, as it were, and that’s exactly what we’ve done. We’re taking Greek philosophy, and in some of the Christian tradition, we twisted the Trinity to fit that, and we don’t even know that’s what we’ve done.

At this moment in history I think there’s some untwisting that’s happening – starting with the figure of Karl Barth in the last century. And people like J.B. and T.F. Torrance and with Moltmann and Colin Gunton, and now Alan Torrance and Trevor Hart – these and lots and lots of people who are saying, ok, we want to participate in the untwisting, we want to divorce from Greek philosophy. We don’t want to participate in that darkness anymore. We want the Christian tradition that stands on its own merits and

this is what we believe. And we're willing to roll the dice to see where it comes out. If we're thoroughly faithful to Jesus as the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, where is this going to come out?

We'll find ourselves right back with the early church. I read that passage last night to a group of folks here in Los Angeles (a younger generation) and they said to me, "never heard that... in all my years in the church I never heard anyone talking..." I said, that's the biggest picture. If you start off with this other model and this God, and you overlay Jesus coming on that, it's all about sin, and it's all about somebody's getting punished and Jesus stands in our place, and by the way, we're supposed to love his Father. The bigger picture is: the Father sends his Son because they have decided that we're going to be given a place in their relationship. And Jesus comes to bring us to be what he is in himself. Not just to give us a gift (like he came to give us a new coffee cup) – what he came give us is himself, in his life with his Father and the Holy Spirit.

So you're untwisting this legal stuff and you're now seeing why the early church was born and why it went around the world – is because the message was not: God is holy, you're a sinner, you failed, Jesus picked up the tab. The message is: The Father, Son, and Spirit set their love upon you from the foundation of the world, and Jesus has come and found you and he's sharing himself and all he is and has with you. And in order to do that, he's died and rose again and ascended.

JMF: Yeah, the way it comes across a lot of times is that Jesus comes to pay the penalty for our sins. So he pays the penalty, we're absolved, we got a legal document, as it were, that says: ok you're not guilty now.

CBK: That we can hold in God's face.

JMF: Yeah, or just feel good about it: "Well, I got off the hook and I'm so glad and now I'm ok." But then, we've got to start keeping the rules because the rules still are the most important thing. We got all of those past sins forgiven – but the rules are still there, we've got to keep them and now the Holy Spirit will come and he will help me keep these rules and if I don't stop keeping them enough, then I'd actually get into the kingdom, where I'll keep them perfectly. But still it's all about the rules.

CBK: We keep moving the bar. The Holy Spirit comes to us to help us share in Jesus' life. And what was Jesus' life? He says, "I only do what I see my Father doing. The Father loves the Son, he shows him all things he himself is doing. I don't have my own agenda. I'm not here to do just whatever I want. I want to participate in what the Father is doing." So it's relational. It's relationships.

Jesus says, “I don’t call you slaves, because slaves don’t know what their master is doing. I’m calling you friends, brothers and sisters, because I’m showing you or disclosing to you everything that my Father who shows me everything he’s doing – he shares with me, because I want you to participate in our relationship – in our way of relating, in our way of living life in that relationship.”

Jesus didn’t come to give us new laws, he didn’t come to give us a fresh vision of God. He didn’t come to give us new steps to joy. The astonishing fact staring us in the face is what Irenaeus was saying in the early church – is that Jesus came to give us *himself*, and in giving us himself, he’s giving us his relation with his Father and his anointing with the Spirit and his relationship with all things throughout the cosmos. That’s who we are, and we are to work this out in concert with him in relationship with him. We would do way more than keep the law in the process.

JMF: We don’t need a law for friendship, do we? I mean, is there a friendship law? We’re able to be friends because we actually care about each other, we care about participating with each other and we care about being together in a way that’s productive. We adjust our wants and our desires because we care about each other. You don’t need a set of rules for that. If you wrote down a set of rules, you could make one. But to sit down and try to follow that in order to create a friendship, doesn’t work. You can look a friendship and say, hey these are things that happen in friendship. But it doesn’t work the other direction.

CBK: To me, Christianity is about (and this might sound somewhat cliché, but it’s beautifully simple) Christianity is about walking with Jesus. It’s about being interested in what he’s doing and what he wants, more than we are of what we want. Instead of me looking at Jesus saying, you’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong, you need to change and believe in me, we say to Jesus: I don’t want to see things the way that I see them anymore. I don’t want to see God the way that I see God. I don’t want to see people the way that I see people. I don’t want to see creation, I don’t want to see myself... I want to see God and people and creation – with your mind and in your faith and in your wisdom and clarity, Jesus. I want to participate in your way of seeing.

He says, come walk with me. Walk with me and I’ll help you see what’s really real and what’s really going on. That produces friendship. Because immediately when you get two or three people that are saying: I don’t know how to do this. But what we want is to participate in Jesus. Then there’s a point of connection that’s profoundly deep and then they become brothers

in the practical ongoing and sisters in the practical ongoing way whereby we're bound together – we care about them too, because we all care about Jesus, in sharing in him and not imposing our own ideas on the world or Jesus, the Father, Son and a denomination or whatever.

JMF: He actually did that first. His interest in us was selfless. He came, showed his interest in us by taking up our cause, becoming one of us and creating the room – the space for that relationship to happen.

CBK: This is where you will see, in the future, the unravelling of that whole notion of penal substitution, where Jesus supposedly goes to the cross to suffer the wrath of God that was intended for us. I just don't see in the New Testament that Jesus suffered the wrath of God. I don't see that he suffered the rejection and abandonment of the Holy Spirit. If you read the New Testament, you read the Gospels and you say, why did Jesus die? Then he tells you: "I'm going to Jerusalem, the Jews and the Gentiles are going to go and conspire together and they're going to kill me, and I'm going to let them do it. On the third day I will rise again."

If you see from the beginning of the Bible, the point here is the Lord is saying: "I want a relationship that is real with the human race so that in this relationship I can share with them the very life that I experience with the Father and the Holy Spirit." Jesus is stepping into that and so he's going to find a way to have a relationship with us as we really are in our brokenness. Otherwise he's not accomplishing the dream – which is to share with us his Trinitarian life.

So, how is he going to do that? He's going to do that by allowing himself to be crucified by the human race and he's going to bear our scorn. He's going to allow us to make him the scapegoat, and to pour our rage, our wrath, our anger on to him and he's going to take it. He's actually going to submit himself to our wrong-headed judgment and to our religion (which he totally disapproves of). He's going to submit himself to it and he's going to die in the arms of our bitterness. In doing so, he's establishing a relationship with us in our very worst and he brought his Father and he brought the Holy Spirit with him.

That's why adoption is not a doctrine. Adoption is what he is. Jesus has included the angry, vengeful, murderous, resentful human race in his relationship with his Father – that's adoption. Not the pristine version that we can dress up on Sunday. Jesus has included all of us in our very worst in his relation with his Father and in his anointing in the Holy Spirit.

So that is where the whole thing gets untwisted and back in line with the early church's vision of the Trinity and the incarnation. That is too beautiful

for words. I mean, the Father, Son and Spirit deliberately submit themselves to our judgment, even though it's bone-headed and completely backwards and upside down and wrong. But they do that in order to meet the real us as we are, to share their life with us. That's the heart of the gospel.

So that's what we are to do with other people. We're to embrace them and meet them where they are and share the truth with them. I don't mean that put ourselves in abusive situations as Jesus did. I think because of what he did, we can move forward. But I don't mean that as a pattern of, "ok therefore I'm supposed to go, stir up trouble and let people just crucify me because that sound like a good way to meet Jesus or participate with Jesus." I mean that we embrace people where they are, we accept them as they are. It's not our position to judge them or to clean them up.

Our job is to meet them where they are and accept them in their brokenness and to tell them who they really are – which is back to the truth that will set Mrs. Fidget free... is "Yes, you are accepted just as you are. So you don't need to invent this ideal motherhood and you don't need to impose this vision of yours on your family. So you don't need to destroy relations in your family because of your own need here." You begin with "you're included." You begin with "I am acceptable," "I am special" because Jesus came and found me.

JMF: So how do we look at the difference between believers and unbelievers?

CBK: Well, the first distinction is not that believers are in and unbelievers are out. Jesus has embraced the human race and indeed the entire cosmos in himself. He is the one in and through and by whom it was created. Now he's stepped into it and he's brought his relationship with the entire cosmos together in himself. He has given us a place in his relation with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. That's who we are. That's our identity. We don't make that so. Whether we believe it or not believe it, doesn't change the fact of who we really are in Jesus. He's done this in beautiful and sovereign grace.

So now the question is: Where are we in our journey of understanding that, and that's where the distinctions like – not inside, outside – but the distinction of believer and unbeliever become important. Because there clearly are people who are raising their hands saying, "Jesus I don't want to see things the way I see them anymore. I'm still fumbling around and my life may not look any better on the outside than the person who says, 'I don't want anything to do with Jesus.'"

But there's a difference in terms of orientation of what they're doing. The best I've ever heard anybody saying in my travels is, "Lord, I believe. Help

my unbelief.” I’ve never heard anybody saying, “Well, that’s the way it used to be until I got saved, or I got the Holy Ghost. Now I don’t even have to pray about my own belief” — we’re struggling.

Believers are people who know that Jesus is the answer. We just don’t know how? We don’t know what it really means yet. That’s where we grab each other’s hands and say, let’s walk with him. Unbelievers are people who are looking somewhere else to experience their salvation, but it doesn’t change the fact of who we really are and what’s happened — it changes our experience. Mrs. Fidget invented a legendary idea of motherhood and imposed it on the whole family, so much so that it killed the family, and when she finally died, they were relieved because they could be themselves.

So the distinction between unbelievers and believers is important as long as that doesn’t mean inside-outside. (That’s the way it’s been used many times in centuries is that, we are the true church, we’re the true faith system — you’re outside till you do it and jump through the hoops here; you’re not included.) The gospel message is that the Father’s Son has come and he has received us into his world. Whether we see it or not, this is what’s happened. Now, where are you in your journey to understand that between becoming a true unbeliever, towards a true believer. There’s way gray there. Lots of people want it to be black and white: “Here’s how you can tell. This is it.” Every time we draw a line in the sand, we hurt people and ourselves too.

JMF: Union and communion, is that a similar...

CBK: Union and communion is a great way of talking about the difference, because *union* is what is. Jesus has established us as joint heirs with himself. He has come and found a way to connect with us, to relate to us, and that’s who we are — who are people who belong and who are united with Jesus Christ.

Communion is as we begin to see this more and more, saying, “Jesus, I want to walk with you. I see something good here about me and you. I don’t know what it means, but I want to walk with this. And oh, by the way, there’s some other people; we’re going to walk with them.” That opens the door for deeper and deeper communion, which is where we are participating actively on our own rather than blindly. Even though when I say it that way, it still sounds sort of Christian arrogance because there’s so much of Jesus going on in the world whether people see it or not.

JMF: That’s how we can understand the fact that sometimes unbelievers seem to be better friends, more loyal, more faithful, kinder than members.

CBK: You will see the love of the Father, Son and Spirit as it’s manifesting itself in people out here who are “unbelievers,” you either see that as the love

of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or you find yourself in a position where I'm now have to have this *Christian* love and it has to be vastly superior to the way this father loves his children. Or, I don't really have it.

The real truth is that, the Father, Son, Spirit's love is being shared with everyone on the planet and it's trying to come to expression through our unbelief, and wrong belief and through our hopefully-sometimes-getting-close-to-being-real belief. It's expressing itself. Once you see that, then you can begin to see what's going on inside of people, because Jesus is that big. We're not going to meet Jesus face to face and scratch our heads, and say: "Jesus, you need to forgive me because I really, really over-estimated you. I just didn't realize how small you are. I thought you were bigger." That's not what's going to happen.

When we meet Jesus, we're going to say: "Man, I've grossly underestimated your place and role in the whole scheme of things. You are the one who knows what love is. You are the one who shares your love and your burdens and you for care with the whole human race and I see it everywhere trying to come to expression, but we're all broken and blind, and sadly, we all keep poisoning it, but you keep sharing it and you keep working with us and we're going to get to see who we really are in terms of Jesus."

I don't think anybody right now would qualify as a believer. Jesus is the true believer. The rest of us are: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Then you got people who are saying: "Oh I don't want anything to do with this just yet." Most of the time you got that, is because of problems that has happened through churches, of abuse and things like that, through parents... Most of the time, when I talk to people about Jesus being the Father's Son who has come to share his life with us – people don't have a real problem with that, except religious people who want this hard line in the sand or in the dirt between those that are outside, those that are inside. It's a huge question.

JMF: Sure, if Jesus were not our life and were not our righteousness, we won't have any anyway. Same with belief, if he were not the believer, what would we have?

CBK: We wouldn't. And if Jesus (Calvin says this on his commentary on John 1:4) "In him was life and life was the light of men..." Calvin says that if Jesus were to detach himself from the human race, the entire human race would disappear.

JMF: So would everything.

CBK: Everything would be gone.

JMF: Everything is upheld by him.

CBK: That's the way we started: where are these people who are creations of Jesus, who are included in Jesus' faith and courage and in his *parrhesia* and his life and his anointing in the Spirit – where are these people in their journey to understand that? Where are they? Well, they are all unbelievers and believers in all kinds of things. The Holy Spirit is someone that straightens out this mess, and helps us come to know who we really are by coming to know who Jesus is. That's the light.

The light is always shining: Jesus is the one who's done this. This is who he is. And as we come to see him and know him, we're coming to know more about who we are. Then that changes the way we are relating to one another, like it would change the way Mrs. Fidget related to her family. If she knew who she was and how she was loved, then this whole world of illusion, the pressure to create this and maintain this world, to give her some sense of identity, goes away. So now she's in a whole different place with her kids, she can actually care about them, in what they want. If it is cold meals that they want, then she'd derive great joy in giving them cold meals. And if they don't think she could do the laundry they could ship it away. And they won't get suck in to her neediness and her world of brokenness and trying to find some semblance of meaning. She's free then to give her life for them — and that's the way the kingdom works. It's beautiful. The simplicity of it but then, man, you start pulling on that thread, the whole world comes undone.

35. WHERE IS GOD IN THE DARKNESS?

J. Michael Feazell: When unbelievers are good, where does that come from?

C. Baxter Kruger: I think that's a fantastic question. If you grew up (like I did) with Calvinism, then you would look at people who are outside of the church and say "that's not really goodness. I don't know what it is, but it's really depravity, because it's really sin."

But if you pan back to the Trinitarian gospel, you realize that Jesus has included the whole human race in his life with his Father and in his anointing in the Holy Spirit, and therefore we ought to see the fruit of that inclusion in people whether they have worked it out theologically perfectly or not. I think that gives a much better perspective, because what you're looking at is the love that the Father, Son, and Spirit share with us freely. They're not concerned about getting credit all the time. They share that with us, so that we can be filled with their music, and we can experience their life and their love in our families.

The Holy Spirit's mission is now to bring clarity to that, not to create it, but to bring clarity to it. Jesus says in John 12:46, "I have come as light into the world so that you may not remain in your darkness" because he has included us. We're in the dark about it, and Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to convict us so that we can begin to know what's going on. That goodness comes from the only circle of goodness in the universe, and that's the goodness of the Father, Son, and Spirit, whether or not people can give you a theological account for that. That's the way I see it.

JMF: So by the same token, all goodness that there is comes from God — love comes from the love relationship...

CBK: ...of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Truth, goodness, life, beauty, music, harmony — these things come out of the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship, and are shared with us and are seeking to express themselves in our lives.

JMF: Which illustrates the point that when we're good, when goodness comes through us, it's not our goodness. This is God's goodness. He gets the credit, not us.

CBK: In terms of origin, it is really important to realize that goodness...comes from the Father, Son, and Spirit. Several years ago I had a pastor friend that called me, and there was a tragedy in the congregation. I think a father had died and left three or four, five kids and mother. The whole church was just overwhelmed with burden for this family. The pastor called

me and he said, “I don’t understand, Baxter,” he said, “Where is God in all this? Here we are feeling this burden, I feel this burden, yet where God in all this?”

I said to him, “Number one, you’re asking two questions. The first question is, why did God let this happen? I don’t think anybody has the answer to that. The second question is, given that this man died, where is God in the midst of all this suffering and pain?”

I looked at my friend, and I said, “Hang on here a minute. Are you actually suggesting to me that this burden, this overwhelming burden that you feel for this family, that your congregation feels, are you suggesting that that has its origin in you? That you are this good of a person, that you are burdened this deeply for this situation? Or could it not be that God is the one who is burdened, and he shares his burdens and his joys with us all, and we are involved in participating in the unfolding of his concern for this particular family, this particular fold of sheep?”

That makes way more sense to me. Otherwise we have to take credit for it, and then we think it’s really us, and then our burden is better than your burden. And we have creativity better than your creativity, rather than seeing it as all of a piece, and being able to celebrate that and help people participate in it. That makes a lot more sense to me.

JMF: I know you’re working on a novel, we’ve talked about that before, is there anything about that that you could share with us — a little tidbit or preview?

CBK: Yeah, I’ll tell you how it starts. I have a recurring dream...one of the characters in the novel...I have a recurring dream. In my dream I’m in the woods. I don’t know if I’m hunting or why I’m there, but I’m standing looking at a farmhouse that’s old, old, old — like 100 years old — and there’s hardly anything left there — a couple of cypress plants, a little piece of what would have been a window, and one rafter that looks like it’s being held in midair, suspended. I don’t know where I am and what I’m doing. I’m standing, and this thing is so old there’s trees and vines and bushes growing up in the inside of it.

I’m looking through this little window in my dream, and I suddenly see a green ghost, radar green, weird green. It’s looking from behind the tree inside the house at me, and it doesn’t want me to see it. It’s terribly, horribly sad — like it makes me almost heave, to feel the sadness of this thing. Then I always wake up. I wake up with this feeling of this horrible sadness. That’s the way the story starts.

Then I actually do go hunting, and I shoot a deer, and I go get it, and it

gets up and runs off in the woods. So I'm chasing this deer and trying to find it, because it was a big buck, and I don't want to listen for the rest of my life to people abusing me about not being able to kill the big deer. So I'm running through the woods, then I crawl through the woods, and I come up under this tree, and I'm thinking, trying to find this trail to the deer, and all of a sudden, there's the farmhouse. It's not a dream, it's real.

Then I'm sitting there wide-eyed and stunned and trying to figure out what in the world is going on, and the ghost appears. So, long story short, I go home, I'm trying to figure out what this is about. At 3:30 in the morning I get a phone call from a man in Australia whose daughter is in trouble. She's read some of my books, she wanted to talk to me...what's happened? She tried to kill herself, why'd she try to kill herself? She's incredibly sad, some green monster, some green creature keeps hanging around the shed and makes her feel incredibly sad.

So the whole question then is: what is this thing? Where does it come from? How in the world can its sadness come on me and her, and how are we going to get grips of this? So there I'm having conversations with my old professor in Scotland who is now in glory, but he gets resurrected in a book, and we have a long conversation about some of this, and I talk to people in Australia and people around the country while I'm trying to pull together an answer to find out, because it's not a theological question, this is a gut-wrenching question. We've got to find some solutions to this, or this girl could die, and I could, too.

That's the basis of the book — works all the way through toward a resolution. I am introducing all of the concepts that are in my other books but almost in reverse. The concept of the perichoresis, sharing in Christ's life...the other question is how the green creature's sadness is shared with me and this other girl.

JMF: So have you got a timetable on it? Is there a...

CBK: I'm going to finish it.

JMF: How close are you?

CBK: I'm two-thirds done now. I'm planning on going back and spending as much of December as I can to finish it up. Then I'll go through oodles of editing and whatever along the way. But we'll see.

JMF: So what moved you to want to start the project?

CBK: Ever since I finished *Across All Worlds*...the very end of that book is a narration of a discussion that a man has with Jesus. He thinks he kills himself, he wakes up, he's not dead, he meets Jesus, and they have a long conversation. That was one of the easiest things I've ever written. Ever since

then I wanted to take that idea and write it as just a great story.

I want it first and foremost to be a story that's just a great read, but underneath it is all the message and the truth and insights that have been given over a period of time. That book was finished in like 2003, and I've been thinking about it ever since, but I did not have the particular plot line that I was looking for. I was sitting one night here six, eight weeks ago, and it just sort of hit me where I need to start. So I sat down and did the first 15, 20 pages. Just right there, just (thump)...and been working on it ever since.

JMF: We'll look forward to seeing it. Let's talk about *Across all Worlds: Jesus Inside Our Darkness*. What lies behind this book?

CBK: That book is where the light and light and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, theologically outlined, and the trauma of human life and brokenness meet. This is in some ways the story of my life — how Jesus meets us in our darkness, not in our theological Sunday-anity. But he meets us where we really are, and that scares us, because the minute he comes showing up in our darkness, then we begin to know this is darkness.

I remember years ago when my wife and I were first married, and we got into a debate about the color of the apartment walls. I had said well, look, Linda, obviously white. She said no, they're off-white. I said no, they're white. So I snagged a piece of typing paper, walked up, and just confidently slapped it upside the wall and instantly knew that they were very off-white. I wasn't even close.

So I think when Jesus comes to us to meet us, to love us in our darkness, his light shines and we suddenly know that no matter what we want to call what we've been living, this is darkness and this is dead. This is not light. So there's this crisis that happens.

This book is about Jesus meeting us in that crisis and loving us because he wants the broken parts of us to come to know his Father's love, and he's determined to get inside of that in the Holy Spirit. In some ways it's a sequel to *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*. And there's another paper called "Bearing Our Scorn: Jesus and the Way of Trinitarian Life" that follows that book, and so that's almost a trilogy. That paper's available on our site for free right now.

JMF: That's thegreatdance.org.

CBK: Yeah, go to thegreatdance.org, and it will take you to the mother ship [i.e., thegreatdance.org will link you to perichoresis.org, where the paper is available].

JMF: In the book on page 29, you begin chapter 5 with this, "Reconciliation is not about Jesus suffering punishment so that the invisible, faceless, and nameless God up there somewhere can forgive us [which is very

much in the back of the minds of many people] — it is about the Father's forgiveness, in action, entering into our estrangement and its hell, penetrating the fundamental problem of sin. As James Torrance would say, "The Father does not have to be conditioned into being gracious," and you say, "There is no sense in which he needs to be coerced in order to forgive," which is so much...

When we pray it's like we beg, and we're not sure he'll forgive us, so we beg some more. And we keep on saying it until we finally get it out in some way that kind of almost convinces us that maybe that was good enough — like we're asking the boss for a raise or something. "Forgiveness is first," you write, "Overflowing out of the way in which the Father, Son, and Spirit love one another. From this forgiveness arises passion for it to be known and received."

CBK: That, to me, is at the core of a proper view of reconciliation and atonement. Adam and Eve sinned, they failed, they hid from God. In failing, they had already become ashamed, and then they projected their shame onto God. They became guilty, they projected their guilt onto God. So they're creating a mythological deity in their heads. That's who they're hiding from, because the Lord is the greatest philanthropist in the world, and how on earth could you possibly think evil of the Lord who had created all of this and given this to them, but in two seconds they go from being believers in the goodness of the Lord to actually believing he is the enemy to be avoided at all costs.

So, for me, the question from Genesis 3 all the way through the book is: how is the Lord actually going to reach Adam and Eve in their darkness and in the bushes? Forgiveness is not about how can we do something to get God off our backs or change God. That's the whole fallen mind's view of forgiveness. The Father, Son, and Spirit forgive us the minute that we sin, that we failed. But they see that we can't receive that, that we can't believe that, that we're not about to say okay, I've been forgiven, I want to have a relationship again. So they're trying to find a way to take that forgiveness and earth it inside of us in our darkness so that we can actually experience it.

They're not going to rest with some legal fiction where the Father says, okay Jesus, enough suffering, I forgive them, because that doesn't do a thing for Adam and Eve in the bushes. They're still scared to death. There's no communion. So forgiveness, and J.B. Torrance is right about this, forgiveness is first, and then comes a determination on God's part and the Father, Son, and Spirit's part, that we actually get to the place to where we can receive it and experience it as forgiveness. The whole Bible is about that passage — to incarnate the forgiving love of the Father, Son, and Spirit so that we can get

to the place where we can experience that love as love and forgiveness that it is. We've turned the whole thing upside down in the Western world with our legalisms. It's pathetic, terrible.

JMF: So the gospel is about restoration of relationships, not about keeping laws and rules.

CBK: It's completely about relationship. Always has been, always will be. We're the ones that have created this system where we think somehow God needs to be changed. I think the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was never for God's benefit. It was never designed to placate an angry God — it was always designed to let Israel know that there is a way of forgiveness here just long enough so that we could have a little bit of relationship.

In the end, the guilty conscience is never addressed in Israel's sacrificial system, and it's addressed in Jesus because the way he comes to have a relationship with us and the way he deals with our guilty conscience is he actually allows us to dump our guilt on him. We brutalize him and humiliate him, and he accepts us, thereby meeting us as we actually are in our brokenness.

He can deal with the guilty conscience because he's standing inside it with his love for Papa and with his love for the anointing in the Holy Spirit. That seems to me to be the heart of the early church, although it's a very modern way of saying it. It's not an early church way of saying it, but it's the same values, the same understanding, I think, as the early church — non-legal, relational, passionate about adoption, we're going to do this, we're going to pay the price of whatever it costs in order to meet the human race in this darkness and confusion.

JMF: Of all the books that you've written, is there one that you can point at and say, that's the one that gave me the most satisfaction, and I felt like I really got across... I'm sure all of them have a degree of that...but is there one special one that stands out to you?

CBK: If you forced me to say it, I would say that the little book which was originally two chapters, but the InterVarsity edition of *The Parable of the Dancing God*. It's a little pocket book. It cuts into the Western legalistic vision of God. It helps people see the goodness of Jesus' Father. That's the whole gospel to me. So if you force me to pick one book, I would pick that one.

Then I would pick sections in other books, like the first chapter of *God Is for Us*. I think probably everything I've ever known is crammed into one little sequence on adoption and total purpose. And then the book *Home* is on John 14:20, which is my favorite verse. It's about what we're really longing for — to participate in life in the Father, Son, and Spirit.

In some ways my favorite of all is *The Secret*, because it was the hardest thing I ever wrote, and it's like I was determined to get it in 20 pages, because it was way more difficult to write than a 300-page book. There's sections in *Across All Worlds*, sections of *The Great Dance*, but if I had to pick one book, it would be *The Parable of the Dancing God*, which, by the way, is now in Portuguese and Chinese, and it's being translated into Spanish, and it's already been translated into German, but we're getting that translation verified. It just has a life of its own.

JMF: You call it *Parable of the Dancing God* and then also your other book, *The Great Dance*.

CBK: Right. You'd think I was a dancer...

JMF: Yeah. How does the word "dance" figure in these titles?

CBK: The story of the prodigal son...the shocking, stunning part of the story is the father's love for the boy, and he's embarrassing himself by running, which you don't do in that culture as an elder statesman. He's dancing in joy over the return of his son, so there's a reason [the book is titled] *Parable of the Dancing God* because the whole story is about who God really is...

Jesus is in conflict with the Pharisees, and he's saying, look guys, you're hurting these people by telling them that my Father is like this, and this, and this. You're wrong, sit down and be quiet. I'm going to tell you some stories here about who God really is and what God is really like. So that comes to me as just an obvious way of talking about God the Father in this story here — as a dancing God.

Then some years later I wrote *The Great Dance*. That's a sweeping panoramic book that goes from why God made us, who we are, what's going on, how our lives work, and why the Trinity...that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, created us to share in that adoption, those main themes. But I was looking for a central metaphor that could capture some of that. That phrase, the great dance, is used in various places in history, particularly though in a couple places in C.S. Lewis, where he calls it not *the* great dance but a kind of drama or dance where he talks about we are going to be filled with the three-person life of the Trinity. That's at the back of *Mere Christianity*.

Some people think that the word *perichoresis* means dance, which it actually doesn't, but some people try to translate it that way, so there's some confusion there. T.F. Torrance asked me about that, and he said he didn't understand. He didn't like the concept of "the great dance" close to "perichoresis" because it seemed like I was supporting the view that *perichoresis* means *the great dance*, and it doesn't. It means mutual indwelling, it

means creating space for one another and dwelling in one another. But that is just a metaphor that came to me, and it seemed like it worked on many levels with different people. I knew the Baptists don't particularly like it, but...

JMF: Well, the prodigal son, when he comes home, and the first thing the father does is give him all the emblems of sonship while he's expecting or only barely hoping for slaveship so he can get a meal. He gets the shoes, he gets the ring, he gets the robe — he's the son. And the celebration is a dance, a party is thrown.

CBK: A huge one. So that emerges there, and then this one is just, I was thinking, trying to think of a single image that captured something of the part of the heart of that book. I came to that, and it was brought up to its own in that sense.

JMF: I think Madeline L'Engle and others have used the analogy of the great harmonies, the song of the universe, the harmonies of the stars or however she puts it...

CBK: Spheres.

JMF: ...that depict a similar kind of a concept — of this everything working together and being part of a great...

CBK: There's a book on physics called *The Cosmic Dance*, where he [Giuseppe Del Re] says in his book that physics has come to know that the Newtonian model (that the universe is like a great huge organized machine) is a metaphor that doesn't really work in the way that the universe really is. He says scientists have come now to see that the universe is more like a great dance. That's the actual words that he uses. So it's been around.

I wanted something that captured that vitality and the beauty and the goodness of the life of the Father, Son and Spirit and helped us see that that's why they made us, is that we could be part of it. To find a single metaphor is hard to do.

JMF: Sure. All the most beautiful things that human beings experience...you can look at, that give you joy, whether it's a beautiful panorama of a wonderful scene of night sky...you can see beauty, you can hear beauty in great music and experience movement...dancing is something everybody can do, but not everybody can play great baseball or racquetball or whatever. Dancing is something that everybody can do. Regardless of your skill level, everybody can sway to the music, tap their foot, get into the movement, feel like they're a part of a dance.

To me the beauty of it is that all those good things we can experience...and they're all in the context of sharing it with others. You look at a great thing and you think, you think of the people you care about the most — wow, I

wish my wife could see this, or boy, I know who would really like to see this. We take pictures so we can share them with other people. It's like I can't take this in alone. This is something that's bigger than me. But all this is built into the fabric of the universe by the author of the universe who is in this dynamic love relationship that's of a movement — an inner penetration that never ceases.

CBK: The great dance is an image that helps us think of vitality in music and movement and life. It helps us begin to realize that this is what's going on inside of us. It's not necessarily just dancing. It is vitality. In the very beginning of the book, I talk about the river of living water that seems to be flowing through all of life that I experienced when I was 12 years old on my bicycle, that I knew playing baseball, that I knew in romances — something ancient and vast and deep and beautiful is running through the middle of all this, that all of this is a part of.

Then in time I came to call that not just the river of living water but to call that the great dance. It's just saying that's the life of the Trinity. That's the river running through it all, is the life of the Trinity and the music of the Trinity, the beauty of the glory of the goodness and the light and the fellowship to come out of it. That's what's being given to us in Jesus. The great dance alights and is seeking to come to expression in millions of ways in us as persons, unique ways as persons. It's the Trinitarian life, it's the great dance, it's the river of life, and it flows from the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship.

JMF: Isn't that where we feel the joy? When we feel joy, as opposed to say, happiness, or a temporary sense of pleasure in something. But a sense of abiding joy comes from that place.

CBK: It's the same as we were talking about, you know, with respect to our participation. Our sharing in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit doesn't look the same way for everybody, but this is the source of it. For some people it's going to be passion for whales, and for some people it's going to be passion for their families and fatherhood and motherhood — making things, caring for people, being a human person engaged in caring for the poor. This is all the ways in which that life of the Father, Son, and Spirit is being shared with us, and we're expressing it in unique and diverse ways.

Learning to see that for what it really is is not just some people being good and therefore because the “save the whales” people care about the whales, and the rest of us don't, they're therefore better than the woman who cares about making bread for her neighbors. And vice-versa.

A lot of times if somebody cares about seeing that dogs aren't mistreated

in town, people will tend to say well, there are *people* being mistreated in town. How can you care about the dogs? And yet, everybody has their own journey, their path, and their makeup that allows them to be an expression in a certain way.

CBK: That's right. If you can recognize it, then you can see the genuine burden of people who are concerned for whales and the burden of the people who are concerned for stray dogs and animals that are being abused. You can see the genuineness there, which is the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and you can see the abuse of that. But if you can recognize it for what it is and not let it become a competitive superiority/inferiority kind of thing — now I recognize who this is, and I even recognize it on Sunday morning and the preacher's stammering attempt to talk about grace. I can hear it in a 5-year-old girl's attempt to play the piano. It's not perfect, it's not professional, it's not technically correct, but there's something going on in it that's really good, that's really beautiful, and that's the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

You see it in the people's care for an animal. You see it in people who are growing crops in Kansas to feed the rest of the world and the people who are concerned for the whales. That's just beautiful. That's where your eyes are opened and you start seeing Jesus and his Father and the Holy Spirit everywhere all around us. I tell people, you've got to take your church glasses off. You've got to take your secular humanity glasses off and look at what's going on — the river of living water, the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The great dance that they share is in us, and is seeking to express itself in us and in our lives in very unique and beautiful ways. Honor it, respect it. Relate to *that*, not to whether or not the person has degrees, or education, or money, or prestige, or lives in this part of town, or is this race, or is this sex, or whatever. Relate to the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit and honor that that you see emerging, and help it. Help it come forward, because it will be a blessing for all of us when it comes forward. That's what I see.

JMF: That's the same thing Paul said when he talked about Christ in us — the hope of glory.

CBK: Exactly. Colossians, where he says, "The mystery has been hidden, God has made known and given to me to proclaim Christ in you. The mystery is Christ in you, the hope of glory." The hope of being included in the glory of God has been given to us in Jesus, because he's come to dwell in us and share his life with us.

There's a huge pressure that gets taken off of us on our religious side when we realize that we're already included and that Jesus did this. He just says, trust me, walk with me, and you'll bear fruit in this that you can't even

conceive of without even trying to bear fruit just from walking with me. There's a great relief of not having to be the person who gets everybody saved... I'm free to be me and I'm free to help the farmer be the farmer.

JMF: And that means that Christ is in everything we do. We can take joy in his presence even in our leisure activities, our sports, or whatever...our cooking, our sitting down to eat.

CBK: This striving that you see in so much Christianity is not Jesus. This is coming from darkness. There are times when the Christian life is painful, there are times when it's full of burden. But the striving to make these things happen for God is from the darkness. Jesus says, "come to me when you want out from that, and I'll give you rest for your souls. Come walk with me, take my yoke on you, I'll show you how to have some fun here *and* get some stuff done. I'll show you how you can get water and I can change it into wine." Now you try that all you want at home, but you're not going to get from the water to the wine, because that's what he does.

He says participate in me, walk with me, I'm gentle, I'm humble in heart. I'm not about servitude and all this striving and keeping everything right for God. That's just not how this works. You come walk with me and we're going to go fishing tomorrow. You come walk with me, we may bake bread for your neighbor tomorrow or we may make a fishing lure, or we may write a book, or we might just sleep in, and we might care deeply about people who are in Thailand who are being trafficked...kids that are being taken away and sent into sex trades. We may get very involved in that. I've got plenty of people I've got involved. But you walk with me, I'm not going to wear you down, because it's my responsibility, I'm just going to give you a part in it. It's beautiful. You'll get way more done walking with me this way than you will striving to get everything right for God and keeping everything right for God.

That's sometimes I think why people are just so put off with Christianity — we talk about the joy of the Lord, you know? It's like, give me a break! Let's just have a vision where we can recognize the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit emerging in people, and we want to help that. We see how it's getting turned over here, and we're opposed to that. What are we going to do about that? Let's ask Jesus what he's doing about it and participate. It's just way simpler. It's not as complicated now, and the straining and striving is very burdensome, very not Jesus. It's our fallen imagination.

JMF: Well, thanks for your time again. It's been great to have you here, great to talk, and we appreciate all the good stuff.

CBK: Great to be back. Make sure you tell Joe, Tony, and the boys and

folks I said hello. Good to be with you.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. C. Baxter Kruger, founder and director of *perichoresis.org*. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.

36. NO SEPARATION BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

J. Michael Feazell: Dr. McKenna, years ago, at least 15 years ago as I think back, I came across a passage that had a profound effect on me, in Romans chapter 5, something you're quite familiar with, where Paul writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." A couple of verses further down, he says, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

The idea that God did what he did for us while we still his enemies was profound enough, but it made me realize that there is no such thing as a "them" and "us" in God's eyes, because God has done what he has done for his enemies, which includes everyone. I'd always read where Jesus told us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you" and so on, in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, and yet the idea that we tend in America, at least what we grow up with regarding God, is that he's very unforgiving to his enemies and punishes them forever.

It seems a dichotomy that I could never reconcile: "love your enemies," and yet God doesn't seem to love his enemies until they change and become his friends, and yet this passage in Romans says, he loved them and did what he did while they're still his enemies.

JM: I think what you were wrestling with was the logic of grace, the logic of God's great gift of peace for us, even while we're his enemies. That logic is not common sense. You cannot turn the logic of grace into what we consider sensible on a common basis. To wrestle through that kind of



problem is to wrestle into a whole new kind of logic that we have to learn from listening to the Word of God and the way he has taken to make us his friends.

JMF: Loving your enemies isn't common logic, is it? Typically, the way you have to get along

in the world is not by loving your enemies, but trying to outwit them, outsmart them, get them out of the way somehow. And yet the gospel seems to be telling us something quite different from that.

JM: It certainly is. We have talked in the past about the assumption that sinners are separated and alienated from God and they need to do something in order to become reconciled to God. I think you referred to it as a very common way of introducing people to the gospel of God in Christ, and we ask people to make decisions that the separation ...

JMF: You mean the idea that there is a giant gulf, there is no bridging that gulf, and so on, and then we draw a picture of Christ being the bridge our faith ...

JM: And you have to decide to walk across that bridge, or something like that, if you're going to be reconciled to God.

The passage you read is dealing with something that God has done in reality with himself for our sakes, on our behalf and in our places. He has demonstrated his love for us even when we don't love him, even when we don't know who he is. He's always working with his love to get us to know him for who he truly is.

JMF: So there is something that God has done for us already before we ever even think about becoming believers, there is a reconciliation from his side that already has taken place.

JM: Get rid of this assumption that there is a separation between God and man. There is no separation. If there seems to be a separation between God and man, it belongs to the side of man, who perceives the separation because of his sin.

JMF: So the alienation is from our human standpoint, we sense ourselves, we see ourselves alienated from God – or we simply don't care. But from God's side, he's done something that ... well, what is it? Colossians chapter 1 speaks to that, where it shows what the actual relationship and standing of all things is to God from his side. Colossians 1:17-21:

“He is before all things [speaking of Christ] and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him, to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds...” he says, which is the opposite of what he just said, yes.

JM: I like the emphasis.

JMF: “Alienated... and enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you...” So our perception of what God thinks of us and what he’s done for us and how he has set thing up changes when we come to faith, but it [reality] is no different from the way it has been from God’s side in his love for us through Christ, Colossians seems to be saying.

JM: What has to change is your perception. What has to change is your mind about the relationship between God, the world, and man as Jesus Christ. People call him in Colossians “the cosmic Christ” – this is not just an individual particular man. This individual particular man is the creator of all things, and as the creator, he has the authority and the power and the holy love to reconcile all things to himself without asking anybody about it, let alone nail you.

JMF: You just had a big reunion at Princeton University.

JM: I loved it, yeah. This idea of separation between the believing church and the unbelieving world came across to me in some kind of glaring proportions during my time. I had agreed to give a testimony in a church in the Sunday of the last of the four days which were part of the reunion at Princeton. I was asked by the church people to participate in much, much more. They have a whole organized effort to bring about revival and reconciliation for the university to Christ. Getting the university back to Christ like it was in the beginning, that kind of thing.

JMF: This is the core of Christian believers at Princeton.

JM: I kept refusing, resisting joining them, because I wanted to spend time with these university people that I knew, who are the unbelievers, and that’s what I did and I had a wonderful time. The grace of God was with me. I saw some blessing of the grace of God, because I went to these people in the peace of God for them, that God wasn’t separated from them, that God was there for them, that God was concerned for them. That’s the way we spent for three days and three nights. When I got back to the church, it was very glaring to me the way that the separation between the church and the world – the believer and the unbeliever.

JMF: The sense that believers tend to have, that there’s a “them” and “us.”

JM: The believers are the “good guys” and the unbelievers are the “bad guys,” and there is this war going on between the good guys and the bad guys. For me that’s not the logic of grace, that we’ve mentioned. The logic of grace is that Christ sends, he sends his Son, he sends his Spirit to be with us even while we are his enemies. He does this for good reason, with a wonderful

purpose of getting us to know him for who he truly is, and the Colossians passage that you read we have to face the fact that who he is, is the Creator of the world as the Son of the Father. The eternal God has not separated himself from his enemies, but he has come to us to be with us and to seek to convert us to who he truly is.

JMF: That plays itself out then, or can, if we embrace that truth from the Scriptures, it allows us to understand what we perceive as enemies of God now differently and interact with them a bit differently.

JM: The way it works for me is that I'm sitting there with a guy who's obviously the enemy of God more obviously than I am the enemy of God, but I don't pretend that I am such a friend of God that there is no enemy of God in me. It's just that the enemy of God that I am is a lot different than enemy of God that he is. So here we are, two enemies together of God, see what can happen by the grace in his peace, in the reality that he has done this for us in his beloved Son and by his Spirit.

JMF: You've had reunions before, ten years ago or fifteen years ago. And you approached the same people differently.

JM: From the separation assumption. I assumed that now that I had believed in Christ, I was the "good guy" and they were the "bad guys" and I could approach them as the bad guys and tell them that they needed to become the good guys. I did that, and these people would see me coming and get as far away from me as they could. That kind of hurt me, because I really loved these people that I knew, and I didn't want to see them running from me, and yet the only gospel I knew to present to them was this, "you're separated from God, you're alienated from God because of your sin, and you need to do this or to do that in order to be reconciled to the God that I've believed in."

JMF: There is a sense in which there is an alienation, and yet as we just read in Colossians, it's from our own, it's from their perspective.

JM: From our own hostile minds against them.

JMF: Now, this time, you were able to show them a different John McKenna, as it were ...

JM: Yeah, a humanity ... They liked me and they liked when I showed up. Even as a believer, they liked a humanity that could be with them, is the best way I can put it. I associate my conversion to this "no separation in the beginning" with the vicarious humanity of Christ. That Christ has been working in me to make me more human than I was. That humanity is something they could feel. So ten years ago they're running from me. This time with them, they actually appointed me their prayer warrior. They know

that I'm going to be praying for them for the next five years until we meet again. That's a delight for me to experience. I associate that with the logic of the grace of God for us. I don't know what's going to happen to these people because I pray for them, but I thank God that they have appointed me their prayer partner.

JMF: You had a speaking part in the reunion on the agenda.

JM: Yes. It can't be at the Princeton University and the Princeton Battlefield, and the history of Princeton, without talking about freedom. Nassau Hall of Princeton University is the birth of the freedom of our nation. So you're talking about the whole atmosphere of what freedom means – what freedom means to the church, what freedom means to the university, and what freedom means to their relationship. That kind of days I spent in a freedom, that I could go to a church and say “thank you very much, I felt your prayers and I felt that your prayers were helping me spend my time in the way I spent my time with the university. I didn't spend my time the way you wanted me to spend my time, but thank you for your prayers because they really did help me.”

I could say that to the church and then I could report about the meaning of freedom, not only in my own life, not only in the life of the church as I know it, but in the life of our nation. Why did George Washington cross the Delaware and win over against the most professional armies in all the world at that time? What kind of freedom allowed him to win? I could associate, relate that freedom to the freedom that is the Spirit of God – where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom.

The church loved the testimony. I know the Lord was blessing it because when you talk to a church congregation and they like what you've said, then they ask you questions like you know the answers to everything, so I got all those questions that I don't know how to answer very quickly, because they liked what I had to say about freedom.

I ended that testimony with my wife's Mickey's wonderful story about Gen. McArthur and the Emperor Hirohito and the Imperial Hotel in Japan – when McArthur went to see the Emperor after the occupation, and the surrender and the occupation, the conversation finally got around to the Emperor saying to McArthur, that he would be willing to give his death for his part in the responsibility for the war and McArthur looked at the Emperor and said, “There is no need to do that, there is one who has already done that for you.”

There is a moment of the grace of God in action with the enemy of the United States, and General McArthur carrying the grace of God to our

enemy. Those are moments in history that speak of what freedom means in the context of the grace and peace which we read in this text.

JMF: In his book *The Mediation of Christ*, Thomas Torrance ... you studied under Thomas Torrance at Fuller Theological Seminary.

JM: Yes, I did. He became not only a mentor but a good friend.

JMF: He says on page 94, “Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly unworthy of him and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. He has bound you to himself by his love in a way that he will never let you go, for even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell, his love will never cease.”

He says that in the context of presenting the gospel from a Scriptural standpoint that recognizes who God is and what God has done – as opposed to one of the prevailing approaches, which is based on the idea of separation, as you mentioned earlier. He wants to say that this is more effective because it presents God as he really is. What is at the root of the idea of separation? Where does it come from, why did it become so common among us as Christians?

JM: Sinners like to perceive of themselves first as alone, and then in some kind of an aggravated relationship with somebody else, once they get over their aggravated relationship with themselves. It’s a perception that belongs to a sinful view of God, the world and mankind. The other way of looking at things has to do with being taken up through Christ and given access to the Father who is the Father, Son, and Spirit of eternity.

The most difficult part of understanding the gospel for me was to understand that when he lived and died and lives again for me, he takes me up to know him for who he is in his own eternity – Father and Son, and the Spirit. Knowing God in this way is to know yourself as a child of God. And to know yourself as a child of God is... there’s no separation between you and God, anymore that there is a separation between you [Mike] as a father and Chris. When is Chris no longer your son? It’s not going to happen, is it? – because of who you are. You’re his father and that’s it.

To be adopted up into God in that way is hard to believe. He has to work on us to get us to believe that we really are his children and we really do belong to him, and he has gone way out of his way. Tom likes to say, “If you really understand the gospel you have to understand that God loved you more than he loved himself.” He was willing, as the Son, to come and die and live for us. That’s not the logic of common sense. That’s not the logic of the kind of love that we define. This is a love that is strange and alien to us, and we have to learn it as his children.

JMF: The basis of this relationship we have with God, with the Father, is because Christ, in Christ we've been made one with Christ and as one with him, we share in his actual relationship with the Father.

JMF: I like to put it, because of the problems we have with... he gives us, by his Spirit, the freedom to choose God, the freedom to obey God, our wonderful freedom that is not like any other kind of freedom. When a man or a woman knows that they have been made free to choose God, to obey God, there is nothing in this world that can stop them from their destiny with God. That is by the grace that moves the world. If you want a revival in the world, then be moved by the freedom of grace and the freedom of God to speak his word with us.

JMF: Usually we see ourselves as in a great struggle to keep God on our side – to keep God liking us or loving us by trying to behave better, as though we are carrying the burden of our relationship with God on our shoulders – as though it depends on how well we keep up our end as to whether God will stay benevolently disposed toward us, let's say. In effect, it's not only how we see and feel about ourselves in relationship to God, but also how we see others and train others. And again you experienced some of that with people you were re-acquainted with at Princeton.

JM: I like to turn that right on its head again, turn it up-side-down. God will not be who he truly is, without us. There is no God who will be without us. There is only the God who wills to be with us with himself. If you have an idea of God, that's not bad – your idea of God is not the God in the Bible. It needs to spend another year of reading the Bible or something, however that goes. The God of the Bible struggles.... you think with his people. We think *we* struggle. The God of the Bible struggles with his people, among the nations of the world and his Creation, to make himself known to people who prefer not to, thank you. It's his struggle, it's not ours.

JMF: What you said reminds me of the all-night struggle between Jacob and the Angel of the Lord, or the Lord, as the story presents it. It's not just a matter that Jacob was just trying, from his side, to get a blessing from this stranger. But this stranger, who is the Lord in the story, stays with Jacob in this struggle, and of course wins (and could have won at the very beginning, because he simply touches Jacob in a way that disables him).

JM: He is very merciful.

JMF: So he actually lets this continue on, and the end result is that Jacob finds out who it is that he is struggling with.

JM: He makes an altar, names the place, where he says the face of God.

JMF: You've written how this portends or is a... I could call it a

metaphor, even though it's an actual story, but of the struggle that I just alluded to, of God and his people, for God's own purpose.

JM: That same kind of struggle we read throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments – and the struggle is going on beyond the canon of the biblical world, it goes on in the church of the world today.

JMF: But it goes on in our individual lives as well, doesn't it?

JM: If we are in the world, it does. I don't know where you are, but that's where I am. That is, we're nowhere else except in the world.

JMF: We're often afraid to admit to that. We go to church, there's usually a sense of trying to put on a façade that we're doing fine, and that we're godly, wonderful people, and we put on the airs of that to each other, and yet, honestly speaking, each of us has our own personal individual struggle...

JM: I keep telling my classes, if they knew me the way I know me, they would not pay one dime to hear me teach. We don't like to know ourselves in the depths of our evil, the way God loves to know us. The way God is willing to go there in the depths of our evil and take us up and heal us and convert us to a "yes" that resonates with his "yes" for us.

JMF: Let's hold that thought, and maybe we can come back to that next time we get together.

37. GOD GIVES US FREEDOM

JMF: You just came from a very interesting reunion at Princeton University.

JM: I sure had a wonderful experience for the 50th reunion of the Class of 1957 for Princeton University. It wasn't my first trip back to Princeton. My first trip back was in 1982, for the 25th reunion of this class, at which time I was invited to give a testimony at the Nassau Christian Center, which is a local congregation there at Princeton University.

JMF: They knew that your career was in Christian ministry at that time and...

JM: Yes. They invited me to come and give my testimony, and they wanted to hear how I got from a graduate of Princeton University in 1957 to Haight-Ashbury in 1972 and how I had been delivered from alcohol and drugs and so forth and had become a Christian. And how I had, from that time, one of the most important – I got married – and two, been able to get back into the academic life and at Fuller Theological Seminary receive a Master of Divinity degree and a PhD degree in theology.

JMF: That was 25 years ago, and they invited you to speak.

JM: Yes, and that was my first effort to relate back to my classmates. In those years I was, with the church, into the separation between the believer and the unbeliever. My friends at the university were mostly unbelievers, and I was with the good guys now, and they were the bad guys. The bad guys, when they would see the good guys coming, would scatter and try to avoid them as much as possible, because they don't want to become what the good guys... They wanted to be the bad guys, and the "bad guys" in a very real world. I wasn't very effective in terms of witnessing to that reunion. But I was well-accepted by the church, and the church people.

That bothered me because I loved my classmates, especially my roommates, and I wanted to get next to them, the way I've once been next to them, however, being a Christian didn't allow me to do that, I thought.

And then again, it was 2002, I went for the 45th reunion, and this time I was able to give testimony at the same Nassau Christian Center about the glorious freedom we have, and I was working my way through the freedom that we need to talk about, that is, the freedom where the Spirit of God is – could not be neither an abstract idea about freedom nor could it be some kind of atheistic subjectivity about freedom. It couldn't be subjective autonomy. It couldn't be an independence that was absolutely free in the sense that independence has autonomy understands its....

I was beginning to wrestle with what is the real freedom that we have as believers in Jesus Christ. This time around, this year, the fifth year after that reunion, I have a whole new paradigm, a whole new way of understanding who I am in the gospel of God in Christ. I have come to an understanding that there was no separation between God and people – whether people were believers or unbelievers, God had done what he had done in Christ for all of us and I could, by his grace, take my humanity both to the believer and to the unbeliever in the same way.

JMF: What you are saying reminds me, right off the bat, of two passages. One in Romans 5: “While we were still enemies, God moved on our behalf.” And the Colossians passage, that

JM: “He has reconciled in all things...”

JMF: Yeah, all things. That turns our common view on its head of how we can look at other people who are not believers. I love this passage, so every opportunity to read, I have to take: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (speaking of Christ) and through him, to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Combined with the Romans passage about while you were enemies God does this for us, while we’re still enemies, then how should we look at who we want to perceive as God’s enemies, is very different ... like you were describing the very first time you went out there to see these people, now you can look at them very differently.

JM: I don’t really believe that anyway, that they need to be told they’re separated or alienated from God. They know that they are. Some people like to know that they are independent of God. I don’t think God wants to be with them, encroaching upon their freedom at all. That’s not the way he has chosen to be with us. He has chosen to be with us in his freedom in Christ for us, on our behalf. Christ’s atoning for us, Christ working for us, Christ working upon us, and in us, to get us to know him for who he truly is, as the Son of the Father of eternity.

JMF: That very next verse in Colossians says, “For once you were alienated in your minds.”

JM: “In your minds ...” Yeah, that’s what we need to talk about. The fact that the fallen mind is hostile and in enmity with God, and will perceive their humanity as separated from God.

JMF: But from God’s side it’s a very different picture. So when you went back recently to the 50th ...

JM: Once you learn that, you have a different humanity utterly, in

relationship with so-called “unbelievers” and believers. It’s no longer the good guys against the bad guys. It’s all people – some believing better than others, some not believing better than others. By his grace and in his Spirit, you can relate your humanity to them. I think that was the big difference, and I had a wonderful time especially with my five roommates, who were very happy that I was the kind of Christian I was.

One of my roommates is a Freudian psychiatrist. He was always so worried. I’ve met him at the 25th, and he was so worried that I would, as a Christian, become something he wouldn’t like. Well, he liked me. At the 50th he went way out of his way to tell me how happy he was that I hadn’t become the kind of Christian he thought he was going to meet. He didn’t meet the Christian that he thought he met in the 25th reunion. That difference has to do with this difference in the assumption that we are separated from God and those who have chosen to believe, they have become the good guys, and those who have not chosen yet to believe are the bad guys. There was the good guys against the bad guys.

I was delighted with the fact that he could say to me, “I really do like you.” That’s a long way from having a “run away” from you 25 years ago – because you’re going to talk about Christ with me.

JMF: So your impact on him in terms of the gospel itself was different in such a way that you actually made more progress ...

JM: These five men ended up, on the third evening, we all had dinner together very pointedly, and in the helter-skelter of the reunion you have to do things like that very pointedly. We had a wonderful dinner, and at that dinner these five men appointed me the one who would pray for them. We would do our best in five years time to report back to one another, and they left knowing that I was their prayer partner for the next five years. For me, that was a wonderful development.

JMF: You have entered back into the friendship akin to what you once had with them, in a way that 25 years ago your perception of Christianity you wouldn’t know how to do.

JM: I couldn’t. I don’t think I had enough healing inside me, either. I could, by this time, have enough inner healing, healing of my memories, that I could go into my past with these fellows without being so guilty and so ashamed, that I had a major in guilt and in shame – no, I didn’t have to do that, because Christ while I was yet his enemy had died for me. He had died for all of this guilt and all of this shame, so I didn’t have to worry about it, I could do this with them. It’s amazing what a good time we had.

JMF: You were also asked to give an address to the group.

JM: Right. Once again, I had to go back on Sunday after spending Thursday, Friday, and Saturday with the university people. Then I had to go to the Nassau Christian Center again and give testimony. They were after me to ... “tell us more about how you got healed and how you got delivered ...” and I said, No, I don’t want to talk about that. Now, after 25 years, I want to talk about God and his freedom for us.

We are in Princeton. I had read a book by David Hackett Fischer entitled *Washington’s Crossing* in order to get ready for this reunion. Fischer’s book was handsomely done and it got a Pulitzer Prize. Fischer was willing to give us a tour based on this book of the Princeton battlefield. George Washington crossing the Delaware and on to Trenton and up into the Princeton battlefield. A lot of us, 150 of us had read the book and took this tour along with Fischer and James McCresson, as the historian in residence at Princeton these days.

We had this wonderfully rich day from morning and afternoon and we walked the walk from the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware, across the Delaware onto the New Jersey side and then into the woods and through the paths that the armies would have taken to march to Princeton and face King George’s armies in that battlefield at Princeton. Along the way, along one of these wooded paths (Fischer calls them the conservative paths – that is, we were walking the same paths that the ragtag army of George Washington must have walked, because those paths don’t change in those woods)....

There we were walking the conservative paths that the armies had taken, and somehow Fischer and I got alongside with one another, and I was telling him how I loved his book because I hadn’t read a historian who was compelled to understand his subject, George Washington, in the categories of contingency and freedom. He thought he came up with this word contingency, and when I was telling him how much I loved it, he asked me where else contingency works. I said, It’s an old concept, the early fathers of the church invented it, and it’s fundamental to science in our time. You can read the concept of contingency in our scientific culture as well as in our Christian theology.

Fischer took down references to Tom Torrance’s *Divine and Contingent Order* and had me send him references to contingency from Barth’s work. I was just delighted with all that, because I didn’t dream I would ever get to witness to the leading historians at Princeton University, which I have obviously done. They gave us a marvelous tour to the battlefield and ...

At the Princeton battlefield, there was a General Mercer (famous in Princeton, streets are named after him and everything), who came from Scotland an M.D., and he was one of Washington’s generals. He was on that

battlefield and he was bayoneted about seventeen times on that battlefield, he died there. When they bayoneted him, they thought they had George Washington, because he was in full uniform. What occurred was that, when they made the bayonet charge, the American ragtags didn't have bayonets. They were doomed, because there's nothing they could do about it, and what I believe Mercer did was, in his full uniform, he yelled retreat and he took their attention and while they were busy bayoneting him, his troops got away. When they were killing him, they were saying things like, "Die, you rebel." He looked up at them and said, "I am no rebel, I am a free man."

That freedom, again, I'm much moved by it, and I hope I'll be able to write a poem about that sometime. It was that same sense of freedom – not a monolithic sense, the Virginians didn't think about freedom the same way as the New Hampshire people, the Massachusetts people, or the Pennsylvania – everybody had some notion of what freedom is and what freedom means, but somehow, contingency and freedom came together to give Washington a victory he should not have had over the professional armies he was up against, on his great horse.

Contingency and freedom are right up my alley. I could, with that same contingency, and with that same freedom, with the same freedom that George Washington won the Revolutionary War, I could go and be among my friends at Princeton University. It was really a wonderful feeling.

I took that sense of freedom to the church that morning when I gave my testimony, and I talked about the freedom from sin, the freedom from alcohol, and drugs and so forth, and the freedom to go back to the academy and achieve this or that in the academy. But the freedom to win, the freedom to live free – my text was the 2 Corinthians 3 passage, where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom.

The Spirit of God is involved on a contingent basis in George Washington's victory. I linked up the freedom of George Washington to win, with my freedom from sin, with the church's freedom to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God to all men, all men everywhere... This is the God who will not be who he is without all men, and there is no separation between God and mankind in Jesus Christ. If mankind wants to conceive itself as independent, or alienated from God – that's their mind. But it is not the mind of God for them, there is no separation, he has reconciled all things to him. The struggle is to get all mankind to understand that it can only understand who it is by saying, "yes" to God's good "yes" for us in Christ.

JMF: Doesn't that change the approach we can take in evangelism toward people? Typically we take the approach of "You are separated from God, God is very angry with you, and if you do these steps, if you say the sinner's

prayer, then God will change his mind toward you.” That leaves us with the need to always be ... (as Tom Torrance puts it in his book *The Mediation of Christ*) looking over our shoulder worrying about, “Is my faith strong enough, was my decision strong enough, am I walking the walk carefully enough.” We’re worried that we might somehow mess up this love that we have acquired by changing our attitude, our mind, and our ways.

But if, as Colossians says, and as Romans says, God has already reconciled us through his Son, and the success in that hinges only on Christ’s success in that, which is true success, then in our presentation of the gospel we’re really asking people to, because God is already on their side, has already reconciled them, therefore, they can – in perfect freedom, say “Yes.” They can repent of their sins and turn to him without fear that they’re not doing it right or they are not saying it well enough, or they’re not measuring up in some way. It seems to me it changes the whole perspective both for our own confidence and for how we view the so-called “enemies of God.”

JM: It’s taken me 25, 30 years to learn the meaning of that sentence. When I became a Christian, I was taught that I was separated from God and that God had broken down the barriers of separation with Jesus Christ, and all I had to do was decide to accept Christ and then I could walk through those barriers and no longer be separated but reconciled to him. That’s the gospel I understood.

To understand that there is no barrier, and if there seems to be a barrier there, it’s not one erected by God. God has torn it all down with himself, and he invites people to come to him, and he does that, as we’ve already said, while we’re sinners, while we’re yet his enemies, he justifies us in himself.

The hardest part for me – because you can’t really see this new way of beginning without understanding that when we believe in Jesus Christ, we believe in the Son of God – that there is no Jesus Christ except the Son of the Father. You can’t understand the relationship between the Father and the Son except in the Spirit of God. We have to understand that we have been taken up by Christ, reconciled to the Father, in the Spirit – it’s not just between Jesus Christ and us. It’s between who Christ really is, with the Father, in the Spirit. That’s why this Trinitarian faith, the Trinity ... beginning in the light of the Trinity is so important.

Nobody is separated from that light. That light shines whether anybody likes it or not – just like the sun shines by day whether anybody likes it or not. That kind of a thing. What the relationship is between that light and the days and nights of people on earth is our problem, not God’s – because he made it, and he redeemed it in himself. I have taken 35 years to understand that I have been given to know God as God knows himself in such a way. I

had to learn that God loves me more than he loved himself, because he went way out of his way – became a “sinner” for me, did everything that needed to be done in my place in order that I could become his child.

That’s the hardest part for people to believe, that they are a child of the Father and the Son, in the Spirit of God’s eternity, and the link between eternity and time and our lives and the life of God has been solidly established to Jesus Christ. That’s hard to believe. People don’t do it easily.

JMF: We look at the Father as being angry and ready to condemn us, I think, and Jesus somehow is standing there in the way trying to keep the Father from losing his temper and moved to help us. He is the nice guy. But Scripture tells us that if we’ve seen Christ, we’ve seen the Father. There’s no difference.

JM: The Father sent the Son. He participated with us through the Son, in the Spirit.

JMF: So if we want to know what the Father is like, we look at Christ.

JM: Tom Torrance used to say that he loved his time as a chaplain in the second war. In the foxholes where men were dying, what they really wanted to know most, “Is God really like Jesus?” They learned a lot about Jesus. They know Jesus was kind and went about doing good things and healing people and that kind of thing – a pretty nice man. But was God really that way? Because behind the back of Jesus, they have in mind that God is very, very angry with them. There’s no such God.

38. GOD CHOOSES TO BE WITH US

JMF: In many of your classes, you focus on the concept of freedom and in particular, our freedom to obey God. Could you talk about that?

JM: I've given lectures and preaching on what we call the glorious freedom – a freedom that we do not naturally possess. Natural freedom is a freedom that maybe conceived as autonomy, autonomous freedom.

JMF: We usually think of freedom in theological terms, or Bible terms, or preachy terms, we think freedom is ...

JM: Independence away from God.

JMF: ... to do whatever we want, think whatever we want.

JM: Yeah. When you give it a second thought, created freedom – which must be freedom we possess naturally because we're creatures, created freedom has certain limits to it. For instance, you and I were made to breathe air. If you try to breathe something else besides air, you'll find yourself quickly in trouble.

JMF: There are boundaries to our freedom.

JM: Yeah, there are certain limits, so that without these boundaries, without these limits, there's no freedom to talk about. Who sets these boundaries? Who sets these limits? How is our freedom dependent at the boundaries upon whatever else there is? My courses are designed to say that whatever else, is not nothing, and it's someone, and it happens to be what I call the great I AM, the Lord God IS, as the blessed Trinity revealed in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My job in my courses is to show students how the great I AM of the burning bush speaking out of the flames to Moses is the same great I AM who speaks with us through his incarnate Word, is the same great I AM who through his incarnate Word he has revealed himself as the Father, Son, and Spirit of the blessed Trinity.

JMF: By "incarnate Word," you're talking about ...

JM: The Word of God become flesh according to St.



John's Gospel.

JMF: So, Jesus Christ – the Incarnate Word.

JM: Jesus Christ, yeah.

JMF: And only in him do we see God as God really is.

JM: Without him, we don't really know who he is in himself. In the Exodus tradition, Moses has to understand that the one who is sending him is the Great I AM who I AM. "You tell 'em I AM has sent you." This I AM has named himself with Moses as the Lord God, the Redeemer, Creator. The I AM of Moses is the Redeemer Creator of the world, of his people – among the nations, in his creation. That was something new in the way of God naming himself and giving himself in his name in the history of the world.

JMF: What's the significance of that to us?

JM: That I AM speaking with Moses is not another I AM than the one who speaks with *us* as the Holy Trinity which we worship today.

JMF: In other words, the God of the Old Testament, who we often look at as being the angry judge of Israel, and we think of as being the angry God whom we must be protected from by the kindness and sacrifice of Jesus. That's not an accurate picture of God, then.

JM: Not at all, it's not an accurate picture of the way he is, in himself, it's not an accurate picture of the way he is in his acts in history with himself, and we have to learn this. The significance of this kind of continuity that I'm after, the I AM of the burning bush, the I AM of the Incarnation, the I AM of the Holy Trinity, is that there's no separation, but deep and profound integration of the dogma of the church, with the biblical speaking of God, with the biblical theologies. You can't have a separation – biblical theology over here, and church theology over there – which has occurred in our time, and because of it a lot of people ask this kind of question, "What's the relationship between the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New Testament, and the God of the church?"

JMF: And by "God of the church," it seems there are two kinds ... when we talk about the church and God, there's one approach we take as preachers when we're preaching to a congregation, or when we're pastors – we talk about God as being graceful or full of grace, and forgiving, and patient, and loving and helping people through crises and so on, encouraging them to know that God is with them. And yet when we go to find a *definition* for God and we look in the creed or we look in classical theology, to some degree, we find words like omnipotent, omnipresent, and all-powerful, and all-knowing – and we lay out this list as if that's what God is. But when we are experiencing God in day-to-day life, we want to preach about a God who's

more like Christ, and so it's like there are two ideas of God going on ... Am I making sense?

JM: All those “omni” words I associate with the God of the Enlightenment, an abstract God, a God whose essence was so abstracted from the realities of history, that it was the biblical theologians who said, “Enough of that God. The God of the Bible is not an abstract God,” and they begin to say, “All we're interested in is the God who acts in history.” There was this biblical theological movement, where people read the Bible to understand God in his acts. Never mind God in his being. All that's essentialism – Greek philosophy, that kind of thing.

So the biblical theologians, with this reaction against the God of the Enlightenment, lost a real ontology with the being of God.

JMF: What's “ontology”?

JM: Ontology has to do with the logic of being. There is a logic of God's being in his names, and in his self-revelation with his names, that we mustn't lose touch with. We mustn't let go of. We mustn't think that God is going to allow us to do that to him.

JMF: Kind of the idea of how we *experience* God being on one hand, as opposed to how God actually *is*, as he actually is – in preaching or counseling, we might say, “God is best revealed in Christ,” and we understand what God is like in Christ. But we put on the shelf, what is God like in his actual being, as something we don't want to have to deal with.

JM: Christian orthodoxy forbids us from doing that. There's a lot of problems here. Let me try and get the idea that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New Testament, is not the same as the God of the church dogma.

Many people think the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and judgment. God of the New Testament – he's the loving Jesus – sweet Jesus, going around, perfect man, healing, doing nothing but good to all mankind, and he gets killed for it. That's what we think of a truly perfect man. He takes it all, while turning the other cheek. “Forgive them, Father, for they don't know what they're doing.” He dies for us and is resurrected, and we have this message of his resurrected life that leads to the dogma of the church under the compelling reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, one God – there's not two Gods.

The New Testament's God of grace is the same as the Old Testament's God of judgment. How can we think these together? I usually, easily show that the God of Moses and the God of the Exodus, and the God who reveals himself as the “I AM who I AM, you tell them I AM has sent you,” the Lord

God is disliked right from the beginning. The people of God so dislike him that they make a golden calf for themselves, right on the heels of all that he's given them in order to take them out of their slavery in Egypt and begin to take them across the wilderness into a Promised Land where they can enjoy life as life ought to be enjoyed.

To that golden calf, Moses is angry, God is angry, because he doesn't want his people worshipping something that he's not, and he is willing to kill them for worshipping their idol. Moses earns his stripes as an intercessor, intercedes for this people, and God agrees with Moses that he will go ahead and work with them in spite of their animosity towards him – I should say hostility, enmity – as it's taken up in the New Testament words.

He says to Moses, "I'll work with this people, but here is who I am going to be in this enterprise." And he defines himself. In Exodus 34:6 – I call it the little credo of the great I AM. And those five terms of the little creed, the little credo of the Exodus tradition, I like to say them in Hebrew, because I don't like to translate it in English, because if I translated it into English, everybody thinks they know what these words mean, and they don't. The words are: *rachum*, *bannun*, *'erek 'appayim*, *hesed ve 'emeth*.

Let me just quickly go over: *rachum*, cognate with *rechem*: womb, compassion, *bannun*: favor, that which allows subsistence, sustaining. I'm the God of compassion, I'm the God of favor. *'Erek 'appayim*, is slow to anger – very vivid in the Hebrew idiom. I am slow to, my nostrils to reach, to get it as wide apart as they're gonna get before I strike with my wrath. And then *hesed ve 'emeth* – very, very great words: grace and faithfulness. That's who I AM in the Old Testament with this stiff-necked people of God.

This God who's willing to define himself in this way with his stiff-necked people struggles across the whole history of Israel until he sends his Son. His Son – the Incarnate Word – is an embodiment of this little credo. Jesus Christ is *rachum*, Jesus Christ is *bannun*, Jesus Christ is *'erek 'appayim*, Jesus Christ is *hesed*; Jesus Christ is faithful, *'emeth*. In the New Testament, *hesed ve 'emeth* – I like to think of it as the God of the future, we call Jesus Christ, "God's grace and truth." So it's *charis kai aletheia* in the New Testament – grace and truth. This is the affirmation God has for the future of his people even though they're gonna put him on the cross. He is willing to do it for them even though they are unwilling to receive him.

That's how dogma gets to be what it is, because he is willing and he lives, we can have a church with a dogma. This dogma of the Holy Trinity is the same I AM that Christ claimed to be, and that he was in the Old Testament. It's onto him that we have to learn who we are in his world. It's a very big

continuity there that people have a difficult time laying hold of. I call that the recovery of ontology in the biblical covenanted relationship that God has established between himself and his people, among the nations, in his creation.

JMF: So where does that leave the common person?

JM: The common person, whether he or she knows it or not, belongs to the great I AM of the Trinity of the Redeemer/Creator. That's who we belong to.

JMF: And belonging means what?

JM: He made us, he made us for himself, he not only made us to breathe air, but he made us to worship him. We are worshipping not him, we're having trouble. It's like not breathing air. Everybody was made to worship the one who truly is transcendent over us.

JMF: And freedom works into that.

JM: Yes, it does. How do we come by the freedom to worship him, the freedom to obey him? How do we come by that? It's a wonderful work of God in Jesus Christ. God sent his Son to die for us and to live for us. He did this once and for all forever, for as long as forever is. His kingdom is without end, the creed says. So once you believe in Christ in God, and God in Christ by the Spirit, you have believed in something that will never end.

JMF: Where does that leave the person, though, who's struggling? In other words, you come to faith, you make a profession of faith, you do your best to walk in the ways of God, you read the Bible and you try to obey God as you understand you should, and you find yourself failing, and you hate to talk about it at church or to church people because they might be judgmental

...

JM: Because they're not teaching the one who is, who he truly is.

JMF: Where does that leave you? What do you do with that frustration, that guilt, the anxiety of your failure?

JM: A couple of things that we should learn from this kind of continuity and this kind of ontological relationship between God and ourselves, is that God will not be who he is without us. There is no such God who will be who he is without us. If you think there is a God that's willing to be who he is without us, then you're worshipping an idol, there is no such God.

JMF: Unpack that a little bit. What do you mean "he will not be..."

JM: He will not be the Lord God that he is, without his people.

JMF: Let me see if I am re-phrasing that in a way that works. Are you saying that he has chosen to embrace us and never let us go, and that's how he's chosen to be?

JM: That's the God who is who he is. Yeah. His freedom to do this cannot be questioned. That would be like, "Who are you to create the universe? Who are you to send your Son to die for me?" Once you ask that question, you better be willing to hear an answer, because he will not be who he is without you. That's the struggle you see right across the whole of the Bible.

JMF: So we get back to our own personal struggle, then, you see yourself falling short, you're saying that ...

JM: See him struggling with you struggling, and in order to give you a "yes" to say to him. Because he's already said "yes" to you in this way with his Son. He's already struggling with us. And he struggles with us in such a way that he's going to be known for who he is, and we're going to be the child of God that he's made us to be.

JMF: Where does that leave me on a day-to-day basis? Let's say I pick up the Bible, but oftentimes in the struggle of our own weaknesses, we don't pick up the Bible, but let's say I do. I read a passage about how God punishes his people for disobedience. I see myself struggling with disobedience, and I conclude, "I'm just going to have to sit here and wait till the punishment comes."

JM: Or, wait until he gives you the freedom to obey. The freedom to disobey has to do with some kind of "no" down deep inside of you – that says "No" to him. I'm not going to obey you, who do you think you are with me? He's has to take that "No" up in himself, in his love, and in his willingness to sacrifice himself to serve you – to be your atonement.

JMF: The person is saying, "No." He said, "Yes." And you're saying he won't stop saying, "Yes," the Scripture tells us.

JM: There's not any "Yes and No" in God. There's only "Yes and No" in man, in sinners.

JMF: There's only God's "Yes" to you.

JM: Yes, that's all there is.

JMF: So what do you want the person who – any person – a person who's struggling, a person who's not struggling, a person who thinks he's not struggling – a person ...

JM: I want them to know that God will not be who he is without you.

JMF: So he will love you in spite of yourself.

JM: Yes. He will not be who he is, a God of love, a God of light and life, he will not be who he is without you.

JMF: There's a passage about how he won't reject himself, and that's in the context of he won't reject his Son and if he won't reject his Son, and of all creation, as we read in Ephesians and Colossians, and so on...

JM: He's certainly not going to reject the creation, is he?

JMF: ...it's all taken up in Christ, who has redeemed it – so he will not reject you, then. That's a comforting thought in the middle of this depression, I would think, if in the midst of our struggle, if we can remember ...

JM: When you're mad, when you're raging against him, all kinds of aberrations and phantoms appear in this kind of mind. He's going to struggle through it all for you so that you can see him for who he truly is with you. That's what he does. How that happens to everybody, each particular person, it happens each particular person particularly. I don't know how to generalize that, I don't know how to formalize that.

JMF: Even with belief, there's a story in the New Testament where an individual seeking healing for a child says to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief."

JM: That's been a regular prayer of mine.

JMF: The belief, the faith that we wish we had...

JM: He has for us.

JMF: ...he already has for us. All the responses that we are supposed to have to God, Christ has already, on our behalf, made those responses.

JM: He's taken up all those broken responses in himself.

JMF: And yet we still find ourselves in this anxiety and fear and frustration and sense of being alienated from God.

JM: That's what unbelief is like. It's a fierce rage that we have against him. There's no way to explain it... If God is the God of love that we say he is, he's sent his Son and his Son died and rose from the dead for us, ascended to the right hand of the Father, sent his Spirit so that his Spirit in the world is where freedom is, you're free to be free with him, or free to be free without him. It's just two different places.

Why is it that some people can say to this loving God, "No"? It's not rational to refuse the love that God is. But more people do it than you want to count, as far as I can see. And even as good as he's been to me – delivered me from drugs and alcohol, and so forth – I've taken 35 years to learn how to love him. It's been a struggle, yeah. But it's a struggle that he wins, and I know that he will not be who he is without me. Go ahead and struggle away, because he's gonna struggle harder.

JMF: When does the struggle end?

JM: When we die.

JMF: If the struggle ends at death, then what about people who die and they haven't consciously ...

JM: He will not be, even beyond death, before and after death, he will not be the God he is without us. Before you and after you, he's got you covered.

He's got all of you covered – he's got your whole time past, your present, your whole future...

JMF: And yet you're never going to enjoy this relationship, be it good or bad,...

JM: Not while you're saying "No." That's the problem, somehow people want to reject him.

JMF: Is that hell?

JM: That would be hell, in my mind.

JMF: Hell; just remaining in this "No."

JM: Yeah. People are living, do live in hell who have in them only a "No." People struggle to say "Yes" to something or other, just so that they don't have to look at this big "No" that they have down there in them, in themselves. They become optimists, they form clubs, they do everything to get a little positive view of things.

JMF: And yet we remain in miserable hellish condition until such time as we do receive his "Yes" for us.

JM: In John somewhere, what is the work of God that he would have me do? It's just believe, believe in me. That's all. There's a great cause, it's the real cause of freedom, and that's why I like to talk about freedom, because freedom is not "from this" or "for that." Freedom is to know who God is and obey him.

JMF: C.S. Lewis in one of his books, *The Great Divorce* – kind of an allegory, opens the concept that even after death God continues to persist as always in his love toward those in hell, and in the story there's a bus that goes back and forth regularly between heaven and hell and anyone who wants to get on the bus can go up to heaven for a visit. They can stay if they want, and in the story there are those who do, but strangely, most get back on the bus and are more comfortable heading on back down to hell. But they're still free to go up again if they want. I think in another place he likened hell as having the doors or gates or whatever locked from the inside, as a picture.

JM: I like that part of it. There might be some pipe-smoking theology in Lewis' literary talent. But I like "the doors locked from inside." You know that he's there, but you will not allow him to come in.

JMF: And he respects that?

JM: Freedom ... is precious.

JMF: But he keeps standing and knocking.

JM: Yeah. He will not be your head, without your freedom. He will not encroach upon your freedom to choose to say "yes" to him. We've talked about this little conversion from your last "No" converted into a "yes" to his big "Yes." The big "Yes" is him in Christ for us. There is no other fellowship

with God that there is to be had. There's no other atonement, there's no other forgiveness, there's no other reconciliation, but this one. If you're saying "no" to that, you need that "no" converted to your little "yes," and that little "yes" is the wonderful participation in the glorious freedom of God to be God with us. It's a mystery how that conversion takes place, when it takes place.

JMF: God is at work in many, many ways that we aren't aware of.

JM: Yes. Fundamental to the ontology of the great I AM is, the incomprehensibility of God's mystery with us has nothing whatsoever to do with human ignorance of him. It has everything to do with what he's given humanity to know of him. So only in apprehending him can you understand his incomprehensibility. Most people think incomprehensibility through some kind of humility that confesses ignorance of him is what we need to talk about. That's not God's incomprehensibility, that's just incomprehensibility of some unknown thing. But when you know God for who he truly is – because he's given you to apprehend him for who he truly is, you know the incomprehensible one. That's gotta go straight through from Moses to church dogma.

JMF: So is there a sense in which God is continually revealing himself to every person even though they are continually saying "no" and to some degree, even those of us who have given our little "yes" – as you said – we still in many ways continue to say "no"

JM: Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

JMF: There are lots of rooms in our life in which we still keep the door locked.

JM: Absolutely.

JMF: We just keep him in the parlor.

JM: Wherever.

JM: Keep him talking out there in the parlor while...

JMF: Have at it. But he's going to find his way there, because he does love you and he is concerned to be your Father, and our Father.

JM: There are people who can't love the Father just because of their experience with their families. I couldn't love the Father very easily, he had to teach me how to love him. Because my father; I didn't love so much, to put it modestly. But he does, and he's a master. I can say to you today that I have a Father. It's not like the one on earth. So I'm very grateful.

JMF: To me that speaks to evangelism a lot. I think we often get the idea that evangelism abides with us; it depends on us. It seems like the gospel motivates us to evangelize with all the vigor we can muster and yet at the same time to rest in our vigorous evangelism with the confidence that it really

doesn't depend on us. God will be who he will be, and he loves people more than we can, and he will reach them...

JM: Much more so.

JMF: ...and in spite of our successes or failures or wisdom or lack of wisdom that we bring to the project.

JM: Yeah, we can depend upon him for his love. That's what *shalom* means, his peace. You do whatever vigor you do things, you have to be able to do it in a peace that passes understanding in God.

JMF: And when we see people as being loved by God rather than as enemies,

JM: We see the truth.

JMF: ...we see that he does what he does while we were still enemies, while they're still enemies, we can approach people as one of them, as opposed to...

JM: That's the truth of his love for all of us, enemies or not.

JMF: We've come to a conclusion.

JM: Don't say "no" - say "yes."

JMF: What passage, or what chapter would you encourage people to read after they're done listening to us ranting back and forth today?

JM: My favorite book is the Gospel of St. John. I started reading that in 1972. Chapters 15, 16, 17. I read them because they're all in red letter. "Oh boy, that's Jesus talking, I'm going to read those words first." Those words today are just as truthful with me as they were in 1972. Read them and listen.

39. THE LITTLE CREDO OF THE GREAT I-AM

JMF: Today we are going to talk about the grace of God in both the New and the Old Testaments. Most Christians tend to think of the New Testament as the Holy Scriptures of Christianity. We have the stories of Jesus, we have the letters of Paul and other apostles. But the Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible, it's the Holy Scriptures of Israel – of the Jews. And yet it is included in the Christian sacred text as well, as Old and New Testaments. Why is the Old Testament part of the sacred book of the Christians?

JM: I teach two courses at the university. One is entitled “The People of God,” and the second is “The Kingdom of God.” In both of those courses I spend three months respectively talking about the answer to your question – which is the reality of God as his grace in the Old, and the reality of God as his grace in the New – holds together the two Testaments – the two covenants: the new covenant with the old, the old with the new. The only way we can understand the relationship between the Old and the New is through the grace of God. It's a very important concept.

JMF: We're going to ask you to boil down six months' worth of instruction to the 25 minutes or so that we have remaining in the program. That will be a challenge. But if you had to start somewhere, you would start with grace?

JM: Yeah, I start the course work with the passage in Exodus 34:6, which I have come to call the “Little Credo of the Great I AM.”

JMF: And a “credo” is a statement of description of who God is in this passage.

JM: Who God is in his covenant relationship with the people – his people that he's just delivered from Egypt and their bondage to Egyptian gods under the Pharaoh.

JMF: A lot of people think, “Isn't the God of the Old Testament more of a harsh, legalistic God?” where Jesus is kind and merciful – a difference between the God of the Old Testament, and God of the New Testament.

JM: We find that appearing right away in biblical interpretation in the early church. When I became a Christian, I found it in the communities where I fellowshiped early on. The idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and law, and the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and sweet love, was everywhere. The divorce between them is something that I had to learn to overcome, more or less on my own, because a lot of people think that way and continue to think that way.

JMF: But this passage you're talking about, where God reveals himself for who he is with his people, really gets at the heart of something most people haven't thought about.

JM: It does it in such a way that I don't even believe that we can read, for example, Genesis without understanding this way that God has in his freedom to be the Great I AM he is, and to define himself in his relationship with his people.

JMF: "The Great I AM" refers to what?

JM: I ask my students to, when you read the little credo, Exodus 34:6, you read it in the light of Exodus 3:14, the great revelation of the name of God.

JMF: Where he is talking to Moses. Moses says, "Who shall I tell them has sent me?" ...

JM: "I AM WHO I AM." That self-naming of the self-revealing God is ... You can find libraries full of books on that one phrase.

JMF: "Tell them 'I AM' has sent me, has sent you." Let's read this passage in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord passed before him (Moses was in the rock and God was going to show himself to Moses) and proclaimed the Lord, the Lord – a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

JM: Five terms which he's used to define himself in his covenanted relationship with his stiff-necked people. The context here is, "I'm defining myself, Moses, so I don't have to kill those who prefer a golden calf to who I am. I'm not going to kill them, and when I do not kill them, this is the way I'm going to be with them." Five terms.

JMF: You are probably, having taught it so many times, dying to give us those five terms as they appear in Hebrew and then talk about each one.

JM: I prefer to think of it as "*living* to give it to."

JMF: All right, go ahead.

JM: I don't even like to put these terms into English when I teach them.

JMF: They're translated differently from translation to translation – we were just looking at it this morning, and this translation is much more faithful to each word than the other two we were looking at ...

JM: I make my students learn the Hebrew terms – because they're terms with which they're not familiar, everybody thinks that they know what grace is, and it's very familiar to them.

JMF: Let's talk about each one of those terms...

JM: The five terms are: *rachum*, *bannun*, *'erek* *'appayim*, *hesed ve 'emeth*. *Rachum* is cognate with the Hebrew "womb." It has to do, as far as I am concerned,

with beginning. You can't begin anything without the *rachum* of God. He is the God who gives birth, the way that the womb of a woman conceives her fetus. When you're talking about *rachum* ("compassion," a lot of times it's translated), it seems that you're talking about the care it takes to begin something that is of God.

JMF: Compassion, and here in the New Revised Standard it's translated as "merciful." That is the opposite of what this golden calf...

JM: ...doesn't have ... for his people.

JMF: In the second term...

JM: The second term, *hannun*, – has to do with the way that God favors what he's begun. If he begins something, he sustains it with his favor. So I like "favor." In your translation they use the English word "grace" for favor or *hannun* – grace, I like to reserve for the term that comes after – the "slow to anger" term. Because that's the term that we can follow all the way through the history of Israel on into the New Testament. I think it's an important one. Don't believe that you are familiar with the way God defines himself as the "I AM" he is, as the Lord and God of Israel. Seek to allow him to show you the significance of these terms that he's used in order to establish himself in his relationship with his stiff-necked people, or people who prefer a golden cow to who he is.

JMF: What are the rest of the terms then?

JM: *'Erek 'appayim* is a wonderful, vivid concept. Literally, it is "long of nostrils," has to do with a face, and an angry face will have a nose that has on it nostrils.

JMF: Flared nostrils.

JM: Flared nostrils, and when a face gets as angry as it can get, those nostrils are flared as formidably as they can be. When those nostrils are as far apart as they can get, he strikes. But he is very slow to get like that. So you get this slowness to anger, because he's got large nostrils, or however you want to ...

"Slow to anger" is a very important concept. God begins something, God sustains it, and he is slow to anger with it. I associate slowness to anger with patience – and with patience, the wisdom of God. You and I would not be here talking together alive if God were not patient, if God were not slow to anger, if God was not free and willing not to minister his wrath against us.

JMF: Even after he gets to the flared-nostril point and determines to punish Israel for its transgressions, its unfaithfulness to the covenant, in Hosea 11 we find a description of that where "I brought you out of Egypt, I have cared for you as my child, and yet you always rebelled and rebelled. And

so finally, I'm going to just let you have the fruit of your rebellion and you can go to the Egyptians as you want to, only you are going to go in chains and all." Yet after that he says, he can't stand that. He can't think of doing that or letting that stand. So in the end, he will bring them out from all their captors and restore Israel, and a prophecy of what he will do with Israel in the future through Christ. It's not only slow to anger, it's ...

JM: *Rachum, hannun, 'erek 'appayim, hesed ve 'emeth.*

JMF: There is a point where he blows, and then all is... when God gets mad, that's it. It isn't it. Because God's anger is tempered with all of these other words, we haven't talked about the last two yet.

JM: I love that passage you're referring to in Hosea 11 because it's an opportunity for us to learn in prophecy who God is. And who God is, is the source of his compassion and favor, his slowness to anger and his *grace and truth*, I'm going to translate those last two terms with. "I can't give you up – not because you shouldn't be given up, not because you deserve it, but because I AM WHO I AM. I will not give you up. I will not be the God I am without you." To discover that source for the grace of God in the Old Testament is absolutely necessary.

JMF: "My heart recoils within me," he says, "and I cannot give you up." That's his own response to the judgment, his own judgment that he's brought on his people that they very well deserved. And yet he will not let that stand.

JM: In chapter 11 in Micah, it's a father-son relationship, all throughout the rest of the book of Hosea you have a marriage relationship being used to articulate God in covenant with his people. You have the marriage between Hosea and Gomer. The first ten chapters and 12 through 14, all those chapters utilize the marriage relationship in order to speak about the covenant relationship God has with his people. But here in 11 it's a father-son relationship. It's very telling, because it's in the father-son relationship ultimately that we have to understand the source of the kind of *rachum, hannun, 'erek 'appayim, ve rab chesed du emeth* God is toward his stiff-necked people.

JMF: Let's talk about the last two terms.

JM: *Chesed du emeth* – I like to think of them as God's faithfulness to what he has begun, to what he cares to sustain, and to that with which he is wisely patient. The future of the people of God is what it is because of his *chesed du emeth*, or *chesed ve emeth*, I guess it is.

JMF: "I change not, therefore you sons of Jacob are ..."

JM: I like *chesed* as "grace." We should always read "grace" for this term *chesed*. My students can spend the whole semester doing a word study on *chesed*

YHWH in both “The People of God” course and in “The Kingdom of God” course, to come to appreciate the dynamic way that God is free to choose to be this way with a people who do not deserve him. That’s grace.

JMF: I took that course under a different professor and did a word study on that very word, just in the Old Testament. I found it surprising and encouraging and reassuring to see the way this word is used all throughout the Old Testament, and I came away from that study with anything but the idea that this so-called harsh God of the Old Testament exists. Instead we see the kind of God who’s revealing himself here.

JM: Think about this: God is whispering these words into the ears of Moses in this Exodus 34 context, so that Moses can understand why the enterprise will continue, why he will not kill his people. We can trace this – what I’ve called the little credo – asking my students to become sensitive to it. Throughout the whole history of Israel, from Numbers, from the wilderness to Nehemiah, to the post-exilic people, you can see the use of these five terms throughout that history whenever they’re going to be renewed in their relationship with the Lord God, with their Lord and God, as the great “I AM” he actually is, they invoke Exodus 34:6, in some form. Once you become sensitive to that, you can see the shape and form and struggle of God’s passion to be who he is in covenant with Israel.

JMF: It’s a covenant he established and he keeps it even though the people are unfaithful to it. He keeps it anyway.

JM: Their future is bound up with his willingness to keep who he is in covenant with his people – that’s what their future is bound up with. The last term, *emeth*, everybody knows, because it’s cognate with “Amen.” It is translatable as “faith,” grace and faith, or truth. Faithfulness, *’emeth* is an abstract feminine form of *emuna* or amen. Those two terms ought to be understood in the New Testament as *charis kai aletheia* – grace and truth. *Chesed ve emeth*, grace and faithfulness.

I try to persuade my students that the way that God has defined himself with this grace and truth in the Old Testament, becomes embodied in his servant Messiah in the New Testament, so the change from old to new is a change from a pre-incarnate definition of God to an incarnate definition of God. That is, he’s not embodied – he’s talking to Moses from the flames in a burning bush in the Old, but in the New he is incarnate as the Word become flesh, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once you understand that, you see how he has poured himself into this covenanted relationship with his grace and truth, with this grace and faithfulness as the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

JMF: So we're not talking about some "other" God in the New Testament.

JM: The same.

JMF: We're talking about the same God who endures, who describes himself this way, endures with Israel and all of us are Israel, in that sense we are all in this rebellious struggle with God where we have our moments, just as Israel did. When we're very faithful, we return, and then we have our departures and our rebellion, and he's faithful, the same God who leaves us this legacy in history of everything that he has been to his people and his faithfulness to them – is the very God who becomes flesh in Jesus Christ. When we talk about the Trinity being one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we're not talking about three Gods, but we're talking about one God, and we're not talking about the Father being the Son and so on. We're talking about one God who is in community as Father, Son and Spirit, and the Son who becomes flesh is one with the Father.

JM: The revelation of God. He is the way that God is free to choose to reveal himself to his stiff-necked people. What you were saying about the way we are in this relationship – if you trace that through the Old Testament, you'll see that in the Exodus, the people of God proved themselves to be stiff-necked – "I prefer a golden calf to whoever you are." In the book of Leviticus, they proved themselves to be high-handed, willing to offer alien fire rather than to worship him the way that he's freely chosen to give them – fellowship with himself. They try to create other kinds of fellowship with him.

JMF: We can read those stories and we think, "Israel was this way, and Israel was that way," and yet we're *all* this way and that way, we're just like Israel.

JM: You go from stiff-necked to high-handed in the wilderness murmuring, complaining and then beyond that, with the creation of the monarchy, you find a self-centered people becoming more and more wicked in relationship to him to the point where he destroys everything sacred to them – their Jerusalem, their temple, everything. But in doing that he's faithful to his word for them. He's faithful to his Torah with them. That willingness to deal with a wicked people out of himself and to be their God, whether they like it or not, is what you find Jesus facing when he's born of Miriam of Israel, the house of David fallen, and God willing to make a new beginning in her womb to give us Jesus Christ.

JMF: He says he chose Israel for the sake of the whole world.

JM: Of the testimony of himself to the nations. Always, that was Israel's

task. But she can't complete that task while she's worshipping cows or being high-handed.

JMF: "She" being Israel.

JM: Yeah. Or complaining and murmuring that the world isn't the way I would like it to be for me, and all of that.

JMF: Those sentiments are not unfamiliar to anyone of us as Christians. We are believers, we trust in God, and yet how often are we high-handed [self-centered], and wanting what we want, and trying to re-make God into the way we want him to be instead of the way he reveals himself to us. Yet through it all, he's faithful to us. He was faithful to his love for us, he won't let us go.

JM: Otherwise we're not talking. One of the things we probably should mention in this context is to remind ourselves that when the book of Genesis becomes a part of Moses' confession, it's in the light of the Exodus, and in the light of this great "I AM" of the little credo that Moses can confess God as the Creator. It's in the light of the great "I AM" that you need to learn how to read Genesis – that will solve a lot of problems in the debates we're having today. All we're saying is this great "I AM" was the pre-incarnate Word in the Old Testament and in the new covenant prophesied by all the prophets – he has come as the great "I AM" embodied in the person of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

JMF: All of the seeming injustices that we see in the Old Testament – I was always, as a child, we had to read everyday in Bible class, we would read through the Old Testament and we'd read all these stories in Samuel and Kings and Chronicles and you wind up reading the same story over again in many of those books, and the story of Jonathan the son of Saul the king of Israel whom David replaced, always troubled me because here was a very good faithful guy – Saul was not faithful, but Jonathan was, he was faithful in his friendship to David, and he was faithful to God, and he was a great warrior and a great leader – the people liked him because of his integrity – and yet he gets killed and does not receive the inheritance of kingship that's given to David. That never seemed fair. It was fair to David as far as that goes, but not for Jonathan. And many other things like that. The girl who gets sacrificed because the father made a rash vow and so on. In Christ, all these things are resolved, because this is the same God.

JM: God has his grace with his people, yeah. You mentioned Jonathan – Jonathan gets killed because he's faithful to his father Saul, whom the Lord has rejected.

JMF: And Jesus is also killed because he is faithful to why he came and

to us.

JM: Saul participates this way in the grace of God. He gets bad press in Sunday schools. But he should not get bad press the way he gets it in Sunday schools. Saul is God's elect, David won't touch him, he is the anointed one. David respects that. And not only that, Saul's sins never even come close to David's sin. Never. The giving of his grace to David rather than to Saul doesn't have to do with our measure of sin, the way we would measure sin. Adultery and murder is far worse than impatience. Impatience is what Saul's problem is.

40. THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST

JMF: In this interview we are going to discuss the vicarious humanity of God as Jesus Christ. I'd like to begin by reading a quotation from a book – *The Mediation of Christ*, by Thomas F. Torrance:

To preach the gospel of the unconditional grace of God in that unconditional way is to set before people the astonishingly good news of what God has freely provided for us in the vicarious humanity of Jesus. To repent and believe in Jesus Christ and commit myself to him on that basis, means that I do not need to look over my shoulder all the time to see whether I have really given myself personally to him, whether I really believe and trust him, whether my faith is at all adequate for in faith, it is not upon my faith, my believing, or my personal commitment that I rely, but solely upon what Jesus Christ has done for me, in my place and on my behalf, and what he is and always will be as he stands in for me before the face of the Father. That means that I am completely liberated from all ulterior motives in believing or following Jesus Christ, for on the ground of his vicarious human response for me, I am free for spontaneous joyful response and worship and service as I could not otherwise be. (p. 95)

As I said, that's Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*. You were a student of Thomas Torrance, you studied under him and knew him personally. In today's program, we'd like to talk about briefly who Thomas Torrance was, as he passed away recently, and what is this vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ that he is talking about that I just read.

JM: I'm very happy that you read that sentence and mentioned that Thomas has gone to be with the Lord in heaven. The last time we spoke together in his nursing home, he said to me, as soon as he got to heaven he would look up Karl Barth and find out what Karl thought about the direction in which he had taken – Barth's theology.

It was a rather long sentence (three sentences), difficult to understand. We've already talked about the freedom of God to be as he is with his grace in the Old Testament. We spoke about the way that God, as his grace, had become the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who was our Savior. This sentence on the vicarious humanity has to do with all that God was able to achieve by embodying himself in Jesus Christ and what that means for us. So I'm very glad to think about Tom being in heaven and you and I sitting here becoming liberated as Christ applies his life to us – that's the vicarious

humanity the way that God is free to give us his Christ and his Spirit as the revelation of the Father – our Father and his Father.

JMF: Vicarious humanity – being human for us in our place and on our behalf, Thomas Torrance brings up the concept of “I don’t have to worry about my repenting being good enough, because Jesus is repenting for me.” How does that work?

JM: That’s a wonderfully relieving, delivering concept once you’re able to lay hold of it. Both the Torrances in Scotland, James Torrance and Thomas Torrance, were champions of this concept. James taught it all across the world while he was alive. He saw that all Christians worship as having a tendency to be something that *we* do – the church does. We thank God. We sing hymns, we pray, we do this, we do that. We take communion.

JMF: And because we do, God is pleased with us.

JM: Yes. For James Torrance, that was putting on its head the real meaning of worship. It is Christ who is obedient to the Father. It is the Spirit that Christ has sent that runs the church. So it’s what the Spirit does, not what the church does, that provides that kind of worship which is of the Father. They were always wanting to convert people from themselves, from that kind of self-centeredness. It isn’t what we do – from beginning to end, it is what Christ does for us. Christ is our worship.

JMF: So, our faith is in Christ, not in how well we do the things we ought to do. Our faith is in Christ, who did all those things for us perfectly.

JM: He did it not just on the cross and his resurrection, he did it with the wholeness of his life – a wholeness of the life that is continuing – he lives even today. In the Incarnation, you have to think of the word become flesh as the embodiment of God’s grace and truth and covenant relationship with Israel, and you have to think of Jesus Christ as his grace and truth coming to be baptized on the part of sinners. John the baptizer is baptizing with water sinners so that they can repent...

JMF: No wonder why John said, “Why should I baptize you?” knowing that here is the Lamb of God who is no sinner, who has no sin.

JM: Yeah, the text tells us that the baptizer recognized the Messiah and knew that the one coming after him was greater than him, so how is it that he could be baptizing Jesus? Jesus says to him, “Suffer it to be done according to all righteousness.” That is, he enters into the place of the sinner in baptism. He makes the kind of repentance as a sinner that repentance truly is, something that the sinner cannot do. The motto there with both Torrances was, “unless you know the grace of God for you, unless you know God’s forgiveness, there’s no way you can repent.” It isn’t that you repent and then

God is gracious. It's that God is gracious, repent. The one who did it as a man is the man Jesus Christ.

JMF: God has already done for you everything necessary, therefore repent.

JM: The repentance, obedience to the Father, obedience even to accepting the evil against God that is the world in the cross, and finally his resurrection to justify all that he came to do.

JMF: Many people think that the act of our repenting and believing causes God to change his mind toward us and apply the blood of Christ to us at that point. But that is not what is going on at all then.

JM: When we do that, Tom used the phrase, "looking over your shoulder," you're always wondering...

JMF: ... did I do it well enough?

JM: Yeah. The answer is, "No." None of us ever do it well enough – even at my best I need forgiveness, let alone you should see me at my worst.

JMF: Our confidence lies in the fact that it is Jesus being righteousness for us that is the basis on which we're restored to right relationship, we're saved...

JM: He takes us to the early fathers, and both the Torrances used it often in this act. They would say, "What has not been taken up has not been saved, the un-assumed is the unhealed." Salvation is the healing of the whole man.

JMF: In other words, when Jesus became human, don't a lot of Christians think that he became human as the perfect human; he did not take our broken sinful human nature on himself, he only took the pre-Fall or the "Adam before the Sin" kind of nature. But what you're saying is that he took our actual sinful nature on himself, and that *had* to be true in order for it to be healed. What he took, what he assumed – that's what's healed.

JM: He took Adam's sin. He took Abraham's sin, he took Moses' sin, he took David's sin, he took the House of David fallen from God, upon himself.

JMF: Isn't there something about that in Romans 8, the first few verses, that specifically tell us...

JM: I think St. Paul is trying to say there that the reason there's no condemnation for the sinner is because Christ has done this for the sinner.

JMF: Let's read that passage. Romans 8, verse 1:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do, by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. And to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the

flesh so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

It's his assumption, or taking on of this sinful flesh, that allows us now to be walking in righteousness, but it's not our own righteousness, it's his.

JM: From beginning to end, his grace and truth, he is for us.

JMF: When we say that we don't need to worry about whether we repent well enough and so on, and we say Jesus repents for us, we don't mean, Jesus is a sinner and he's got to repent. We mean...

JM: He was willing in his freedom as God to do this for us.

JMF: We certainly couldn't do it for ourselves.

JM: He takes my broken prayers. He takes my wounded soul. He takes my fragmented mind. He takes up all of that and in the wholeness of who he is, presents me to his Father and our Father.

JMF: When we talk about the Christian faith being a life lived in faith, as opposed to a life of following rules, we're not talking about ... isn't it kind of a razor's edge that Christians tend to walk? On one side, we know that we are saved by grace and we trust God in faith to be merciful to us, to forgive us. But on the other side, we know that God doesn't do this just so that we can continue to be in rebellion and live a sinful life, on the other side, we want to walk in the kind of righteous way that Jesus taught us (and that we, as Paul put it, ought to walk) because we are saved. How does that come together?

JM: Because he lifts me to his Father – that I might live before his Father as his brother. That's a long way from license, isn't it? Grace has nothing to do with the freedom to sin, it's a complete liberty from death and evil and sin.

JMF: Yet we find ourselves still falling short, still participating in sin.

JM: That's why it's important that we learn how to forgive one another. We can't learn that any place except with Christ in the Father – in the Father-Son relationship, the vicarious humanity of God in Christ for us is there fully mediating to us his grace and his truth – his life, his light, his word. That's where we live as believers in Jesus Christ – we don't have to look over our shoulders to see if we've done it well enough – we haven't.

JMF: At the same time, we care about that. It isn't as though we say, "I don't care."

JMF: Like prodigals. "Yes, Father." Who says, "Yes" to the Father? Jesus Christ says, "Yes" to our Father for us, even when we are still willing to say "No" to the Father. Christ will not be who he is without us. We said that the Father-Son relation in Hosea 11. In the Father-Son relation, we learn love

and grace and truth as he is eternally Father-Son in the Spirit. That's what makes Baxter Kruger's ministry so important in Mississippi, because through the vicarious humanity of God in Christ, you begin in the Father-Son relation, to seek to understand who you are as a child of his kingdom. There's an awful lot involved in the vicarious humanity – when you want to flesh out the meaning of the concept, “vicarious humanity,” you're always answering the question, “who is Jesus really?”

JMF: Across the page from what we just read is this comment that is also meaningful in terms of how we present the gospel to others. There's this tendency to present the gospel – the good news as “God does not love you yet, but Jesus has done these things and you can take advantage of that, IF you DO certain things. If you pray a prayer of repentance and ask God to come into your life, then he'll change his mind toward you.” And Thomas Torrance says this:

How then is the gospel to be preached in a genuinely evangelical way? Surely in such a way that full and central place is given to the vicarious humanity of Jesus as the all-sufficient human response to the saving love of God which he has freely and unconditionally provided for us. We preach and teach the gospel evangelically then in such a way as this [and here's how he gives what the message actually is to us as unbelievers, but it's a reminder of the way we stand as believers as well] – God loves you so utterly and completely [and this is to unbelievers] that he's given himself for you in Jesus Christ his beloved Son and has thereby pledged his very being as God for your salvation.

In Jesus Christ, God has actualized his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a way once for all that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the incarnation and the cross and thereby denying himself. He died for you precisely because you are sinful and unworthy of him and has already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. [Then he goes on to say that]... Because all this is true, therefore, renounce yourself, take up your cross and follow.

The assurance we have in salvation, of our salvation, doesn't lie in how well we do everything. It lies in our faith, or we sense it because we trust in Jesus. Our faith gives us that assurance and window on what is already true that God has already done. At least that's how I see this... Torrance presenting what we just read in Romans chapter 8.

JM: I've heard him also say, when you understand God in this way for

you, you have to understand that God loves you more than he loves himself. Recently, as I have been learning this kind of love through the vicarious humanity of Christ for me, the one who presents me to his Father in the Spirit, I've been watching people, and I know that naturally they do not believe they're loved. They're always seeking to be loved one way or another. But just sitting there and watching them, I can get a feel for this "they are unloved." They know that. They're always trying to do something to get love. To be loved.

Probably, their biggest problem is this: God so loved the world that he gave. This is the way he's chosen in his freedom as his grace to love the world, to love these people, and the accusation is because, in his freedom he's chosen to love in this way and not in some other way, well, then he's some kind of narrow God, he's not a universal God, and so we have a problem there understanding that the particular is the universal. The singular way that God has chosen to show his love in the world is something we despise, because we despise that kind of particularity.

JMF: You mean the fact that Jesus ...

JM: Something new, something particular, is also universal.

JMF: So the fact that he is a Jew, the fact that he is a man and not a woman, a Jew and not anyone else, and the fact that you must believe in him, as opposed to some other thing that we come up with as humans – are all "particular"...

JM: Absolutely despicable! We prefer our "cows," we said. We'd rather kiss our cows than know this love for us.

JMF: And yet this particularity, of Jesus, is how everyone is saved, it is not restricted to just a certain kind of person or certain part of humanity.

JM: It is the universal ... He is the one God – the God of the Old as his grace is the God of the New as is grace embodied. It's something new. We can accuse him of being narrow-minded for choosing this particular way, and the way that we prefer to kiss our "cows" is fundamental.

JMF: "Cows" – you're referring all the way back the golden calf of Israel.

JM: Our idols. We would rather have our idols save us than the great "I am" that God is.

JMF: This sense of not being loved, needing love, looking for love – seems to be a plague of our time. Who doesn't, even in marriages, in families, we disappoint one another but we can't see past our own weaknesses... Love doesn't have a chance. But in the gospel, we are saying that God already loves you even before you ever believed or even heard.

JM: Sure. That's a very serious move that he's made on us. We're going

to have to take it seriously sooner or later.

JMF: The fact that God does love everyone means that everyone has to take it seriously at some point, because he's never going to let up.

JM: He doesn't call anyone somewhere else besides to himself. All people are called to him.

JMF: "If I am lifted up I will draw all men to myself," Jesus said. Men in the sense of all people.

JM: If you object to that, that's a problem that you're having with God.

JMF: That's again like Israel, always having to struggle as a type of the way everyone is.

JM: Sure, and as such, Israel even today serves as the disobedient servant to show us, to bear witness to, to give testimony to the fact that this is the way he's chosen to love.

JMF: Even those of us who are believers walk in that same path much of the time ...

JM: We said, "stiff-necked," "high-handed," "murmuring," "self-centered," "wicked."

JMF: We turn to God and yet we keep wanting to turn back.

JM: If you're normal. Because we like that which we are habitually familiar with, much better than something really new. We like that much better. We're always trying to get back. If I think about my time in the Haight-Ashbury, for instance, and people desperately looking for love in those '60s and the kind of nostalgia that exists in our nation today for those times.

JMF: Where there was at least a recognition that we knew what we were looking for. We were looking for love and we knew it.

JM: I don't whether we knew what love was, but we knew we needed something besides what we had. The vicarious humanity introduces us to a concept that takes us into the new creation, the new world of God in Christ for us, and that newness is not something necessarily having to do with what we already know. We have to be willing to become something new to accept him as the love he is for us.

JMF: Assurance of salvation is something that people want.

JM: It's right there in him.

JMF: It's there, in him, all the time, not in anything we do. Our faith is only in the fact of his love for us, not in anything that we can conjure up or worry about of whether we did well.

JM: If you're looking for assurance in what you can do, you're never going to have it.

JMF: Our assurance is absolute because it's in Christ.

JM: He is who he is. I am who I am. “You tell them, I am has sent you.” When Jesus said, “before Abraham was, I am,” he was saying, I’m here. I’ve been sent, and I’m the one.

41. RELATIONSHIPS AND EVANGELISM

JMF: We're talking with Dr. Paul Louis Metzger, professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Metzger is founder and director of New Wine, New Wineskins, and author of several books.

He also serves as the editor of a forthcoming multi-volume series on the Scriptures for InterVarsity Press, for which he is writing the volume on John's Gospel. His newest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, co-authored with Dr. Brad Harper [2009]. Dr. Metzger's passion is integrating theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. He is a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, and developed a strategic ministry partnership with Dr. John M. Perkins called, "Drum Majors for Love, Truth and Justice."

Thanks for joining us today.

PLM: Thanks, it's great to be here, Mike.

JMF: I'd like to begin by finding out what led you into the study of theology.

PLM: I was in Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota. In my junior or senior year I was interacting with a couple of professors and one, Walter Dunit, introduced me to the discipline of systematic theology and how it's all-encompassing. While there's the descriptive element in talking about what the church has believed in the past, there's also that prescriptive element, about what do we believe and present today for the church and the society at large. I always had a desire to bring theology into the present context. So that was very intriguing to me in terms of that all-encompassing enterprise that also has present-day import. That's what led me into the discipline, and the



study of God, and I could think of nothing greater than the study of God and especially the triune nature of God.

JMF: Somewhere along the path you moved into Trinitarian theology. How did that go about?

PLM: I was a

student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a couple of my professors there had encouraged me for my doctoral studies to consider applying to King's College, London, to work with Professor Colin Gunton. He was a leading Trinitarian theologian who died a few years ago and was a major player in terms of the renaissance in Trinitarian theology. Working at King's in London was a great introduction into Trinitarian thought forms, and it was great to be able to work with him. There were others, such as John Zizioulas, who would come in and teach and lecture, and many others as well. It was a great place to study Trinitarian theology.

JMF: You're editor of a book called *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, in which you look at Colin Gunton and his work through the eyes of a number of authors. Maybe we could talk about that a little later. Right now, as we introduced you, we mentioned that your passion is the integration of theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. What is an integration of theology and spirituality? What's the difference, and what do you mean by integration?

PLM: Theology by nature is a very integrative discipline and very much concerned for various domains of thought and life. As a Christian, I think everything we're about should be about spirituality. While I'm not doing spiritual theology in that classic sense of the discussion that Professor James Houston will be about, I have great respect for his work. The types of theological thought forms I'm working with within Trinitarian theology are participation in the life of God, union with Christ. Those are central motifs in my own writing and research, and that has import for cultural sensitivity dynamics in our postmodern, post-Christian context of how we engage alternative spiritualities. We need a robust understanding and awareness of the spiritual dimensions bound up with the holy love of God, and Christ, in the power of the Spirit. That's bound up with what I'm thinking of here.

JMF: By "spirituality," you're not talking necessarily about spirituality in the sense of mysticism... you're talking about a holistic Christian life as theology informs it, particularly Trinitarian theology. What is practical about Trinitarian theology in the Christian life?

PLM: When Trinitarian theology is framed in light of the holy love of God in Christ and that we're called to participate in this God's life and not simply to emulate (which is part of our work), but actually to participate, it gets us beyond a form of religion, or rules, and legalism and "sin management" (as some will talk about it) of do's and don'ts. Paul is very much against that in the book of Colossians, where there was a faulty asceticism of "don't drink, don't chew, don't date girls who do" type of

thinking back in the ancient world. The Christians were getting bound up with them and they thought that their identity with Christ was about sin management — keeping the rules.

Paul is saying that our life with Christ goes far beyond sheer concern for moral rights — it must be about union and communion within the life of God. He says in Colossians 2:9-10: “All the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ.” That’s the kind of union that Paul is concerned for. You said before that it’s not about mysticism per se, well to me, there is a mystical component. It’s not the kind of Buddhist mysticism, a pantheism, it’s not that, but the Reformers were very concerned for union with Christ in the Spirit, where our hearts are wed to his heart. There really is that participation, and I would call that mystical, but it is bound up with the holistic frame of reference with practical import to such things as you mentioned in getting beyond legalism toward a real relational model of spirituality.

JMF: By relational model, you’re talking about how to get along with each other.

PLM: Yes, and that God communes with us heart-to-heart, not simply thought-to-thought, but heart-to-heart, because that’s where the best communion takes place. Our thoughts, our actions, our moral initiatives flow out of that heart-to-heart communion with God. I like to pick up from Martin Luther and his side-kick Melanchthon, when they both in the 1500s talked about, we don’t change hearts by changing behaviors. Our behaviors are changed by our hearts being changed. That only occurs by way of the Holy Spirit being poured out, as Romans 5:5 says: “The love of God is poured out into our hearts with the Holy Spirit.” When our hearts are transformed, then these other things flow from them. That’s what I would call an affective spirituality that’s bound up from Trinitarian thought.

JMF: Now, cultural sensitivity flows right out of that, in an authentic Christianity that’s coming from the heart as opposed to a list of rules. Cultural sensitivity is going to be the natural by-product. What are some of the ways that you focus on with regard to bringing cultural sensitivity into that process?

PLM: Well, because God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, God did not seek to... I like to use the imagery of he didn’t come to take back Jerusalem or take back America from his enemies. In the evangelical Christian movement (of which I’m a part), we’re often concerned for our rights, and taking back America from those who live very differently from us. While I want to follow the Bible through and through, and live

according to God's desires for us as his people, nonetheless God is calling us to love people where we're not seeking to shape them by behavioral frames of reference, but as we relate to people relationally, not behaviorally — they get to see that we care about them. That's where there's the opportunity for people to have a change of heart. As it's been said elsewhere (and I agree with this), we're known more in the conservative Christian movement for what we are against than what we're for.

As I'm engaging in cultural issues when I'm working in Portland, Oregon (it's not the Bible Belt), and when I'm working with Buddhists and others and they're concerned about what they've seen in evangelical America of seeking to take back America from them, there's a lot of fear that they have of us. I think that an imperfect love is driven out by fear, but a perfect love casts out fear. When they come to understand that we're concerned for their well-being and that we want to care for them in the love of God in Christ, that changes the dynamics of how we deal with people with different spiritualities and different moralities. It's that relational context that gives birth — comes forth from God's heart — to a kind of cultural engagement that is not about enforcing Christianity on people, but it comes from the inside out, not the outside in.

JMF: In the Gospels, Jesus is described as a friend of sinners, and yet in our evangelical traditions, we tend to shy away from being friends of sinners — the last thing we're going to be is a friend of sinners. We want our children to go to private Christian schools, we want to keep ourselves in an enclave of our friends within the church, not outside the church. Yet it sounds like you're talking about the need to be friends of sinners, like Jesus was and for the same reasons as Jesus was, because people are human beings created in the image of God, and it's the heart of God that reaches out to all people. Often though, Christians are told to make friends with non-believers with an ulterior motive of getting the gospel to them [**PLM:** bait and switch] — it's a project where the *real* goal is to get the gospel to them, as opposed to them being the goal as a person, worthy of friendship because the love of Christ is in us and he's a friend of sinners.

PLM: Absolutely. With that frame of reference, Trinitarian theology gives rise to a concern for people as people, and not as a means to an end of something else. So I couldn't agree with you more, that we don't engage nonbelievers and build relationships with them simply to get the gospel to them, because there's a problematic notion of the gospel if we don't see the gospel itself in terms of its DNA as *relational* — the good news is that God desires relationship with us. If I'm only after relationship for the sake of

seeing people come to Christ, then relationship is not the goal — relationship is a means to an end of something else, and often that's a behavioral rationalistic frame of reference — *understanding* certain things about God and *doing* certain things, rather than heart-to-heart communion.

When I talk about a desire to build relationships with people, that goes beyond whether they come to Christ or not, because I think Jesus would *want* me to care for them, for the oppressed, those who are in hunger and need, even if they don't come to Christ. I think he would still feed them and would still care for them, and we should, too. But we always want to see people come to know Jesus personally as Lord and Savior. That's our desire because *we* know this communion with him, and we want others to know it. It's an invitation rather than a negation.

JMF: It's living out of the gospel, rather than a formulaic presentation by words — it's being the gospel.

PLM: It's a gospel of word and deed. Especially in our context today, because we have created so much fear in the broader community and so many contexts as conservative Christians with our "take back America" strategy, I find that we have to create the space with our lives for our views to be heard, and that's going to require a lot more sacrificial living than we've been accustomed to. We'll look a lot more like the early church context. I'm excited about that, even though there's some fear on my part of what that will entail, but for us to move toward a mindset of being a missional outpost in our culture rather than some dominant superstructure, makes for our depending on God and Christ more, not less. So I'm excited about the opportunities that the church will have in North America in days ahead.

JMF: Speaking then of cultural sensitivity, in your book *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, you point out that race problems are not necessarily a thing of the past, even though overtly many of the structures are gone, that within the church, there tends to still be race and class divisions. Could you talk about the title, what you mean by "consuming Jesus," and also what these race and class divisions look like.

PLM: In the title, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, I'm doing two things with the words *Consuming Jesus*. One, negatively: we have with consumer culture these projections we place on Jesus. We make Jesus to be what we want him to be. So consumerism consumes our perspectives on Jesus.

I think here of the movie *Talladega Nights*. There is this prayer by Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell) where he's praying to Jesus, eight pounds, six ounce baby Jesus, to help him win a race. Other people at the dinner table are talking

about how they like Jesus looking like this or Jesus looking like this, but it's all based on their own preferences rather than on who he is in himself. So the negative aspect is how consumerism impacts us and we distort the biblical perspective on Jesus with our own cultural preferences.

The more positive notion, in terms of how I use the words, is that I long for the church to be consumed by Jesus and a more noble vision of our concern for the church being his people, his community, where there are no divisions (including divisions of race and class) — those are torn and destroyed. That's the other aspect of how I'm using the words "consuming Jesus."

To develop that further, the issue of how race is still with us today (and race and class divisions tend to go together in American culture historically and even in the present day), there's a book called *Divided by Faith* on evangelical religion in America where the authors, Emerson and Smith, talk about how we're not in the slavery era of race problems, we're not in the Jim Crow era of separate drinking fountains, sitting at the back of the bus, but in the post-Civil Rights era. Because we don't have these legal structures in the same way that we may have in the past, a lot of people think that racism is no longer with us.

So they develop this at length about how racism, racialization, how race impacts everything from economics to where you live, to job placement, etc. They talk about how race is still with us. Race is a variable, not a constant — it's always fluctuating — racialization and race impacts our culture. With that as a backdrop, I argue in the book that one of the ways in which racism is still with us is by consumer preference. We all tend to flock with those or toward those who are like us, and a lot of churches cater to that.

There's been use of this missions principle, the homogeneous unit principle, applied to church growth strategies in America. To help the church grow fastest, you work with people of the same socio-economic feather and if you target them, they will flock together and they will flock quickly. It's difficult to get churches to move beyond these kinds of principles because it's very pragmatic: it does grow churches quickly when you're working with preferences of people, and people tend to choose (if you listen to them) churches based on what they like rather than where God is calling them.

Just listen to how people say, "I chose this church because I like the worship, I like the way the pastor speaks." You don't hear much about "God called my family to this church." That might be hard to configure at times, what's the call of God like, but nonetheless you don't have people even wrestling with that. So if a pastor's going to talk about race divisions, normal

families will be thinking, “What does this have to do with my family? I just want to see my kids raised up morally and I want them to have good Bible teaching. I’ll just go to the church next door where we don’t have to listen to this stuff — what does this have to do with the gospel?”

I talk about how these things are related to the gospel message because Paul says in Galatians 3: “There’s no longer any division between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.” While the Jew-Gentile issue is different from black/white issues, for example (because you could become a Jew if you’re a Gentile, by circumcision and other things — but a black person can’t become a white person, a white person can’t become a black person), but those same divisions between Jews and Gentiles have pertinence and relevance to the divisions we have on racism and racialization today.

JMF: Morality seems to be the thing that we’re focused on with our children — maybe not so much with ourselves, but certainly with our children — we want our children to be moral. It reminds me of *The Music Man*: we want the children not to be playing pool, we want them to be moral, so we get them into band. But through all that search for morality, or that effort to focus on morality, we can get to the place where morality becomes so important that we look down on sinners, we even despise them, we talk about them in negative ways of reflecting how we feel about them, as opposed to being like Jesus, who is a friend of sinners, to letting his love flow through us because these are the very people he came to die for. We are all sinners before we come to Christ anyway (and we still sin afterward), and yet we focus on morality, but the gospel focuses on relationality. You’ve talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, how it relates to that.

PLM: When Jesus is talking about morality (because in the context of the Good Samaritan parable, he’s being challenged by a religious leader who asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?), Jesus gets into that discussion of caring for one’s neighbor, and Jesus frames morality relationally. He’s concerned, as God, for morality, but how he shapes or frames morality is always relational. The religious leaders were often so concerned for a kind of behavioral, individualistic morality, they missed the real essence of the law — which was to love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus says, “this is what it means to care for one’s neighbor” — and our neighbor is not the person I most like. As Henri Nouwen said, “a true community is the place where the person you least like always lives.” Who does Jesus use as the hero in the story of the Good Samaritan? It’s the Samaritan who had extraordinary mercy, as one translation frames it. In that

context, it's the religious leaders (this man's peer group), who don't care for the Jewish man (I'm assuming it's a Jewish man) — one of their own who's been oppressed, who's been beaten, left for dead. It's a Samaritan who comes to his aid, and in the issues of race and poverty matters that I'm concerned for in *Consuming Jesus*, I'm not looking at people of different ethnicities as bound up somehow with sin, but how we relate to people or not relate to them, based on them being different from us. That's the sin issue, that we don't care. Jesus is concerned for mercy and justice and sacrifice and breaking down divisions, especially in the church, but also beyond. Jesus was concerned; Paul was concerned for these things in the church.

JMF: I've always been intrigued by Peter's statement: to be ready always to give an answer for the hope that lies within you. It implies that you're not supposed to be always going around blurting out the hope that lies with you, but you're prepared, you're ready to, when the opportunity and the circumstances call for it. Paul said something, in another context, about an individual that he said not to associate with because of his behavior within the church and they were, in effect, putting him out of the church for a season. He had to correct them: "When I said that, I didn't mean not to associate with anyone who's a sinner — I was talking about the individual who purports to be a member of the church who was grievously and overtly sinning in public." He said you've got to associate with sinners and unbelievers, otherwise you have to come out of the world.

There's a recognition of the fact that relational Christianity is going to and needs to engage people who are not believers. That means it's right and appropriate to be friends of sinners, and you can do that without taking up their behavior. Yet how can we reach out to them showing them what the gospel is and what Christ is like in the world if we don't engage them, if we keep them at arm's length, if we just see them as a target of our condemnation, and we're constantly trying to pass laws to put them in jail?

PLM: Exactly. With Christ, even with the leper, even though it wasn't a sin issue that the person had leprosy (maybe some people want to make the connection, he has this because he's a sinner), if you look at it from a legalistic sense, looking at the letter not the spirit, Jesus, by touching the leper, broke the law, from that reading. But by touching and healing the leper, he fulfilled the law. Jesus is about a relational engagement, a transformation of people. While I share the concern for being holy people and we're called to be holy people, it's a dysfunctional spirituality, it so fears engaging the world that we don't have contact. We need to be so captured by God's holy love in Christ that the real force of movement is from us to them in God's holy love, not a

fear of coming out from the world so that we're not tainted.

Where's the transformation coming from: Are we being conformed, or are we being transforming agents? In John 17 Jesus prays, "Father, I don't pray that you would take them out of the world, but that you protect them in the world." Where did Jesus hang out, and where were Jesus' greatest rebukes going? Who was the audience for his rebukes that were most forthright? For the religious leaders. I think about that in terms of a concern about myself, because it wasn't the tax collectors and the sinners, the prostitutes that he attacked — he called them to repent, but his attacks were for those who considered themselves righteous and they don't need him. That's where his rebuke was, and it was a stinging rebuke.

My question to me, as a religious leader, is, if I read this Gospel and I'm thinking he's attacking mostly the nonbeliever person who is the "sinner," then I'm missing the point. Am I broken? Am I sensing my own need for him today? That's where I think all Christian leaders should be going, and we need that sense of desperation for him to show up and transform *us*. Because then, we will be in a position to speak to people in our midst.

42. THE CHURCH SHOULD INCLUDE ALL PEOPLES

JMF: In your book, *Consuming Jesus*, you have an afterword by John M. Perkins — you have a strategic ministry partnership with him. In the beginning of the book especially, you have some extensive quotes from him, and one is, “We have substituted a gospel of church growth for a gospel of reconciliation.” Tell us about that.

PLM: Dr. Perkins is saying that our emphasis is often on quantitative growth, and while there is a place for that (the early church had 5000 right off the bat), we’ve taken the focus off of qualitative growth and discipleship, and have put our focus on quantitative growth. So he says we’ve replaced the gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. He’s calling for a more holistic spirituality and a church that gets beyond issues of race and ethnic division and the like, and that’s the context for that statement.

He also says in that same context that the American evangelical church is the most racist institution in America, and at least one blogger raised questions over that statement, and really misunderstood what Perkins was after. He’s not saying that evangelicals are the most racist individuals, but institutionally, we’re often blind. Because of our emphasis on individual people, we often don’t account for the structural dimensions.

Even in church growth, we structure religion and spirituality by way of, what I have said elsewhere, along the lines of this “homogeneous unit principle,” of working with people, targeting people of a certain sociological, social, economic bent, if you will, sort of demographic. That’s not expansive enough. We need to take into account people’s whole stories, their contexts, and I’m for a focus on language and location, but not likings. To work by way of preferences gives rise to separating people in America today along consumer lines, and that often tracks with separation by way of ethnicity and economics and other related matters. That’s what I think Perkins is after.

In the evangelical movement, we have no idea, at least by and large, about a prophetic voice of what Dr. Perkins is calling for. We write books on how to grow your church and make a profit in religion, but we know very little about prophetic voices such as what Perkins offers. We need to reengage the Scriptures in terms of its call to a holistic spirituality.

JMF: Most evangelical churches are going to have white faces, predominately, and be more of a middle-class constituency as opposed to reflecting the whole culture, and you’re proposing certain ways to address that. How do you suggest churches begin to look at things, and what should

they do differently?

PLM: I think that's where we've been as a movement. But if we're going to have growth, we need to be concerned for diversity. Not in some kind of politically correct manner, because that's where a lot of people will raise questions... is this just trying to be PC, fit in with American culture? That's not it at all.

Are we really missional in our orientation? Do we have our eyes open? Are we reaching out to the communities around us? America is not becoming increasingly white. America is becoming increasingly brown, if you will. I don't look at that as a threat — I look at it as a great opportunity. In the years ahead, the growth is going to come, by and large, in non-Caucasian contexts. That's already happening in certain contexts, but the dominant evangelical superstructures are not there.

Our leadership, in our institutions of churches and education and parachurch, are largely white. I happen to be a white person, and I'll often joke with people when I'm speaking to them, remember I'm a white guy. I'm not out here to attack white people, but we need to be missional. We need to open our eyes. We need to be concerned for doing church, as I said earlier, based on language and location, not likings. If we have eyes to see, we'll see that there's more diversity in our communities than we've often been able to or willing to acknowledge. It's there, but are we being intentional about looking to see how diverse our communities are?

That is what I would want to maintain in addition to other principles, even in how we do theology, what we preach on, how central the Lord's Supper is in our worship services...not as a placebo tablet with the Supper, but more that it's not simply about individuals before God — it's about persons in communion with God and with one another. The Lord's Supper in Corinth was meant to break down class divisions, and yet the Corinthian church, 1 Corinthians 11, was dividing people even at the Agape Feast by way of social class. Paul says, "not on my watch. That won't happen here, because it is the Lord's table, where all are equal, where all are welcome." We need to make sure that all people are welcome to the bountiful harvest of God's communion.

JMF: Even if all people are welcome at a given church, wouldn't it still work out, in general because of the way people are, that churches still build up around racial and ethnic similarities? Don't most people feel more comfortable worshipping together with others who share their cultural and ethnic background and history?

PLM: People feel more comfortable with that orientation or with that framework, but that doesn't mean it's most biblical. That's what the

Corinthians were doing. They were doing things based on comfortability. The rich were in their dining rooms in the house church eating with each other, because the Greco-Roman culture allowed for that, and the poorer Christians were without. They were not able to have anything of the feast. They were, so to speak, in the courtyard with their faces plastered to the glass looking in.

Paul said that's not going to happen. Even though that's your comfort zone, that's not going to happen at God's table. We need to replace comfortability with the comfort of the cross — and all are equal there. That might sound pious and super-spiritual, but I don't mean it that way. It's a matter of, do we really have a heart for seeing the church look like what the kingdom of God would be?

In another book that just came out, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, my co-author and I say that we need to live now in light of what will be. As a friend of mine has said elsewhere, if the kingdom of God is not divided, how on earth can the church be? We need to live now in light of what will be in God's eschatological kingdom before the throne. As that kingdom and community now, we need to look different, because Scripture calls us to do that. It's not to beat ourselves over the head if there are no people of different colors in our community, and we don't have to bus people in from hundreds of miles away, that's not the point. But are we truly seeking to be missional?

I want to get beyond what I like, and my preferences with worship services (this is a lot of where the generational divisions occur). I don't necessarily like a lot of the worship in churches with the praise choruses. I like a lot of hymns. I like liturgy. But I'd rather put down my own preferences for the sake of worshiping with people of different generations.

We have the generational gap, the worship wars and generational divisions. I think that's going to hurt us long-term. It's already hurting us long-term, where young people don't feel connected to churches and they leave churches for their own type of church later. We need to worship as a family. My concerned about all these services (contemporary or traditional) is bound up with the same kind of consumer preference. It's subtle, but it ends up with very destructive tendencies in the long haul.

JMF: What is a way around that, though? In a given church...you take a black church or a Korean church, typically a white person is not going to feel comfortable there, likewise a typical Korean worshiper is not going to feel comfortable in a white church or a black church. They're going to prefer to go to a Korean church. You've got rich people, young people, generations as well as socioeconomic levels. There can be an effort to make everyone in the generations and the rich and poor welcome in that context, but how do you go about it? It's one thing to be welcoming, but will it really happen where

churches begin to become missional to the degree that all races can enjoy and meet together as one body? Will that ever become a reality?

PLM: It's a very long process, and it's a hard road. It's painful, because those wounds are still deep. A lot of people think the wounds have gone away, the racial tensions for example, but it's often from people who haven't even engaged in the issues. They haven't asked the questions. They haven't come alongside of others from different backgrounds and really started to ask questions and live life together. If we do, we'd see that these things are real issues and open wounds in many contexts. It depends case by case, but they are there. They are very much present in American culture.

As I said before, it's OK to distinguish language and location, not likings. You can have an immigrant community from Africa, or somewhere else in the world where they're speaking in their native language the first generation. I'm thinking, okay, second generation, third generation, and are they still seeking to be set apart? At that point, it often becomes a matter of cultural preference.

I'm not trying to do away with cultural distinctiveness. I love and long for church contexts where we celebrate the diversity of our worship styles and the like. We need to be intentional. It's one thing to say we're welcoming. Anyone can say that. I never talk about that we just want to welcome people. I want to be intentional about making sure that they really do have a place at the table, and that they have ownership.

So, how do I change structures, even leadership structures, where if I'm a person in a position of authority, how do I use my gifting, my influence, my position to make it possible for people of other gifting experiences to have ownership and leadership? In some ways it's a death to myself.

When the issue comes back to making people feel comfortable, we're just going to nurture that same problematic orientation. I do not believe in making people feel comfortable in church. I want to have people know that they're loved and cared for, but not comfortable as in making sure they feel that all of their desires and wants are met. That's the consumer problem. It's giving people what they want, when they want it, at the least cost to themselves. That's the consumer problem in the church.

If you deal with these issues of ethnic division and economic division and generational division and that doesn't whet their appetite, they'll go next door, and that's very problematic. So how do we change the preaching? How do we change the ideology? The mentality? The spirit of our churches where we're just catering to people because we want to make sure people come in the door? Again, I don't mean it by way of false piety or it sounds all good.

To me this is DNA, and it's partly because this is my own life. My wife's

from Japan, she's a Japanese national, a Japanese citizen; our kids are dual citizens. I have to hear what my son experiences at school and what my daughter will experience and what my wife has experienced going into an immigration office to get a green card years ago (I talk about it in the book *Consuming Jesus*; it wasn't as sexy or as funny as Hollywood's green card version). It was a very painful experience, and I felt like a helpless hopeful, just like the Mexican applicants looking for green cards and citizenship papers. I felt on the outside looking in with some of the things we had to endure. I saw another side of America. As much as I love our country, I saw another side.

A lot of people experience that in the church. Do we want people to feel welcome? Absolutely, as long as everyone feels welcome. But that doesn't mean comfortable, because Jesus calls us to carry a cross so that we die, so that we can truly live and find a meaningful life that's beyond our best life.

JMF: It sounds like there has to be a passion. I don't see that happening unless there's a passion in the pastor to preach and educate the church in a way that helps it to see itself in a new light and fresh light, as opposed to just being a church to attend for the various social reasons that oftentimes we attend church, for the friendships and the security in the sense of support and so on, but for the church to see itself differently.

PLM: It's partly the pastor's role, but just like the president of the United States, the president isn't fully in control. There are a lot of other people who have ownership of the issues. The pastor is a major player, as well as the elders or church council, and the lay people. There's a sense in which we all need to be in a state of desperation.

Perkins says we've replaced this gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. That's not good news. A watching world looks on us, and it's not like we're trying to tickle the ears, it's not like if we just do the race issue right then the world will like us. I don't believe that. But I think they see the hypocrisy when we talk about the love of God in Christ and all people are welcome, and yet Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement from way back in the '50s or '60s is still true today. The most segregated hour in Christian America, even in a post-Christian America, is Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. How can that be, in God's household?

We have to have a sense of urgency and desperation, and that doesn't come overnight for a lot of people. It would be wonderful if the Holy Spirit would just move in such a way that people would be awakened to it. Sometimes the Spirit does work in that way. Other times it's a long haul.

I've been in church situations most of my life, even talking about these things, where the dominant structures aren't thinking about moving toward

change anytime soon. It's a marathon race, not a short-term sprint. If I didn't have this confidence and hope that Jesus will make this reality of the church that is truly unity in his eschatological kingdom, I'd give up hope and I'd despair because it is so painful and it is so slow-going. There has to be that sense of urgency and desperation that our lives must create the space for our views to be heard.

When we have a segregated church economically, ethnically, and in other ways, what are we saying to the world? Are we really salt and light? I don't think so. I don't see it from the standpoint of wanting to put a guilt trip on people and be moralistic. It's a longing for something more noble, more profound, a Christianity that really gets at the heart of God. That's what I long for. I've seen what it can be like. I've been in situations where it's more beautiful and more profound, and I long for us to look like what God calls us to be as his church.

In John 17, "May they be one as we are one, Father, that the world might know that you have sent your Son." So we're telling the watching world that God hasn't sent his Son if we're not truly one — and that's not just ethnically, economically, it's not just generationally. It's in a host of ways in which we don't have unity. The turf battles we have in churches and beyond. The denominational warfare and the like, turf. It's often ego-related.

Paul challenged that completely head-on in 1 Corinthians. They were saying, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas," and they weren't of Christ. The ego problem is usually the biggest problem along with, in American culture, the comfort-zone problem. Those things need to be dealt with prophetically and passionately, calling people to something more beautiful and noble. (Because if it's guilt-tripped, that doesn't help anyone.) It's helping people to repent, but to repent so that we enter into something more profound together. I'm part of the problem; I want to be part of the solution. I know a lot about these things, the question is, what am I doing about them? I have to live them out all the more fully.

JMF: Paul wrote that 2000 years ago. Here we are 2000 years later, and we still have the same problem. In your book, you propose a few concrete suggestions about moving from here to there. Can you talk about those?

PLM: I'll talk about the kind of preaching that needs to occur, and I had already mentioned that aspect of prophetic speaking. And the kind of theology we're teaching, what kind of theology we foster. Trinitarian theology is communal, it's relational, it's not individualistic.

There are many practical principles that the book sets forth from different angles—some theological, some in terms of worship: how we do the Lord's Supper, how we view the Lord's Supper. Also, as it relates to community

development work, we mentioned Dr. John M. Perkins before, and even how we engage as the church in the broader community. He's talked at length about principles of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. Perhaps we'll have time to talk about those things, and it's bound up with our partnership that he and I have developed.

Third, there's a network called the Mosaic Global Network, which is helping churches move toward being more multi-ethnic. There are a lot of things that can be done, developed, different models for how to be integrating, even how we do (and this is beyond the book), but how do we greet people? What does our literature indicate? What does it suggest? Again, how do we do worship? Who are we targeting? I don't like the word "targeting" because it's too narrow in its orientation. I want to be *missional*, but often targeting is, "I'm going to focus on this niche group."

Our whole community should be who we're seeking to minister to. Jesus' band of disciples was diverse. Even though it was Jewish men, it was pretty diverse. Jesus always had his sleeping bag between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector every night, because tax collectors were hated by Zealots. Given the chance, who knows what Simon the Zealot would have done to Matthew the tax collector? Paul rebuked Peter for not associating with the Gentiles and he talks about it in Galatians. In the early church, James talks about the economic, what we would call class divisions today, with the leaders giving preference to the rich and despising the poor.

Who makes up the boards of our churches? Is it the power brokering of the world that we have, or is it the cruciform existence of the cross? Not many of us who were called to Christ were great or noble by way of the world's standards. Where is greatness to be found? A theological, a spiritual, a missional perspective, is all-encompassing. It takes years to develop. It takes a lifetime to live out. It is costly, but it's more profound in terms of what God is calling us to.

JMF: How did you meet John Perkins?

PLM: Around 2000, a friend said to me we needed to get John Perkins to come to Portland to speak at Multnomah, where I teach and I direct this institute on the Theology of Culture, New Wine, New Wineskins. So we invited Dr. Perkins, and he accepted, and he came to Portland to speak for our conference on justice issues.

One of the places he spoke at was Reed College. Reed is talked about every year in the *Princeton Review* as being one of the most godless or non-religious, secular, irreligious schools in America, depending on how you want to word it. It's not seen as a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy, to say the least. Yet the Reed students wanted to hear this evangelical social-justice advocate

civil-rights leader from the deep South, John M. Perkins, which struck me.

When he spoke there, he just shared his testimony, but it was radical and it was transformational to me. I felt, as a Multnomah Biblical Seminary professor, I had come to Christ in Reed College's auditorium hearing Perkins share his story about how he was led to Christ, how God called him back to the deep South to give his life for the poor, and then after he was nearly beaten to death, God called him beyond bitterness to be broken and holy love for even his oppressors. God called him through that traumatic ordeal where he had a heart attack, and vital organs of his body were shredded. He said God called me through that incident with these white police officers beating me to the point of death, God called me to race reconciliation for all people.

The Reed students gave him a standing ovation for a life so well lived. While they might not have agreed with his evangelical convictions at that point, they knew there was something beyond religion here, that really was an encounter with the living God through this man. Even now, that sends shivers down my spine because that is a more profound form of Christianity than I ever had experienced to that point. I want my life, I want my family's lives, I want the church of Jesus Christ and of North America to enter more fully into that kind of radical, sacrificial spirituality that is simply bearing witness to and participating in the life of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.

JMF: You are partnering with him in a particular ministry. How does that contribute?

PLM: Around the time of the release of the *Consuming Jesus* book (after years of reflecting upon his story, theology, my own family's story, life in Portland and beyond), it was my own manifesto, so to speak. When he read the material, and he had come back to Portland for another New Wine, New Wineskins conference that was geared toward the oppressed, the poor, ex-offenders, how we relate the gospel compassionately to them in a holistic manner.

Dr. Perkins asked me if I would partner with him, and this is one of my mentors. This is a man whom I have the highest regard for, and that he would ask me to partner with him was one of the greatest privileges of my life. Having studied under Colin Gunton in London and then being able to work with this evangelical community development civil rights leader, it's a great marriage between Trinitarian theology and a life that really lives it out, illustrates that life and how to develop it.

He could sense that there was a theology I was developing by the grace of God that resonated with what God had called him to do as a Bible teacher

and as a practitioner for decades. [At the time of the interview] he's in his late 70s and he's thinking about the marathon race ahead and the legacy, not in terms of an ego issue, but a stewardship, how these things would be carried on for the long haul. He's partnered with a variety of people, and I'm one of them. This partnership, Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice, is bringing together a biblical theology of engagement that's led to his profound practices of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.

We've spoken in different parts of the country and we're looking for other opportunities to go out and speak, to inspire people to become themselves, members of the marching band. The imagery comes from one of Martin Luther King Junior's messages where he wanted to be remembered as a drum major for justice. Love is the driving force of justice and the biblical framework, and there's a need for justice. There's so much injustice in our world today, in America, with all the greed that's bound up with the current economic mess and the lack of concern for biblical truth.

Love, truth, and justice as a catalytic force, they simply want to bear witness to the Triune God as he engages sacrificially through the church in our cultural context. It's putting together that biblical theology of engagement with what Dr. Perkins has been about with his community-development work for decades.

43. CHRISTIANS ENGAGING CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

JMF: You're partnered with Dr. John Perkins in an organization called Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice. Can you tell us what that's about?

PLM: The drum majors partnership is something that started a little over a year ago when Dr. Perkins had asked me to join him for this partnership where it brings to bear the theology of engagement that I have developed that's based in Trinitarian thought, and then also his work as a practitioner with community development motifs...and to join those two in a word of inspiration and exhortation to the church at large in terms of how we should engage and challenge and build up the church in terms of confronting race and class barriers in American Christianity and beyond today.

We've gone out and spoken in different places. The Luis Palau Association sponsored the Drum Major's Conference in Portland. We spoke at the CCDA Convention last year together in Miami, Florida, and we spoke at Calvin College for a conference earlier this year. We're looking for opportunities to speak and encourage other people to join the band, so to speak.

The imagery for this work comes from Dr. King's sermon where he talked about being remembered as a drum major for justice. We're about love, and love is the impetus, or it's the momentum building for issues of justice and truth. We want everything to be captured by God's holy love in Christ, and then truth and justice.

We live in a culture where biblical truth is not often taken seriously, and we want everything to be grounded in biblical truth. And justice...we live in a culture of greed and consumerism, where people are taking advantage of the system to get rich as the poor get poorer. So we want love propelling or moving truth and justice forward. That's our message to encourage, invite, challenge the church at large, to join in this movement of God's Spirit as we seek to be catalysts for this work under God's direction.

JMF: If a church wants to join that movement, what does that look like in terms of the effect on the local church or what the church would do?

PLM: We would look for opportunities to speak together to a church or churches or schools, institutions. We do several things in terms of our speaking because it's an inspirational work. We're not trying to do the work for people, but to come in and give biblical theology, practical applications and illustrations, talk to leaders and work with them on things that they can be doing in their communities, and maybe we can talk a little bit about what

Dr. Perkins has stood for, by way of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution—his three principles that he’s been known for for decades—advisor to several U.S. presidents on these matters...on poverty and racism.

With relocation, it’s a matter of following God’s incarnation, where Jesus was incarnate—he relocated from heaven to earth...and so to be intentional about locating or relocating into communities in disrepair. There are different ways in which that can be done, but one way is a group of people moving in and living in the community and staying in a community to build the community up from the grass roots—a community that’s been in disrepair.

Reconciliation, first the vertical component of being reconciled to God, because that’s huge: On issues of race and class divisions, we need to be born from above, because the movement of God’s Spirit is essentially important if we’re going to move beyond those historic and present tensions of jealousy, envy, greed, hatred, whatever you want to call it, and even those more benign forms of simple indifference. We need the movement of God’s Spirit. Reconciliation with God then flows forth in a love for neighbor, reconciliation with our neighbor—black and white, Asian, Hispanic, you name it, breaking down those divisions. It’s not just race—it’s class divisions and beyond. That’s reconciliation.

Then redistribution. It’s not simply about giving money to a situation, because you can throw money at something and not be very relational or communal or caring—it’s just easing a bad conscience. With redistribution, it’s a life-on-life form of solidarity, where people are moving into a community, or people coming in from outside. As long as there’s an incarnate presence working amongst the people, other people can come in and associate too, in sharing not only financially in a work, but also with talents and resources—expertise.

It has to go beyond charity. Perkins has written a book called *Beyond Charity*, and what I would add to that, is that Jesus wasn’t condescending in his engagement of the Samaritan woman. He was really in need. He needed water in John chapter 4, and she gave him a drink. There was that sense of Jesus coming in this humility and love, of equality. He saw her as a precious human being created in the image of God, and so he cared for her, I would say, even as an equal.

We need to get beyond charity, where we keep the poor, as I like to say, at the far end of our outstretched arm. We are into token gestures rather than really entered into relationship and seeing the value in them—and also our need for them, because there are many ways in which we benefit from that relationship with people who are in impoverished situations.

Not that poverty is sexy, but at the same time, how many stories have you heard of missionaries or churches going to Mexico or elsewhere and coming back and saying, “These people had so little and yet they had so much in Christ, and we have so much, and yet so little in Christ.” They are moved toward a greater sense of discipleship and concern for Christ having his way in their lives. In those encounters, there’s a sense in which people come away impacted and can be built up. The need is mutual rather than a token gesture of condescension. It has to be incarnational and communal.

JMF: Is there an example of that you can give? Of a church that made a transition like this and began to experience their Christian walk in a fresh way?

PLM: There are churches that have been concerned for this. I think of Irvington Covenant in Portland, Oregon, formerly pastored by Henry Greenidge. He’s an African-American pastor, and is intentional with people in the community, people with different ethnicities being intentional in concern for the plight of the urban poor. They have a ministry to the ex-offender population, amongst others, and work with the elderly. Irvington Covenant in Portland would be an example.

Another church would be Lawndale Community in the Chicago area. Coach Wayne Gordon is the person who is responsible for founding that work, I believe, and he’s a close associate of Dr. Perkins. And there are other works around the country.

A movement that’s concerned for multi-ethnic (and I had mentioned this before in another segment) is the Mosaic Global Network. Mark DeYmaz and others are seeking to be intentional along those lines.

I’m excited that different works are developing. There’s the Christian Community Development Association that meets annually. It’s a network to encourage groups working in this regard. I also mention your denomination’s Office of Reconciliation Ministries, which is an outreach ministry of Grace Communion International. Curtis May, whom we both know, runs that ministry, and it’s a vital work that the denomination is developing, with Curtis as the leader of that. So that would be a work that people within the denomination and beyond could connect with to learn more on how to go forward in this regard.

Then there’s the John M. Perkins Foundation in West Jackson, Mississippi. All these works are great resources to help along the lines of what we’re talking about.

JMF: How does Trinitarian theology come to bear on this work?

PLM: In the context of consumerism, for example, we have to move

beyond the commodification of human identity. What I mean by that is where we treat people as objects; we use them to get what we want. If you go back to the slave days, the trade triangle of sugar, slavery, and shipping, it was all bound up with what we might call materialism, or what have you. They needed slaves to get the sugar to put on the ships to send back to Europe, and it was the commodification, the using of people for financial value, financial gain.

We don't do that in the same context today, but when we use people for whatever means or end we have in sight, rather than seeing them as people having inherent dignity and value, as I was talking about before, even amongst the poor, we should look at them as equal. Especially among the poor! Looking at them as equal, rather than as people we can give to and look down upon and feel good about ourselves. That's commodifying them for our own spiritual growth, so to speak.

Trinitarian theology is about communion of persons, but we don't use people as means to the end, of individuals in isolation using people for our own individualistic gain, but really a communal reality, where we become the community of God reflecting what it means to be the people of the Triune God, three Persons in communion, giving sacrificially to one another for all eternity. That is the model, and the basis, and the foundation stone, and the inspiration for living life today.

Jesus Christ incarnate—what greater example could there ever be? He had everything—he who was rich became poor so that we could become the riches of God [2 Cor. 8:9], and he who knew no sin became sin so that we could become the righteousness of God [2 Cor. 5:21]. Instead of upward mobility and the yuppie dream, it's downward mobility and getting beyond homogeneity, of like attracting like—we move toward the “other” to embrace the other in all our distinctiveness to build a community that's diverse and a profound example and illustration of what the kingdom of God that is dawning in our midst is all about.

JMF: In your book, you talk about “beyond moralism” and “beyond escapism.” What is that referring to?

PLM: With the “beyond moralism” aspect, I'm getting at the issue that it has to move beyond simply doing good deeds, because Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 talks about anything not done for love will profit us nothing. Even giving all of our possessions to the poor, surrendering our bodies to the flames, speaking in the tongues of men or angels, but having no love, it profits us nothing [1 Cor. 13:1-3].

In the context of dealing with the Corinthian church (where there wasn't

much love...and we're talking about the works of the Spirit and the like), Paul puts it in the context of the moral axle, in a way, and says you can have all these things and do everything right, but if it's not birthed from God's love, which according to Paul comes from the Spirit's movement in our hearts, that as Paul says in Romans 5:5, "The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

That changed heart creates faith, as I read the Bible, because Paul says, "I've been crucified with Christ," Galatians 2:20, "and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me, who gave himself for me." Faith is an empty hand. We don't bring anything to the table. Luther said, "Faith is an empty hand." Faith is created by God's Spirit moving in our hearts giving us a new love, creating in us, instead of self-love where we turn inward on ourselves, the selfless love of God poured out from God into our lives, and that gets us from beyond self-concern to concern for others—especially those who can do nothing to elevate our own status—the distressed, the downtrodden.

But we go beyond rights, our own rights, and the like, and that will lead us into issues of getting beyond escapism out of concern for people who have no rights and benefitting them because of God's compassionate loving overflow of salvation in our lives. The love-transformed heart births ethical action. Otherwise, it can be pharisaical; it can be just a "dutiful" Christianity. It has to be birthed from God's love. That's what I mean by living beyond moralism... the intent, and the heart transformation.

But some would take that to mean, "Okay, so as long as we have this heart transformed and feel different, things are fine, and then we don't have to do anything about it." No. If we're truly converted... It's not that we're supposed to analyze our spiritual navels and the like, but a true conversion will always lead toward care for the other. I think of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Jesus said, "Salvation has come to your house, Zacchaeus" [Luke 19:9], it's because he who had usurped people's significance, had taken money from them, had been a robber, so to speak, as a tax collector, he says, "I'm going to pay you back and then some and give bountifully to those whom I've taken from."

It's in that context that you see the transformation having fruit. The transformed heart always gives rise toward a life of concern for the other. That's what I mean by moving beyond escapism. Often our Christianity has been how to show non-Christians that Christians can have fun, too. I think that's a very weak view of what it means to be caring for others. While it's good to have fun, all the more important is to have love, and to be concerned

for the needs of those in our community—especially in a culture so captured with affluenza. I think that the problems are intensifying.

JMF: Affluenza?

PLM: There was a PBS documentary a while back about the problems of affluenza, affluence, and how it's sickening our society. There's not a problem with having money, it's what you do with money that's the issue. Do we distribute our wealth to benefit all, or do we take it to ourselves like the rich fool and say, "I'm going to build more and more and more for myself," and God says, "Your life is going to be taken from you this night because you haven't been concerned for the things that are on my heart" [Luke 12:18-20].

If I'm concerned for what's on God's heart, that shows that I love God and have concern for his concerns, and I want to please him just because he loves me. It's not so I can find my merit or my worth ultimately, it's just because I'm captured with God's love and therefore I would want to give because he continues to give to me. It's gratitude, not guilt trip. It's not sense of obligation as in guilt, but that sense of obligation that comes from gratitude. I have a debt to pay to God's love which I could never repay, nor should I try, but that I would love on others as he has loved on us.

That's what Paul says: "The love of Christ compels us" [2 Cor. 5:14]. Jesus is saying, "Those who are forgiven much, love much" [Luke 7:47]. That's what we need to see in the American church. We've been too concerned for our own image and too concerned, in so many contexts, out of fear of having our rights taken away from us. It's all fear, fear, fear, and it's not missional, it's all insular. That reflects to me a spirit not of God but a spirit... Paul says, "We have not been giving a spirit of timidity or fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and a sound mind, and discipline" [2 Tim. 1:7]. That's what we've been given, and so it should move us from even beyond seeking our own rights to seeking the rights of others.

As Karl Barth, whom I've written about, once said and once wrote, "A church that is always demanding its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." What Dr. Perkins and I are about (somehow with our respective vocations and our partnership together) is not about somehow taking back America from our enemies, but laying down our lives as the church for those who have often been seen as those outcast and shunned by the church that we would have that concern, that compassionate concern of co-existence and of the sacrificial love of the Savior poured out through the Holy Spirit.

JMF: You've also written about Karl Barth in *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth*, published

in 2003 by Eerdmans. What does Barth bring to the question of Christ and culture in this context?

PLM: Barth is often misunderstood in terms of his engagement and understanding and reflections on culture. He's often looked on as a despiser of culture. It's an issue, a problem, in Barth studies that hasn't gone away readily. One of the things that I wanted to show (and others have done this in certain contexts as well) is that Barth had a very nuanced, multi-faceted approach to engaging culture. There's much there that is advantageous to someone who is seeking to develop a theology of culture.

A key part of my work is on the theology of culture. That's not just systematic theology, which is dealing systematically with the various themes in church doctrine. With theology of culture, it's focused even more on the matter of "What does that entail for how we engage in our contemporary cultural context?" and seeing that all theology, every aspect of theology, always arises within a cultural context.

That doesn't mean it's relativized, as some would fear, but it means it's particularized—these things aren't coming out of a hat like a rabbit—they're not pulled out willy-nilly in that way. They arise, whether people are conscious of it or not, from a cultural context. Every theology is that way, so we need to be aware of it and be attentive to it, so that we can engage thoughtfully and meaningfully the biblical text, and bringing that home to how we engage in contemporary culture.

One other point along those lines... John Stott, the famous Anglican evangelical minister, said that evangelicals are very good at engaging the Bible, but not so good on engaging culture. Liberals are good at engaging culture, but not so good on engaging the Bible. As ministers of God's word, we need to be concerned for both. As Barth said, having one finger in the bold print of the Bible and the other in the bold print of the daily newspaper. We need to be in those two worlds, bridging those two worlds as ministers of the gospel.

Barth had a multi-faceted approach to culture, and all of his theology arises within various cultural contexts, because it was written over many decades and developed. He was responding in one way or another to the situations that he faced, such as Hitler in Nazi Germany. Barth was one of the key opponents of the Hitler regime.

Barth would often attack "cultural Christianity," but it wasn't that Barth lacked an appreciation for culture in its various manifestations, such as Mozart. He had a great appreciation for the music of Mozart, which is striking to people and puzzling to many, because Mozart was a Mason, was perhaps

a nominal Roman Catholic, and Barth was a Protestant theologian, and what might he see in someone like Mozart? He saw him as the theologian of providence par excellence in terms of his music. Barth would listen every day to Mozart's music.

Barth was a great student of politics. He read and studied on politics and spoke to issues throughout his theological career, on the issues of the Soviet Union, democracy, what was going on in Hitler's Germany and beyond...working with the miners in their crisis in his early days as a pastor in Switzerland, where he was from.

Barth was engaging culture in a variety of ways—not always negatively, sometimes constructively and positively. That was one of the things I wanted to bring out in the book — showing this multi-faceted approach. There's a famous book by H. Richard Niebuhr called *Christ and Culture*, and it has merit in terms of certain typologies, but I also think it's lacking. I've written on this with my colleague, Brad Harper, in our new book *Exploring Ecclesiology*, where I deal with Niebuhr's categories and see they have a place, because you can use them to classify. But Barth's model doesn't quite fit any of Niebuhr's categories. It's not Christ against culture, it's not Christ of culture, it's not even necessarily Christ transforming culture, to use Niebuhr's categories. There is a *sui generis* [one of a kind] quality to Barth's work. It's very multi-faceted, and he was a complex theologian.

Those are some of the things that intrigued me about Barth, including his opposition to Hitler, because the work of most theologians is not taken seriously in terms of having much say in the broader sphere. Barth's work did have that kind of import for the political issues of his day. I don't think we should politicize the faith, where we use the faith to baptize this or that political party, but the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ does impact all kinds of political issues.

When Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" [John 18:36], he wasn't saying, "My kingdom is irrelevant"—he was saying, "I'm not going to be manhandled by you, but my kingdom will intersect, will call into question, will judge your culture and even your reign and rule, Pilate, because I am a king of a different kingdom and that kingdom is coming, and it will be the eschatological reign of God in Christ's person." I appreciate that in Barth's thought—he had a robust theology that had import for all kinds of issues in his day, and I believe also beyond.

I'd like to talk to that issue of how his theology, in many respects, gives rise to a missional engagement in a post-Christian America. When I talk about missional Christianity, I don't mean a church with a missions program. You

can have a missions program and not be missional, because you're not thinking about how to engage the world around you—you just have a program and everything has to fit inside that mold. When I talk about being missional, it's getting outside of our doors, trying to think in a way, communicate in a way...not that necessarily people are going to agree with it, but at least they understand.

We don't want Jesus to be the stumbling block, he *is* the stumbling block, and we have to deal with him, too. I don't want to be the stumbling block. I don't want to be an obstacle to faith, but Jesus will be a stumbling block to people, and I don't want to stand in the way of Jesus in one way or another. So when we're talking about missional, it doesn't mean tickling people's ears, it doesn't mean being politically correct, but it does mean presenting the gospel in ways that people around us can understand and can engage meaningfully, constructively.

The evangelical movement in the church at large in America, if anyone's reading the newspapers and listening to the airwaves and reading carefully, people are going to see that in our scene, America's changing rapidly. A lot of Christians are threatened by what they see as the rise of secularism in America—things may not be going politically, ethically where many evangelicals would like them to go. It depends on which aspect one's thinking of.

I'm glad, I'm thrilled that we've had the civil rights movement. I think there's been progress there for America. Some Christians don't seem to take all that too seriously and just think everything's getting worse. In some ways, things are getting better. But secularism, nonetheless, is on the rise. There's a lot of talk today about Christianity and religion in general being antagonistic and not good for the common good, and evangelical Christians and Christians more broadly in America... We've moved from the Simpsonesque version of the evangelical Christian and the Christian as Ned Flanders, if you're familiar with that...you know, nice guy, a bit naïve...to looking more like a fascist. We're made to look like Adolf Hitler, that we're antagonistic toward the common good, rather than caring for our society at large.

How do we engage in that context? Do we close the doors and retreat and develop even more a fortress mentality, which I hear about? This is a challenge to people, and I ask people to keep thinking and keep dialoging. But all this talk about going back to the religion of our founding fathers... I really struggle with that, because not all of our founding fathers (this is one of these delicate issues) were God-fearing biblical Christians. There were many Deists in the American government. Thomas Jefferson was no Bible-

believing Christian. He had a cut-and-paste Reader's Digest version of the Bible. He cut out the miracles. We didn't have just the government and American culture at large filled with Bible-believing, God-fearing Christians. There were some of those, that was a big part, but there were a lot of other sectors. We've always dealt with this.

I like what John Perkins said, "If we go back to the religion of our founding fathers, I'm still a slave, and I don't want to be that." It's this funny historiography about what we value and what we think is meritorious and that we want to go back there. I want to live *now*. I want to engage in biblical Christianity now, and I feel that there's this fear of losing "our rights," losing our power. I don't see Jesus or Paul and others having that fear factor. As a Christian, I want to influence my society, and to the extent I can, influence government in the ways that I think honor the society at large.

In the light of that Barth statement, I think he was reflecting on Scripture when he said, "The church that demands its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." There's that fear of rights, and our rights, and you've got to preserve those rights. We're not caring for the other. We're not caring especially for the dispossessed, like a William Wilberforce, the leader of England's parliament on the race issue—he lost his wealth. His life was threatened numerous times because he was willing to use all of his affluence and influence for the sake of people who could not benefit him—the slaves. That speaks volumes to me.

That's the kind of evangelical Christianity we need—not because we're trying to tickle ears, but because God is moving in our midst, and we're willing to lay it down, like Esther in the Old Testament, where Mordecai says, "Who is to say that you weren't raised up for a very hour like this, Esther? [Esther 4:14] Do not preserve your role as queen to gain more affluence and wealth and influence. Give your life for the people, otherwise God might dispose of you and put someone else in as queen." Esther's response should be all of our responses, "If I die, I die" [v. 16]. She put her life on the line for the sake of her oppressed people with Haman's holocaust ambitions.

That's the kind of sense of urgency we need to have—not taking back the centers of power from the left or the secularist and the atheists. I want righteousness and I want good government. Sometimes I think that there are people who are non-believers who have a better sense of that than we do, though. Our greatest concern should be how can we live compassionately and live of ourselves, because then we should influence as much as we possibly can.

Jesus and Paul and others, they didn't have this "moral majority." They

didn't have places of power and affluence. The church often works best as a missional outpost where we haven't been given power, and we have to depend on the power of the cross. As Paul says, "The cross is foolishness and it's weakness to most, but it is the power and wisdom of God." 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. That excites me, that challenges me. I long for us as the church in America to move into that sphere of engagement. I think Barth's theology resonates with that and gives a theological platform for cultural engagement along those lines in a post-Christian context.

44. CONSUMER CHRISTIANS, AND GOD’S LOVE

JMF: I’d like to talk about your book *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*. You edited this book and worked on bringing the authors together. What themes did you see emerge in the preparation of this book?

PLM: I’d like to preface that by saying a little bit about what the book did in terms of bringing together these respective contributors and what the aim of the book was. It was to bring together many contributors who shared interest, passion, conviction on the subject of Trinitarian theology and to look at most, if not all, the major doctrines in what is called systematic theology from the vantage point of Trinitarian thought.

For example, prolegomena, which is first steps in theology, the first foundational guidelines of how you’re going to do theology. What does that look like from a Trinitarian perspective? The doctrine of revelation, what does that look like? The doctrine of the image of God or the divine attributes or perfections, the sacraments or ordinances, and on it went, to ethics. We dealt with various subjects, sin and grace, all from this vantage point of Trinitarian theology. That was the aim of the book, and I was encouraged by the consistency and the integrity of the work as a whole with the different contributors and the themes that appeared and continue to appear.

That brings us to the question you were asking. I think a key thing that would appear at various points would be *participation* — participation in the triune life of God (and we’ll come to that later as we’re discussing issues of grace and how that gets us beyond legalism and even burnout in ministry, things of that sort) but that issue of participation in Christ. God does everything through the Son and the Spirit. That is a key aspect of Trinitarian thought.

Colin Gunton (the book was dedicated to his memory as a Trinitarian theologian) liked to quote Irenaeus, the second-century theologian who said that “God does everything through his two hands, the Son and the Spirit.” That was a key framework, a key aspect that continued to appear — that God works always through the personal mediation of the Son and Spirit. The personal dynamic — the interpersonal nature of God — has import for how we live, for issues like revelation, where we look at the Bible relationally. We understand sin and grace...non-relational in the case of sin, from a relational perspective in the case of grace. All those things came into play...and atonement — understanding the atonement from the standpoint of this Trinitarian relational matrix.

Those are some of the themes that appeared and reappeared in the book.

Others have said that they felt that it was a fitting tribute to Professor Gunton, who was my theological mentor from my doctrinal studies days and whom I miss dearly... He's had an impact on multitudes of people across the world. I'm just grateful for the privilege of having worked under his supervision for a time.

JMF: I'm sure a lot of people will find that book both encouraging as well as a great resource for understanding Trinitarian theology and its practical impact. Your latest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, which you co-authored with Brad Harper, and it's subtitled *An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*. Can you tell us about that one?

PLM: The book *Exploring Ecclesiology* is framed by way of a Trinitarian and eschatological vantage point. Those are the two angles, if you will, from which we approach all the different subjects that you would hope to find in an introductory text on the doctrine of the church, which is ecclesiology, the study of the church. We deal with the sacraments or the ordinances, when we deal with issues of order in ministry, worship, and culture, and mission all from the standpoint, in one way or another, from a Trinitarian and kingdom vantage point.

Dr. Brad Harper did his work (on George Ladd) from the University of St. Louis for his doctrinal studies. So that Laddian paradigm of the "now and not yet" enters into play when we look at the church. In many contexts, especially amongst dispensationalists in America (I have a great respect for dispensationalism, and I teach at a school that's historically that, but...) often those in the dispensational tradition have not seen the church itself as a kingdom community because [in their thought] the kingdom is all future and it's Israel.

So this was unique in that sense, to talk about the gospel of the kingdom, the church is the community, the eschatological community of the Triune God, and that has practical import when you're talking about such issues as race and the like. I have alluded to this in some of our previous segments — the church must live now in light of what will be. So we use Harper's words, thus bringing the future into the present. We live now in light of that eschatological reality in the present context — the now of the not yet, so to speak. The church must be seen, as others have argued, as a concrete manifestation of the eschatological kingdom.

There is also that aspect of Trinitarian thought in that we must see ourselves (this is how the book starts out with the first chapter) as a *being-driven* community. The first chapter is "the church as a Trinitarian community," the church as a kingdom community, so to speak...and so the

church as a Trinitarian community, the being-driven church. While I think that Pastor Warren's purposes for *Purpose Driven Church* are biblical, I don't see a problem with them, I think more foundational than purpose and activity is *being*, communion, relationality.

We should all be purposeful, but you can be purposeful in a variety of ways. What about the baby who doesn't have much purpose in life, or the elderly person who's not able to function very well? They might not be seen to have much purpose, but they're still loved, and they're in relationship, I would hope, in the church. But we often look at people pragmatically, in a utilitarian way, of what benefit we can gain from them if they attend our church? What are they going to put in the offering plate, or what kind of tools or gifting might they have? We want people to bring their resources and gifts and talents to the church, but do we care for them as persons in relationship?

We have all these churches that are called "community church," but, as a friend of mine in London said, "The very thing people want most they find most difficult to give — communion." We all want it, but it's costly, and it causes for a lot of consternation, because we usually don't want to build the kind of community that's needed, and that calls for a lot of sacrifice.

Relationality must be at the core. The Trinitarian framework of our churches being the people of God — because that's what we are biblically, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body and bride of Christ, those things, the household of God. Most of those images, if not all of them, are framed relationally, organically, and not by way of institutional frames of reference.

I hope that as we're inviting people to our churches, that they're coming not because we have the best programs in town, which I think can play into the consumerism — who has the best children's programs, who has the best latté, who has the best coffee bar, on and on it goes. Instead of that frame of reference, it should be "come be the people of God with us," — participational, relational. That's key to the book.

Yet, as George Hunsberger, a leading figure on missional theology, has said, "So often in America the church is viewed as a vender of religious goods and services..." It's the commodification of human identity [turning people into commodities] and of spirituality and of consumerism. What we're trying to get at is that the church is the human community, the people of the Triune God, and we must live as that people in the here and now.

I will mention one other point that brings us into the issue of contemporary cultural considerations, and, as you mentioned in the introduction at a few points in our various talks, I edit a journal called *Cultural Encounters*, which is a biblically informed Trinitarian engagement of

contemporary culture and its various manifestations. I have a real burden for that, and it flows out of an institute I direct called “New Wine, New Wineskins” at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland.

With that cultural framing, we did a lot of the chapters, follow-up sections, as well as a major chapter in exploring ecclesiology, from this cultural vantage point. In America the church is often seen as a voluntary association of religious individuals whose true allegiance lies with the state, the market, or the nuclear family rather than being seen as the people of the Triune God, the kingdom community of the Triune God. I think we need to move beyond that idea of voluntary association of religious individuals where we pick and choose the churches we want to attend and we find our true identity with the state, the market, or even the soccer family motif, of finding that people are more connected to those after-school or weekend programs than they are to being part of the people of God. There are many reasons why that’s a problem — partly the way America is framed from its founding but also a contemporary consumer problem.

These themes emerge and re-emerge in the book. We’re hopeful that it will be of help not only to evangelicalism but to the broader church as well, because it is also an ecumenical book concerned for the church at large. We’re hopeful that it will help the evangelical community become more ecclesiastically framed. With all of our emphasis on individuality, it’s hard for us to see the church as something other than the people of God. We so readily look at it as a means to an end of helping our own individual spirituality, and God’s concern is first and foremost for the church. I’m not the bride of Christ, I’m not the body of Christ, I’m *part* of the bride, I’m *part* of the body. The church’s concerns must file away at my own concerns in the church.

JMF: What advice would you give pastors who want to shift their focus from legalism to grace, from an inward kind of a theology to a Trinitarian theology?

PLM: As it relates to the doctrine of the church and the like? I think for one, when we’re talking about the church as the kingdom community of the Triune God and God as a holy lover, we must always see that we have to get beyond this idea of sin management — that we’re going to church to manage our sin, to keep it under lock and key and close the doors. In fact, we don’t even deal with our sin in the church. There’s a lot of dysfunction. It’s like being an alcoholic. (I have friends and loved ones who struggle in that way, so I don’t mean this in any demeaning manner, but they don’t talk, don’t feel, don’t think about these things.) That pertains to a variety of issues in the

church. We don't have safety, we don't have authenticity, and we have to create a safe environment where people can be authentic and really deal with issues.

One of the things we get at in *Exploring Ecclesiology* is that we need to see the church as not simply a sanctuary of saints but also a hospital for sinners. As Martin Luther made clear, we are both unrighteous apart from Christ but also righteous — but only in Christ. So we have to keep that dialectic in mind, if we're to move beyond behavioral Christianity. We have to acknowledge that we're all broken people saved by God's loving grace, and we're on this journey together. We're not finished products, and we need to love one another and see truth and holiness relationally.

So also with truth, instead of having a guard-keeping mentality of gate-keeping, and if anyone doesn't line up theologically, we're going to oust them, using doctrine as a means of how do we help people grow in the truth of Jesus Christ? We need to have a mindset that we're about relational truth, not truth as some kind of doctrinal position that we simply recite and stick on a wall. No, it's articulating what it is we believe and the reality of God in whom we participate. It's from a relational framework.

I believe that does help us get beyond behaviorism and legalism and to really work with people...disclosing to them first and foremost in preaching and in other ways this idea of who God is revealed in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, as God is a holy lover and is someone who longs to have communion with us. To understand who we are as the church in relationship to that God, I think that's exciting and where I would hope that pastors would increasingly move to invite people to taste and see that the Lord is good in the communion of his saints.

JMF: If there was one main thing that you'd like to get across to people about God, what would that be?

PLM: I would long for people to know, and not simply to know cognitively, but to know experientially, that God and Christ truly loves them. I look out at the faces of people when I share about God's holy love for us in Christ and the Spirit and that God loves us dearly, and I can often see in people's eyes a longing, a sense of longing, "If only that were true, I wish that were true, I want that to be true." We live in a culture today where there's so much dysfunction in the family and in society at large, people don't know what it's like to be loved, to be cared for faithfully and for the long term, for the long haul. Show me a child who is secure, and I'll show you a child who is loved. Show me a child who's insecure, and I'll show you a child who has not been loved.

The apostle Paul, when he was Saul, was all about trying to perform, was all about trying to gain merit and worth and security. I think he struggled with these Pharisaical teachers about the circumcision laws, who were trying to take people away from security in Christ toward insecurity, and Paul was all about moving beyond that, because he had been in that frame of reference for such a long time. Jesus would come on the Damascus road and love him, transform him, make him his own, make him someone who had a calling, a purpose, and life in him. Those who are forgiven much love much.

I've often had, and still struggle with, insecurities. It's often in my hard times — not the good times, in my hard times, that I have found that God truly loves me and that God comes close. When I'm thinking, "If I go through these hard times, how will I ever make it?" I have found time and time again that he is there to sustain and to lift me up and to draw me into a closer relationship with him through his Son. I don't mean this as "pie in the sky" impractical spirituality. This is, to me, the most important thing.

For the people I mentor in the internship program with New Wine, New Wineskins, the thing I want for them is what I want for myself too, is that whenever they're ministering, from whatever vantage point, it's not that they're trying to measure up and to make something of their lives, but everything would be not from measuring up, but from the measureless overflow of God's love in Christ. Again, Romans 5:5. I love coming back to that text. It was a key text to Luther, a key text to Jonathan Edwards, and a key text to Saint Augustine. "The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

It's that love that creates faith, because if a child doesn't trust the parent, they're not going to believe in that parent. If they don't think that that parent loves them, they're not going to trust. It's only when they know that their parent cares for them and is living it out, that the child really trusts. It's important for ministry, vitally important. How many people are in our chairs, in the pews, in the pulpits, who really don't think God loves them? They're performing in order to try to get at that. I can't wave a magic wand and make that happen for people. I think it comes through the trenches, the difficulties of life experiences, and being loved by other people in the church. What we need is people who come alongside us and say, just as Christ has accepted us, Romans 15:7, "So I accept you."

I had a very painful past. I was rebellious as a youth and went through a lot of self-doubt going into the ministry. A pastor, mentor of mine, said, "I accept you, Paul, and I love you, and I care for you, and I believe God's hand is upon you." He spoke the words of Christ to me in the love of Christ, and

mentored me and secured me in that love because God does use his people to that end. We need one another to confess our sins to one another, as the New Testament talks about, and also to encourage and exhort one another, but from a relational vantage point of moving forward participating in the triune life of God and his story, and that we're a part of that story. It's amazing to me. That's good news.

JMF: Where do you see the church, or where would you like to see the church in general in the U.S. ten years from now?

PLM: I hope that as the church...I long for this, I pray for this...that we would be beyond the performance frame of reference of the driven-ness toward success. While I want us to be good stewards, I think a lot of times we're trying to play the role of God in the numbers games that we play, and one church competing with another church.

It's often subtle, sometimes not so subtle, but performance-based spirituality. Pastors go to conferences; the question that's often asked of them is, "How big is your church?" If their church is small, they lose value. That's the kind of thing that is really problematic. Then that pastor brings that pressure back to the churches, and then they start viewing people as means to an end of growing the church, rather than they themselves are the end as the church — the people of God are.

For an academic like myself, is it publish or perish? Or is the writing I do simply gratitude of delighting in God's love and having a burden to express that, and not looking to how I can build my resume? I have the struggles, too, pastors have their own struggles, but then, how does that shape itself in the lives of parishioners in the congregations — that performance of measuring up, measuring up, and not making, not making it?

The call to sanctification in the churches should not be, don't be who you *are* — be what you're *supposed* to be. That's not how the apostle Paul spoke. It was, "Be who you are, not what you once were." We're calling on people to be who they are in Christ, and to be that together with them, and to move into that safety and authenticity bound up with the holy love of God in Christ that secures us in the Spirit poured out in our lives and in our hearts. That's what I would hope for the church to move into, and the reconciliation that that entails on subjects as we've talked before on moving beyond racism and classism divisions and the like, and moving toward a unity that's a reconciled unity in the power of the Spirit to the honor of Jesus for the Father.

JMF: What do you see as some of the causes for legalism and behaviorism in Christian churches?

PLM: I believe people-pleasing is a huge problem. I think of the Gospel

of John. I'm working on a book on that subject with InterVarsity, and one of the things that keeps coming up is that they love the praise or the glory of humans rather than the praise and glory of God, whereas Jesus loved the Father's praise. He longed for the Father's affirmation. He had it — it wasn't something he had to go and seek after, but that's what concerned him is, was he pleasing his Father. That filial connection, that love relationship of the Father and Son, it kept Jesus immune to people-pleasing in his human state. It kept him from that evil.

Paul says strongly in the Galatians epistle, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men or of God? If I am still trying to win the approval of men, I am not a servant of Christ." He says, "You foolish Galatians, having begun in the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" He talks in that same book about how he had to rebuke Peter because Peter would not associate with the Gentiles in table fellowship, because he was afraid of the Judaizers, or what his own people might think of him, and that enslaved him to a godless passion.

As Martin Luther and others have talked about, we need to be enslaved to a godly passion controlled by the Spirit. That's not legalism, because those who are controlled by the Spirit, they're not enslaved to the law of sin and death, but they live by the fruit of the Spirit, "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Again, that comes from the book of Galatians. People pleasing, I think, causes us to look inward, trying to compensate, trying to cope, because we're trying to win the approval of people who are out to win their own approval. That's not freeing — that's enslaving in a very dysfunctional manner. People-pleasing is a huge problem.

There's also the legalism that's bound up with performance-based spirituality. One of the things that Trinitarian theology involves is this key theme of participation. We've talked about it in different segments, but my own dean, Dr. Robert Redman, has talked about how there's so much ministry burnout...people talking about what they need to do for God, what they must do for God in ministry, instead of what they do *in* God. You know, "Abide in me and my word...abide in you." You know, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus says.

So it's participation. We live *in* God, not simply live *for* God. God doesn't even see us simply through Christ, he sees us *in* Christ. Paul's key phrase, "*en Christos*," in Christ. That would be the vantage point that guards us from legalism. It guards us from a performance-based spirituality. I'm excited about what's going on in your own movement. I believe it's a movement of

God's Spirit. I seldom see a vibrant concern for Trinitarian theology, and I cannot say enough how encouraged I am by what you're doing, and I encourage you and those who work with you, Mike, to keep moving in this direction, because you're an encouragement to me, you're a good challenge to me and to many others to keep the faith and to press on in terms of Trinitarian thought, because it's not life-taking, it's life-giving.

It's made all the difference in the world to me because it's not a program, it's not a product that we sell to people — this is our God! God is a triune communion of persons — eternal, holy, life-giving, and he calls us to participate in God's story for eternity. That is what I'm willing to live and die for. This is good news to me, and you guys are leading the charge by the Spirit of God leading through you to move in this direction. I can only pray God's richest blessings on you in this profound work, so thank you.

45. HELPING YOUTH EXPERIENCE CHRIST

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

What’s behind the name, Reality Ministries?

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

JMF: Really?

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



Jesus Christ is how we know what God is like, and that’s how we define what God is like through his Incarnation, and his articulation of what the life of God is like.

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

JM: By buying into that model, what we are saying is that when we make a decision of faith, we’re actually changing the reality. We’re changing the truth – which to me smacks more of postmodern relativism than it does of the gospel. The gospel give us a way into understanding that what we are

living into by the Holy Spirit when we come to faith, is something that was already true before we believed it. Or else, it's not true. I don't want to fall victim to, or set people up to believe that we *create* the truth by our decision.

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

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

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

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

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

And I say, "Before you jump to conclusions, let me explain what I mean by that. What I mean is that kids today, more than ever, don't understand what God's attitude is towards them." Because they don't see him as he truly is and have distorted pictures of him, they feel that God must be against them. Or even that the youth minister, or the youth leader that's reaching out

to them and is treating them with all the fruits of the Holy Spirit, must be doing that in a way to somehow use it as a means to an end to get them to hear about a God who is really not like that.

We want kids to know that Jesus Christ (and hopefully, much of the time we are representations of Jesus Christ as his ambassadors) is truly an accurate picture of who God is. A lot of people don't trust the picture that they get in Jesus Christ and believe that God is different from Jesus, and a lot of people, even all of us, whether young or old, are tempted to question, "What does God really think about me?" and "Is God really like Jesus Christ?" Those are questions that can haunt us if we don't...

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

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

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

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

JM: Everything depends on the starting point, doesn't it, Mike? For instance, if you start with hell, or if you start with "you are separated from God," you're essentially saying, that is the reality. Your starting point is the

reality. The way we articulate the gospel, we communicate that hell is a greater reality. Heaven or life with Christ is the exception to the rule – it kind of sneaks in there, and God will tolerate you (because of what Christ has done) and he will allow you to come into heaven. Maybe at that point, you're told that everything changes and his attitude about you changes once you become a Christian – and yet again, if his attitude was the exception to the rule for you as a Christian now full of grace, that means that really his attitude changed from being against you to being for you – and at the end of the day, can we trust that that is indeed the case? Or are we gonna fall back on the default of, “you're not really sure if God loves you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Or not.

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: And repent means – be perfect.

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

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

JM: Repentance is not about that. In fact, repentance is the word *metanoia*, and that is a radical re-schematizing of our minds, a radical change of mind, where all of a sudden we say, by the Holy Spirit, I'm not believing that Jesus Christ loves me conditionally. I'm believing that he loves me unconditionally and wholly, and that he says to me, "You are forgiven, therefore repent."

John Calvin coined the term, “evangelical repentance.” The idea is that you *are* forgiven; therefore repent. As opposed to the idea, “*If* you repent, you will be forgiven.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

grace lets us off the hook.

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

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

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

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

JMF: And we're part of it already.

JM: We're part of it. God has said "yes" to us and he said "yes" for us,

not just a sloppy kind of liberalism...

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: That's where the repentance problem comes in, with people misunderstanding what repentance is. They think that repentance is a life of perfection. Whereas repentance is a change of mind, to know what this reality is of who you really are in Christ in spite of this old self that still raises its head.

JM: Colossians 2 talks about Christ being the reality, and even Sabbath day observances can distort our mind and thinking and cause us to think that, that's the reality and even the good becomes the enemy of the best. Or religion gets in the way, and our proud badges that we wear. But it goes on

in chapter 3 to say, you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above. Practice living and thinking by the rules of reality, not by unreality. You've been raised with Christ. He says in the first part of Colossians 3, you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of some kind of sin modification or behavioral modification or sin management and trying to help him with all kinds of techniques to stop his habit, I tried to go deeper and to stare that pseudo-reality down and to say to him, there's something deeper. Because otherwise it's like re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. You're just trying to deal with those symptoms of the sinful nature that are still there. When I said that to him, it pierced his heart and he began to weep, because he needed to be reminded that this forgiveness was not something slapped on something that was the ultimate reality of his sinfulness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: That's reality.

JM: And his resurrection is reality.

46. DOES JESUS APPEASE GOD'S ANGER?

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

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

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

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

JMF: And that's not reality?

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

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

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

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

JM: That's right.

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

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

I was taking a series of courses from Fuller Theological Seminary through

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

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

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

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

JMF: Now, that ties in so importantly with the Trinitarian understanding

of who God is, but the whole point of us understanding that God is Father, Son and Spirit – the Father and Son are one God – is that, if Jesus likes us, well, that’s how the Father feels about us, too.

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

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

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

JMF: They all belong to him.

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

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

JM: It’s made a dramatic difference in the way I do evangelism, because what I’m doing first and foremost now is giving young people or anyone who wants to listen the reality of their belonging to God first – not just by creation in some general... God created us all in his image. But Jesus Christ is the creator and he is also the Redeemer – the two are one and should not be pulled apart. Jesus Christ has belonged us to the Trinity – to the Father, Son,

and Spirit relationship – and he’s done that by grace, and he’s done that in a way that’s so sure, that when you begin to speak that way – and make that kind of a robust claim upon a person’s life, the bell of truth often goes off in them and they begin to realize, I am created for something more, and not something that I have to create or make true by my own decision, but something that’s already true.

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

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

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

JM: Right.

JMF: How do you get that across to kids?

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

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

Supposedly monkeys in Australia, the way that they catch them is they put

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

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

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

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

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

become just a drop of rain in a cosmic sea, but in a way that really personalizes you into the person you are created to be.”

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

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

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

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

accepted and cleansed not in spite of God's holiness but because of it."

JM: I see that most prominently in the Gospels, where Jesus interacts with sinners, especially in Mark chapter 1 with the leper. In that chapter, Jesus is recognized as the Holy One by the demons. They see the transcendent picture of who this Jesus Christ who has been made flesh – they see that picture in a more accurate way than the human beings that are around Jesus at that time – there's an irony in that. But here's Jesus, this is where we find what the holiness of God is like, this story where Jesus Christ reaches out and he touches and embraces this leper at his worst. He doesn't cleanse him from afar and say, "Zap, I healed you. Now, come here, brother, give me a hug." He goes up and touches this man wracked with leprosy. I can imagine him putting his hand right around his neck, right there looking into his eyes, right in the sores of his skin and saying, "Of course, I want to. Be clean." And he was cleansed at that very instant.

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

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

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

JMF: And in fact I've already.

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

All we can do is preach the truth and hope that by the Holy Spirit people will have ears to hear. When they hear that, when they hear that good news, they begin to see the "NO" that God has against sin – inside of the larger "Yes" that he is saying to us. He never says "No" to us and then "Yes" to us

later when we get cleansed. It's always "Yes" to us, but he's saying "No" to that sin and he does something about it. He doesn't just give you an offer of some pills to take to make it better maybe. But "NO" – I'm so thoroughly against sin that I'm going to eradicate it. I'm going to destroy it. Because you are so insinuated by it, I needed to crucify you in me as the Holy One, I needed to take you in myself and crucify you in order to make you new, and give you new life, and for you to share my righteousness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those are very comprehensive statements. Does that make us universalists? No. By no means does it, because we don't believe in that inevitable deterministic kind of robotic love – it's not really love at all. So I'm going to base my theology on what I know about Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the Scriptures that I just mentioned and others. There are

question marks about hell. Do I know anyone is in hell? I don't, I don't have the vision beyond the curtain to know that there are. I can hope that... I think it's okay for us as Christians based on scriptures to hope that no one is in hell. Because Peter says, God is patient, does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

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

JMF: And that's completely unscriptural.

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

47. CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM, AND KARL BARTH

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

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

JMF: And could you rehearse that?

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

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

JMF: A focus on freedom.

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

The idea of what freedom is, is something that Karl Barth hammers on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

my own faith occurs in that moment.

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

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

Once they proclaim you are a sinner, therefore repent, and then they see people who do repent, then they can say, "Well actually, you were forgiven 2,000 years ago by the cross of Christ, actually you are already reconciled to God, and already redeemed by the finished work of Christ. But we couldn't tell you that upfront because we didn't know if you are one of the elect or not." The "Limited Atonement" piece is really troublesome and causes an internal conflict for the passionate five-point Calvinist evangelist – because he does want people to know Jesus Christ, but he's a little bit hamstrung because he can't get the good news out there at the beginning. He can't say, "You do belong to God, you are one of the elect, you are chosen by God," until that person shows some kind of movement toward God, and then he can give them the goods.

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

JMF: If you are a five-point Calvinist, how can you be sure that you are among the elect, because if you were among the elect, then you should be bringing forth fruits that are meet for repentance. Every time you fail in some way, then you have to kind of look over your shoulder and say, “Well, maybe I just think I’m elect and I’m going through the motions but I’m not really right.” How do I know for sure? The only evidence that there is, is godly behavior, a changed heart – so it comes back down to a lack of assurance based on whether or not you’re bringing forth fruit. And so, if we’re honest with ourselves, most of the time we’ve got a kernel of doubt about whether we really are. We can say, “I’m sure, I’m convinced, I know I am one of the elect.” But there’s really no way of proving it beyond any shadow of a doubt.

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

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

JMF: That kind of language is actually used.

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

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

and the sacrifice of the cross all go together, and you can't force those apart and say, God loves everyone, but Jesus Christ does it apart from them in terms of redemption and in terms of his death on the cross.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now the weakness. There was a time in my life where I did agree with the Arminian way of thinking – I thought of the cross more as a hypothetical – there wasn't anything actually accomplished by the cross and by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I could say Jesus Christ died for every one of you, but it wasn't true that they were forgiven or redeemed or reconciled to God until that person, in the Jeff-moment, made that decision. As I began to realize that, and began to understand why Karl Barth wanted to move away

from that, I began to realize that it's a great favor to us as human beings not to be thrown back upon ourselves in order to try to make this true or to make this real, or to make this actual, or effective.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul is saying, "It's not a question of whether everybody died and rose with Christ." The question is, "Are you going to live for yourself, or are you going to live for him who, for your sake, died and was raised?" There's an objective truth, but there's a subjective participation in the objective truth. It

goes on to say, “We no longer, therefore, look at anyone from a human point of view. We used to look at Christ that way, but from now on we don’t, and anyone is in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone, the new is come.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Therefore as a person who’s included in that, you may submit to it or may fight against it. The subjective participation is to believe, not only that you’re included in this, but every person in the world is included. This gets past the “limited atonement” problem. If I don’t know everybody’s been included in this, I’m not really sure if I have been included in it. Because that goes back to... if just a few people are included, how do I know if I’m on the right side

or the left side of the ledger? But to the extent that I know this includes everyone, I'd be assured that it includes me, too. But to the extent that I think it includes *some* people, I'll be concerned and worried about that, and my assurance would be virtually nil, or it will go through this revolving door syndrome.

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

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

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

I would say, that's a great place to be. I think everyone who's a Calvinist who wants to give the first and last word to God, needs to go through this strait of wrestling with that question – because it does still seem to exalt the "do" over the "done." But what Barth wants to do is always keep the "do" *inside* the "done." He would say the epitome of anthropocentrism, the epitome of humanism, would be for us to objectify God and to say from a distance, "This is the situation now (as I just described it a minute ago), and now I'm going to decide if I believe it or not."

Barth would say that Arminianism, at the end of the day, is humanistic. He'd say that Calvinists are right in that it's not good enough just to stop

there, he would say that it lands us in a place of semi-Pelagianism – where belief becomes a work. Barth will never do that. But how does he keep the “do” inside of the “done”? He does that by using the word “be.” As Paul says in this passage, “You’ve been reconciled to God, therefore we beseech you: BE reconciled to God.”

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

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

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

Instead of fighting to get ourselves outside of that equation, just recognize you’re inside of it. Don’t fight that, you’re inside. Submit to the ad infinitum. You can never get to a place where you pull your belief outside of what God has done or what God is doing to make a decision about it as if you’re quantifying God. That is actually religion. Instead, Jesus Christ has made this decision. Your decision is really more of a non-decision. The action step is really a non-action step. It’s important, it’s critical, but it’s actually to submit

to the ad infinitum of saying, “My decision is not that important anymore, my decision is secondary to the decision that God has made for me and Jesus Christ – that God has said, ‘yes’ to me and he said ‘yes’ for me in Christ.”

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

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

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

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

Jesus is trying to get something through to us when he says, “If you want to find your life, you got to lose it.” When you lose your agency, you lose your claim to individual decision-making and making-it-happen, you get back your personhood and you get back your share in the Trinitarian persons and that great dance that’s going on between Father, Son and Spirit. Who, if they knew, would want to hold on to their individuality and be wrapped up in themselves (which is a very small package), if they really heard the gospel with ears to hear and could lose their individualism to become a person?

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

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

48. ARE WE SINNERS, OR SAINTS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

exist in the same space and therefore there is a mutual exclusivity there that if God became sin, he must have stopped being God. That's bad Christology, but in turn it's also bad anthropology, because of what Christ has done for all of us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

onto us there, and pulled us out, pulled hell inside out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's say this is our fallen human selves, and we used to look at ourselves like this, and we saw our sinfulness and we saw our shame and we saw our

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

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

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

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

If we start with that as the baseline, then all of a sudden, instead of trying to minimize our sin or manage it, we can see how heinous it is. To me, this is one of the great keys of sanctification for us as believers in the economy of grace. We can give ourselves permission to say, "I am wicked in many of my motives. I am bankrupt. I struggle with original sin. I am tempted in ways maybe now that I wasn't tempted before."

What we are allowing ourselves to do is to start with the starting point of total grace, and from within that, to be able to see our total depravity. But to

talk about total depravity outside of total grace will destroy us absolutely. That's why Karl Barth, the Torrances, and others have always wanted us to know that God's "no" to humanity was always inside of the larger "yes." Our solidarity with Adam and our solidarity with Christ fit in the same space.

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

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

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

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

JM: To be able to say "I am moving toward the finish line because Christ has carried me across the finish line" is a beautiful way of thinking. I am going to make it across the finish line because I *have* [already] made it across the finish line. Sanctification depends on starting with the end in mind. It comes down to believing that we're home before we start.

JMF: When Paul gives these so-called sin lists or gives admonition about right living, he always starts from "here's who you already are, therefore act

like it, therefore behave this way.” Not “*If* you behave this way, then you’ll become the child of God,” but “You’re already a child of God, this is who you are, therefore start living like it.”

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

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

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

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

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

Thank God that idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Thank God that that adulterous Jeff McSwain has been crucified with Christ and no longer lives. In the ultimate scheme of things, he doesn’t have a future. Thankfully, I don’t have to define myself that way anymore, so I can give full play to my sinfulness and say thank God that that doesn’t inherit the kingdom, thank God Jesus Christ has taken care of that, thank God that grace is a slaying grace – that I have been crucified with Christ, that when Christ died, I died, and so did all of us, and we’ve been given a new life. To think about it from that perspective...

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: In spite of the fact that that's often used as an attack against you talking about grace too much. I've never met somebody who actually says that, who actually believes "I can do whatever I want because I'm under grace." The spirit of God in us doesn't even let us think like that.

JM: Alan Torrance has a good line about that. He talks about how in the

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

JMF: Exactly. It's nonsense.

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

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

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

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

That's why this whole thing is corporate from beginning to end. What must I do to be saved? Well, be saved because you are. How do I do that? I want to know how. How? How? Well, let's do it together. Let's just celebrate it. Let's pretend like it's true. Let's keep thanking God over and over and be grateful for what he's done, and let's rub in the ointment of grace. And pretty soon we'll begin to have the mind of Christ, which we have been given, to think about ourselves more accurately, but not only that, to think about everybody else in the world more accurately.

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

49. READING THE BIBLE WITH JESUS AS THE GUIDE

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

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

JMF: I've heard it put that way.

JM: Many times it's put synonymously.

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

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

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

But oftentimes we don't think about this. If we're going to have a really high view of Scripture, we need to keep the written word subservient to the Word, the Living Word. What I mean by that is to have the highest view of

Scripture, it needs to be in its proper place. It needs to be held accountable to Jesus Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JM: Right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he says that within the good news... all have been redeemed and justified by the work of Jesus Christ. There's the symmetry of the "all" and the "all." All fall short, and all have been justified by his grace in 3:23 and 24. Paul reinterprets the Psalmist's dualism and what he wants to eventually lead to is to talk about the fact that those two things are not a dualism, they're a duality that's defined by the person of Jesus Christ, the two natures in one person – that Jesus Christ, that we are the wicked, all of us, but Jesus Christ has shared our wickedness...that he is the righteous, but he's also shared his righteousness.

He shares our wickedness to give us his righteousness. That wonderful

exchange moves us past the dualism of the Old Testament and moves us into the Christological way of understanding righteousness and wickedness as a duality, instead of in a dualistic way where we're the righteous, they're the wicked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

God loves everybody. What's a right way to understand that passage in its context?

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

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

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

JMF: It's a hyperbole of contrast.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JM: That's right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: It's funny how in human language we use metaphors and hyperbole all the time and we understand what we mean by it, and nobody takes it literally. If I say, "It's raining cats and dogs" nobody runs outside to see cats and dogs smashing against the ground. We know what I mean. We know that it's a way of saying that it's raining very hard. Nobody has a problem with that. But God forbid that the Scripture should use the same kind of conventions that normal human language does. Well of course it does! If I say the Phillies bombed the Dodgers, I don't mean the Phillies bombed the Dodgers literally. It's just a way of saying that they beat them with a high score. Everybody knows that, but then we go to Scripture and we all of a sudden want it to be literal in everything it says....completely misusing it.

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

Well, we have to go to the Scripture and say, okay, these people *are*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

50. EVERYONE BELONGS, WHETHER THEY KNOW IT OR NOT

JMF: Could you tell us about Reality Ministries?

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

JMF: "Live into"?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Regardless of decision.

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Most youth programs, or most churches, take that kind of approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

community, that kind of belonging is attractive to young teenagers that we work with.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cannot be lost unless he has a home.” We want them to know what their home is, who their home is, and how they can walk in relationship with this great God that we know.

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

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

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

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

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

We want kids to know they are in his embrace, Christ has embraced them at their worst, and we’re not the center of reality, where *we* can invite Christ

in as an accessory to our lives, or even to be the center of our life. Christ is *always* the center. He's never anything but the center. Because of what he's done in Christ, he's the center of everyone's life. That sounds heretical to some in the evangelical world, but when you think about it, how heretical does it sound to say that Christ is not involved, that Christ is not the center, but *we* make him the center? To me, that sounds a lot more heretical.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What we want these kids to know at the Reality Center is that Jesus Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

was able to bare his soul, “Have mercy on me, for I am a sinful man,” he says.

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

51. RESPONDING TO GOD IN AN AUTHENTIC WAY

J. Michael Feazell: As I understand it, you were the first American student that James Torrance had in doctoral studies in Aberdeen.

Roger Newell: Right, that was 1978. I arrived just a little bit after Professor Torrance came the previous semester to be the professor there, after having been the teacher in Attenborough, Scotland, for quite a few years. It was a great opportunity and privilege to be one of his early students, to attend his seminars, and to get to know him as a mentor and as a friend.

JMF: You mentioned that he instilled the passion in you for pastoral ministry...

RN: Right. The time I went there, I was thinking maybe I wasn't sure if I was going to do pastoral work or just pursue teaching. But having studied with Professor Torrance, I became more aware of a call that I really did want to pastor. He inspired in me a sense that the parish, the local church, is the laboratory where people come to know the living God and we become

participants in that and roll up our sleeves. That was very significant, and I wanted to do that.

JMF: So you spent a little over a decade in pastoral ministry before you began teaching in George Fox.

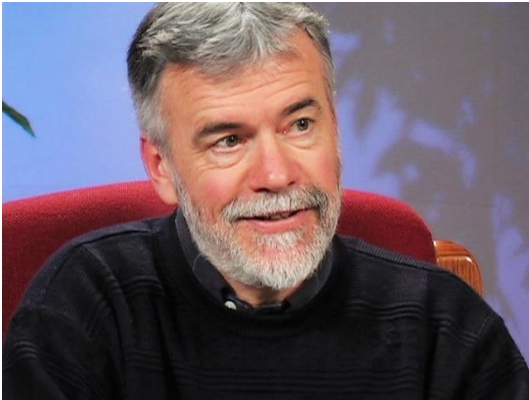
RN: Thirteen years.

JMF: That would bring to your theology a real,

practical, meaningful, tone that we don't often see in theology.

RN: I was also fortunate in having studied with Ray Anderson at Fuller Seminary. Ray had made it important, and modeled for this same kind of connection and integration between pastoral care and pastoral work and the best theology one can articulate.

JMF: We had the privilege of having Ray on this program. In some of the writings you've done, you've written about the encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel. Gabriel announces to Mary what's going to happen to her and then her response to that, and then you tied that in with *our* response. Could you talk about that?



RN: The reason I started in with the story of Mary as a way of trying to understand how a person responds to God is because, in a way, she's the first one in the Church who has the word spoken to her by the angel. She's the one through whom the Word becomes incarnate. Her response becomes, in some ways, a way to begin to understand what it means and how you and I can learn many years later to begin to respond. She is a great example to see what is going on in learning how to respond to God. I wanted to start with her.

JMF: One of the things with Mary that you point out is that her response is not some ideal, high, moral, Christian, so called, godly response, as we think of that sometimes – she's a little worried about it, upset, to some degree – there are all kinds of questions she has, it's a very human response.

RN: Yes. If we take the halo pre-arranged off her, then it's important to realize that she, as the text says very clearly, was deeply troubled. She is a young woman going to her prayers, as a devout, young Jewish maiden, and what she got in her prayers that day was not what she was looking forward to, and it wasn't expected, and the text is clear that she was deeply troubled by what happened, and she was also afraid.

If they had wanted to make her into some kind of an idealized portrait, they would have air-brushed that very human response away. But instead, there it is, and this is how she responded. It's part of her journey to then saying, "I'm the handmaid of the Lord, and let it be to me according your will." It's all included, and that's an important key, an important thing for us to remember – that there is no perfect way to respond to God except to be genuine and honest before God. If there's fear, if there's trouble – things going on in my life – that's part of what I openly and honestly bring to the table. God accepts that.

JMF: In preaching and teaching that, we tend to hear the admonition that jumps us right to the very end – let it be unto me as the Lord has spoken, without acknowledging the fact that there is a journey to get to that spot. It's a human journey, and the honesty that you spoke of, being a part of what we are able to have as a part of our response – admitting to God, dealing with God, like Jacob did – this wrestling with God over issues, is part of the Christian experience. That has become lost in some of the liturgy and some of the teaching and preaching we hear today.

RN: I suppose it's inevitable that we jump too quickly to the last word, and we don't always listen to the next-to-the-last word. We hurry to the happy ending, maybe, or the perfection, and the real journey that people have sometimes is telescoped or narrowed. Maybe that's part of the fact that in our culture everybody's in a hurry. The pastor's in a hurry, he wants to have

perfected saints. Sinners are very messy to deal with, and if you could clean them up more quickly, maybe everybody's job would be a little easier.

But for whatever reason, that doesn't seem to be how we are formed. To try to prematurely, or shrink-wrap Christians and make them saints, in a way that's artificial, like hot-house plants, doesn't seem to work. We may have to begin to unlearn the false responses that we make to God because we think everybody expects them of us. But they aren't from our own hearts. We have to sometimes unlearn those manufactured approaches and learn to respond to God genuinely as did Mary.

JMF: You talked about the "ought" and the "should," how did you put that...

RN: The danger is that, in the urgency or the anxiety we preachers sometimes have to get people to the bottom line, we can pressurize people to make the response we think they ought to make... Maybe we lack confidence that God is going to do what he intends to do, and so we feel like we have to pull the strings a little bit. So we can put pressure on people, and as a result, instead of letting people respond to the good news, we have this twist, and sometimes we turn the good news into "should" news.

This is something that's been talked about, I think very perceptively, by C.S. Lewis, and why he wrote the *Chronicles of Narnia*. He says that one of the things he thought that was inhibiting people from really hearing the gospel is that... He talked about the stained-glass window in Sunday School associations, whereby one was told, one ought to be grateful to God, one ought to be thankful. And having heard this so often, it caused the person to focus on themselves and their response, rather than on the object, the reality of God, which naturally evokes a response. Inadvertently, we in the church too often turn the good news into "should" news. It's not our intention, but what it means is the recipients take their eyes off the source and try to manufacture a response that we think is expected, and ironically, that cuts off our feelings, and our feelings freeze up.

JMF: Don't we do that a lot, especially in worship: we try to make ourselves feel something, we're not sure exactly how we should feel, but we know, not to be holy and not to be sanctimonious or something, and so we try to will ourselves into the right feeling – and, as you say, our attention is totally on ourselves instead of on the object of our worship.

RN: That's right, and the problem is that we become self-centered in our worship, either focusing on our virtue, in patting ourselves on the back and thinking well done, or we become focused on our failures, our inadequacies and whether our self-centered response to God becomes inflated, congratulating ourselves, self-righteous on the one hand, or we become

discouraged and deflated and put ourselves down on the other. Both are ways of getting in the way and not being responsive, trying to create some kind of virtue in ourselves.

This always leaves us frustrated, either in a negative way or a positive way – the Pharisee thinking, “Thank you God that I’m not like other people. Wow, I’m really good at this responding to God.” Or on the other hand, a person who feels like, “Everything I do is hopeless, and I can’t.” Like Martin Luther, when he was a monk, whatever he did wasn’t good enough. He was constantly berating himself and criticizing himself and he had made himself miserable

JMF: Jesus told a parable about two sons. One responded right away with the right words by saying, “I go, sir” when his father told him to go work in the field. And the other one refused, but in the end, the one who responded with the wrong words is the one who did what he was asked, and the other one didn’t.

RN: Right. Even though he said he would, and so the words came easily, but actions, once the father looked the other way, were nowhere to be found. It reminds us of how important our response is meant to be: not just a verbal one, but with our whole hearts. The second sentence is a great example of somebody who took him a while. At first he let his father know (was it his father or the master, I forget), “I’m not doing this.” But it percolated, he thought about it, and he was honest and genuine in his initial, “No,” but as he thought about it, he thought, “I think I’m going to do what I was asked.” That had integrity.

JMF: We have a fear of responding in a way other than rightly, and that contributes to wanting to look at ourselves and analyze how we’re responding, how we’re thinking. But aren’t we freed to respond freely and honestly, if we remember that it isn’t our response that matters. Jesus has already responded for us perfectly as the human who stands in for us before the Father. If we can rest in that, we don’t have to worry about or think about or second guess how we’re responding.

RN: Yes. I’ve been wrestling with the whole relationship between God’s reaching to us and coming to us and our responding to this. I’ve been re-reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his wrestling with this issue in his little book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He talks about the danger of cheap grace – grace that comes without any response on our part, because it’s all been done for us. He says, this is what’s wrong with Germany. He’s writing in 1937, when Fascism has basically taken over a country of good doctrinally Lutheran justification-by-faith Christians. Somehow their response seems to have been perverted. He is trying to recover a sense of response that has integrity.

This is where he makes a great point that grace is absolutely free. It's absolutely free, but it's always costly, because it cost God everything. It cost him sending his own Son, so therefore, it could never be had by us by anything other than by a deep response of gratitude and thanksgiving – that is far more than verbal.

Professor Torrance used to bring this home in an important way when he talked about God's grace being unconditionally free. But he says, as a result, the response is, "Therefore," not "If you." It's not, "If you believe, if you have faith, I will love you, and so on."

But because our God, in Christ, has loved us and given us himself so freely, therefore, we want to respond. That freedom to respond is evoked by the reality of God – not by some sense of obligation on my part to earn merit, but the most natural way of responding to such a good gift.

JMF: It's freeing to know that our response is taken up by Christ, in such a way that it matters and that it's healed. There's a tendency toward carrying unnecessary guilt and carrying an unnecessary burden of second-guessing everything we do and worrying that God might not be accepting us and is probably fed up with us and is angry at us. But how freeing is it to know that as we respond, out of gratitude and a heart of appreciation for one who has healed our responses and made them right, when I'm thinking rightly about that, it keeps me in a channel of rest and freedom. The less I'm focused on myself and how I'm responding, the better I respond. It's when I'm focused on myself and my responses that I seem to be heading to the edges all the time and bouncing down the river instead of going down the middle.

RN: Absolutely. Another way that helps me understand this better is to be aware that my response to God is always an accompanied response. It's not initiative. It's not me taking charge. It's not me asserting myself, but it's learning, like those people we read about in Scripture, to realize that my response, whether it's initial fear, initial hesitation or initially being deeply troubled, is accompanied.

This is part of the importance of the humanity of Jesus, that Jesus became human, fully human. Whatever response that we make is never autonomous, or on our own, but it's shared with Jesus himself, in his own humanity connecting with our humanity. That is part of the freedom and the freeing experience of knowing that my response is not isolated, in some kind of splendor of its own religiosity or whatever, but is taken hold of and brought before God the Father by Jesus the Son.

JMF: You've written about Apollinarianism, which you call functional Apollinarianism, and how it affects our worship patterns and even contemporary music. Could you describe Apollinarianism and functional

Apollinarianism, and how does it affect our worship patterns?

RN: This is a complicated issue ... maybe we could get into this little bit further later on. But what I would say now is that Apollinarianism focuses on the sovereignty or the deity of Christ, but forgets or sets aside the real humanity of Jesus. Sometimes this affects us when we have a worship experience, when we go to church, in which we have forgotten that Jesus is truly human and Christ in his humanity accompanies us in our prayers, in our worship. We have forgotten that we have a priest – a priest in his humanity who accompanies our worship, again to the Father.

But if we don't have that sense of Jesus as humanity and we just have a sense of Christ's exalted Lordship, then we sometimes think, I've got to substitute, I need to somehow intercede for myself, or maybe my pastor has to somehow become the bridge. We can inadvertently put all our marbles on these very frail humans – myself, or my pastor, or whoever – to somehow create the connection between ourselves and God, and we end up with a functional Unitarianism in our worship and our prayers....

JMF: Which is as though Jesus is high and exalted, and we think of him that way, and we re-create the gulf between humanity and God by focusing on Jesus as high and exalted...

RN: Pure deity. God alone, God only. The uniqueness of our faith as Christians is that God has in Jesus become truly human as well as truly divine.

JMF: He is the bridge and the mediator as a human being. [**RN:** That's right.] Many people think of Jesus as being human when he was on earth during the Incarnation itself, and then when he's resurrected and ascends to the Father, he's not human anymore – now he is the exalted God, with God, and we lose the human connectedness, but in fact, he remains human...

RN: Yes. This is a very profound and important thing, that our humanity has been taken up into God through Jesus, and our humanity is no longer apart from Jesus. This is a tremendously important thing to think of. The implications continue to multiply as we ponder what this means. Certainly, part of what it means is that my human response to God should never be seen in isolation from Jesus as accompanying me in his humanity. This is the great theme of the book of Hebrews, that Jesus is our high priest, who in all things knows what we're going through, he's tempted as we are and yet without sin. He knows what it's like to be human, and he knows that from the deepest place of what it means to be a human being – in terms of all our human frailty.

That is the humanity he has worn and recovered and then taken up to God. That includes me and all my awkwardness, my brokenness and my imperfections, as well as my strengths. That's been accompanied, and that's

what I'm learning to offer back up to God. Not in a way that's uniquely set apart...in some kind of isolated offering to God. It's this communion, a communion of love, with the human Jesus.

JMF: We're one with him as he is one with the Father. There's no other way to be human except to be human in Christ – where we live and move and have our being in him and not just as the exalted, resurrected One, which he is, but as the human being – the glorified human.

RN: Even in his glory – remember those wonderful words from Charles or John Wesley – rich wounds he had visible above and beauty glorified – even in his being exalted, his wounds are still visible – his humanity has not been discarded as being something extraneous to the Incarnation, extraneous to the reality of God, but has been brought together again. This is the healing, the bringing together of heaven and earth, where God's will shall come, and his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is the firstfruits of all that. He is going to take all creation with him, and he has done that. And he will do that, but it's an *accompagnement* now. Creation will no longer be cut off and separated from the Redeemer – from its Creator and Redeemer.

JMF: Reminds of one of the last scenes of Jesus in the Gospels, with the disciples, after his resurrection... They're out fishing, and he's on the shore, and he wants them to come and have breakfast with him. This is the resurrected Christ, it's very intimate ...

RN: And very physical [**JMF:** ... real], eating food, and this part of the sheer earthiness of our humanity, and this is included.

JMF: You are working on a new book?

RN: Yeah. The things we were talking about initially, about Mary and the meaning of her response... This has been one of the great challenges for me, to try to make sense out of it... encouraging discipleship, encouraging others to grow and develop as a pastor, and in my own journey to be faithful to Christ in a way that becomes and continues to be healthy and real and not artificial and contrived in order to earn approval – from either others, or one's congregation, or from God. But rather comes out of a heart of genuine response to the good news.

I started with Mary, but I'm really trying to make sense out of what I see as a tremendous gift that C.S. Lewis, in his writings, has given the church about teaching people how to respond to God ... and in his instance, how to respond to literature. What is it about? Why was Lewis such a great reader? Why was he so receptive that he could get to the very heart of what he was reading and pull out what really mattered?

There's a wonderful wisdom in his whole approach to literature, which I think he learned, and it came to him in his own journey of faith – he learned

to recover a faith that he lost to the “should” news, and he learned how to recover and receive again the grace of God as he went through a very difficult time. You know, losing his mother to cancer as a young boy and then his father virtually as well, because his father sends him off to boarding school, and he becomes an atheist.

All the while he was trying to be open and exploring what life is about, but he had some relentless willingness to be open and to ask awkward questions of reality and of himself, too, and ask questions of himself, and eventually this leads him back to faith. Applying some of those lessons, which he, as a world-class literary critic, a wonderfully gifted reader, applying that to learning how to be open in reading of Scripture, our sourcebook.

JMF: Like many, I’m a big fan of C.S. Lewis’ writings, so I’m looking forward to that; I hope it’s published soon and can’t wait to read it.

RN: Thank you, me too. I’m working away, trying to get it in a presentable shape.

52. INSIGHTS OF C.S. LEWIS

JMF: [At the time of this interview] You're working on a book and putting the final touches on it now. Can you tell us about that?

RN: Yes, my concern is to try to try out the implications of Trinitarian theology for how we read Scripture. I found a wonderful guide in this with the writings of C.S. Lewis, who has himself had to work through a lot of false starts of trying to respond to God, and he learned through the writings of George McDonald and through encounters with Christians, that he had sold Christianity prematurely as not a helpful way, that he had to let go of as he grew up.

He had grown up in a legalistic Protestant environment in Northern Ireland, and some of his experiences there had caused him to have this attitude. But to watch how he recovers and had his faith restored is.... He's articulate, he explains it so well, then he applies it to the reading of literature, and I'm taking some of those lessons in trying to describe how one can recover an understanding of the grace of God – and not just a conceptual understanding, but a felt, emotional congruence with the truth. I want to shed some light on that and show how his way of reading can help us recover the meaning of what Scripture is all about.

JMF: Anything new on C.S. Lewis is bound to be flying off bookshelves, we look forward to reading that. You deal in the book with *The Chronicles of Narnia* and how Lewis deals with judgment and redemption and freedom and such issues through those stories.

RN: The central part of our faith has to do with the judgment of God, which is surprisingly also where we meet God's grace. This is clearly shown in the death of Jesus on the cross, in which is the judgment of the world, and yet also is where we encounter the grace of God at its most penetrating. How can these two, judgment and grace – we tend to think of them as opposites – how can they come together and both convict us of our sin, and also bring us healing and hope, so that we aren't just the victims of our failures, morally and every other way.

Lewis does a wonderful job of showing how the judgment of the children. The scene in the first novel, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is a moment of extreme judgment and also a radical intervention of grace. This is something that he doesn't forget as he gets older.

The last novel he writes, *Till We Have Faces* – the climax of the book is this wonderfully talented but flawed woman who is the queen of this Oldia Greek city state who is now ready to die. She's an old woman and has to come to grips with her entire life and how she came to power and especially

how she treated her little sister, who is a beautiful woman. She has to come to terms with the fact of how she really felt about... she has convinced herself that she's been only loving towards her sister, but now she has to see herself as she really was, and this is part of her judgment, and this is a devastating experience when she finds the truth about how selfish her love was. (This is a great theme of Lewis in his book *The Four Loves*, also – how love can be ironically selfish.) Helping people can sometimes, because we love them, be very selfish, and so she has to figure out a way to face this truth.

And yet the miracle of this judgment is also, it's accompanied by grace. That's the hope. Lewis' sense is that, in his career as a writer, about this amazing juxtaposition of judgment and grace. If we read the Old Testament carefully and see how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New, this is our hope, too – that the judgment of God is not mutually exclusive from the grace of God, and that's our hope.

JMF: You reminded me, when you were talking about how love can be misused, of another episode in one of Lewis' books, *The Great Divorce*. The woman rode the bus up to heaven from hell, and she is touring with everyone else, but she's the one who had devoted her whole life to just service – helping everybody in the family and doing work for them. But she was always angry because they'd never seemed to appreciate how much she did for them and what sacrifices she made for them and so on. Her expression of love was actually negative for her and for those around her.

RN: Yes. Lewis has this image again in the *Four Loves*. He has Miss Fidget, who worked herself tirelessly for her family and inadvertently wore her family out by trying to accommodate all of her care. As a pastor, I think of how many times I was involved in caring for people in ways that were maybe a lot more focused on my own role, or my being a servant of God, that became much more self-serving than I would like to admit.

Part of the healing process is taking that, so one can learn to see that our love is often a wounded thing, and we need to be forgiven even of our attempts at love. This is the radical hope of grace, that even our virtue has to be forgiven, but there's hope in that. Even at the places where we may seem to have a virtue. Karl Barth says that religion can be the place where human beings most fiercely resist or challenge God.

We wear religious clothing, and as a professional Christian, as a minister, you wear Christian garb. One of the great challenges of living faithfully is to learn that those clothes are simply that, and to learn ways to be neither rejecting of every effort to give and to show love, faith working through love on the one hand, but also to realize that anything that has validity in those acts of love and service of love, giving a cup of cold water in Jesus' name or

going and visiting a sick person, etc., always needs to be under the mercy of God and the grace of God, that it won't be a self-serving sacrifice in some way to draw honor or attention to yourself. That's an important part of the lesson of an ongoing journey of leadership in the church.

JMF: Henri Nouwen's book *Wounded Healer* gets into pastoral recognition of our own need, like Hebrews talks about – the priests like ourselves who are sinners too, and accepting that, coming from that foundation as we serve and help others.

RN: Here's a place where Trinitarian theology is very therapeutic for us, just putting our lives back together. At the very heart of who God is, there is this perfect communion of giving and receiving love. It's this equi-poise of free unconditional giving and then this free responsiveness between Father and the Son and the Spirit from all eternity, and we get to be included in that and brought into that. That means that my service learns not only the art of giving gracefully but also the art of receiving gracefully. This changes the dynamics of a pastor and his flock, a teacher and the students, and all the rest of it.

It becomes more of a communion rather than identifying love with just one side of that equation – giving a cup of cold water in Jesus' name – but also it's so blessed when *you* are thirsty and somebody gives you a drink, and you don't have to earn it, you can simply receive it and look them in the eyes and say, "thank you." Sometimes our families, our children, our spouses, our congregation, give us that wonderful gift, if we are willing to receive it and not always having to be on the giving end. That's a very humbling part of maturing.

JMF: The whole communion, being part of that relationship, Father, Son, and Spirit, totally changes the pastoral/penitent or lay relationship. (You've touched on that to some degree, I don't want to talk about this right now, we'll get to it later, you've done work with, and working now on political theology in Germany from the '30s up through 1989, and some of that plays into the relationship between leadership in the church and those that are being served.) Before we get to that, I want to go back to the judgment scene in *Lion, Witch and Wardrobe* and get you talk about that a little bit more.

RN: That's maybe the central point in the *Narnia* series, and probably weighing it, because when you read the four Gospels, the death of Jesus is so central and so focused, and attention is paid to that. It is a scene of the judgment of all humankind, and the cross is the climactic moment when the sins of the whole world are judged. And the miracle is, is that it's not simply condemning the world and rejecting it, because God did not come into the world to condemn the world but that the world, through Jesus, might be

saved.

So in the moment of our deepest having to come to terms with our judgment, that our sins have put Christ on the cross, he has taken our place, he has come alongside us and he has spoken from the deepest place in our humanity, this word of hope and forgiveness is given so we can begin, from the bottom of our beings, to begin to live a different kind of life, a response, a genuine response of thanksgiving and gratitude for this gift.

So there it is, like the scene in *Narnia* where the little boy Edmund deserves to be killed because of his betrayal of his family. At that point of his most vulnerability and most sure of being guilty, he's rescued. There's an intervention there, and later in the story you realize how costly this intervention is on the part of the great lion, Aslan. But there's hope, that even when Edmund is most guilty, and he has to face the kind of person he's become, in doing that, he also discovers the depth of God's meeting him and coming alongside him, not to condemn him, but to rescue him. That changes the tone of everything, and it changes the tone of our lives.

JMF: Don't we all walk in the shoes, or take the journey of each of those characters? We're all Edmund at one time or another, in one way or another – needing the grace of redemption. But we're also Lucy and Susan having to forgive, and we're also Peter having to deal with that response to the betrayal and the anger, of being the responsible one who has been thwarted and hurt by the betrayal. All of us need the redemption that comes at that point.

RN: Yes. That that highlights the fact that we don't do this in isolation from each other. When I sin, or when I continually, maybe forget something – sins of omission as well as commission – that has consequences to my relationships of everyone: friends, family, strangers, community. Part of what takes place in the *Narnia* that's so lovely is you learn how the children learn to forgive one another – what has happened vertically, begins to be experienced horizontally, in the way they learned to treat each other in a new way. That's the challenge of being a family of God, a communion of faith in the church and in our families – to practice the art of forgiveness. It's the great challenge and hope of Christian living.

St. Augustine says something wonderful about the hope of trying to come to terms with the terrible challenges of betrayal – the greatest sins Augustine talks about – how the one place where the gospel really addresses the frailty and brokenness of people is, that the church has the audacity to practice the forgiveness of sins. When you hear this preached and taught and lived out, it's a costly thing, it's not a simple thing. When a community catches the meaning of this, you know the gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached and being lived.

JMF: You bring out in *The Chronicles of Narnia* – as you used those as a springboard – the difference between a felt response and an obligation, in terms of responding to God.

RN: This is an important part of it, isn't it? The reason life is so difficult sometimes is because we might know something we say in our head, but our hearts are not connected to where our head is, so how do we have a *felt* at-one-ment as well as a cognitive one? This is one of the gifts that I think Lewis brings to us in the *Chronicles* – he helps to pull out what's in the Gospels, but we've just grown by our Sunday School associations. He says we have this subtle turning of good news into "should" news, and how do we recover that?

How do you discover the reality of thanksgiving and forgiveness and gratitude? It inheres in our response to God because this kind of grace has its natural inter-correlate – a response of gratitude. That is the emotion that is most congruent with the grace of God. So, whatever is getting in the way of that – fear, anger, or guilt – part of what I need to discover is, where I feel like resistance is coming at me in this way, part of what I need to do is just open that up – whatever that is, whether it's an anger, or fear, or guilt, open that up and see what I'm going to find there at the bottom of that, isn't just rejection and condemnation – but actually hope that even in my most unattractive, un-healed, un-loving part within myself, the grace of God will not reject me and turn away from me. It causes me to come clean on this so I can begin to live in a new way – a way of being reconciled to God and to my neighbor and to my family and so on. Again, that's *good* news. It's not "should" news.

JMF: There's a freedom that we have, that we don't even realize we have, that you show in the course of Lewis unfolding the story of Shasta in *A Horse and His Boy*. Could you talk about that a little?

RN: It's especially touching because the great thing in America is freedom. We love freedom, and this country prides ourselves on our commitment to freedom and liberty and so on. One of the things that's interesting about Shasta is he is an orphan boy who's grown up in a totalitarian hierarchical society in which freedom is not very available, but his whole desire is to become free, and so he's on a journey to run away from where he's an orphan in this not-very-nice culture of Calormen and to get back to Narnia, get back to freedom and to become free. He discovers, like I guess we all do, that becoming free he's brought with him into Narnia a lot of slave habits of thought, and a slave has certain qualities (that are internalized) which make a free response to people, or free response to life, very difficult.

The other irony of that story is the little girl he meets, who goes with him

on this journey to freedom – to Narnia – is on the opposite side of the political-economic spectrum. She's a wealthy, aristocratic child, and she's being forced to marry somebody she doesn't want to marry, so she wants her freedom, too.

The two of them together on this journey have to find out what freedom is all about. That means that she has to give up her attitudes of superiority, and Shasta has to give up his attitude of inferiority complex, which was always putting himself down and always feeling basically he's not very worthy; these are classic descriptions of a slave's mentality. C.S. Lewis does an interesting study in words, and he describes in his book a study in words, what are some typical attitudes of slaves, slave habits of thought – he takes this from Aristotle and some of the other ancient Greek writers. One of the dangers of growing up a slave and being in a slave-holding society is the sense of inferiority that you're constantly pre-occupied with and therefore need to prove yourself or put yourself down or something.

The other thing is the sense of, as a slave you're typified as always looking after yourself. This is actually a phrase in Aristotle – a slave is always thinking about himself and not with the common good. It's interesting that part of what Shasta has to discover in real freedom is not just constantly thinking "what's in it for me?" – the angle of looking after number one, this kind of language, that's a slave mentality. Part of his discovery of the freedom he has in Narnia is that he can begin to be healed of this self-preoccupation by having this deep sense of commitment to other people and by being bound to their welfare. Now he has a freedom to be a different kind of person, not just the person who's constantly looking for "what's in it for me."

Aravis, the girl, discovers the freedom to not look down on people – which is a terrible way to live, even as it is a terrible way to live to constantly be looking up. But to look at people eye-to-eye and seeing them as humans and real people, free citizens of Narnia, and to begin to relate to people in an entirely new way – this is tremendously liberating.

JMF: My favorite passage in all the *Chronicles of Narnia* is the scene in *The Silver Chair* where in the depths of the underground realm of the green witch, the children are captured and the prince is captured, and Puddleglum (a marsh character) is also there. She's putting out some kind of smoke that causes them to get drowsy. Even though they're trying to find their way up to Narnia, up to the surface, she's telling them, there's no such thing as the sun, and there's no such thing as the upper world, and there's no such thing as Narnia, and all of this is just a figment of your imagination – and *this* is the real world, and you need to stay here with me where, this is all there is. Everyone is drowsy, they're coming under the spell that she has kept the prince under, captured with, all this time, and Puddleglum, as a last desperate

act, sticks his foot in the fire, and burns himself. He regains his senses and remembers what is real, and he says, “Look, even if you’re right and there is no sun, and there is no Narnia, and there is no Aslan, I’d rather spend my life searching for those things than to live here in this place you call the real world.”

RN: That’s a wonderful confession of Lewis’ faith and belief that the bottom line is, that I’m going to live as a Narnian even if there is no Narnia. It makes me think of Job in the Old Testament where it says, “Though God slay me, I will trust him.” It makes me think of this strong affirmation of trusting in God that comes in Romans, where Paul says, “Let God be true and every man a liar.”

There is a fundamental reality here that, even if it isn’t popular, even if it’s been a camouflage and hidden, and there’s smoke and mirrors everywhere telling you that all that really matters in life is whatever contemporary fashions are, either the materialism, or certain kinds of temptations that are played within our contemporary culture (and they’re unavoidable), there is a fundamental reality that pierces through all that.

Luther says, “Faith doesn’t create God, or create this reality – faith sees what is there.” Seeing that which is invisible. It’s there, and faith doesn’t create it. Faith is gripped by it, and this is the power inside of old Puddleglum, which is an insight and an experience that is very important for all of us.

JMF: It’s a mix of doubt where we need something like that to cling to and hold on to, because we all go through these periods of doubt, and our faith becomes cloudy and misty and weak. It isn’t a static thing where I have a strong faith and it just stays like that. It spikes and then it looks like the stock market does today. But Lewis deals with that in a number of ways as you move through the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

RN: That’s right – faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive. Ray Anderson used to say, “Faith grows on the narrow ledge of doubt.” That’s a lovely way of expressing that, and one of the things that’s very impressive about Lewis is how he continually has this deep honoring of people who ask tough questions. One of his heroes is Puddleglum, who tends to look on the difficult, the dark side of life. He’s not going to pretend that things are okay. In the New Testament, one of our heroes of faith is Thomas, because he’s not willing just to hear a feel-good story about the resurrection that isn’t real. He says, “You guys sound pretty happy, you seem pretty convinced that things would work out okay, but unless I can see, unless I can touch this risen Lord, I’m not going to, just for the sake of camaraderie or just for the sake of everyone feeling good, to go along with this.”

The beautiful thing is, the disciples don’t say, “Get out of here, Thomas. You’re not one of us anymore, because you’re being awkward here.” He says,

“I want to be a follower of Christ, and I don’t want to pretend I don’t have these doubts, but I don’t want to leave you guys, I’m here with you.” It’s in that context then that the risen Christ appears to Thomas. He doesn’t scold Thomas; he just meets with Thomas and says, “Blessed are those who don’t have this privilege that you have, Thomas, but your questions are not bad questions.” The only bad questions, when we have doubts, it’s the bad side of that when we cover them up or try to pretend.

Augustine has this wonderful prayer that we sing in some of these Taize songs, “Let not my doubts and my darkness speak to thee Lord, let your light shine upon them.” So we open them up; we don’t hide them away. We allow them to surface because they need God’s touch also. They need to be open. Many wonderful questions are in the New Testament, and like Mary, we were talking about Mary last time, and Mary asked the toughest questions that anybody has ever asked about the virgin birth. She asked them not in a casual way, but in an honest and heartfelt way: “How can these things be?” She doesn’t hide those things, and that’s to her credit. That means that she’s really engaging God with her deep self, not just a superficial self.

JMF: Do you have a title for the book?

RN: *The Feeling Intellect: Reading the Bible with C.S. Lewis*. He is the dialogue partner, and he provides a style or a way of being receptive and open. I try to apply that style to some things he addressed, and then some issues that we have to deal with now in more contemporary situations.

53. THEOLOGY AND NAZI HISTORY

JMF: You're working on a very interesting project, and I'd like to ask you to talk about that today.

RN: It's a fascinating study of what is the relevance of theology to church history, particularly to the tragic history of Germany from 1933 to 1989, but maybe even before that. What was going on in the heart of Protestant Germany with this great tradition of Lutheran theology, and the justification by grace alone of the sinner, and many other great themes of the Christian life? What happened that this became the soil upon which two world wars began and was so devastating for Europe and so devastating for the German people?

I'm trying to explore what was the relationship between church and state, the way that the pastors and the theologians of the church understood their relationship to this state, that allowed for this to take place, and then what were the remedies or what were the signs of hope and resistance and of, ultimately, reconciliation that led to, much to everyone's surprise, in 1989, a peaceful reunification of Germany? Those are the questions I am trying to look into and make some sense of – trying to understand, from my own point of view, how did the theology of grace, the theology of Father, Son, and Spirit, become crucial in this transition period and redemption of a very dark period of modern history?

JMF: Let's talk first about the beginning of the transition, in 1933, Hitler's rise to power, and how the church was looking at that and responding to that at the beginning.

RN: Maybe we can back up a little bit to 1933 to give us our context, which was Germany was devastated by the first world war and the complexity of having seen itself as a Christian nation with a Christian leader, a Christian Kaiser, and so on, and the church totally supporting the war effort, and then being devastated by a complete failure in terms of the war, being financially overwhelmed by the cost of war (the cost in lives, the cost in resources) and then trying to rebuild itself in a way that, maybe in retrospect, the fundamental questions didn't get addressed.

They were burdened with what they felt was a deeply unfair sense of responsibility and guilt for the entire enterprise. They felt like they had had a lot of help in plunging the world into war. I don't know how much people are aware of. They had to sign a document at Versailles in which they took total responsibility for the war, the war guilt clause. They had to live with the idea that it was all their fault, and they chafed under this as well. This sense

of resentment, the new government that had to sign onto this, the Weimar Republic, and their enemies were forcing them to sign this. The French, British, and Americans created an atmosphere in which the rise of someone like a fierce nationalist, a nationalism on steroids, like Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party, could begin to emerge.

The church, meanwhile, is torn, because on the one hand they want to be faithful to the state, and on the other hand the question is what is the relationship between the people who come to church faithfully Sunday by Sunday (it's a state church, the Evangelische Kirche; taxes are raised and the state organizes that and supports the church through them) on the one hand, and also this sense of a prophetic ministry and holding kings and emperors accountable to Scripture.

This is the tension at the heart of any church/state relationship, whether it's formal, as in Germany, or whether it's more informal, as it is in the United States, where we have a separation of church and state formally, but informally we have a Billy Graham swearing in presidents every four years, a chaplain to the U.S. Senate who is usually a Protestant clergyman and so forth. These are the issues that were made acute in the devastation of two world wars (I'm jumping ahead in the story), after the first world war created a sense of confusion, and wanting some answers for what had gone wrong in the first world war.

JMF: How is the church coping with that in terms of preaching? When people went to church, what did they hear? What kind of solace or comfort or response was given?

RN: Too often when people went to church, there was a terrible temptation to basically blame the other guy and not to take responsibility. Instead of confessing their own sins, there was a tendency to confess the sins of the countries they had gone to war with. This sense of injured merit and having been mistreated was a lingering bitterness, which was then picked up on by the national socialists and by Hitler. It fueled into this sense of "we want justice" in the world, saying we want to be respected and we don't want to be treated the way we felt like we were treated at the Versailles treaty after the war. The church was often complicit in saying yes, we weren't well treated, we need to be, this wasn't all our fault, and we haven't been treated fairly.

JMF: What was the perspective of fault? How were they viewing the causes and the blame for the war?

RN: There was certainly a sense, as you can imagine, that there was a sense of the nations becoming hungry for, maybe dominance is the best

word, in terms of power and influence in global trade and markets and political influence. It's hard for us to look back on this and realize the extent to which the Germans felt like they had been (unfairly) blamed for the devastation of the First World War. But that's how they felt, and the church, in terms of its pastoral care strategy, chose to put a sympathetic arm around the shoulder of German society and say, "Yeah, you weren't treated well."

Instead of saying, "Wait, how did we get into this, what caused us to become such a militaristic society that we chose to go to war to solve our problems rather than to use other means?", there was tendency to be overly sympathetic with the nation and to identify, in a not very helpful way, with the nation's sense of mistreatment.

JMF: So the German people were feeling that they were drawn into or forced into, by political and economic circumstances, toward war by the rest of the political situation in Europe, and therefore it was more of a shared blame?

RN: That's probably the case. And as a result, they wanted more evenhanded treatment after the war. Unfortunately, they didn't get that. They had to sign a document saying they were at sole fault of the war. They had tremendous war debt repayments that they had to pay the Allies, and they had to give up some of their territory both toward the French on one side and parts of Germany in the east that were taken over by other eastern European countries, like Poland and what we now call the Czech Republic. They felt like they had been scapegoated.

This was part of their resentment. They resented the country, the power, the political system that took over after the Kaiser had to go. They started the republic, and they tended to resent their own government for signing this document. There was a simmering discontent. It was this kind of negative, you might say negative political energy, that Hitler took hold of and fanned these flames. He tried to say that Germany had been treated unjustly and needed to find its proper place in the world again and to contribute. Part of its gifts that it was going to contribute to the world was its leadership, the Führer principle.

JMF: Were there voices in the church that were contrary to this general theme of commiserating with the political viewpoint?

RN: There are some interesting studies of individuals who made some very significant transitions from on the one hand supporting Hitler as yes, he'll give us back our sense of standing in the world, he's going to stand tall for Germany.

For instance, the famous Pastor Martin Niemöller had been a U-Boat

commander in World War I, had become pastor of a very affluent suburban congregation in Berlin, and he voted for Hitler, and he thought this was the right step forward. But in the course of time from 1933 to 1937, Niemöller had become increasingly disillusioned with what he was seeing with Hitler. He saw him not just wanting to restore Germany to a place of leadership in the world, but rather to take the church and the other institutions of the people and subsume them under the dominance of the government, the ideology of National Socialism.

At this point, from being a patriotic German, he began to challenge the state, and to say you're trying to accommodate everything through Fascism or the national socialist message, and you're subverting the church's message of a gospel of salvation in grace, and you're saying that there are other forces, other powers, other voices in nature and in history, namely the voice of the Führer, who's coming alongside, and it is being unequally yoked on an equal basis with the revelation of God in Christ, and this is idolatry.

This didn't go down very well with Hitler and the national socialists. And so from being a very well-regarded parish pastor in 1933 who had voted for Hitler, in 1937, we find Martin Niemöller in a concentration camp.

JMF: You mentioned a famous quote by Niemöller in regard to this transition he was making.

RN: He says in 1933 they started to imprison the communists just because they were a political alternative, and they were articulating that, and they had newspapers and had voices in the political sphere. One of the first things that happened when Hitler took power was he put a lot of their leadership in jail or in concentration camps. Then he started to arrest and put in jail the trade union members, which he had implied he would all along, but then he finally started doing the same to Jews and putting them in jail and concentration camps and so on.

Niemöller's famous quote was: "They came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist, so I didn't stand up for them, I didn't say anything. They came for the trade unionists, but I was not that, so I did not do anything. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew. Then finally they came for me, but there was nobody to stand up for me."

He ties this back, in many of his sermons, to Matthew chapter 25, when Jesus says, "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me. If you visited the sick, visited those in prison, fed the hungry, you did it to me."

Niemöller is saying in retrospect that, I saw people being mistreated, but I wasn't a Communist, I wasn't a trade union member, I wasn't a Jew, so I

just walked by on the other side. He says this is the sense in which I failed, and we as a church failed to stand up for the most vulnerable members of our society. Even though from 1937 to 1945 Niemoller was in a concentration camp, what was he doing from 1933 to 1937 when he had freedom to speak out, freedom to say this is wrong, these people are not being treated well.

Because of his own prejudices and his own opinions politically, he just let them rot in jail. He also had an implicit anti-Semitic streak in him, and he was happy to let these people get their just desserts, as long as he was free to preach the gospel. But in retrospect, he realized that that was a guilt that he had to own up to. Even though he was a concentration camp survivor, he stood in solidarity with the many Germans who implicitly or complicitly allowed Hitler to take over power and to be so devastating in his behavior toward the world.

JMF: As Hitler took power, there was a certain color of Christianity that he projected so the church would lend its support. How did that progress? How was he able to move from at least the color of Christianity to what amounted to a worship of the Führer eventually?

RN: That's right. Hitler was a wolf in sheep's clothing. He said very openly, when he was elected, in a famous radio address, that the foundation of our society is always and will always be Christianity, and we stand for a heroic faith, a positive Christianity in the Protestant tradition of Luther, and this will be the foundation upon which we build our new Germany. That made patriotic Lutherans feel very good, and we had a leader who was going to be somebody we could trust and so on. Many Protestant pastors and theologians were, I don't know what other word to use but *seduced* by this kind of language. After all, it says in the book of Romans chapter 13 that we are to submit to the government and to obey it.

There was a tradition of that in Germany that goes back to Luther, and his siding with the princes against the peasants in the peasants' rebellion, and all this seemed in order. As long as the church was free to preach the gospel in the church, then it was the responsibility of the church to pray for the state, to pray for the prime minister or the chancellor, to pray for them, and that was a happy harmony between church and state. Hitler took advantage of this to begin to, in a totalitarian way, take over the various aspects of German culture, science, education, and so on, and also the church. It was under his orbit, and Christian language was used to basically to make it subservient to the purposes of German culture or an ideology of the German folk, the German people, as the natural leaders or rulers of the world.

JMF: You've done a lot of work with the writings of C.S. Lewis and how they speak to the church and to the gospel, so I can't help but think of the Narnia Chronicles and the last book, *The Last Battle*, and a very similar thing happening with the ape...

RN: ...who would not believe. The donkey and the ape have a clever idea of taking this old lion skin and putting it on the donkey and pretending that Aslan has come back, and the people naively believe the ape.

JMF: So he's able to do what he does in taking power over everybody and subjugating everyone all in the name of Aslan, even though this was not Aslan at all. It was similar in the way Hitler's regime was co-opting Christianity to achieve its own ends.

RN: It took a lot of courage for Christians to begin to be not only suspicious that something seemed to be going wrong, but after being so hopeful that this was going to be whole new day, it took the courage of people like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller and others to begin to say no, wait a second, this language and the way they are behaving, their use of force, their practice of arresting people at night, there's some lies going on here. The truth is being missed.

The racism that began to become very open and naked in the society, they could not in good conscience say this is Christian heroic piety in the tradition of Martin Luther. This is something that has become very twisted, and we have to call a spade to spade and speak out here. This was the glory of the confessing church, the branch of the church that resisted Hitler.

It was a challenge that was not successful, in that Hitler was clever enough to divide his opposition into a camp that was wanting to be more conciliatory and deferential to the power of his authority and one that was going to be more of a challenge, such as Martin Niemöller and Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was able to divide and hence to conquer. The confessing church found itself in increasingly compromising situations, such as every pastor signing a personal oath of loyalty to the Führer, and things like this which compromised its stand against Hitler.

Someone like Karl Barth refused to sign – based on his beliefs about what was going on here, he couldn't do that. So he was kicked out of his position as a professor of theology at the university and he was deported to Switzerland. But what do you do if you're not a Swiss citizen – you're a German citizen – what do you do? If you don't sign this personal oath of loyalty, you lose your job. The pastors had to sign this oath of loyalty or they couldn't stay being pastors. When the confessing church decided... they backed down, as it were, to show they are good patriotic Germans, these are

examples in which the church, sadly even the confessing church, began to compromise itself to a point where its resistance to Hitler capitulated.

JMF: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, being a German citizen, had no recourse as far as being deported, so what happened there?

RN: It's complicated, but Bonhoeffer for a while was a pastor in London at a German-speaking congregation. He went and studied in New York at Union Seminary, he was a pastor in Spain for a while for German congregations there, and so on. But in the end of the day, he felt duty-bound to come back and be with his people. He could see the war was coming, and he felt like he needed to be there to support the German people during this terrible destiny they were going to have to go through and take the whole world through with them.

It was at that point that he got involved in the opposition of a political nature to Hitler, through his family connections, even involved in a plot to kill Hitler, for which he was a conspirator. He was put in a concentration camp when all this didn't succeed, and he ended up being killed in a concentration camp just a week or two before the Allies liberated that part of Germany in 1945.

JMF: How does Trinitarian theology come to bear on this whole thing?

RN: It's a wonderful thing to look into, and I'm having a wonderful time exploring, just trying to make sense out of all this. What I can tell you now is: it seems that one of the fundamental healing things that took place, despite all the tragedy here, is that the church and people like Barth and Bonhoeffer and others began to understand that Jesus isn't just the Lord of the church. He's the Lord of all the nations, that he's the Sovereign of all nations, and you can't neatly divide God up as the Father, the Lord of the state, and Jesus the Son, the Savior, as Lord of the church, and the two can just happily coexist.

But what they began to see is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the Lord of heaven and of earth, of all the tribes and tongues. This understanding enabled them to break through this traditional split between church and state and to hold kings and chancellors accountable to the one Sovereign of heaven and earth.

This, ultimately, bears fruit as the country is split between the eastern and western by the Allies after the war, and the constant ongoing work of the church, even during the time of communist East Germany, was to bear witness to and hold the state accountable to the Lordship of Christ. They did this, in retrospect, in an astonishing way with the peaceful nonviolent movements of prayer meetings and candlelit rallies around East Germany,

which ended in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the nonviolent reunification of Germany. The role of the church in this and the thread from Barth down to the movement in Leipzig is part of what I'm trying to highlight and draw attention to.

JMF: When can we expect to see it?

RN: There's so much information out there, and I'm trying to put it together in a way that's more understandable and accessible to English-speaking folk. But it's a wonderful story.

54. RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH MINISTRY

J. Michael Feazell: Our guest today is Dr. Andrew Root. Thanks for joining us today.

AR: It's a pleasure to be here.

JMF: We have a lot to talk about. Youth ministry is a dynamic area, and you have some challenging things to say that are significant for facing what the church is up against in today's world. I wanted to read from page 15 of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, your first book: "Ministry, then, is not about 'using' relationships to get individuals to accept a 'third thing,' whether that be conservative politics, moral behaviors, or even the gospel message. Rather, ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives." What are you driving at here?

AR: The whole book, as you mentioned, revolves around that point. That point was born in my own experience. It was right around this area, in a church here in southern California that I was invited to be part of a youth ministry. It was at a large Presbyterian church, kind of a classic youth ministry.

One Wednesday night, for no particular reason, some kids from the neighborhood that surrounded the church showed up on the church steps. The church saw this as serendipitous and a wonderful opportunity. So not knowing what to do or how to do ministry with these young people, they decided to throw money at the problem, which probably happens too often in churches, and I was the benefactor of that. It became my job.

I was hired to bridge these two worlds, between the kind of classic youth



ministry and the church kids, and then the kids in the neighborhood. I was invited to be part of this and to take this job because I had worked for Young Life and supposedly knew what I was doing when it came to

building relationships with young people. It took myself and the team of people that I worked with about two or three weeks to realize we had no idea what we were doing.

We had been taught, and we had read all sorts of youth ministry literature, and we had done a lot of youth ministry, and we were some of the best, smartest, good-looking youth workers that we knew about. It took us, again, like two weeks to realize we had no clue what we were doing.

We had been taught that all you had to do was try to be friends with these kids and that kids wanted relationships with adults, and that through your relationship with a young person, you could lead them into the church or to accept Jesus or to avoid immoral behavior, or that there would be a way that you could use your relationship to get young people somewhere positive, somewhere good.

The kids we were working with that showed up on the church steps this night were not so easy to influence. They had this incredibly genius way (that was slightly diabolical) of keeping adults at a distance. We would get close to them, and they had a way of either questioning our sexuality or questioning our motives or assuming that we would make a scene, that we were going to do something to them.

It became difficult to figure out “how do you do ministry?” We had been told that all you had to do was build a relationship with kids and they would come, and these kids were pushing us away. I would go and visit these kids at their public school campus, and kids that I had known for months and they had spent time at our church, I would come up to them and they would say, “Get the F away from me,” and swear in our face. This was not the kind of youth ministry I was taught was supposed to happen. These kids were supposed to *want* to be with me.

So I started to question, “How do you actually go about doing this?” You take a kid out for a Coke and a burger and you drive them home into their neighborhood and the fog has condensed on your window and right before you drop them off, they write rival gang signs on it so when you turn around and drive back through their neighborhood, your life is put in danger. How are you supposed to do ministry with a group of kids like this? How are you supposed to do it when they seem to refuse your ministry, but nevertheless continue to ask for it by showing up every week? And showing up at 4:00 for something that starts at 7:00, and stay till 11:30 or 12:00.

It was in the middle of a fight with my wife that I realized that I had problems. I realized I had problems in more ways than one, but particularly I had problems in my conception of ministry. We were newly married, and my wife was going through a crisis in her family of origin. That was difficult

for her as she tried to kind of figure out what was going on and who she was, in the midst of this family chaos.

We had spent a lot of nights just talking about issues. She would talk about how hard this was as her family was in the midst of transition. I always had this great way of reframing her problem for her. She would say things like, “This is really hard.” I would say, “Don’t think about it like that. What if we think about it like this?” Or she would say, “I hate when this happens and I feel that it just grieves me that this is all changed...” I would say, “There are futures before us. We don’t have to worry about this. Let’s just move on, let’s think about something better than this.”

Finally, after me reframing all of her issues, she finally stopped me and said, “Would you just seriously, just stop.” She said these words. In her frustration she said, “Don’t you know that relationships are not about fixing things? Would you stop trying to fix me and just be with me? And if you can’t be with me, nothing will get better anyhow. So stop trying to fix my problems and just *be* with me.” I realized when she said that, not only did I have a lot to learn about being a young husband, but I also realized that that’s exactly what I was doing in my ministry.

These kids who lacked the middle-class decorum that the kids had when I worked in suburban Saint Paul, Minnesota, they lacked that, so they could simply say, “get away from me.” They knew that I had an agenda for the relationship. Maybe it was a good agenda, maybe it was good for them, but my ministry wasn’t essentially about *them*. It was about where I could take them. Maybe some of the things were really good. Keeping them in church, helping them to understand who Jesus Christ is, those are all great things, but they had the sense that it was happening outside of our actual relationship.

So you mentioned “the third thing.” That’s something that I’ve taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*, he has this beautiful phrase where he says, “When we encounter the neighbor, God is there.” He says, “There’s not a third thing. There’s no third thing. There’s just me and you or I and thou, and Jesus Christ becomes present *there*, not outside of that.”

Often in youth ministry the objective has been to use our relationship with young people to get to some third thing. So what I try to do in the book is just re-imagine what it would be to think about ministry (and it’s really all ministry, and not just youth ministry), to think about ministry in this idea that there’s no third thing. That somewhere in the midst of really encountering another person, God becomes concretely present with them then.

JMF: Isn’t that true in any relationship? As a church, isn’t that how we tend to think about almost all of our relationships outside of the church?

That it's a means to an end. We get to know people, we draw them into the sphere of the church in some way, through some project or whatever, but we really have a hidden agenda.

We have an ulterior motive. A good motive, perhaps, of presenting the gospel to them, but nonetheless, it's an ulterior motive. The friendship is for that sake. Almost like an insurance-salesman approach or something, rather than friendship, relationship being an end in itself. Is there something to be said for that in terms of who Christ is in us and in them?

AR: I think that is true. When I go around the world and the country talking about this, you'll have people say, "We always have agendas." You can't strip yourself from an agenda. That's true. We are kind of socially located, and we have our own hermeneutical location that we take into relationships. But there is a difference, and I think you're hitting on it.

This reminds me of what American sociologist Peter Berger talks about. Peter Berger talks about that somewhere after industrialization and into modernization, we as people started to take what he calls "technical rationality" into the way we formulated and constructed our day-to-day relationships. We spent so much time working in institutions that tend to make decisions on people through their bureaucracy and in very technical forms.

For instance, I grew up in a community that a lot of employees from 3M lived in. (3M, the people who make your post-it notes and your tape.) One year, 3M decided that they could save a lot of money if they laid people off who were over 55 and hired people at entry level, that they would lose very little productivity but gain a lot of money. So a lot of people in the little suburb that I grew up in, they were laid off during this period. A lot of my friends' parents were. 3M is making that decision, they don't necessarily care about the people, but they make that decision technically. In a realm of technical rationality, it makes sense for them, for their ultimate goal, which is the bottom line of making money, to lay people off who are over 55.

Berger's point is that we live in those realities for so long that they start to filter into how we organize the rest of our relationships. We start to say things like, "Honey, I still really do love you, but for the bottom line of my happiness, this marriage really isn't working out." Or we look at our friendships and say, "I really do care about this person, we share this history, but I just can't do this relationship anymore because it's not letting me become this self-fulfilled person."

I think that's filtered into the church as well, that we tend to make decisions about ministry in the technical realm. We tend to use technical rationality to make decisions about how we go about doing ministry, how we

think about the ministry of God. I think that there's a different logic, than this technical rationality that we often fall into when we think about ministry.

JMF: That's exactly the opposite of what real Christian life, Christian ministry is all about, isn't it?

AR: I think so. The core theological element that I'm working from in the book is this Trinitarian element that God the Father and Jesus the Son are in eternal relationship with each other. That relationship isn't built around this kind of technical rationality, but it's built in a whole desire to be with and for each other.

If you look at Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics II*, he will talk about the Spirit as the very essence, the very reality of the Father and the Son's relationship. Too often in the church, we use our relationships as the means to another end, as opposed to seeing our relationships as a way of living into this inner reality of a relationship that's going on between God the Father and God the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

That's the element that I'm trying to work out in that sense of "What if our relationships in ministry (in a broken metaphor) reflect this eternal relationship that's going on between the Father and the Son?"

JMF: You've use the term "real relational, relational youth ministry," and is that what you're...

AR: There was an article that was written probably five or six years ago, that was trying to talk about a post-relational youth ministry. It was a fair article that was trying to show some of the pitfalls of relational ministry, but I tried to reframe that and make the argument that we hadn't really talked about a truly relational "relational youth ministry," that our relationships in "relational ministry" had tended to be means to another end. They had been for influence, to influence kids in some direction, and they have yet to reflect (maybe in this broken way, but in a real way) the inner life of God that we're called into, this eternal relationship that goes on between the Father and the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

JMF: There are a couple of ways I want to go right now. One is to take a different gear and talk about your assessment of the TV show *Lost*, but let's save that for the moment and get back to these young people you were working with. You saw that you had to do things differently, so what started to happen then?

AR: We tried to live this out, but as you mentioned, it's hard in a congregation, and you run into all these conflicts. It was very interesting to watch this church wrestle with this issue. To the church's credit, they had raised money, they had seen this opportunity to do ministry with these young people from their neighborhood, they had hired me, and we worked hard at

it. They started this ministry in full blessing of the church, that we want to reach out to these kids. We really want to build relationships with them.

But what happened is: it started to become costly, and it became costly in ways that a lot of churches experience, but in very profound ways when you're experiencing them. Like your building being tagged, like mothers who are waiting to pick up their daughters from church are noticing kids from the neighborhood doing things behind the church building that would make anyone uncomfortable, when drugs are being sold before Wednesday night program.

Quickly the church's mantra changed from "We want to do ministry to these kids" to "These kids need to act better. They don't deserve to be here until they can show that they can act better." We worked at that for a while, but it became very difficult, and I lacked a lot of power to bring any change in the midst of that system.

My wife and I had an opportunity to travel, and when we came back, I had a school year before I was going to start my doctoral work, so I took a job at a non-profit organization very close to here doing gang prevention counseling. It was my job to go into four public schools a week (this was before the California economy had imploded and there was money available and they were giving grants to these non-profits to go in and do gang prevention). It was my job to go into these four schools and to meet with kids who either were in a gang, a family member was in a gang, or had just been manifesting gang-like behavior. They had been caught tagging their school, or they had threatened their teacher with a pencil, or they had done something that was at risk.

I would go into these schools, and often it was either the principal or the guidance counselor who would give me the folder to one of these kids. It would often come with something like, "Here's Jacob, and Jacob just came to us. He was in an orphanage for a while because he watched his father beat his mother with a wrench on their front lawn." Or, "Here's Sally, and Sally's dad just got out of jail and from as far as we know, he comes back every other week to do his laundry and to beat them up." These horrific stories of loss and pain. And that was just what the school counselor could tell me.

So I would meet with this student, and we'd sit in some little dusty back corner of a public school, some little book storage area where the school could find a place to put a table and two chairs. I realized quickly, as they would tell me these stories, that there was nothing I could do. The story that the school counselor or principal would tell me that was horrific in and of itself was just the tip of the iceberg. After a while they would tell me these stories, and they were just heart-wrenching.

I knew that there was nothing I could do. There were certain actions I could take, make people aware of certain things, but I couldn't change the fact that this was the family they grew up in, that this was the situation that had happened to them. I realized quickly that all I could do was for one hour, once a week, when I would meet with them, was to share in their hell with them. So I did that. I did that from reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and reading some of the Trinitarian elements of Karl Barth, and even some of the early Jurgen Moltmann, and I decided that what I would do was for one hour once a week, I would share in their hell with them.

An interesting thing happened. I would haul in this bag of "Connect Four" and checkers and these board games, and I would set them on the table. The kids loved it, because they would get to leave class to play checkers with me or play some board game with me. But we started to share our stories together, and they would share their story with me, and I would share mine with them, and for one hour once a week we would share deeply in each other's life.

There was transformation that actually happened in them. There wasn't this radical transformation that they didn't have all these issues that had been nipping at their heels for their whole life, that didn't go away. But there was this real way that something powerful happened where we would share in each other's lives, that God was present in the midst of that. I was allowed to speak deeply into their lives.

But instead of saying things like, "You can't do that because God wouldn't like that, or because that would make you a bad boy or a bad girl," I could start speaking into their lives in a much more powerful way. I could say, "You can't do that because that will hurt you, and if that hurts you, that will hurt me, because I'm your friend, and you can't do that because I'm your friend." Or, "When I see that attitude that you have, I wonder about that, not because I want you to be better, but because I want to be in relationship with you, and that could be problematic to multiple relationships that you have."

The light bulb that went on for me is that there is something in the midst of just sharing each other's suffering and joy that there's a concrete way that God is present in the midst of that, that I've tried to theologically develop through these two books.

JMF: You never had any other opportunity to be with those kids or any other influence in their lives other than these one-hour meetings?

AR: That's correct. Maybe I would see them once in a while in the hallways, but for the most part it was that one hour once a week. I was constrained by the school, and I was constrained by the job that I worked in,

but there was something that powerfully happened when we were able to share our suffering with each other.

I tried to make that mutual. I would try...keeping a boundary...that I think is important, that hopefully we can talk about as we go on, but I also shared my own story with them. There was something powerful for them to hear my story and to participate in my story.

JMF: Did you have any way of knowing what kind of impact your time together was having on them?

AR: That's a great question, and there's two kind of rationalities that I think can operate in that. In the rationality of influence, there was no way I could know. In many ways I was a failure, because these kids went back to their same situation, and I'm sure some of them are in jail now. The kids we worked with in the congregation, we don't know what happened to many of them. A lot of them were in eighth grade and they went into ninth grade and got jumped into gangs. From the rationality of influence, it was a failure. We don't have any trophies to show for it.

But in the rationality of place-sharing, of trying to do relational ministry as being with and being for, as God is with and for us, I don't know if it was successful, but I believe it was *faithful*, in that we were faithful to their humanity. In being a gang prevention counselor, I felt like I was faithful to their humanity.

Was there radical change in their lives? I don't know. I don't know if I can see that, but I do trust that something powerful happened in that one hour a week, that they knew that they were not alone. If in the dark universe that they existed in, at least there was someone for one hour once a week who was with them. That reflects the fullness of the gospel and the fullness of a God who becomes incarnate to share our place in its full brokenness and its full darkness, to share with us so deeply that we're never alone again. Though we still often live in darkness, we're never alone.

So I don't know if it was successful, but I know that it was faithful. In youth ministry particularly, we fall into this trap of looking at success too often. It's a vocational hazard, because you have young people who are, 12, 13,14,15, and they're making these jumps in our societal structures to go to college or to decide for careers or to fall in love and get married, so there does seem to be this trajectory of progress that's going on.

But too often youth ministry has fallen into the trap that believes that our job is to make kids successful or help kids be successful, and then we judge our ministries by how many trophies we have. I don't know if that's a true reflection of God's own ministry in the world as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected in the person of Jesus Christ. We would do better to think of

ourselves and think of our relationships as “How can we be faithful both to the young person before us as well as to this God who has revealed God’s self in Jesus Christ?” How can we be faithful to that, as opposed to how can we be successful?

JMF: All of that is compelling, because there’s got to be a way to measure success in this in order for us to know whether this project is worthwhile or accomplishing anything. It’s like the need to ask that question, and find an assessment tool of some kind, is so overpowering that we lose the gospel itself, because when it comes to our Christian lives, don’t we do the same thing? We’re looking for God to fix things. We think answered prayer means getting me out of whatever situation is a problem for me or what I perceive as a problem.

But isn’t that how Christ meets us, just the sense of knowing we’re not alone? Meeting us in our loneliness, in our void, in our darkness, and bringing light, because we’re operating with faith (which is evidence of things not seen, according to Hebrews), we’re looking for a restoration that isn’t going to take place in this lifetime. It takes place only in the sense of place-sharing, Christ sharing our place, not in the sense of our circumstances necessarily changing, which can be, in itself, a source of frustration, because we’re expecting or looking for something different.

Don’t we look for that, because in our preaching and teaching we often build a sense of expecting that? It carries over into youth ministry in the sense you’re describing so well of “We want to see kids be more moral. We want them not to make the same mistakes we made, or not to pursue things that are going to cause them trouble.” The whole sense across our Christian lives of just being there, like your wife told you, as opposed to trying to make everybody be good and not make mistakes. . . it seems like you’re talking about something that’s a big iceberg that needs exploring.

AR: One of the things that your questioning points to that’s helpful for me is maybe to boil it down. The thing that we haven’t dwelled in enough is this question “Where is God? Where do we encounter God?” Which is one of the central elements of a Trinitarian theology, is that God encounters us, and God reveals God’s self. As God reveals God’s self in Jesus Christ, we’re taken into this Trinitarian reality.

So I’ll tell you this story, which I think is the trap that we often fall into in ministry. My son is four, moving toward five, and he’s a great little existential philosopher and theologian, probably because I’ve terribly warped him. One night I was putting him to bed, it’s my job to put him to bed, and it’s right before I go and watch TV when I put him to bed, so I’m always trying to hustle him off to bed so I can go and relax in front of the TV.

One night I was putting him to bed and he said he was scared, and he was

scared that there was a nightmare in his closet. I had told him, “You don’t need to be afraid of this. There’s no nightmare in your closet. Jesus is with you. You don’t need to be scared, because Jesus is with you.” And he said, “No, no no no no no there’s a nightmare in my closet. I’m scared of this.”

I said, “Owen, you don’t have to be scared, there’s no nightmare in your closet.” I opened the door and turned on the light, and he was satisfied that there was no nightmare in his closet, but as soon as I turned out the lights and shut the door, he says, “It’s back! The nightmare’s back in my closet.”

I said, “You can pray to Jesus and it will be okay. Jesus will be here with you and you don’t have to be afraid.” So we prayed for a little bit, and he said, “But where is Jesus?” I said, “Jesus is here. If you pray, Jesus will be here.” “But I don’t see Jesus. Where is Jesus?” I said, “He’s here with you.” “But I’m scared. There’s a nightmare in my closet, and where is Jesus?”

Now I’m starting to say, “If you pray, Jesus will be here and you don’t have to be afraid and Jesus will keep you from bad things happening.” I’m starting to doubt myself as I’m saying this. But then, in earnest desire to comprehend something, he says, “But I don’t see Jesus and I’m scared. Where is Jesus?” Then in the profundity of a four-year-old he says, “Jesus is not here. Jesus is not here.” I said some prayer and left, and I kind of satisfied him so he wasn’t crying anymore, but that is really the question: “Where is Jesus?”

Kids often live with nightmares in their closet. We all do. Often we want to say “Jesus is here, and if you pray to Jesus then the nightmare will go away.” One of the theological elements that I’m trying to develop more and more is: How do we answer this question, where is Jesus? Or, where is God? There’s something in this story of this God who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ that reflects to us the full life of God as Trinitarian. That God becomes present next to darkness, next to brokenness, next to pain.

Too often in youth ministry, we see shiny happy kids as the sign that our ministries are going well. They become the sign of authentic adolescent faith, kids for whom things are going pretty well. I don’t want to belittle those kids, but often it perpetuates this idea that to be a Christian means that you have it together. It leads us away from this question of where is God?

Where is this God of the cross found? Where is this God who cries out to his Father on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and hears nothing. Where is this God? If our models of great adolescent faith are just the shiny happy kids, then what about all those kids who know that question deep in their being? But the church never helps them articulate it.

Christian Smith has done this study, the National Study on Youth and Religion, that *Soul-Searching* came out of. This book has been quite famous about teenage religiosity and faith. One of the overwhelming findings of that

book was simply that kids don't know anything about their faith. They know very little about any of the theological elements of their faith. They can barely articulate what it means to find Jesus.

I wonder if the reason is because it doesn't matter to those kids? Those kids often are the shiny happy kids that things are going well for, and we point to them as the models of good adolescent faith, but they don't need to, as Anselm would say, really dig into "faith-seeking understanding" because things are unfolding okay for them.

JMF: For now.

AR: Exactly. Which is the real disservice we do to them, because they go to college, they go into young adulthood, and then things don't go right for them.

JMF: [And they become] totally disillusioned.

AR: They don't have a theological lens to see their reality where God is present in it. So one of the theological elements I'm trying to work out for youth ministry and ministry for the church in general is: how do we answer this question, where is God? I think there's a deeply Trinitarian element about that. But it's also this assertion that God encounters us in darkness, in brokenness, in yearning, because God is reflected to us in Jesus Christ on the cross.

55. REAL RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH MINISTRY

J. Michael Feazell: Last time we were together, we were talking about place-sharing versus influence in terms of how we relate to young people. What is the difference?

Andrew Root: That's the point of both books, is to try to draw that contrast. Last time I tried to argue that we've tended to see youth ministry as for *influence*, to try to influence kids toward some end. The reimagining of it is to think of it as place-sharing, which is a concept that I stole from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer wanted to make this argument that the way we really experience God is as our place-sharer, and he said in his *Ethics*, "Just as a good politician is for her people, a good teacher is for his students, and a good father is for his children, so Jesus Christ is for us. Jesus Christ shares our place."

I think we've tended to see youth ministry as trying to influence kids toward some end, as opposed to sharing their place. When we think of influence, we get the whole understanding of the Incarnation all mixed up. We tend to think the incarnation happened to influence us toward some end, as opposed to sharing our place.

The story I often tell is... every Christmas Eve we go to my grandmother's house, and as soon as dinner is done, and the coffee is brewing, and the Christmas cookies come out, we all move from the table to the couches. Often, my grandma will leave the party and she'll come back with the folded piece of newspaper. It's the story that I'm sure many have heard. It's the Paul Harvey story about the birds.

The story goes that there's this man who refuses to go to church on Christmas Eve. He's basically done with his faith, he doesn't believe it anymore, and it's a cold, cold, bitter cold night. He's not doing it. He is going to stay home. He's going to actually enjoy his Christmas Eve. So he sees his family all off to church and he lays down on the couch to have this wonderful Christmas Eve. He kind of laughs to himself thinking how much smarter he is as he looks out his window and it's so cold.

About halfway through his night, he looks outside some window and he sees there are some birds. He gets very concerned that if he doesn't do something for these birds, they're going to die. I mean, it is a cold, bitter cold night, and they won't make it through the night if he doesn't do something. So he gets his hat, and his gloves, and his boots on, and he goes outside and

he opens his barn door and tries to shoo these birds into the barn.

But he's too big, and he's too scary, and the birds don't understand him, so they jump away. He tries again to shoo them in, but they just won't go. So he gets some birdseed and tries to make a trail, but it just isn't happening. He's frustrated because he knows if he doesn't get these birds into the barn, that they're not going to make it through the night, that they're going to die. He tries one more time to shoo them in, but it just isn't working.

In pure frustration he says, "If only, if only I could become a bird, then they wouldn't be scared of me and I could lead them into the barn, and they would be safe." Just as he says that, the church bells ring, he falls on his knees, and for the first time he understands the meaning of Christmas.

Every year my grandma will fold that newspaper up, and wipe a tear from her eye, and lean back in satisfaction. I always think it, but I never say it. I always think, "Grandma, that's a great story. I can see why you love that so much, but it's not the incarnation."

I think the church has developed an understanding that the Incarnation isn't for simply getting us in the barn, but actually sharing our place. We need a God who doesn't just come close to us, to lead us into some place so we're okay, but we need a God who actually shares our hell with us, who bears the cold night with us.

So what I'm after is trying to develop a theology for youth ministry that can bear the dark night with kids. One that can enter into their lives at its most frigid points and be with and for them in the confession that Jesus Christ is with and for us, born from that eternal relationship of the Father being for the Son as the Son is for the Father. That's what I'm after when we talk about place-sharing, of trying to do ministry that's faithful to this theological assertion that God is with and for us in Jesus Christ sharing our place all the way to hell for the sake of life.

JMF: It's significant, it seems, as you were telling that story, when Jesus says, "I am the way" and "I am the life," that's different from saying "follow me and I'll take you to a new place that's better than this."

AR: That's a key element that I'm hoping to push forward in these books, is that it's something about persons, and Jesus calls us to his person to find life inside of his person, which is a reflection in our relationship with Jesus. As he calls us he says, "Come to me," or "I am the life," or "I am the vine and you are the branches." It is a manifestation of the relationship he has with the Father, and he calls us then to live near his person.

So my argument is that when we live in relationships that are human-person-to-human-person, where we actually share in each other's lives, that that is a reflection and a way of living into the inner reality of God's own life

and God's own love from the Father to the Son. I think there is something about human-person-to-human-person.

Usually, we tend to think about our ministries as pastor or youth worker to kids or to other people, and we tend to find ourselves in that specialized role, "I'm the youth pastor." I think that adolescents don't need youth pastors in their lives. They don't need youth workers. They need human beings. They need people who will have a relationship with them. They don't need a specialized someone who knows all this information — that can actually keep them at a distance from their life.

What young people need is human beings to be in relationship with. Too often we get stuck in these specialized forms of action that keep us from being human with them. What we're really after is being human alongside and with young people as Jesus Christ is human with and for us.

JMF: How does that look? What is the difference between having a relationship with someone and sharing-place with them and being there with them in sharing the humanity? What does that look like?

AR: It plays out in a couple different ways. One of the interesting elements of doing a relational ministry of influence, if we get stuck in that rut, is that influence really can't *suffer* with young people. It's either got another agenda that it needs to go to, so it so quickly wipes away adolescent suffering, or tells adolescents, "Don't worry about that," or, "If you pray about that, that will all go away," or else, even more diabolical, it uses suffering as another carrot that says, "Look, I can suffer with you, so you should listen to me and let me lead you to where you need to go." But it can't really suffer with and for young people.

I was at a conference a few years back. It was a unique conference because it brought together some academics, it brought together some paid professional youth workers, some publishers, as well as a number of volunteers, were in this room. It was a conference where they were laying out the findings to a study that they had done. I don't know if it was number four...one of the points was that relationships really mattered, that relationships were really important.

After the presenter said this, a man, probably in his early 30s, raised his hand and he invited him to talk. He was a volunteer at his church and he said, "I get it. I get that relationships are really important, but relationships can be really hurtful, too."

He went on to explain: "When I was in high school, my parents were going through a really messy divorce and it was really difficult for me. I don't know if it was in the midst of the chaos or what have you, but I found myself attracted to some Buddhist literature. It was something about the meditation

that calmed all the chaos that was going on in my life. I started to read it, and I was just interested in it, but I started to read it.”

“My youth worker came up to me and said, ‘You know what? You better not read that stuff. That’s a false religion, that stuff is corrupt. It’s my job as your youth worker to make sure you make the right choices and stay faithful to Jesus Christ, so you better not do that anymore.’”

So he said, “I heard him, and we were close, but there was something about it that I kept reading. My life was so chaotic, I just kept reading. He warned me one more time, ‘You better not do that.’ Sure enough, after two or three months, he stopped calling me. I didn’t talk to him for most of the rest of my high school years.”

His point was, he said, “I see that relationships can be really powerful, but relationships can be really hurtful as well.” In that story what happens is you have a youth worker who confuses their ministry. It isn’t about sharing in a young person’s life, but influencing them toward some end. When a young person can’t conform to the agenda that the youth worker wants them to go, they feel justified in cutting the relationship loose, where I think imagining our relational ministry as place-sharing calls to be faithful to the young person in the situation.

So the depressed girl that we have in our youth group, if we’re trying to influence her, the objective of our ministry is to get her over her depression. But if the objective is to share her place, then we confess that only God can heal her. Only God can come near to her and heal her broken humanity, and we’re called to join her in her suffering. Often part of the problem with seeing our ministries as influence is, it can’t suffer, and therefore it lacks some reflection of who God is for us in Jesus Christ, which is to take on our suffering, to take on death in its fullest, and then break that by being overtaken by death in the resurrection.

JMF: Isn’t it hard to de-link, or unhook, from the sense of need to influence and fix?

AR: It is really hard. It’s incredibly difficult. That’s the whole specialization that we fall into. It’s common in our culture. If you drop your computer, usually you’ll have to go to a specialist to fix it. Or if something’s not working on your computer, there’s a different specialist that runs the software and another one that works with the hardware. We’re used to specialization, and I think youth ministry has fallen into that.

We hear this all the time when we invite other adults in the congregation to volunteer, to participate in the youth group or to participate in confirmation or something, and I hear them say, “I did that ten years ago,” or, “I don’t know what I’m doing,” and sometimes you’ll even hear them say,

“That’s what we paid you to do.” What that means is “You’re the one who’s specialized. You received the specialized training to do this.”

Often the real problem of youth ministry is that it tends to let the church off the hook. We hire someone who does ministry with our children, therefore *we* don’t have to. A better way of looking at the youth worker or even the paid youth pastor is not as the one who does the ministry, but someone who *equips* and is trained to equip the rest of the congregation to do ministry with their own children.

That’s where we get hooked, is that we think, “It’s my job as a specialist to influence kids, therefore when I have my end-of-the-year evaluation, what will I point to as having done a good job?” It is a full paradigm shift in how we think about ministry. My point is to try to embed that in our theological commitments more than simply pragmatism of, “what will work and how do we get it to work and try to really drive toward.” What does it mean to be faithful to who God is?

JMF: Don’t we do the same thing with our children? Isn’t our goal usually to influence them? We feel like we have a duty to influence them. How does that affect relationship when you are continually looking for getting the kids fixed and getting them to do the right thing in a direct way that we’ll always approach it as parents? I suppose it’s somewhat rhetorical, but don’t we accomplish more when we try to share their place as opposed to just the right-handed force of forced compliance?

AR: I think so. We all can probably point to people in our lives who have been meaningful to us and that we really changed in relationship with them, and it’s often been because they shared our place, more than they demanded that we conform to something. All relationships do influence. So it isn’t to say that influence isn’t found anywhere, even in authentic real relationships, but the question is, what’s the driving force?

My wife and I didn’t decide to have our son because I thought, “You know what? I hate having to go find the remote. It would be great to have a little kid that I could get to go find the remote for me.” Or, “I’m sick of unloading the dishwasher, so what I need is a child to unload the dishwasher for me.” Or even maybe more close to home for some of us, “What I need is to have a son that can do all the things that I didn’t do. I need to make him into what I wasn’t. I need to get him to an Ivy League school, I need to...” That becomes diabolical parenting.

This reflects to our Trinitarian commitments that God chooses to create out of God’s own inner love. It’s out of desire to be with and for father-to-son that God creates something. Barth beautifully says that the Trinity exists in a relationship before creation even exists. God creates out of the place-

sharing, in many ways, of the Trinity itself. That the Trinity desires to be with and for itself and out of the abundance of that love, it creates.

In the same way, in the best of marriages, we have children out of the reality of our love for one another. Once our children exist, we put certain demands on them. We say things like “We need you to do this.” But even those rules function best within the relationship, when we say, “You can’t act that way because you are my boy. You belong to me. You’re mine and I love you,” as opposed to, “If you want to belong, if you want to have a place here, then you better get on board or else you need to find somewhere else to be.”

We all have experiences where we’ve heard similar things, but there is something about place-sharing that we often fall into the trap of this kind of individualized competitive culture where we think that our job is to influence our young people instead of being with and for them.

JMF: Let me ask you this from what you’ve experienced in youth ministry: Studies have shown that parents have far less influence on their kids than they think they do, that it’s peers who actually have the influence on one another. Is that, in part, or largely perhaps, because peers are, by nature, place-sharing with one another?

AR: That’s a great question. I’m going to take a step back and try to answer it sociologically a little bit. There’s been some great work done by a British sociologist named Anthony Giddens. One of Anthony Giddens’s essential arguments for what’s happened in late modernity in our time is he argues that all relationships have become what he calls *pure*. He calls it the pure relationship. I’ve kind of redefined that a little bit and called it *the self-chosen relationship*.

His argument is that sometime in the mid-century and moving on into our own time into late modernity, that all of our relationships are really self-chosen, that for most of human history you were *given* these people, whether it was in a village or in a religious group. You lived with these people, like it or hate it, because you were bound to these people, and if you wanted to survive, you needed these people.

Because of the operations of modernization moving into globalization, we’re free. You know, at 15, 16, 17... You see this in Los Angeles all the time, a 15-year-old from the Midwest decides, “I hate my family. I’m moving to LA, and I’m going to be an actor.” The idea that you can choose to do that, is a new cultural phenomenon. Couple that with the high school, the creation of the high school, where young people are spending most of their meaningful hours in a day with their peers, as opposed to working in a business or working the land with their uncles and their parents. Now they’re in a peer-government institution.

The argument that I try to make in the first half of *Revisiting Relational*

Youth Ministry is that the task of the adolescent becomes formulating relationships in this self-chosen manner, and they're free to choose those however they want to choose them, there's no tradition or family expectations anymore, for the most part. You're completely up to *you* to formulate your needed intimate relationships.

Young people's whole lives are organized around trying to construct meaningful relationships with themselves. Their friends, some of their closest friends maybe do become place-sharers. There's also this incredibly rich tapestry of power going on in a high school campus where they're defining each other as cool or un-cool and all these things are happening.

It makes great sense that we would talk about relational ministry and youth ministry because young people, their whole lives, are trying to seek out relationships in these self-chosen arenas where all the relationships they have to choose for themselves. That is a driving force for them — they're always trying to figure out “who are these people? Should I love these people? Should I hate these people?”

Parents do influence young people, their own children, in a great manner. But what young people will self-report, whether it's true...and I think there's always debate between sociologists of how much parents actually do influence their young people or how much they do impact them. But if you ask young people to self-report what's the most important thing in their life, they will say their friends. That's because they're trying to work out who they are and where they belong in the midst of this realm of self-chosen relationships.

JMF: Is that good or bad? {laughing}

AR: It is. {laughing} It just is. There's no way to change that. If we see it as the way it is, what it does mean is, we can't just simply wipe relational ministry off the map. Hence the titles of my books, *Relationships Unfiltered* or *Revisiting Relational Ministry*. I think there's good reason for us to say we can't do away with relational ministry. Because of the way the culture is constructed, young people are all about relationships.

But it does mean that we have to be intentional, and I would add intentional theologically, in asking what is a relationship and what is a relationship for? That is the task of those of us who are thinking about youth ministry. What do we mean when we say relationship? That's one of the things that we've talked about earlier. My assertion would be that it just is, and that we need to enter into that reality.

JMF: Getting back to the difference between place-sharing and influencing, and we were talking about what it looks like to place-share with a young person or even with others who are adults, how does that look from the perspective of...let's say you're not a youth worker, but you're a member

of the church and you want to have a decent relationship with young people in church, what do you do?

AR: We tend to over-think it. We're talking about the core of our humanity in many eyes, and it's almost too bad that we have to think, "How can we have authentic real relationships with our young people?"

JMF: From the time I was a teenager, the big word then was generation gap. It was clear that there was a barrier between the adult world and the teen world, and no one knew quite how to bridge that.

AR: We do over-think it. You ask the question, if you're just a member of a congregation and you want to be in relationship with young people, what does that look like, what does that mean? This may sound over simplistic, but it's being yourself with them. That means inviting them into our lives.

Usually what we think the objective of our relational ministry is, we usually think our goal is to get the young person to open up to us. So often we carpet-bomb them with questions. "So, tell me, how's school? How's home? How's reading your Bible going? Who are you dating?" We keep asking these questions. If you've spent any time with a 15-year-old boy, you know you get one answer, maybe two, which is a yes or no and a grunt. That's about the best you can get.

I think it's the other way around. I think the objective for us is not to get them to open up to us and therefore we can say, "I'm good at getting 16-year-olds to open up to me; therefore I'm good at youth ministry." The objective is the other way. I think the goal is to get for *us* to open our lives up to them, to invite them to come near to us and watch as we live our lives. Watch as we struggle with having to bury one of our parents or raising our own children. I hope we can talk a little bit about...

There are boundaries within that, and I don't mean being radically open so you have no freedom in the midst of that, but it's saying, "Come close to me, live near to me, hear my story and let me hear yours." Usually we think it's the other way around. Your job as the volunteer or as a paid youth worker is to get the kids to open up and to share something. I think there's real power when we'll open our lives up to young people.

It's no wonder we see so many young people leaving the church after high school graduation and not coming back ever, or coming back in their late 30s, because they've never really experienced an adult living out their faith. They've never experienced a faith community living out its faith. They've experienced a youth ministry and they've experienced volunteers who are trying to be volunteers, trying to be youth ministry people and not human beings in their frailty and their suffering and their joy seeking God within great doubt and great hope.

JMF: With my own children that's exactly the complaint. As teenagers

they would say, “Why do those people have to pry about everything? Why do they have to come up and be so pushy and won’t leave you alone?” It makes them not want to come back, and they don’t want to have to keep putting up with that. So you do your best to try to make excuses for people who behave that way and don’t know any other way to approach a kid. But it’s a problem, because it does turn them off to church, not just my kids, but their friends, too, experienced the same kind of thing at church.

We have a minute or two left, let’s talk about the boundaries for a second.

AR: The element we often miss when we formulate relationships, especially in the context of ministry, is that relationships (to be a relationship) have to be, as Bonhoeffer has said, both open and closed. We usually think that a good youth worker or a good relational minister is someone who is radically open. But it’s just as important that we learn how to be closed and be able to say things like, “I’ve just had enough,” or, “I’m on vacation,” or, “How about you call me when the sun’s up. I know you just broke up with your boyfriend and you were dating for a whole two days and this is really hard for you, but can you call me when the sun’s up?”

Maybe a story would help if we have time for it. When I was new in ministry, I was invited over to this ministry partner’s house. This person that I was going to be in ministry with invited me over for dinner, and I went over and was sitting in the kitchen waiting for the meal to be ready and watching his wife hurry the meal ready and get their kids ready for dinner, and all of a sudden the doorbell rang.

My ministry partner went to the door and then he shut the door behind him and he was gone. I stood there for a few minutes and I was too young and too stupid to ask his wife if she needed any help, so I just stood there with my Coke in my hand and just watched her. Finally dinner was ready and we sat down, and we ate pasta and had a salad, and he still hadn’t returned. He went to the door and just disappeared. Ice cream was being put on the table for dessert when he finally came back in.

I thought something must be terribly wrong. So about halfway through the meal I asked his wife, “Where’s your husband? What’s happened?” She said, “I’m sure the guys stopped by.” I thought, the guys? Maybe he’s got a gambling problem, the mob stopped by.

She says, “Oh, the guys from his Bible study.” She mentioned that this happens quite often. When he came back in the door, having missed the whole meal, I asked him (assuming that one of the kids must have been suicidal for him to be gone with a guest over for the whole meal), “Is everything okay?”

He said, “Yeah, everything’s fine,” and he gave me this look, like he was trying to teach me something, and he said, “That’s relational ministry for you.

It just isn't nine to five." As he said that, I looked at his wife and his kids who were ravaged and tired, and I thought, this is relational ministry? That you leave your guest, you leave your family? He had mentioned that this happens a few times a week that these kids stop by.

The more I thought about it, I realized that I don't think that's relational ministry. What was happening is when he went to the door and spent most of his evenings outside with these kids, he wasn't a human being to those kids, he was a jungle gym. They would come over, and he would hang out with them, and they'd have something to do.

But if he would have just even once in a while went to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, glad you stopped by, but I'm having dinner with my family right now." Or, "It's story time and I'm reading my kids a story," he all of a sudden becomes more than a youth worker. Now he's a human being who calls them into their own authentic humanity to be in relationship with. He becomes somebody really interesting to be in a relationship with.

But when he spends every night outside with them neglecting his own family where he's radically open to them without being closed, well then, he's just a commodity that they can consume. I don't think young people need youth worker commodities. I don't even think they need youth ministries. I think they need people who will be in relationship with them. If he would have gone to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, but I'll catch up with you tomorrow at school, I've got some other things going on," he becomes a person to be in relationship with. I think that's what young people need.

56. ENTERING INTO THE FULL HUMANITY OF ADOLESCENTS

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for being with us. You wrote an article called “A Call to See and Be Near,” and in it you said, “Too often, relational youth ministry avoids suffering and therefore lacks the boldness and bravery to enter into the full humanity of adolescents.” What does it look like “to enter into the full humanity of adolescents”?

Andrew Root: That article is an excerpt from this book, *Relationships Unfiltered* (that’s the shameless plug). I think it has two broad forms that exist. I’m often asked, “What will this look like, how do I do this?” I’m always very uncomfortable to say too much because I want to remind everyone that *context* always matters. Your contextual location will set the tones for how you do things. I’m no expert to tell anyone in their own context, which they know much better than I do, how to do something. I see my job as only presenting some ideas that might help people think about what they’re doing.

I think there are two broad points that give some of this some shape. One is...I think our objective is to correspond to reality with young people. Another way to say that is to take Luther’s statement in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, where he says one of the points of the Christian, one of the objectives of the Christian, is “to call a thing what it is.” Relational ministry has this element to it, that part of the heart of it is “to call a thing what it is” — to see a young person’s reality and be able to speak and call it what it is — to say “this is incredibly difficult,” or “you’re really good at this.”

Maybe the best analogy or story that goes along with this comes from the British comedy *About a Boy*. It’s this movie about two individuals, Will, who is this young adult, maybe in his late 30s, who is played by Hugh Grant, and there’s this junior-high-aged boy named Marcus. Marcus is this odd eccentric kid who’s been raised by his British hippie mother. Will, played by Hugh Grant, is this incredibly self-centered dude. His whole life is really about pleasing himself. He meets Marcus when he is out on a date with one of Marcus’s mother’s friends because Marcus’s mother is feeling blue.

When they return to Marcus’s flat, they realize that his mother has attempted to commit suicide. She’s lying on the floor and had vomited. Luckily, she doesn’t die, they get her to the hospital. But for some reason, Marcus decides that he’s going to start showing up at Will’s apartment. So he shows up the first day, and Will is not happy to see Marcus, but Marcus wants to come in. Slowly, day after day, Marcus starts showing up at Will’s apartment. They spend about a half an hour, 45 minutes together watching a

British game show, and then Marcus leaves. But he keeps showing up.

The scene starts where Will is very reluctant to have Marcus come into his house, until days later, in this kind of montage way they're telling the story, he's opening the door and expecting Marcus to show up. As the scene unfolds, you hear inside of Marcus's head. He says, "After a while, Will felt like he had to ask me serious questions. I know all he wanted to do was watch Zena Princess Warrior, but he decided he had to ask me a serious question."

So Will turns to Marcus and says, "So how are things going at home then?" Marcus kind of stoically says, "Oh, fine. Thanks for asking." Then he says, "Well, is that still bothering you then?" (Referring to his mother). Then we hear inside Marcus's head, and Marcus says, "It's still bothering me. That's why I come here every day after school instead of going home." Then we hear outside of his head, audibly, he says, "A bit when I think about it."

Will turns to him, this self-centered guy who has invited this kid into his life, turns to him and in this great compassion and empathy he looks at him and then shakes his head and swears. He says the F word and just shakes his head. Then you hear again as Marcus is leaving the flat, you hear him say inside his head, he says, "I don't know why Will swore like that, but it made me feel good. It made me feel like I wasn't so pathetic for getting so scared."

I think part of faithful relational ministry, that's place-sharing, is being able to be close enough to kids to say, that's a terrible thing. And being able to call a thing what it is. I think it's a way that we really join in relationship, is to be able to call a thing what it is.

But there's a second element to it as well: we not only have to call a thing what it is and be able to say, bleeping hell this is hard, but also be able to say nevertheless, even in the dark shadow of this reality, the tomb is empty.

A couple of springs back, my wife's grandfather had passed away. It was right on a Sunday morning when my wife was getting ready to go to church. We had known that he was fading and that he would die soon, but we got a call on Sunday morning that he had passed away. My wife knew about that, so she was fairly stoic about it, so she grabbed our son and got him in the car, and we headed off to church.

But about halfway to church it hit her that he was gone and that she wouldn't see her grandfather again. She started to tear up and cry in the front seat. Our son was behind her in his car seat. After a while she noticed in the rearview mirror that he was looking at her. She said, "Owen, I'm sorry that I'm crying. I'm sad." He said, "Why?" He was about 2, maybe 3 years old, probably 3 years old. "Why?" would just spill from his lips upon any question he would ask. But this "why" seemed to have significance to it.

She said, “I’m sad because my grandpa died, and I’m not going to be able to see him again.” We kept on driving, and as I got off the freeway, he was very quiet and pensive, kind of looking out the window. As we got to the first light, he said, “But mommy, I have a secret.” She said, “What’s the secret?” “The secret is that someday Jesus is coming back and you and your grandpa will be together again. Jesus is coming back and death will be no more.”

There’s something between these two things, of being able to say bleeping hell, and I have a secret — it’s where we live out the faithfulness of relational ministry. We’re in connection with young people. We call a thing what it is. This must be incredibly hard to have to deal with not having any friends, or feeling like these rumors are destroying your life, or to wonder if your parent’s marriage is going to make it. Or to have your dreams about what you want for yourself, to find them implode when your test scores come back, or when you get cut from a team. To be able to say this is incredibly difficult.

But also to whisper, and whisper it as a secret...I don’t mean it’s a secret where we want to keep it from people, but it’s a secret in the sense that it’s so beautiful and so profound and so rich — this idea that God is overcoming death with life — it’s so wonderful that it shakes the very foundations of the universe. We have to whisper it because it connects with the core of our humanity so much.

It’s living between these two things. Being able to call a thing what it is, and I have a secret — nevertheless the tomb is empty. Living out of those two inclinations, those two stances, is a way that we faithfully live with and for young people, and really live with and for each other.

JMF: What is it about us as adults that makes us feel such an urge to attempt to control what an adolescent thinks by what we say and how we say it? It’s as though we want to give an impression of invulnerability on our part... We think we can control what a child or a kid will think, or be, by telling them the thing that we want them to do, or the thing we want them to think, from some kind of imperial bench looking down on them to tell them how it really is.

AR: Right. I think it’s out of fear. We fear that if we’re not in control, then we don’t make a good case for the gospel, which is counter to the biblical picture we received from Jesus, particularly about what the gospel is... It always comes in weak, broken forms. It’s like a mustard seed, or it’s like a woman who sweeps her whole house looking for a coin, or it’s like a father who sees his son on the horizon and rushes out and throws off his cloak to embrace his lost son. It’s about all these broken forms.

We tend to think that if...and this is just the lens we’ve been given in our

cultural context, that “might makes right” or powerfulness is what sells; maybe it’s part of the consumer culture that we exist in, the material culture we exist in. But there’s something counter to that in the gospel, which is that God comes to us in frail and weak ways. In a baby born in a manger to a 15-year-old girl who’s existing under the thumb of Roman rule, and then this God chooses, in the person of Jesus Christ, to show us the full picture of who this God is by going to a cross outside the city to be neglected and destroyed by death.

We tend to want to control young people because we fear that if we show weakness, then what will become of them? They’ll surely deny the faith or not have a place for the church in their lives unless we give it a nice spin and we make it look shiny and good as opposed to talking about the fact that Christianity is this commitment to a God who comes to us in the frail humanity of Jesus Christ, that goes through death for the sake of life. There’s something unique about that narrative in Christianity that should change the way we interact with the world and engage the world.

The reason we have such a hard time doing it is that we fear that weakness will lead them away from where we desire for them to go. But at the very core of who we are, what we want more than anything is to be with them — that’s what we want from our children. That’s what we’re all yearning for — is to be with and have someone be for us. I think we get stuck in thinking that we all have to make something of ourselves. How can young people make something of themselves if we show ourselves as vulnerable?

JMF: It seems like in our desire to push them, that we actually harm the relationship. Our efforts to influence drive them away from us instead of drawing them in. We lose the influence we want through the effort to exercise the influence.

AR: Yeah, I tell my students all the time, “You cannot get a relationship through judgment.” There are very few people who will ever have a friendship when someone comes up and says, “I just wanted to tell you, you are a very ugly person” or, “You dress like you’re from three decades earlier” or, “Your whole disposition repulses me.” Usually a relationship does not start very well that way.

But once you *have* a relationship, it does demand judgment, or it does demand certain assertions. My wife wouldn’t love me unless she said things to me like, “Because I love you, I have to tell you, do you know you talk more than you listen?” Or, “When you say things like that, it is belittling to me.” The fabric of our relationship is contingent on her saying those things to me. It deepens our relationship.

But too often adults (maybe it's this generation gap that you've mentioned in an earlier session) we come into this relationship saying, these kids need to be made right. Instead of seeing them for who they are in their humanity and then joining in relationship... And there are things that *need* to be said, like "You can't do these things" or "These thing will hurt you."

We tend to lead off with the judgment. We may not intend to, but it's often interpreted that way. I don't want to say that we never say anything to kids like, "You know what? You need to finish high school." Or, "You need to think about showering before you go to a job interview." Those are all valuable things that we would want our friends to say to us, but the key is, are they our friend, or is there a relationship there of love and mutuality and connection that invites us to share things and to share life this way?

The way relationships function, at least in my own experience, is that there has to be kind of an equal pace at going at depths. This happened to me in college all the time, it's why my dating record in college was so poor, because I would go out on a date with a young woman and then I would want to take the relationship deeper than she would want to, and all of a sudden the relationship was over, because I had forced a level of intimacy or connection that she wasn't ready for, and no relationship can live under those strictures. But when relationships function the best is where people go at a level, and it's mutual.

Often in youth ministry we meet kids and then we try to get them "deep" right away, instead of sharing their lives and trusting that in being together and being with each other and sharing the importance of the gospel in my own life, that there's a level of shared life that will bring us to a deeper level. But too often we think it's our job to get them here, and then drive the relationship deeper. There's many kids who say, "These people are weird" Or, "This is just uncomfortable." Or, "They don't see *me*, they see where I need to go." That's an important element.

JMF: Isn't that partly a function of having a number of kids assigned to you, as it were? The kids become a job, a project, and you have to get through so many, and you've got a place where you want them to be, as it were. You want them to be moral and you want them to make a commitment. It isn't like you've got the patience or the time to invest in letting each one develop into the relationship that will, in effect, bring them where they need to be.

AR: Yeah. This gets back to the specialization thing we talked about earlier — I don't think that one paid youth worker and her two or three volunteers can be place-sharers with 35 kids in their youth group. It's impossible. If we are about sharing in the yearning and brokenness, the joy

and the suffering of young people...then if it's going to be both open and closed, then you can't do this with 20 kids, if it's just you or maybe one other person.

This is a congregational approach. You're right that one of the reasons we tend to default toward influencing them toward some end is because we think, "I have 15 kids here and they all seem to need more time." It's even worse, because once one class graduates, there's another class going in, and it can feel like this incredible burden. That's why I don't think there's such a thing as an incarnational or a fully relational youth worker, but there are *communities* that are incarnational. There may be a few people who do some of that action, but it takes a congregation.

We can only be place-sharers with three or four kids at the most. The truth is that one paid youth worker cannot be a place-sharer with...unless your youth group is three or four kids. But every congregation has the resources in its own life to have adults be place-sharers with the young people that they have, and even more young people they have in their community. It becomes about a congregation and not a youth ministry, or even worse, a youth worker.

That does mean that the paid youth worker has to change the way she thinks about herself. It's no longer your job to be the pastor to these kids, but you are pastor to this whole congregation that advocates for these kids. That means you have to do certain work to accrue relational capital with the young people in the youth group, but also in the adults. Usually when we interview youth workers, we want to know, do the kids like him or her, do they like this person? That's important. But it's just as important that other adults in the congregation are willing to be led by this person or to enter into a partnership of ministry with this person.

If this person is good with the younger populations of people but the other people in the congregation, the older people, don't trust this person, then their ministry becomes only about them, and we'll always default then into patterns of influence instead of patterns of place-sharing, and we'll tend to live out of more of our knee-jerk need, than out of this theological commitment to a God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and this Trinitarian element that we've been trying to point to.

JMF: Isn't that true across the board in any ministry of the church that it becomes real in its context within the whole congregation, as opposed to a segmented narrow approach to just "meet the needs" as it were, the perceived needs, of seniors ministry, or a young adults ministry, or a singles ministry? When everyone can be part of everything, it works a lot better.

AR: Yeah. This always makes my students uncomfortable, but youth ministry doesn't really exist in the sense that it's not a biblical theme, it's not a theological commitment, it's a reality that's determined by the way our society is structured. As soon as the high school doesn't exist anymore, MTV doesn't exist, there's really no reason for youth ministry. Youth ministry exists because we put over 90 percent of people in their teen years in a government institution and have them spend most of their days in a peer-driven institution, and then there's a whole marketing infrastructure that sells things to them in these niche markets.

You know, 150, 200 years ago, there was no such thing as youth ministry. Your young people were near you. Youth ministry exists because of the way culture has constructed itself. It doesn't exist as a thing. Too often we've fallen into the trap of seeing it as this thing, and then we perpetuate certain activities and actions that we think a youth worker would do or a youth ministry should do. But the truth is, it isn't a thing. Ministry is human-person-to-human-person, through the humanity of God in Jesus Christ.

We fall into that trap that youth ministry is this particular thing, and then we give all sorts of different "bubbles" of this — like you said, there's a senior ministry and there's a young adult ministry, and there's the "mothers with three kids who like bubble gum" ministry or something. You can segment this into all sorts of different groups. I think it does tend to be problematic and lead us away from this core commitment ... This is about a community of faith who seeks God in the frailty of our humanity.

JMF: In your article, "A New Generation Demands New Categories for Theology and Ministry," you wrote, "As it has been documented, most don't hate or despise the church, they just don't care. And they don't care because the categories that they use to make meaning are not the categories we are using to do theology and ministry. Our categories no longer match their reality, no longer have congruence with their habits. We must do theology and ministry in new categories if we hope it will mean anything to a younger generation." What are these categories that they have, that we're not sharing?

AR: In that article you can find online, I look at this pop artist, Lily Allen, and this song she has called *The Fear*. She says some interesting things in it where she discards these categories that the church and theology have tended to live in, which is right and wrong, and connected to that saint and sinner. She has this very provocative line in the song where she says, "I'm not a saint and I'm not a sinner, but all is cool as long as I'm getting thinner," which shows — at least the way I interpreted it — she's not going to live in these old categories, but that there's something else she's trying to find meaning

and purpose in.

My argument, as you read, is that these categories have changed, in that instead of young people trying to figure out “am I good or am I bad?” that they recognize, especially in a post-modern context, that that’s really a hard thing to define — that you can exist in one of those things. But the new category that we haven’t yet dwelt enough on, and she enters into this in her chorus, is that she asks this question, “Am I real? Is there anything real here?” It’s a question of ontology. Do I have any being, and is there anything solid that I exist in? Her fear isn’t that she’s bad or that she’s a sinner, it’s that she doesn’t exist at all.

There’s this element of the early Reformation theology that goes back to Luther, which is dwelling on these questions of the ontological significance of Jesus Christ for us. It’s asked these huge questions of where does God encounter us, and how does God encounter us?

For Luther — and Calvin picks this up in his own way — but it’s really the God on the cross — that’s where God encounters us. Luther would always love to use this phrase that Moltmann picked up for his book in the late ‘60s/early ‘70s called *The Crucified God*. Luther wanted us to recognize that it’s God on the cross who is being crucified — that God, in God’s self, is going through death. Moltmann would push this in his work to talk about how the Trinity goes through death on the cross — that the Father, that the Son is overtaken and experiences negation and the Father understands what it’s like to have the Father’s heart ripped out from the Father as he loses the one he loves, to the abyss of death.

My argument in this article is that the church hasn’t dwelt enough and formulated practices of ministry that reflect on this question of “Am I real?” “How do I navigate life in a way that makes my existence feel like it stands on anything solid at all, because I feel like things are slipping away?”

Part of my argument is that it’s not that young people don’t like the church or don’t think there’s any value in it, they just don’t think it has anything meaningful to say. It’s still talking about being right or being wrong, it’s still talking about *saint* and *sinner* categories instead of talking about them through this ontological framework, which is when the saint and sinner dynamic becomes much more significant — that we’re both saint and sinner simultaneously, but we’re caught between these two realities. God, in Jesus Christ, enters into despair and death so that we’re never alone in it again, and so that turns it, so that from death comes life.

JMF: What does that mean for a congregation’s approach for young people in the church and those they want to reach?

AR: It means, ultimately, being people who are willing to confront and articulate those places in our lives that we find to be places of yearning and brokenness — our preaching and our teaching and our life together should mean something, and it should mean something up against those raw places of our life.

Part of the issue why young people have these benign relationships with the church is because they don't think it means anything. It doesn't matter to them. So the place for us to start is to be willing to dwell in our own lives at those places of yearning and of brokenness and try to construct theology around those.

JMF: So that gets back to what we were talking about earlier — that of sharing the place and learning how to listen to the story and to share stories, our story, with young people.

57. GOD TURNS DEATH INTO LIFE

JMF: I wanted to begin with something from the back of your book *Relationships Unfiltered*: “For more than 50 years relational or incarnational ministry has been a major focus in youth ministry, but for too long those relationships have been used as tools, as means to an end, where adults try to influence students to accept, know, trust, believe or participate in something. Andrew Root challenges us to reconsider our motives and begin to consider simply being with and doing life alongside teenagers with no agenda other than to love them right where they are, by place-sharing.” How does that kind of relationship with teenagers play out?

AR: The objective of it, and the desire, is that we would start with living authentically with young people and living authentically from our own places of rawness and brokenness and sharing each other’s lives from that location. That’s been one of the main problems with the church in the last few decades, something that it’s been striving for, is to say something authentic and meaningful — something that is located in the messiness of our lives.

There’s a great scene from the movie *Walk the Line* where Joaquin Phoenix plays Johnny Cash... it’s a movie about Johnny Cash’s life...and there’s this powerful scene that I think relates to this, where Johnny Cash is going to have his first audition with his band, and he confronts the owner of this recording studio and asks for an audition, and he gets one, reluctantly, by the owner. He gets there with his band and they’re wearing black shirts because that’s the only color they all have of the same shirt, and he starts to play a gospel tune.

You can tell in the first few notes that the record company guy is unhappy with this, as he doesn’t find it very interesting. After a while he stops him and says, “Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to just sing this same song we’ve heard over and over again? This Jesus By and By? Is this what you’re going to tell me again?” Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash says, “What are you saying? That I don’t believe in Jesus?” He said, “No, I’m not saying you don’t believe in Jesus, I’m saying that this doesn’t mean anything. There’s nothing here.”

“Well, what do you mean?” Johnny Cash asks him, and he says, “What I mean...is this the song you would sing if this is the last song you had, you were lying in the gutter and you were going to die and you had one last song to sing to God before you were dirt — this is the song you’d sing? By and By Jesus is with me?” He says, “It doesn’t mean anything unless you sing it from your heart,” unless it comes from your own broken experience, is essentially what he’s saying.

Johnny Cash says, “Well, you got a problem with the Air Force?” And he

says, “No.” Johnny says, “Well, I do.” Then he sings this song that he had written (I think it’s the Folsom Prison song), but then it has this incredible human pathos to it, this incredible significance that’s born from Johnny Cash’s own broken experience and his own yearning.

Often I will show that clip in classes and say, “How come our sermons aren’t like that?” Replace “song” with “sermon.” Many people in our congregations hear a sermon or another Sunday School lesson and they’re thinking, “Really? You’re going to give me this same ‘Jesus is with me by and by?’” Why don’t you say something that means something, that comes from this place of loneliness and this place of deep yearning? The objective of being a place-sharer is to do ministry from our broken humanity that yearns for God and seeks to confess and worship a God who meets us from the gutter of the cross and seeks for God to find us taking on death for the sake of life.

JMF: Don’t we, as youth ministers and as pastors and associate pastors and otherwise, gospel workers, feel like we have to give an image of strength, some kind of façade of righteousness and faithfulness and all that? And in doing that, we think that somehow we’re setting an example or conveying a proper image, and yet there really is no such beast as a person who is the façade we’re trying to put forward.

AR: Exactly. I think the objective is to be and to do ministry from the location of our own barrenness or our own broken situation. There’s a great story about my kids. My son is almost five now and my daughter is two. But when my daughter was younger, she was probably eight months, we made the terrible parenting mistake of having her sleeping upstairs in our house and having the baby monitor switched to the wrong channel so we couldn’t hear her. After an hour or so we thought, “Wow, this is a really long nap for her.”

I walked by the stairs and she was howling, she was crying, she was very upset. So I yelled for my wife and we raced up the stairs, and our three-year-old at the time followed us up the stairs as we went to her. We picked her up and she was as mad as heck. She was angry. We don’t know how long she had been crying, but it had been a while. We picked her up and we tried to comfort her, and as we did that, my son climbed up on our bed and we were saying, “Oh Maisy, it’s okay, it’s okay,” and he, in his great three-year-old way, crawled up next to her, patted her head, and said, “Maisy, it’s okay. You just had hotus.”

We looked at him and said “hotus?” This made-up three-year-old word. We said, “Hotus? Owen, what is hotus?” He looked kind of matter of factly, like everyone should know this, and he said, “Hotus is when you’re all alone and crying and no one is there to be with you.”

It was this beautiful, beautiful assertion, but I think that is the human condition. In many ways, if we're not now, we know of times when we've been all alone and crying and need someone to be near to us. Too often we do ministry out of "I have the answer" or "I can get you somewhere" instead of this mutuality of trying to dwell in God's word and contemplate who God is amidst and alongside our shared hotus. At some point in our life, we're all alone and crying.

I think the beauty of the gospel is that we have a God who encounters us not outside, around, but within our moments of hotus, of being all alone and needing someone to be with us. God desires to be with us, and with us to such an extent that God goes to death. Not only death but, as our creeds say, all the way to hell, so that we'll never again be alone or without God, even when we still feel overwhelmed by our experiences of hotus, as my three-year-old, now moving toward five-year-old, son would say.

JMF: We usually present the gospel as being a way to become moral and righteous and to solve our problems. But that's not what it's about, is it?

AR: I always worry because we've tried to frame things for my son not about what's right or wrong, but what serves death or what serves life. I fear that we've warped him, because he'll always package things in death. Once we were on a walk and he fell and he skinned his knee, and so we raced over to him and said, "Owen, are you okay?" He said, "Yeah, I'm fine," and he pointed to his knee, which was a little bloody, and he said, "But death made me bleed."

He has this concept of life and death, which I think biblically there is something about right and wrong that's there, but there's also another foundation which that rests on, which is, do you serve life, or do you serve death? The God of Israel is a God that is about life. We have all these odd biblical texts about "the right thing to do is to hide spies in your house and to tell a lie when someone comes to your door," because it's not really about what's right or wrong, but what serves life or what serves death. What serves the God of life or death?

Too often we fall into moralism with young people. We tend to judge how well we're doing in our ministries with "our kid's getting better." And how many conversions and how many virgins do you have? That seems to determine if you're a good youth worker, instead of trying to live with young people next to their death, so that they might be people who seek for God and death for the sake of life.... It gives us an ethic, but it's a much more robust theological perspective that leads us into contemplating our own broken humanity and a God who encounters us within it. It's grander in the sense of, in the way it encompasses us and claims us. That is much more beautiful, at least to me.

JMF: You have a couple of new books that came out in 2010. *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*, from Abingdon, and *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*, from Brazos Press. Can you give us a little preview of those two books?

AR: *The Promise of Despair* is my attempt to write at least a little bit of a theology for the church ...in the church's location in our context now. I fear it's not an upbeat Hallmark kind of piece. The basic assertion is that [we need] many of the new kind of paradigms for church that have been around from emerging church folks, to others talking about the church needing to take new form and think differently about its theology and its very life in our cultural context. I affirm that very strongly in this book, but also add to the conversation that I don't know that in those conversations we've dealt enough with the reality of death.

So I try to articulate that and tell some of my own experiences with that. It hinges around this argument that comes from Luther in his Heidelberg Disputation, where Luther is writing his, really a major document of his theological breakthrough that would bring forth the Reformation, and Luther has this very interesting comment in there where he says "a theologian of the cross." If there's anywhere forward for a theologian of the cross to escape all the legalism of the Christendom of his day, that person, that theologian must *despair* — that you have to despair.

I've tried to look into that and to ask, what would it mean — is there a promise in despair, and what do we believe about this God who brings life out of death from the location of the cross? It's a theology of the cross for our contemporary church in our context. In the second half of the book I try to develop a Trinitarian theology, drawing from Eberhard Jungel as well as the early Moltmann, trying to make an argument using some of their sources that God takes death into the Trinity itself.

The ramifications of that, which are quite beautiful, is that now anyone who experiences any element of death — whether that's legitimate death being put in a grave, or severe depression, or just experiences of death, that we can be confident that now we exist within the life of God — that because death has been placed within the inner life of God, that death destroys the Trinity, and then the Trinity is put back together after resurrection, and that now, anytime we experience death, we can be confident and confess that we find ourselves taken up and swept up into the life of God in the Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son that the Spirit ushers us into.

That's a mouthful for that book, but it gives a cultural analysis and then takes a turn on the theology of the cross and looks at how we might do church next to death, and a lot like the Johnny Cash story — how might we

actually practice our faith in a way that honors the realness and messiness of our existence.

The second book, *The Children of Divorce*, touches on some of these themes, but in a much more specific way. It argues that we haven't quite culturally grasped the significance of divorce as it relates to young people. One of the issues that we haven't necessarily dealt with is that divorce may be... (before it's an *epistemological* issue [a question of what we know], in the sense that we usually think as long as kids know that the divorce wasn't their fault, and if we can get some structures in place, like after-school programs and grandparents to be invested, then it's not a big deal, it's a minor disturbance).

My argument is that maybe some of that stuff helps, but that primarily divorce is an ontological issue [a question of being]. What I mean by that is: that what's thrust upon a young person when their parents divorce is the very question if they can exist at all, after the fact that they realize that this relationship of mother and father is responsible for them existing at all. What does it mean for them, that this relationship that is the very elements of their being in the world, is taken apart?

From my own experience of my parents divorcing, as well as the young people I've worked with, I try to make an argument that we need to look at the experience of young people in divorce differently — that it may be an issue of questioning “do I exist at all?” or “How can I be, now that these people who are responsible for my being are no longer in the world?” That's the point of that book — two kind of heavy topics. But ones that would be interesting reads for people.

JMF: You've written an article that I read and found very interesting. I don't watch the TV show *Lost* because I watched it a couple of times and I haven't gotten into it because I found it so abysmally difficult to understand and know what's going on. I know a couple people who are great fans of it, a couple of relatives who never miss it. I ask them, “Well, give me a little... so I can at least have enough to go on to watch it.” They look at me for a second thinking, and then they say, “You really have to watch it from the beginning. I wouldn't know where to start. There's too much to just say easily.” So I don't watch it. But then I read your article and I thought it gave some good insight into what was going on in the show, and you brought in some theological perspective that the show triggered for you. I thought it would be interesting for everyone to hear that.

AR: The first thing I'll say is, for real *Lost* fans out there, I fear saying anything, because you don't want to make avid *Lost* fans angry at you. So I will just say this for myself. I'll say two things before getting into the theological dialogue that I do with the show. The real interesting thing to me

is that it is an incredibly dense, and I don't want to say intellectual, necessarily, but there's so much rich mystery and theory that's embedded with it...so much with philosophy and mythology, and it's fascinating to me...

A question the church has to confront is, why does J.J. Abrams, the producer of this show as well as other movies, why does he get all the best stories? What I mean is, how come we have this incredible story of a crucified God, of... this incredibly beautiful story, and we can so easily make the story of the gospel benign or uninteresting or just plain lame. A show like *Lost*, I think, reminds us that the public is yearning for good narrative. Not narrative that is clean and easily finished after 22 minutes in a laugh track, but is really wanting to dwell in a difficult narrative. At least there's a number of people who are fans of that show who don't want it to be neat and tidy but want to really focus on a very mystical, very transcendent, very raw narrative. I would say that first.

My argument in that article, which was written several seasons ago, so things have changed. But one of the things that was true that I was pointing to in that article that I hadn't verified yet was that the life on the island and the life in the regular world, that they were existing on two timelines — that time was unfolding at a different pace on the island than it was in the regular world.

What was interesting to me about that reality is that essentially, Jurgen Moltmann, in *The Theology of Hope* and in some of his other works, his whole eschatology is built on that perception — that God is encountering us not from the past but from the future. That God's bringing forth God's future. In a sense, God exists on another timeline. That timeline overlaps with ours, but God is ushering all of time and all of creation into God's very future.

It got me thinking about certain things, and *Lost* was doing this — it was living between these timelines. In many ways I think that the vocation of the Christian is to live between times, in the sense that we're stuck in this time. Our lives unfold from life to death, but a future is breaking in where death, from death comes life, where the complete opposite happens. There's a certain way of even reading some of the gospel texts to see it as this reality of a new timeline coming in. For instance, after the crucifixion, people from the graves come out and start walking around Jerusalem. It's a sense where the time has been split open.

Then when Jesus returns after the resurrection, some of the disciples and some of his followers don't even recognize him — not because he isn't human anymore, but because he is the person of the future, he's the man of the future. As many theologians, particularly Karl Barth has argued, that Jesus Christ's resurrection is our promise. The only one that has been resurrected is Jesus Christ, and because of Jesus' own resurrection, we're promised a

resurrection as well. Jesus Christ now exists in God's future.

So I tried with the show, in these multiple timelines going on in the show, to make this argument that the church awaits, yearns, desires for God's future to come while we live in this time. It's interesting to think, for instance, about prayer and healing in that situation. There are times in our congregations and in our lives where we pray for somebody to be healed, and they are. In the church, we rejoice in that and see in it a gift. But it's not the norm. It's abnormal. It's God's future breaking in for some reason into our now. But the unfolding of the timeline we exist in, is that if you get cancer, you die. Or if you get hit in a head-on collision, you probably die. There are times when God's future breaks in and we're healed, or we taste God's future, but that's more abnormal than normal. I tried to develop that element of timelines and eschatology through the TV show *Lost*.

JMF: It makes me want to watch it, but I don't know if I would invest the time it takes to get caught up to speed.

AR: It will make you a fanatic, too. You have to have the time for that.

JMF: I'm glad that some of the shows that I was having to never miss have finally come to an end. It gives me a break in having to be addicted to a certain TV show.

As we conclude, I wanted to ask you something we often ask, we try to ask everyone at some point, and that is, if there's one thing that you would really like people to know about God, what would that be?

AR: The one thing that I would want people to know about God is that God comes near to us in those moments where we don't know what to do or when we feel lost. There are certain moments in our life that are utterly God-forsaken and are irredeemable. But often in those moments, someone else will share in our lives with us. I think, in those moments, God becomes concretely present.

The one thing that I would want us to know about God is that God comes near to us, in our yearning simply to be human, and that the Christian life is a basic life of trying to grab hold of what it means to be human in the midst of a lot of questions and doubt, and doubt is a way of faith in many ways — that if we'll yearn to know God up against our deepest questions, we'll encounter God, and in a beautiful way encounter God in a community of people who are believing while they're doubting, who are yearning for God in the midst of broken and thin places in their life. I think that's the thing that captivates me the most lately, is how to think about our encounter with God in those places of deep yearning and brokenness.

JMF: Interesting you bring up doubt, because typically we're afraid to admit our doubt. There's no Christian who doesn't doubt, and yet we don't want to admit it to anyone else, and we don't even like to admit it to ourselves.

Yet this is where Jesus meets us, in the midst of our doubt.

AR: One of the ways potentially forward as we think about passing on our faith to young people (whether that happens through confirmation or some other form of catechesis or Sunday School or some other educational form) ... I wonder often if we wouldn't do well to build those conversations around our doubt, and how powerful it would be to get a handful of high school students and a couple of adults and to say, "In this hour and a half, we're going to talk, and we're going to doubt our faith together."

I don't mean doubt it, in this kind of nihilistic tone that we're just going to wipe it all off the table and find it's all meaningless. But to enter into the kind of doubt that says, "We're going to wrestle with this" is to take faith and to take the Christian tradition with utmost seriousness — that we're going to really delve into this, but we're going to do it not through our place of power, of having it together, but from our place of wondering, what does this mean?

Young people are searching for a church that will doubt with them, and we continue to give them a church that has certainty. Certainty is the demonic element. Certainty doesn't need to see neighbors. Certainty doesn't need to listen. But doubt listens intently. So I think there's a way that we doubt our faith while confessing Christ. We hold those things together. I doubt while I yearn for God. There's something really beautiful about that.

It would be an incredible witness to the world if the church was this group of people, maybe a little weird people, but these people who deeply searched for God through their doubt and through their brokenness — never claimed to have it all together, but simply yearned for God as they articulated to the world their own shortcomings and their own doubt. We would have a generation of young people that would know their faith better, that would live their faith, and we would have a witness to the world that would be much richer. There would be a community in the world that calls a thing what it is. We have a culture that desires for the church to call a thing what it is.

JMF: Often when somebody approaches us (young person or otherwise) with doubts and has the courage to express those, we respond with defensiveness and with authoritarianism, with "You better not doubt your faith," "You're in danger of something," of losing your faith, or whatever. So we don't listen, and we ourselves become fearful and defensive, perhaps because we have the same doubts and don't know what to do with them. A dialog where there's freedom to live with and express out doubts, share them, deal with them, confront them, look at them, consider them, would be a nice healthy environment.

AR: Yeah. We often are afraid of doubt because, well, because we're afraid. Our fear really is fear of death. It will feel like death if our kids aren't good kids or if they deny their faith. But what's so interesting and paradoxical

and maybe disobedient about such a stance is that the Christian commitment is a God who meets us in death...and there's a freedom in that. There's a freedom, that we need not be afraid of death, because God has overcome death with life. So we don't have to fear our children doubting our faith. Their doubt of our faith is an invitation to share deeply in their lives and to share deeply in the activity of God in a certain way — to yearn for God, to seek God. But we fear death, and because we fear death, we fear them doubting, instead of recognizing that God has overcome death.

There's great freedom in discipleship to not fear death. There's a great line in *The Cost of Discipleship* when Bonhoeffer opens it up in the first few pages when he says, "When Jesus Christ calls a person, he calls a person to come and die." We usually think of that like a football coach on the Friday night high school football game, where the football coach says, "We're going to go out there and we're going to kill those guys this week." The players know that the coach doesn't mean that they're literally going to go out and kill them. They don't take guns out onto the field. It's rhetoric that's supposed to motivate certain action.

We think that when Bonhoeffer says that or when Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me," that it's a pep rally, that's just to get us motivated to live the Christian life. But in a real way that that's the call — that if you are going to follow Jesus, that you have to come and die, that you have to come and face the death inside you, the death inside the world, and seek for God in that death.

We often want to keep our young people from doubting because we're scared to death that they will start smelling like death instead of saying, if I can hold them and if we can together look at and face death, whatever that might be — either doubting of their faith, or their certain struggles, or their depression — that we can in faith and hope trust in God in the midst of this, for our God is a God who brings life out of death. Our God is a God who enters deeply into death. There will be a great way forward if we would choose to doubt our faith together. Again, not as a nihilistic way, but as a way of actual obedience of following God to the cross.

JMF: I can't help but think of a passage, Colossians 3, verse 3, "For you have died, and your life is now hidden in Christ with God." We're dead and alive at the same time, yet the life is hidden and yet the death is real. It also reminds me of the doubt you mentioned [in an earlier interview], the story with your son saying, "Jesus isn't here. There's a nightmare in the closet, and Jesus isn't here."

AR: The objective of the church is to say, "You're right — Jesus isn't here. So together let's search for God..." and this is the paradox — "let's search for God in the utter feeling of God-forsakenness, of God not being

here,” which is this Christological element that opens up, that Moltmann beautifully does, to the Trinity — that God knows death, that God knows what it’s like. Jesus essentially says “God is not here” on the cross. The Father knows what it’s like to lose the Son to the abyss of separation and death. There’s something very Trinitarian about being willing to say “God is not here,” but not as a nihilistic assertion but as a confession of faith.

“God is not here” as a confession of faith that says “I will now search for God in this place where God cannot be found” because this God who cannot be found, this God who I can’t find now, is a God who is often not found, in certain places like in the barren womb of Sarah or in a people under years and years of oppression in Egypt, in the virgin womb of a 15-year-old girl in a God-forsaken place called Galilee...that in those places where “God is not here” is the place where God becomes found.

It would be really interesting for the church to be this place that is willing to say “you’re right, God is not here, and we will serve this God and worship this God,” because when we say God is not here, God becomes here, in our shared community of suffering.

58. HOW *THE SHACK* WAS WRITTEN

J. Michael Feazell: A new novel has skyrocketed to the top of the charts, capturing the imagination of Christians everywhere.

What's so surprising about *The Shack* by William P. Young is its portrayal of God: not the solitary God of popular imagination, such as the one portrayed by George Burns in the film, *Oh, God* or by Morgan Freeman in *Evan Almighty*, but the God of Christian orthodoxy – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three in one and one in three, the Holy Trinity. The result has been hailed as life-changing. Let's talk to the author, William P. Young.

What is it about *The Shack* that is capturing Christians' imagination?

WPY: I have no idea. (laughter)

No, I have some ideas. I think that for a lot of us who grew up inside religious kinds of environments, *The Shack* allows God to become accessible and understandable in a way that hasn't been out there in the same kind of form. There's something about a story, there's something about art in general, that has a way of getting past our preconceptions and our paradigms and everything else. Music does that. It has a way of going right past our intellectuality and penetrating us in the heart.

I think that's why parables that Jesus would use were so effective, because they had a way of penetrating past people's preconceptions and their stereotypes and everything else. As a story it has a way of doing it, when you come to the character and nature of God.



I grew up as a missionary kid and a preacher's kid and I went to Bible school and seminary and we always try to find analogies or some way to comprehend the Trinity. I didn't intend to write a great book on the Trinity, that was an accident. What I did was want to communicate to my children, the fact that

the very nature of relationship has to be embedded in the character and nature of God.

JMF: So you wrote this for your children to begin with – publication wasn't something you had in mind.

WPY: No. I'm the most accidental author you'll ever meet. I've never

published anything, I've always written as gifts, whether it was poems or songs or whatever, gifts for my children, for my friends, for events, and this was no different. This was in obedience to my wife. She wanted me to write something for the children. She said, "I'd like you to write something that would help your kids understand the breadth of how you think, cause you're a little bit outside the box."

JMF: There must be a reason she asked you to do that, there must have been something shaping. This is a pretty enormous undertaking...

WPY: It's probably because I've done a lot of speaking, a lot of teaching, those kinds of things, and the transformation in my life came about through the process of the renewing of the mind, the healing process in my life, and she'd watched all that and then she also liked how I wrote. So the combination of the two things. My goal in 2005 was to get it done by Christmas, and get it to Kinko's, put it in a spiral bound, whatever, and have it for them for Christmas. No thought whatsoever, it wasn't even on the radar that somebody would want to publish it.

JMF: So what happened?

WPY: It got out of hand, is what happened. Even the electronic version, the first manuscript I sent to a couple of my cousins. It had this huge impact that I wasn't anticipating. And it would spill over. People would send it to other people, and we started getting this feedback about the book, and I didn't know what to do about it.

So after Christmas, I sent it to the only "for real" author that I know – that was Wayne Jacobson and he intentionally writes books. I just attached it to an email because one of his books had just came out that I really loved and I said, by the way, I've been working on this. Then he said, of course, he gets buried with these kinds of things. I understood that and said, no expectations, really.

I just had the nudge (and sometimes the Holy Spirit gives us a nudge just so we learn how to hear his voice, not for any outcome). But in this case he actually started reading and he promised me he would read at least 20 pages. He called me back up and kind of freaked me out, because (I've come to know that Wayne is like this, but I didn't know it at that time) he started off – "What were you thinking sending me this manuscript?" I thought, "I have pushed all his hot buttons." I'm backing up in the basement. "Oh man, what do I do?" I said, "My relationship with you is way more important than some sort of manuscript...just put it on the shelf."

He said, "No, you don't understand. I can't print the pages fast enough. I don't remember the last time I read anything where my immediate response was "I have six or seven people that I need to send this to right now."

So I said, "I trust the Holy Spirit in you. Send it to whoever you want."

He said, “I already did.” This is from Friday to Monday. That sort of got the ball rolling.

I went down and met with him and his buddy Brad Cummings – they do the “God Journey” podcast, and Bobby Downs from Christian Cinema came around, and we began to just talk about and work on how to bring this about, which started a 16-month process, because we all have jobs and busy-ness and everything else.

We very collaboratively worked on the book – then nobody would publish it. We sent it to everybody. Nobody wanted it. Either they didn’t respond, or if they did, they said, “It doesn’t fit our niche.” It’s either too edgy or too much Jesus, depending what side of the farm they’re on. So the guys said, “Well, we’ve always wanted to be a publishing company,” so they created their own – with one title – *The Shack* – and attached it to a website.

Wayne’s and people from the podcast were the initial ones who purchased the copies, and then they’d come back and they’d buy four, and they’d come back and buy six, and then a dozen, and then a case, and we just watched this thing begin to blossom. Even to date, we’ve only spent a couple or three hundred dollars in marketing and promotion, total. It’s all been through relationship, which is the earmark of the book itself. It’s all about: this has got to be a relationship with God or else we’re just not going to be good enough to achieve that whatever it is that we’re supposed to be doing.

JMF: There’s a perception of God that most people have, kind of a “God’s out there, we’re down here.”

WPY: He’s watching from a distance, like that silly song.

JMF: Yeah. What do you see as the problems of that kind of perspective – that’s how most people think of God?

WPY: Any theology of separation creates a gap that is up to *us* to traverse.

JMF: Now, theology of separation, you mean ...

WPY: A lot of us grew up with an idea that everything was based on our performance. Instead of a new covenant understanding of union with Christ, we still function as if we lived in the old covenant ...

JMF: Separated from God.

WPY: Separated from God. When we have any perceived separation, that separation’s our problem, it’s our fault and it’s our sin, it’s our whatever – and so it’s now up to us through behavior to get across that separation to wherever God is – to enter his holiness.

Even modern believers use language that is a language of separation. “We are now going to come into his presence” – as if we’ve been out of it. All of that language is old covenant language, and the whole performance-based paradigm is definitely old covenant, but we’ve just modified it – changed some of the words – and now we can eat shellfish. But we also have another

thousand extra little rules that we've added as well.

JMF: When you talk about relationship, as opposed to this theology of separation, this is what you get into as you unfold the God-character in the book. The Trinity plays a very important role in that – but the Trinity is not something the average Christian thinks much about. It's a doctrine, and the church holds it as a doctrine as important and key, but...

WPY: But it's a more of an intellectual kind of affirmation than anything else, and people don't see how crucial the reality of the relationships amongst or within God are to us. Again, I didn't intend to write a book on the Trinity, but by describing them relate to each other, all of a sudden it makes sense.

JMF: That is, Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

WPY: Exactly. You begin to see God within – God's very character is relational and cannot be un-relational. For example, God has never done anything by himself. There's always been three involved. In the creation, he says, "This is a great creation, it's all good. But there's one thing that's not good. We have a creation here, a human being who doesn't have anybody to collaborate with. And that's not good." In God's very being, you have collaboration and relationship, that's why there's verses about the Father being the creator and the Spirit being the creator, and Word, Jesus, being the creator.

We think in our independent theology, individualistic theology, that somehow we can do this by ourselves – that we're going to be alone. It's relational for us because we are made in his image, and his very nature is relational. It begins to change everything – the dynamics of how this all works.

So when Jesus comes to us, when God the Father comes to us, the Spirit comes to us, it's all about relationship. That's why to me the central passage of the new covenant in Scriptures is John 14, 15, 16, 17, when he's talking about, "this is what we've been going after. We are coming to live inside of you – we're going to make this a habitation and not just a visitation. We've been dealing with visitation, but it's all going to change now and we're going to come live inside of you."

JMF: Typically people think of that in terms of rules! God has a list of rules, commandments and we obey those, and that's how we have a good relationship with God and with each other.

WPY: Good luck with that! If you think that it's on the basis of behavior – especially those of us who've been damaged, which would probably include most of us. But the more damaged that we've been, behavior is not going to work for us. We have to have some form of transformation, or there's no hope for us. We're not people that are necessarily self-disciplined. Our flesh got hurt somewhere in the process and we don't have the bent for that or the

ability for it. So if we make everything behavioral in terms of relationship with God, we're toast. This is not going to happen.

JMF: Does it take a degree of honesty for Christians to see themselves in that light?

WPY: Absolutely, and it takes time, it takes process, and for us, to become honest is a process by itself. You have Jacob, right? Jacob is in the later part of his life and he's still not been honest. It has taken this whole time. God has been consistently working at him and present with him, and he's now going to face his brother who he thinks is going to kill him. He sends everything out until he's got nothing left to work with, and then he takes on God.

In the wrestling match, God finally says, "I'm done. We're not doing this anymore. This is your whole life. I'm not going to play this game anymore."

Jacob says, "I'm not going to let you go until you bless me."

God says, "Ok, tell me your name."

When I first ran into that during my process of healing, I immediately went back to Jacob as a young man and he goes in looking for the father's blessing. I'm not going to leave until you give me the blessing. His dad says, "What's your name?" And he says, "Esau."

We're right back there, in that sense, but all these years later – and now he's wrestling and saying "I'm not going to let you go until I have the father's blessing."

And God says, "What's your name?"

He finally says, "Jacob. I'm a liar, I'm a heel-grabber, I'm a cheat, I'm a usurper, I'm all these things."

Then God says, "Ok, I'm not only going to bless you by putting your hip out, so that you have something that will remind you everyday of who you are and where you've come from, but I'll change your name, too. You'll be a conquered one, you'll be conquered by God."

That level of honesty is what *The Shack* is part of. It's about being honest. *The Shack* is a metaphor. It's the place where we got hurt. It's the place where we got damaged, it's the place that we messed up so royally – or that we've been piling all the stuff. And we don't want to go back there. We want God to come in and just yank us from where we are, to somewhere where we think we ought to be. And he says, "No, we're gonna actually begin to heal the emotions, and heal the thinking, and heal the heart, and do all these things. But to do that, we've got to go back there."

For me, it took 38 years to get to the shack, it took 11 years to get through the shack, and I condense that 11 years to a weekend for Mackenzie Allen Phillips, the main character. And in that "shack," it's time for all secrets to come out, because we are as sick as the secrets we keep. A lot of times, the

religiosity side – this performance-based paradigm – either forces us to hide our stuff, or just flat out lie about it.

JMF: To ourselves.

WPY: To ourselves and to everyone out there, and to God. It's just like somebody said to me: "Oh. I couldn't really tell God this." It's like he doesn't know. All because he is separated again – he's over there somewhere and this is just between you and me, I can tell you, but I couldn't really tell God these things.

We again have that idea of God as not being inside this process with us. He is outside, seeing how good at the process we are, and judging us at every point for our inability to be perfect in it. We only feel as good about ourselves as our last moment of perfection, inside that paradigm. It's a devastating paradigm, and I think it's false.

One of the reasons I wrote the book for my children was to save them maybe 40 years of legalistic-performance-oriented baggage. I don't want them to run with 750 million pounds of weight, and they're so far ahead of where I was when I was their age, and I'm grateful for that.

JMF: Why, even though we know this about God, do we tend to be so addicted to rules?

WPY: Part of it is bad theology. Maybe intended or unintended – but we got the idea somewhere along the road that we're still in the old covenant, the language changed a little bit. The other part of it is that – think of where we've come from, where before Jesus Christ came to live inside of us and make us spiritually alive, all we had was the flesh, all we had was this mortality, and everything was dependent on how we looked, who we knew, how good we thought, if we could sing or not, everything was performance and competition. That's how we think about everything.

So when Jesus now comes to dwell inside of us, he doesn't automatically transform the flesh. It's in a process of being saved. I reject the Buddhist kind of mentality that says (and it's in Christianity to a degree) that somehow we need to disappear so that Jesus can be revealed.

He's already come – the Father is well pleased with the Jesus that is part of the Trinity. He doesn't need a billion Jesuses – what he desires is to come and live inside of *you* – the epitome and apex of his creation. As great and incredible as the macro universe is, as incredible as the micro with quantum mechanics and everything else, it's nothing compared with one human being. The intricacy and the incredible wonder of that person, he comes to make alive and then begins from the inside to transform out.

We're not used to that – we're so performance-oriented that we want to take the rules and think that they are going to affect my behavior from the outside. That's the intention of rules, is that they will modify my behavior

and they'll tell me what to do. That's why we love self-discipline without understanding that it's a work of the flesh – as opposed to self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit that comes from the inside and works its way out.

We have this natural affinity with rules, because all of our sense of worth, our value, our security, all of our understanding of reality is attached to performance. I can judge you, I can compare myself with you – or I can find somebody else, if you're better than I am. It's all based on performance, and it's what we're used to.

How do I understand significance? Behaviorally. I've got to do something in order to be significant. God says, "That's not the truth. You're made in my image. I love you. There is nothing you can do to change that. You can't add to your significance, you can't take it away." And yet the issue of significance inside the Christian community is as rampantly a driving force in the lives of people – especially men – as outside.

The whole paradigm is a very coercive, imprisoning paradigm – because it all comes back to "how good at this I can be?" You know what? It doesn't change us. All it does is modify our behavior. But give us enough time – it will all explode again, anyway, because all we're doing is repressing the shame and the guilt and the condemnation – the things that God nailed to the cross, because he knew it couldn't achieve one ounce of righteousness. None of those things can produce righteousness.

The law can't. All the law could ever do is say, "You're guilty, I'm here to tell you." In the book I used the illustration of – it's like a mirror. You've been working under the car all day, you've been wiping your face and you don't know how dirty you are until you look in the mirror. And the mirror says, "You need soap."

And you say, "Oh if I can just take the mirror and scrape myself clean" – which is what the legalistic paradigm says. Somehow, I can embrace these rules in such a way that I can accomplish them.

Then Jesus comes along and says, "You can't even have the *desire* to break one of those [laws] inside of you, because if you do, the whole thing's lost."

Somehow we think, "No, God gave us this whole new set of rules – the Ten Commandments plus whatever our religious environment and sub-culture has added to it – to do certain things, to not do certain things, whatever. If we can just embrace that. And God gave us the Holy Spirit to help us do the rules now."

I'm sorry, it's not going to work. If you think you can do this, I've got a book for you: "One thousand and three hundred and forty two steps to holiness." I guarantee you at step number two, you'll be dead.

JMF: Now, surely, you get objections from some sectors of Christianity that say, "By saying this kind of thing, you're just encouraging people to sin

and you're taking away any kind of ..."

WPY: I've got good company there. Is this not the question that Paul raises in Romans? "So, are you saying that we should just go out and sin so grace would abound?" [Romans 6:1]

What's his response? "You don't have any idea of who you are, do you?" Because when it comes to God, the central issue is his character – who is this God? When it comes to human beings, the central issue is identity – *who* are you?

We have a theology that has told us that we are still stuck in a paradigm that identifies us as an old nature. But we have a new nature now – and these two are duking it out, and it's kind of, "what nature are you going to feed today?"

But they don't tell us if the feeder [the one who is doing the feeding] is part of the old nature, or part of the new nature. If it's part of the new nature, it's only going to feed the new nature. If it's part of the old, maybe it gets confused. In that paradigm, which comes down to performance, you're always going to consider yourself fundamentally as the old nature.

The issue is "identity." Did anything really happen when Jesus Christ came to live inside of you? Or is it just all positional and intellectual? Because if it's just positional and intellectual, I'm back working at this as hard as I can – just like I was before.

But maybe, maybe he came to dwell inside of this flesh, not to eradicate it, but to heal it. If that begins to happen, here are some things that I won't be... There's a possibility that I wouldn't be. My emotions begin to be healed. I begin to feel things differently. My thinking obviously gets transformed. It's renewed – all this transformation takes place because of the renewal of the mind. I begin to look at people differently. I begin to touch people differently. I begin to relate to my circumstances differently. Those changes, for a lot of us, we couldn't go and say, "This caused this change, or that caused it." God is the only one inside of us who can unwrap this healing in such a way that it doesn't destroy us.

JMF: Isn't it like a sheer force of will, that rules and laws are about *you* deciding you're going to do something right? Whereas we're not talking about that. We're talking about actual relationship.

WPY: Yeah. You cannot use the flesh to defeat the flesh. You cannot use self-discipline to become self-controlled. That's the whole Galatians 3 thing. Paul says, JB Phillips translation: "Dear idiots of Galatia, who has bewitched you? Having began in the Spirit, do you think you're gonna be perfected by the flesh? Don't you understand who you are?"

To use an easier illustration that might help – there are a lot of folks that pray for patience. Do you find anybody in the New Testament who prays for

patience? Can you think of one prayer in the New Testament where somebody prays for patience?

JMF: Nothing springs to mind.

WPY: Exactly! Cause it isn't there. There is an understanding that patience is a fruit of the Spirit, that when Jesus comes to live inside of me, patience comes to live inside of me. Patience has wed his life with mine in such a way that my nature is now patient.

But if I think I'm still the old nature, and I'm still impatient, I will continue to function because that's what I think the truth about myself really is. Instead of beginning to understand that for me to act impatiently is to go contrary to my nature – that who I am in Christ – that's the core of this new covenant that I'm a part of. That's the central element of identity, is that union – relationship. Jesus says, "I'm coming inside. In fact, not only I'm coming, the Father is coming. We're going to make a habitation in you." It's not a visitation, where you're once in a while empowered so that you can create holiness in your life, or righteousness.

59. IS GOD A CHRISTIANIZED ZEUS?

JMF: Thanks for being with us again, Paul. And, by the way, you do like to be called Paul, even though your name is William P. ...

WPY: It's a family thing, my dad is William Henry, I'm William Paul, my firstborn is William Chad, and my first grandbaby is William Gavin.

JMF: And the thing you have in common is no one goes by William.

WPY: No. You know what's funny is, I've had people recommend the book to *me* who are my friends, because they did not connect that I'm the Paul.

JMF: Hey, there's a guy by the name of Young who's written a book...

WPY: Yeah, you related to him?

JMF: What kind of people are reading *The Shack*?

WPY: It's across the board. It's people who are from a conservative Christian framework, there are people who are totally outside. There are people in prisons, and people from every kind of walk of life you can imagine. I get 30 to 50 e-mails a day, from all over world. It is really across the board – theologians, to people who have never ever read the Bible, and so we're getting people who are attracted to the story and it's impacting their lives – from every walk that you can imagine.

JMF: What are some of the common themes of positive response that you're getting?

WPY: Believe it or not, there have been a lot of people who've been hurt by religious institutions.

JMF: That's shocking!

WPY: Totally shocking. I don't mean that facetiously – there's a lot of hurt out there because of – systems have a way of manipulating people of accomplishing their goals in a very non-relational or un-relational framework. So there are a lot of folks who are coming with a whole lot of hurt that way. There are people who are in the middle of great sadnesses themselves – who have issues with their family or health, and they bring that.

One of my favorite quotes – not because I love it, but it was so penetrating to me. There's a gal in Atlanta who is struggling with cancer who said that the book really yanked her out of the depression that she was in, and it's serious. She is facing life and death. When she wrote, she said, "I wasn't afraid to die. I was terrified at the look of disappointment on his face when we meet." That encapsulates, for a lot of us, our experience within religious systems.

People are coming with their own stuff. I got a note from a gentleman who's in prison. And another one from the guy who is the chaplain of, I believe, Leeds Prison in London – the largest prison in London – he was

saved under Nicky Cruz – he was a Hell’s Angel and doesn’t like Christian fiction, but really loves this book. It’s penetrating into those areas.

We’re finding that it’s being a bridge for reconciliation even between the African-American community and the arch-conservative White community – just because, for a lot of people, they’ve never been able to use any imagery of God other than Zeus. We’ve Christianized Zeus – or Gandalf with an attitude. But now for the first time it’s like – let’s get God out of the box that we’ve placed him in, because he’s frankly left anyway.

JMF: The old gentleman, kind of like Gandalf with a flowing beard, out there ... judging..

WPY: And with the lightning bolts, and it’s all our behaviors, so as soon as we step aside...

I had some young men, and I know about a discussion that they had about the character of God. One particular young man who’s a friend of our family was struggling last year with his relationship with God because they had concluded that God was Zeus, and that doesn’t create a lot of relationship. My wife, Kim, handed him the book last summer at a wedding and said, “Just read this.” He called me up about three weeks later and said, “Paul, when Papa came through the door, my whole world changed.”

It’s not about me coming up with all the effort necessary to bridge the gap – but that God actually crosses it himself in pursuit of us. The only time you see God running anywhere in Scripture is when the object of his affection is coming toward him – that’s the prodigal father – he runs. Other than that, it’s all walking, it’s all relationship. I wanted God to just come across that divide – because that’s how I believe he is, and everything that I understand about Scripture says that’s the God that we are in love with and who loves us, and pursues us.

JMF: You’ve had objections from religious circles.

WPY: Yeah, I had a few.

JMF: The question comes up, “This is just your idea of God that really isn’t biblical.”

WPY: I wrote God as good as I knew how, and he is better than I wrote him. It’s fiction. This was not an attempt for a systematic theology, so there are things that are not in there. This was a story for my six kids. It’s a fictional account. There’s a lot of truth behind it, in terms of – the pain’s real, the process of coming to wholeness is real, the conversations are very real conversations and the character of God is as good and as real as I could write him.

We are getting some push back, but it’s very minor, and very small. Just some people who are vocal minorities. It just tends to be that way. I have a couple thousand emails from people whose lives and relationship have

changed – and stories all the time. That stack is what I really care about.

I am not opposed to answering any of the [doctrinal] questions, but a lot of times [this type of] conversation doesn't push us across into loving people. It's just kind of a theological place. Unfortunately, there are some folks who, when they ask you a question, they're asking for a piece of wood they can burn. They're not asking for a conversation. Those are not the conversations I get involved in. They're just not valuable.

But I got an email the other day and this gal writes, "Your book's the most juvenile piece of trash I've ever read. It's pedantic, it's slow..." it's whatever. She really gave it to me. She's the kind of conversation that I love...

To just step back a second. I had a fellow say to me this weekend: "When somebody asks me about *The Shack*, this is what I say to them: 'Your response to this book will tell me more about *you* than about the book.'" That is so accurate. I don't have a sense of ownership. This was a gift, all of what's happening with the book is so outside the box. My favorite quote is from Tyson, who goes to Oregon State. He says to my 19-year-old daughter, "Amy, this book is so far beyond your dad." That's my favorite quote. With all that in mind, when people are telling me, I have nothing that I need to protect. I don't have a territory here. This is not my identity. I'm not a writer in terms of... I wasn't doing this in order to be significant or because my security was involved here, my sense of worth.

So when this gal writes me this note, I wrote her back. I was very careful because I wanted my response to be affirming and positive. People who are word smiths, we know how to put a knife just under the surface of a word – you know what I'm talking about? So, I wrote her back: "I'm so impressed that somebody would have the self-confidence to write an author and trash their stuff like this." I said, "I am so impressed." And I said, "I'm attaching about two week's worth of emails that I get, about 20 pages, and email snippets, and you maybe absolutely right. This could be the most juvenile piece of trash you've ever read. But look at how it's changing peoples' hearts and lives, look at how it's bringing people into a relationship with I Christ? The beauty of that is that God could take such a juvenile piece of trash and impact peoples' lives this way. I am so pleased to be a part of this."

Four days later she wrote me back and said, "I need to ask for your forgiveness." Which is beautiful, because if I've been all defensive and said this or that or "you can't even spell all your words right" or whatever, there's no relationship in that. All I've done is protected my little kingdom, my little territory, my little sense of identity or worth.

So yeah, we're getting some push back. I've been labeled a Hindu, and I've been labeled a Universalist and I've been labeled somebody who hates the local church. But there are folks out there, and they're bringing everything

they've got to the table, and part of what they feel they've got is that there are people behind them, and they want to protect them from people like me. It's what they've got, this is what they're bringing to the table. I think they're wrong, that the people behind them don't need protection – that the Holy Spirit can speak to them – all of that. But it is what it is.

We can deal with individual questions, like being Hindu, because I'm not, being a Universalist, because I'm not. All of these kinds of things are part of the ongoing conversation. But it is a small group compared with how this book is simply, in the best way, ruining people's lives – in the best way. It's just transforming, and all of a sudden God in Three is becoming accessible, and is on their side to help them deal with their stuff and there's no shame in that process.

JMF: The common perception of God is being a Judge, and you are separated from him until you say the sinners' prayer. You deal with that in pretty clear terms as the characters are unfolded in the book.

WPY: Absolutely. If you look even at I, and I always go back to "how does this play out in the life of I?" He called them "disciples" a long time before they were alive. He even said to them, "I no longer call you servants – reflecting the old covenant kind of mentally – but I call you friends." They're not even alive yet.

In the same passage he's saying, "I'm going to go to the cross, I'm going to come back, receive you to myself, on that day you'll be alive." Then he says, "The work that I do, you will do also." Which means, not the work that I *did*. "I didn't come to model this. I came to *continue* to do my work. But now, I'll be in you together, we'll be able to collaborate, participate together in what I'm doing."

Even in relationship to the disciples, you don't have this sense of separation. The whole point of the Incarnation is his identification with us – it's not a sense of separation. This is where we've done a huge injustice to the Trinity. It's like God the Father is the Holy One. I is the one who's allowed to get his hands dirty. God has to be at a distance, you know, like you're saying earlier – watching us from a distance, because holiness means he can't look upon sin or he can't be around it. And we're going, "how does that fit with the omniscience of God? How does that fit with the Incarnation? Isn't I fully God, and fully man? If he's fully God, then God must be in the middle of it.

One of the dominant metaphors or images that I used, is that there are nail scars on Papa's wrists – God the Father. I've been given some push back about that. But that's scriptural, and everything that is embedded in the story – and I didn't do this just by myself – I had help from some very smart theologically trained people to make sure that the realities that are inside this

parable, this story, are validated by Scripture.

This one's 2 Corinthians 5:19 For Papa – God, “for God the Father was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself not counting their sins against them.” Is that separation? Where did reconciliation take place? It was on the cross! Where was God the Father? He was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. This was a collaborative event where God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in Christ was involved in getting inside all of our loss and all of our pain with the express purpose of healing us. Not “I’m sorry, you’ve got to deal with all the bad stuff, I’ll be back in three days.” That, again, would be separation, and that’s what I was trying to go against.

JMF: “I and my Father are one.”

WPY: Yeah, “you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.”

JMF: Yet at the same time, in the book, you maintained the distinctions, Father, Son and Spirit while also bringing together the unity.

WPY: Which turned out to be so beautiful. I’ll tell you, a lot of people have asked me, “Who did you read in order to portray God this way?” I hardly read anybody about the Trinity. I’ve started to read a lot more, because it’s out there from the Catholic experience, from the Protestant experience – there are some beautiful things, Eastern Orthodox has beautiful portrayals of the Trinity. My guiding phrase was Ravi Zacharias’ little phrase: “Unity and diversity in the community of the Trinity.” That little phrase was what framed everything that I did when I was talking about how they related to each other – how they loved each other.

I wanted my kids to stand back and say, “That’s the kind of life – that’s the kind of dynamic relationship that I want, not only between me and God, or involved with me and God, but I want it in terms of my experience with the people that I love. And with my enemies even,” because it continues to extend.

God’s nature is agape. I want my children to bask in the love of Father – and that’s the central thing that I was trying to communicate, as well as his character and the consistency of his character. Then, let’s take a look at some of the worst situations that we could ever imagine, and let those situations ask the questions that all of us feel in our hearts.

JMF: In light of the response, the overwhelming response that you didn’t even expect as the book has been distributed – word of mouth, not even by ...

WPY: It’s through relationships. It’s people who care about somebody, who gives it to them, and it’s like these conversations just emerge. How you respond to the book will tell you more about you, as you respond, it tells me more about you than about the book, a lot of times that’s very true. But it raises conversations that have never happened before among people that

thought they knew each other.

There's a lot of people who respond, "This is exactly the way I always thought God must be like." And there are people who are responding and going, "I'm so afraid to believe this because I've been disappointed so many times... Is God really like this? Is this a possibility?"

And there are folks who are saying, "There's just not enough wrath in this book," because there's wrath in Scripture. Yes, of course, there is. A friend of mine who is an Old Testament professor and theologian, when asked that, he says, "Can you name me one thing that God lets Mack off the hook on and says, 'Oh, that doesn't really matter?'" There's nothing. God goes after every single thing.

JMF: Mack, being the central character.

WPY: God goes after everything in Mack's life that is wrong, everything that's not truthful, that's not honest, everything that's a lie, everything that's false, and to me the wrath of God is God's very character against everything that is wrong. The fact that a doctor comes to someone and wants to perform surgery to cut a piece of your body out because it's got cancer, doesn't mean that he hates you. In fact, he's after that which is destroying you.

When you look in [God's] face and you see anger, you might misunderstand that he is making a value statement about you. But he's not. He is coming after everything that keeps us from being free and being whole. The full set of his fury is against that. Even what he did in the Old Testament in terms of what *we* call the plagues, many times is referred to as the miracles, or the great workings, or the wonders, the nine wonders – because he went after every point of idolatry that was locking the Egyptians into their losses, as much as it was locking the children of Israel into that bondage. That's a beautiful thing, you know.

If we want to understand the Old Testament, we've got to first look at I, because he is the most obvious expression and manifestation of the character of God – "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father; I and the Father are one." All those things are true. Some people think that God got saved somewhere between Malachi and Matthew and during the 400 silent years. This is the same God who's been there. Just because our conceptions are so wound by performance – and by these kinds of frameworks that we don't see clearly – doesn't mean that he is what we thought he was. Like one gal wrote and said, "My daughter just came in, she's 21, she wants to know if she can divorce the old God and marry this new one."

JMF: Already been done. The concept of wrath itself – the definition of wrath, when we talk about the wrath of God, we like to put the definition of our own wrath, when we are angry about something that's offended us – and we project that onto God, and so that's the way God must be.

WPY: Absolutely. For a lot of us, our theology has been maybe our own father, or authority figures in our lives, projected to the ultimate level. And we don't...

JMF: Angry...

WPY: And out of control, and I'm constantly disappointing him and I'm constantly failing. It's a, "You got an A minus – that's ok, but I know you can do better." "Yes, you played great defense, but your offense was awful." Whatever it is, we are constantly put onto a scale of performance and say, "You failed."

What's the main question in legalism? It's "How much is enough?" And the answer is always, "More." How much is enough prayer? How much is enough reading Scripture? How much is enough giving? How much is enough? And legalism says, "More." We can't do that.

JMF: And even if it's more, it's got to be better.

WPY: Yeah. More as in perfect. Yeah, you figure it out.

JMF: And then how do you define perfect?

WPY: Exactly.

JMF: Your life has changed as a result of an enormous amount of... You have everything from interviews, everything's turned up-side-down, I imagine, in you life as a result of the spread of this book.

WPY: Yeah, it's had a little impact.

JMF: So, what do you do for relaxation to get away, hobbies, or...

WPY: I have two grandbabies. Part of my relaxation is to spend time with them. Any grandparent knows. That's as close to being in heaven as you can imagine. I have six children, I still have three at home. So I'm involved with some sports activities and drama and being involved in their lives as well. And I'm married to the woman who saved my life, and I think all men, for the most part, marry up. I have a community of friendships and relationships that are all a part of that, that are wonderful.

Life is lived at one day at a time. This is a funny, different kind of season for us, and we're tracking it one day at a time. We don't have any guarantees we'll be here tomorrow. So I want to spend this day in the present, in the presence of the one who loves me best. I don't want to project it into what's going to happen into the future and be freaked out. This is where he lives with me.

It goes back to the prayer I prayed at the beginning of 2005, when I came out of the shack: "I will never ask you again, Papa, I'll never ask you again to bless anything that I do, but if you have something that you're blessing that I could hang around, I would love that. Because I want to know at the end of the day, you did this." My whole life is religious. At the end of the day, I couldn't tell you whether I did it or I performed it because of insecurity or a

need to be significant and I coerced people into getting things done and I shamed them into doing stuff. I'm done with that.

JMF: Isn't there a certain confidence ... like Mack finally saw in the book that, regardless of what you wind up being involved with, you can rest assured that God is there with you in it – whether it might have been the best choice or not-so-best, he's there.

WPY: Absolutely. There's a huge rest in that. I says, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light." Where does he live? He lives inside of us. If my yoke is not easy and my burden is not light, what part of God have I picked up? I picked up something that doesn't belong to me.

Rest is the environment in which we do everything. We live our lives and that happens today. Today is the day of salvation. Today, enter my rest, today. This is where eternity intersects my life – today.

I love the bride of Christ. I bash any institutional systems generally. I don't care whether they are political or religious or whatever, because frankly, they are part of the world's system – a way to coerce and manage human beings. But I love "the bride." I don't care whether "the bride" meets in a used building or has a steeple.

The church is "people." It's people, always has been. You either are the church or you're not. To gather together is a gift – always has been. We were intended to be in community. How you do it, it's going to be different from culture to culture and situation to situation. If you are under persecution, it's going to look a whole lot different than when you're not.

All of that is to say, "God decided to do something with this story." When I asked him if it would be okay for me to hang around something he was blessing, I never thought it would be something that I did – actually wrote. That wasn't on the radar. I was just saying, "I'm available." I said, "I don't care if I shine shoes or open the door, or clean the toilets. It doesn't matter to me, if I can just be hanging around you." Because that's where I am in my life, that's all that matters to me.

All the gifting of family and friendships and community of faith – all of that – is just the gift he brings to encompass his presence. That's where I want to stay, that's where I want to live. Between you and me (and I guess everybody out there), if this all went away tomorrow, I'd be fine. My identity is not in this book. My significance is not connected to this. My security is not. He's everything. If it goes away, great! I want to be around whatever he's blessing. This doesn't have to be it.

When somebody attacks it, and attacks me or whatever, it's just part of being part of this process. They don't know me, so they can't be attacking me. If they knew my history, they'd go, "Why in the world would God have loved a man like that?" I'd say, "It's just the way love is. Grace is wasteful,

and he wasted it on me – like he wants to waste it on all of us. He has already.” Don’t we love being in the middle of his embrace? Absolutely. Do we want to leave it for some temptation, for something else? Not anymore.

JMF: Any more ideas for writing on the horizon?

WPY: I write little things, so far, and I post them on WindRumors, which is the website that I write stuff on. I’ve got ideas, but you know what? The beauty of this is that I want to walk it out a day at a time. If I do it, I’ll do it as a gift. I don’t even know if I’ll do it under my own name. I don’t know. I don’t know any of these things today. But I’m always thinking about stuff and working on different ideas and things, I love that.

I love the freedom that says, “Just stay in my presence, everything will be fine,” and if I get the chance to do some other things and creative stuff, if I live past today, he’ll be there, we’ll figure it out – we’ll work it out. It’s a journey and it’s a process. As much as we’d like the blue or the red pill, it’s a process, and it’s a great one.

60. DID AN ANGRY GOD FORCE HIS SON TO DIE?

JMF: The view of God that you present in *The Shack* is a sound biblical perspective that strangely is foreign to the way many people have traditionally thought about God.

WPY: We have lost, or a lot of us have never had, the conversation about the nature of God. We've been so focused on our ability to keep the rule, or the law, or whatever and it's all been behavioral. We haven't had a conversation about what is this character. We live in such world of uncertainty. Everything about our lives is uncertain. We could get a call from the boss today and what we thought we were heading toward is no longer there. A sale could go sideways, a truck comes across the middle line, and changes our lives. So we're filled with uncertainty.

JMF: And especially about what God thinks about us, we don't know... we're afraid of him.

WPY: We try to create something that will get his behavior to be certain. "If I can just do the right things, in the right order, to the right degree, then God is rather obligated to do it" – to do whatever it is that we think we want him to do. That can be having enough faith, for example... Whatever our formula is, to get the result... so that we can get God's behavior to be certain. There's a word for that, and it's called *magic*. God doesn't like magic. Magic is, if I have the right formula, the right incantation, the right something, I can get the right result. We try to use magic to get certainty.

If there's no certainty in our circumstances, and there's no certainty in God's behavior, where is there any certainty? It has to be in his character. If we get his character wrong, or if we think that he is not good, that he is not loving – and we get that wrong, then we are by ourselves, and we're back to issues of fear and control, because we try to get control over uncertainty in many ways. Anger, or dulling the pain of it through addictions of one sort or another, depression... there's a million ways that we try to gain some control. Instead, if we begin to understand the character of God – that he comes into this relationship with us, for us, to heal us – that is a place we can put our feet down and begin to stand and move forward. Otherwise, we're just on our own.

So the characterization of God in the book is an attempt, in fiction, to try to describe that solidity of character that I think a lot of us have not trusted. We don't trust... That's Mack's big issue – that he doesn't believe God is good. But he doesn't know to get from where he is to believing it either, and

God is very gracious about that process and says, “You can’t do it by yourself, but together we can do it.”

JMF: In the midst of tragedy or great pain, that’s when it’s very difficult to believe that God is good...

WPY: Yeah, because everything has become uncertain.

JMF: There’s a place in the book where you talk about the Father versus the Son, the Father being so holy and so great that he can’t be touched by our evil and our wickedness. But Jesus on the other hand is the good guy. Kind of the good cop, bad cop... Let me just read that section briefly.

Mack [the central character] says, “But I always liked Jesus better than you, he seems so gracious and you seem so mean.” “Sad, isn’t it? He came to show people who I am and most folks only believe it about him. They still play us off like good cop, bad cop most of the time, especially the religious folk. When they want people to do what they think is right, they need a stern God, when they need forgiveness, they run to Jesus.”

And yet as you portray the characters here, we’re not talking about two different Gods of different character, we’re talking about one God who is for us...

WPY: Unfortunately, we have some theology that has come alongside and said, where God the Father is, his issue is our sinfulness. He can’t hang around us. That is sort of like Jesus has made friends with us and God the Father is a little perturbed about it. He wants to say, “Can you find a better quality of friend? I mean, they come to my house, they mess it up, they leave things dirty, they don’t do the dishes. If you just find a better quality of friend. I know I’ll be ok because you love them.” We have the mentality that Jesus is trying to convince the Father that we’re worth enough to love.

JMF: We use the word “advocate” because he’s an advocate with the Father for us, but ... he needs a lot of convincing.

WPY: And to make even matters worse, we have this idea that God comes to us and says, “You and I have a problem. Your behavior doesn’t meet up to the standards required, but I have a solution: For you and I to be ok, I’m going to take my innocent Son, whom I love more than anything else in the world, out to the woodshed, and kill him – and then you and I will be ok. Oh, by the way, trust me.”

We’re going, “Is there a disconnect here somewhere? Is that what had to happen for God the Father and me to be ok?” We’re going, “That’s not it at all... that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, it was God the

Father that crawls inside of this very thing.”

People say, “What about, ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’” That is Christ on the cross, for the first time as a human being, experiences a sense of separation. He doesn’t believe that it’s real – because the next thing he says is “into your hands I commit my spirit.” There is no real separation, but he feels the sense of it, but God is in him in that whole process. There is no abandonment like that. That cry is a cry of those who have experienced abandonment. For some of us that is such a hope for us.

JMF: There is this sense that you get from preaching sometimes that the Father is so angry, he’s furious; the wrath of God is cited, because the word *wrath* appears in Scriptures. The sense is that he is so angry that somebody has to pay, and so Jesus steps in and says, “Well, kill me if you have to kill somebody.” So we have the resolution that, “Christ died for my sins, therefore I’m absolved” – but there’s still that angry God. He has calmed down, but when he is going to break loose again?”

WPY: Exactly – we’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and we fall back on performance, we fall back on our behavior being the basis for his mood. We have to maintain at least an adequate amount of behavior so that he feels good about himself and doesn’t take it out on us. So we have this schizophrenic God, we have the “good cop, bad cop” type of God. We don’t know whether we’re waking up on the side of his love, or the side of his justice – or his holiness. We think holiness is a manifestation of his reaction against sin. The truth is, he was holy before there was sin. What makes God “other” [i.e., holy] is his very nature of love – that’s what makes him “other” than us. Holiness then becomes a manifestation of his love, not of his justice, not of his dealing with sin.

Wrath is the right response to things that are wrong. Anger is the right response when there is pain and hurt, when children are abused, when people lie to each other, when divorce happens, people taking advantage... to greed, to all of these things, it is the right response. And for God to have that right response against everything that is in his creation that prevents the freedom of the human creation, which is the object of his love, for him to come after that with everything that he’s got, [wrath] is appropriate, is right.

My friend Wayne Jacobson has a book called *He Loves Me*. In it he uses the illustration of being a child running into a hornets’ nest and screaming running in the direction of his mother, and seeing her coming at him with this look of rage. She wasn’t after him. She was after these hornets, how dare they touch her precious little child. But if you look at her face, you’d think he had done something wrong. We have that mentality when we deal with God.

He's angry against everything that hurts us. Jesus showing up at Lazarus' funeral – that intense anger, compassion that comes out even though he is in the midst of raising him from the dead. Death is wrong, you know. The impact of sin is wrong. The wrath of God is an element of his love. You can't divide his wrath from his love, as if he's two separate characters. Everything God does is motivated by love, and everything has a loving purpose.

JMF: Scripture speaks of “the enemies of God,” and “the wrath of God against his enemies.” How does the love of God come into his relationship with his enemies in terms of his wrath?

WPY: He is constantly saying that we are to love our enemies as well. There is an understanding that we wed ourselves to our own lost-ness, to our own independence. It's like the surgery. There is a process that is very painful for us. God, even, in dealing with the Egyptians, or the wonders of the plagues – that was a very painful process.

There are people who set themselves up in an independence stance and I tell you, you can wed yourself – the people in the New Testament that were most doing that, were the religious people. They were the most lost when Jesus says, “Woe, woe, woe,” and he tells them that they are dead men, the inside of them is dead. The “woe” idea is a warning woe. It's saying “whoa!”... almost like a horse. “Stop what you're doing. Don't you understand that this process that you're on, this path that you're choosing – of independence, is going to drive you deeper into the darkness, not into the light that you think?”

One of the other questions that has come up about book is, “Why isn't Lucifer in the book – as one of God's enemies?” I believe in the fallen angels, I believe in the demonic, and I grew up out in the mission field. I know the reality of these things – the spiritual dimension. We don't live in a benign universe as far as the spiritual dimension. I don't believe God has any rivals, I don't believe Lucifer is a rival. I think his power was totally destroyed and now all he has is the ability to lie.

All those things being true, the book was not intended to be another book about Satan. It was intended to say, “This is who God is, and this is the process that we're in – that he comes inside of us to bring us to healing. We don't need the juxtaposition in this book, and like I said, there are plenty of books that deal with that. This was not an attempt for a systematic theology.

JMF: When we talk about enemies, Christ died for us while we were yet enemies ourselves.

WPY: Who among us has not been an enemy?

JMF: Right. Then, like you said, we're told to love our enemies. Then we

proceed with the idea that God doesn't love his enemies, but he expects us to love our enemies.

WPY: Suddenly we have this requirement that even God cannot live up to. The reality is, that he does. The reality is, that the creation that he has created, he loves, and human beings as the epitome and apex of what he pursues. We have all been in the position of being his enemy, and in some respects, we still fight him in this process, but there's no shame to it.

JMF: That's the beauty... In your book, the most poignant scene, to me, is the judgment scene where everyone stands guilty. It's very beautifully done, and thoroughly scriptural. That's what makes it so beautiful.

WPY: Part of that was to try to get the reality of this out of the abstract intellectual framework – just like using the loss of a child as the core part of the story. The term *agape* is used, that God is *agape*, he's this kind of love that's so different. The only verse that I can think of (and there maybe other ones) where somebody who is apart from God experiences *agape*... (Normally you cannot be apart from God to express it. But the closest that a human being apart from God can) is reflected in the verse, "If you being evil..." It's talking about your core independence. "If you being evil know how to *agape* your children..." That's the word that's used.

The closest point that we can come to understanding the way God loves is the way that a parent loves their child, and I tell you there's nothing like that – not if there's any kind of health in your life, there is nothing that comes close to that. That is the kind of way God is, in his very character and nature. That's why I wanted to use the thing that is deepest in us, to raise the deepest kinds of questions, and (for my children) I wanted this to be the conversation around which to develop the conversation, the processing, the ideas, and the relationship with God.

JMF: I tend to be that kind of person who when he sees a bandwagon, I say, "The last thing I'm going to do is get on it." So, as people kept saying, "You ought to read this book, you ought to read this book," I thought, "I don't read books that 'you gotta read.'" But finally I did read it. I read the first few chapters, and this is where we get into the story of the tragedy and so on, and the very real anger and so on that Mack has.

He enters the shack, and I lost interest after God entered the shack. I thought, "I don't see how he's going to get out of this, because I'm on Mack's side here. There won't be a good resolution to this, I don't see how, in fictional form, we're going to be able to – [WPY: Find our way out.] – get from here to there, and resolve this anger without it just being facile, just some easy solution – what do we call that, a platitude, sort of thing. [WPY: a cliché.]

I eventually got back to it and well, I had to do an interview with the author.

WPY: That'll get to you every time.

JMF: So I better finish the book anyway... That judgment scene, to me, that itself could be a full treatment of the subject, it was just beautifully done.

WPY: Thank you. That scene has become where the whole book leads to. From there, everything becomes resolution after that. It was to say, "This is the reality of the heart of God in terms of how he relates to us. Let's take it out of intellectual, spiritual, religious kind of terminology and make it real to us.

For Mack to have to struggle with this big question about his own children – that becomes something very real to him, and all of a sudden it puts us into a spot thinking, "Are you telling me that God loves us like that?" We're saying, "He loves you more than that." That is as close as we can get to understanding the intensity of that love – he loves us more than that, and more pure and better than that. I agree, I love that chapter.

JMF: Another section that is striking in the book is where Jesus is talking to Mack:

"Remember, the people who know me are the ones who are free to live and love without any agenda." And Mack says, "Is that what it means to be a Christian?" "Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian," Jesus said. The idea struck Mack as odd and unexpected. "No, I suppose you aren't." Then Jesus says, "Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhist or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who are murderers and many who are self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I've no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into brothers and sisters, into my beloved." "Does that mean," asks Mack, "that all roads will lead to you?" "Not at all," smiled Jesus. "Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."

Some people have taken from that or responded that, "You're saying that being a Christian doesn't matter," they accuse you of universalism, whatever they mean by universalism.

WPY: Yeah, when somebody asks me if I'm a Christian, I ask them back: "Would you please tell me what one is, and I'll tell you if I'm one of those."

If we're on the same page, I don't have any problem identifying myself as a Christian. Unfortunately, in the world today that has become kind of a Ziploc bag, and as soon as you say the "C" word, there's no more communication, no more conversation. What people think in their minds what a Christian is, is not what Scripture reveals as someone who is indwelt by the very character nature of ...

JMF: It has become a caricature, a pre-conceived idea depending on a person's experience of a Christian or Christianity.

WPY: Exactly. For example, we think of anybody in the Middle East, as Westerners, we tend to think of them as Muslim. As if they believe all the tenets of Islam, etc.

JMF: And they're all the same, and they all fit this particular category that we have them on.

WPY: Most believers from the Middle East will still tell you they're Muslim, but they're Christian. For us that's a little incongruous. These little boxes, I wanted to get outside. Jesus died, rose again, ascended to the right hand of the Father before the term [Christian] had even been created or coined. It happened probably in Antioch, where it was a derogatory term; they were going, "We like this term." And so for Jesus to identify himself as a Christian is moot. The term didn't exist. That was one piece of it.

Then I wanted to push it even further and say, "It's not the label that you're identified with that is the relationship. A label is a label, and I don't care what label you have, let's talk about what you *mean* by it. And then we'll see."

I have no problem identifying myself as a Christian, or the validity of being a Christian, or any of those things. But I want some agreement about what we are talking about. What a lot of people think of a Christian, I don't want to be identified with, because there's a bunch of it that is not true, and not right. I want a bridge to be built in a relationship with anybody. I don't want the word "Christian" to become the impediment that stops that relationship from being built. I don't want it to be an impediment between them and the love of Jesus Christ, either.

JMF: That has nothing to do with faith in Jesus Christ, or belief in the name of Christ, as some would want to say it.

WPY: No. If I can say it as clearly as I can, I am convinced that Jesus Christ is THE only way into the embrace of the Father. There is no other name given among men through whom we are saved – he is the sole and only road into the Father's heart – he is the Father's heart who has bridged that gap to us.

That was the last edit we put into the book, because somebody who read a pre-version said, "I love this book, I love everything about it, but I've got a couple of friends who are going to think you're a universalist." So that little section where he says, "Do all roads lead to Papa?" Jesus smiles and says, "No, most don't lead anywhere, but I will travel down any road to find you." That was the last edit we made before it went to the printers in the first edition.

I'm grateful for the brother who sent that and said, "What do you think?" Because I wanted it to be clear that we are not talking about... I want the centrality of atonement to be central. This is what God has done to reconcile the world to himself. Now, as ambassadors of Christ, as if you are the very pleading of God, beg, "Be reconciled back to him, because he's reconciled himself to you." That, to me, is the centrality and the significance... the exclusivity – if I can use that term – of the person of God who has come in Christ in the power of the Spirit to make a way for us. I'm not a universalist.

JMF: The subject of the Bible comes up in the course of the discussion between the Holy Spirit and Mackenzie, and in one place here, they're out together in a canoe. Just reading from the book:

Mack allowed his oar to turn in his hands as he let it play into the water's movements. "It feels like living out of relationship, you know, trusting and talking to you, is a bit more complicated than just following rules." "What rules are those, Mackenzie?" "You know, all the things the Scriptures tell us we should do." "Ok," she said with some hesitation. "And what might those be?" "You know," he answered sarcastically, "about doing good things and avoiding evil, being kind to the poor, reading your Bible, praying, going to church, things like that." "I see, and how is that working for you?" He laughed, "Well, I've never done it very well. I have moments that aren't too bad, but there's always something I'm struggling with or feeling guilty about, I just figured I needed to try harder. But I find it difficult to sustain that motivation, [I think virtually everyone, with any honesty would have to identify with that.] "Mackenzie," she chided, her words flowing with affection, "The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules, it is a picture of Jesus. While words may tell you what God is like and even what he may want from you, you cannot do any of it on your own. Life and living is in him and in no other. My goodness, you didn't think you could live the righteousness of God on your own, did you?" "Well, I thought so, sorta," he said sheepishly."

You're presenting here the Bible not as the way it's popularly taught – as God's instruction book for mankind. So it is used to rule on behaviors and to judge and to tell everyone what they're doing wrong, and then goes back on the shelf. But the whole idea of Jesus in the Scriptures is often missed.

WPY: If we are only flesh, if that's what we come to this writing with, then we'll drop back to see it as a behavioral kind of thing without the illumination of the Spirit and the work of the Spirit. Even those words are dead to us. They don't produce life. We are absolutely dependent, even in the words of Scripture, for the presence and life and illumination of the power of the Holy Spirit. All of us are. We know folks who know the words very well but have no life in them.

There's that part of it. Jesus on the Emmaus Road with the disciples: Starting with Moses he showed them himself throughout all of Scripture. It's a story, it's a story of his love, it's a story of his attraction to us.

I love Scripture. We are very blessed in the sense that we have this so available and just at our fingertips. Most of our brothers and sisters throughout history did not. They began with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I think maybe they have a little bit of an advantage, because we so easily fall back into our intellectuality and don't even know how to hear the voice of the Spirit for ourselves.

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." And there's a lot of us who are going, "Well, but don't we just have to hear it through whatever the leadership is, or whatever the structure is that I'm a part of?", and he is saying, "No." He's saying, "You individually, you hear my voice." I think that's part of what the work of the Spirit is. It's to tune us, to allow us, so that through the purification process, we sense his presence, and we hear him speak to our hearts. That becomes central.

Then Scripture comes, he can illuminate it – but I'm not at all convinced that Scripture is the sole and only place through which God speaks. In my life, it's been through movies even, but also music, creation, relationships, conversation, art, architecture, incredibly beautiful cultural diversity and uniquenesses that happen there. The Spirit is very able to speak through whatever the Spirit has available or what we've given the Spirit to be available.

JMF: And the Scripture provides a rudder, a foundation, a primary means by which God reveals Christ to us. But isn't that something that is often misused in order to maintain some kind of control or to subjugate or to rule over ... That isn't the Holy Spirit speaking to us through Scripture, that's us manipulating Scripture for our own ends, our own selfishness.

WPY: Yeah, it goes back, in part, to not believing that people can grow

up to hear the voice of the Spirit for themselves – that we need to interpret that for them so we can maintain control. A lot of people are afraid that if people move into freedom, and freedom is why Christ came – it was for our freedom – that if that happens, people will go do crazy things. There is good evidence that suggests that the amount of coercion and control that's placed on people is the reason why, when the control comes off, they go out and do crazy things. They've just never matured inside of that framework. The work of the Holy Spirit is to move us toward freedom. That is his life in us.

Freedom within the context of our understanding of reality is all based in dependence, not in independence. We are a culture that's full of independence, which makes sense, and the Holy Spirit is constantly driving us toward dependence. That is the only place where we find freedom, because we were designed to live our life in freedom – in dependence – in that union relationship with God.

Scripture is wonderful. It is definitely something through which the frame of our lives are understood. But if I was thrown in a prison, without it, I know the Holy Spirit would be present with me. You have a teacher, you have an anointing on you, and in that sense you don't need a teacher, because the teacher lives inside of you, and in all things will teach you how to abide in him, 1 John.

JMF: Sure. And yet there's a submission that we all have to one another, to listen, to test our ideas, and so on, and make sure that we are reflecting the self-sacrificial love of God rather than our own agenda. All that works in community...

WPY: Exactly, it takes us back to this relational element that exists in the very character, nature of God, that our relationships are just a reflection of that unity and diversity in the community of the Trinity. The beautiful thing is that he invites us into that level of relationship.

I was thinking about Christmas this year, and you have God who is working together for our redemption and they [Father, Son and Spirit] have this circle of relationship and they crack it open and invite a 15-year old little girl into it and they say, "Would it be ok if we did this?" They wait until Mary says, "Be it done unto me." That's the God of the universe who is in relationship with us and submitting the process to us so that we would join in that process with him.

Same in our own hearts, same in the process of our own healing and nowhere does he use shame to try to produce this. He doesn't use law to try to produce it. The beauty of it is, as we become whole, pure in heart, we begin to see God everywhere. We see his activity, he's in the details of our lives,

he's in the present with us. Incredible. Is this good news or what?

61. DISCOVERING THE SHACK

JMF: You've both been on the program separately before. Since that time you guys have met and you've been doing a lot of traveling around the world giving lectures, answering questions. How did you meet? How did this getting together for meetings around the world get started?

WPY: I'll let Baxter take the first crack at that. It's a great story.

CBK: Your guy Tim Brassell in Virginia is responsible for our first meeting.

JMF: The Grace Communion International pastor.

WPY: He wasn't responsible for you getting the book?

CBK: No, he's responsible for us meeting. Wendy Marchett, from Sault Sainte Marie, Canada, phoned me and says, "I'm not getting off the phone until you promise me you'll read a book." She made me write it down, and I've got the post-it note. It said, "William P. Young, *The Shack*," and the ISBN number.

I said "Wendy, I mean, I'm not... Don't do this to me." She said, "I wouldn't ask you to do something like this if it wasn't really, really, important." I said, "All right, what's the book about?" She said, "I'm not going to tell you." I said, "Come on." She said, "Just trust me." I said, "Okay, here's what we'll do. Deer season's just around the corner. I'll get this book by William P. Young and I'll put it on the top of my deer-stand reading list pile." I did.

Mid November comes along. I have a deer stand that we affectionately call the "Cadillac Stand," which has nicer chairs than these. It's covered and it's got three or four books in there. I went to the Cadillac stand and I started reading. I'm thinking, "Well, the guy is writing a book about meeting God in the woods in a shack, maybe it's an old hunting camp." I'm clipping along, and he gets beaten, chained to a tree and I'm thinking "What's going on?" Then he starts telling about great sadness, he starts telling the "Multnomah princess" story, and I'm thinking, "I don't think I like where this going." Then, Missy — and man, I'm sitting there crying.

Then it hit me (and I told Paul), I stood up in the stand and I held this book up and I said, "William P. Young, I don't know who you are, but if you hand me the same old, same old, Augustinian, distant, removed, impersonal, unapproachable, legalistic, God who watches us from the infinite distances of a disapproving heart, as the answer to this problem that you've come up with here, I'm going to walk down that path 200 yards, and I'm going to lean the book up against a tree, and I will personally eliminate this

copy from the cosmos.”

Then, I turned over to chapter 5: Papa comes out the door. I’ve got all kinds of things that are going off in me theologically because of my studies with Professor James B. Torrance, things that he used to emphasize. This was absolutely astonishing.

That was on a Friday. I couldn’t finish the book. I remember pulling a flashlight out, a little rubber flashlight that I had. I was trying to finish the book, and my son texted me and said that he was back at the base camp. So I finished it that night.

Then, Sunday... It was either that next, two days later, or the next weekend (I really don’t remember). My son and I were watching a football game and my phone rings. I look at it; it’s a 503 number, and I’m thinking “Sunday afternoon, I don’t know...” but something told me I needed to take it.

I answered the phone and I said, “Hello.” He says, “Baxter, this is Paul Young.” I thought, “I don’t know Paul Young, never heard of Paul Young.” I said, “Well hey Paul, how are you doing?” I knew he knew that I didn’t know who he was, and he was enjoying it.

He says, “You may know me as William.” I’m thinking, “I don’t know William Paul Young,” but I’m trying to think of what... Surely I met him somewhere, we’ve talked, we’ve probably sat down and had a beer or some... I don’t know, I’m just racking my brain.

I thought, “William, William P. Young.” I said, “Are you like William P. Young?” He said “Yes, my friends call me Paul.” I said, “Are you the dude that wrote the best book that’s been written in the last 500 years?” He said, “Well, I don’t know about that.” I said “Well, did you write *The Shack*?” He said, “That would be me.” I was like, why in the world are you calling me? The whole world wants to talk to you.

Tim Brassell, one of the GCI pastors, had emailed Paul and said, “I don’t know if you know Baxter, but Baxter’s written a theology that goes along with *The Shack* and here’s his phone number, you need to call and talk to him.” So he did. We talked an hour and a half.

WPY: We did.

CBK: I’m thinking, “My goodness!” I have all these questions like, where did you come from? How in the world did you come to see this? People who study with J. B. Torrance, you can see the trajectory. But he didn’t know J. B....

JMF: Good story looking for a theology.

CBK: That’s right. Anyways, I was so excited. We hung up the

phone (that was in November), and I called Tim, because I was speaking for Tim and Bill Winn at Bill's church, doing a conference that next April. I said, "You call Paul right now before he's so booked he can't breathe, and invite him to come to the conference and get him to do Friday. Just tell him to do whatever he wants to do on Friday, and I'll take Saturday and do the theology of *The Shack* Saturday." He did, and it all worked out.

We had adjoining rooms that weekend and I asked him four million questions, because I wanted to know all about how he came to see this. It's a stunning story, it's so rich with great theology that's rooted in the history of the church. His journey to come to see this was a very different way than the way the Lord had brought me to see it.

WPY: Which is part of the beauty of the whole thing. It's one thing to have gone through the theological training and come to it. To have somebody that comes from a totally ... I've got theological training, but I didn't come through Barth or the Torrance brothers, or any of the Trinitarian community. Mine was much more having to slog it out in the trenches of being a preacher's kid, a missionary kid, having all the questions and not having any answers. Nobody even wanted to talk about the questions.

Then having to work this out in my own life, to get to the place where I finally felt healthy enough to write a story for my kids, which was the original intention. Make my 15 copies at Office Depot and go back to work. Not thinking the thing was going to light up the world the way that it has. To have those two things come together, and in such a beautiful way. I was talking to Baxter today on the flight down here about how grateful I am for that voice into my life, that comes from that trajectory compared to the way I've come. I've come on a very lonely road, in a sense.

We've now traveled to Australia, spoken there, done a bunch of conferences, done a lot of little things. It's a beautiful thing because our lives dovetail, the theology dovetails, it supports each other. The conversations are incredible as a result.

JMF: Your first trip together was in Australia, right?

WPY: That's correct.

JMF: Tell us about some of those things that happened.

WPY: [first trip] out of the U. S.

CBK: In April, when I was there and Paul came, I said to him that night, "I would love for you to come to Jackson, and I would love for you to go to Australia through our network." He didn't need me to set anything up, but I just asked, "Would you go with me?" That worked out. Then from there it tumbles and...

On that trip what fascinated me about it was the way Paul's book ... When he speaks, he doesn't just talk about *Shack*, he talks more about his own life story. Some people are prepared for it, some people are not, because he had a pretty brutal childhood. He opens himself up and shares his journey. That means that the minute you have the end of the lecture or whatever and someone's singing, there's 150-200 people lining up and they've got to talk. This is not going to be "would you sign my book, thank you, move on." I was fascinated by how many people.

There were some folks who didn't particularly like maybe some of the things he was saying but, by and large, it's like 99 percent of the people not only loved what he was doing, but they wanted to talk. They were so thrilled and they cried, and it was a moving, liberating, almost like an evangelistic experience, is the way I saw it, from where I was sitting.

WPY: I'll give you an example that Baxter can dive into. For me, *The Shack* is a metaphor for the heart, the soul of a human being. It's the house on the inside that people help you build. For a lot of us, we didn't get good help. *The Shack* becomes a centerpiece for the story line where you've got a guy who suffers, not unlike many of us who've had difficult relationships with our fathers – there's been the abuse issues, all these things. He manages to make his way, he ends up with a family and then suffers a horrible tragedy with one of his daughters, Missy. He ends up having to go back to this place that is the center of his pain, with the sense that maybe God will meet him there.

I'm drawing this story together because it's based in my own great sadness. It's based in my history. I'm trying to communicate to my six children (who are grown; my youngest is 18): I want you to meet the God that you've heard me tell you about now for the last number of years. The God that actually brought healing to my life, not the God I grew up with. Which is G-o-d, right? He's the omni-being watching from the infinite distance of a disapproving heart. That's what I was trying to do – draw them into that conversation. Now Baxter is reading that whole thing theologically. What do *you* see when that's happening?

CBK: It's so beautiful. It's a brilliant move. What you did in the scene where Mackenzie goes back into the shack, he goes to meet God, and G-o-d is a no show. It doesn't exist anywhere but in our imaginations anyway. He's in the shack, it's dark, and he just explodes in his anger. He tears up one of the chairs, throws it against the wall, a leg breaks and he just pounds the floor. He screams out, "I hate you. I'm done. I've tried to find you. Where are you? You couldn't even bother to let us find her body so we could give

her a proper burial!” He just yells out at God; he finally leaves the shack and he’s pissed, just furious. He leaves and then things begin to change.

I think it’s something like two months of spring happen in 30 seconds. Now the snows melting, the shack transforms, or morphs, into a log cabin with a picket fence, there’s some smoke wending from the chimney. I’m reading along ... Then he thinks he can hear laughter coming from the shack. The first hint that we get of the real God, in *The Shack* is laughter. He’s thinking, “I don’t know what’s going on here.”

He goes back and he’s stepping up on those steps again and he’s not sure what to expect at all. All of a sudden Papa comes out the door, lifts him off the ground shouting his name, as if she’d known him and loved him all his life. The next thing he knows is this Asian looking woman, who is almost invisible, brushes up against him, and she says, “I collect tears.” He’s standing there... A third person appears, which is the figure of Jesus, in a carpenter’s outfit. He’s got dust all over him because he’s already preparing the coffin for Mackenzie’s great sadness.

As a theologian (someone who had the singular privilege of listening to J. B. Torrance, and one of J. B. Torrance’s phrases that he would say a hundred times a day is that he would say “Forgiveness is prior to repentance.” Forgiveness is logically prior to repentance), I’m thinking this is J. B.’s theology written into a story form and without a single theological word. What Paul has done is thrown us into the room where we can feel the total inadequacies of Western legalism. It rips our souls open and we don’t even know what goes on. All we know is we want to be there and be hugged by Papa.

The fascinating thing is all of a sudden, Mackenzie’s still mad, he’s still furious, he doesn’t know who these three people are, he doesn’t know if he can trust them, he’s being hugged but he’s like this, he’s bristling. He is already embraced, he’s already not only accepted but loved, he’s already included. The figures of the Father, Son, and Spirit are already inside of his pain and he hadn’t repented and believed! He doesn’t even know who these people are!

To me, coming from where I came from, studying with J. B., I’m thinking “This is the heart of the gospel.” That’s what the early church proclaimed, that’s what was recovered in the Reformation, then it got lost again in all these rationalistic, legalistic, crap. It’s being recovered again, now here it is in story form so people can feel it and see it. I was sitting on a deer stand thinking, “What is going on here?” I was so excited to see this, right there, so beautifully portrayed.

Who doesn't want to be sitting at Papa's table? Just what did Mackenzie do to get there? Where is Papa's table? It's inside his pain. How did Papa, how did Sarayu get inside Jesus' world? The scene with the garden is the same because the garden turns out to be the brokenness of Mackenzie's soul. There's the Holy Spirit digging around with Mackenzie, the two of them working in tandem, digging up issues and pain. It's the Holy Spirit that's already inside our world of pain. In our legalistic deism we got God over here separated, until we get it all worked out they're not even looking at us.

Then Papa comes walking into the garden with a sack lunch smiling. That was one of the first things I asked him when I got on the phone. I said, "Tell me you did that on purpose. Tell me that you knew what you were doing." He said, "Oh yeah." Well, when you hear his story, his life was shattered. Who was it that he met in his pain but the Father, Son, and Spirit? He's found a way to help us see it and feel it with him. I think it's beautiful. Very liberating.

WPY: If we can't get to the place where we have a relationship with God, and the character nature of that God is trustworthy, we have no hope. The bottom line question in *The Shack*, and the bottom line question in theology is: "Who is God? What is the nature of this God really?" Frankly, if you don't know God loves you relentlessly, with a full-on abandon, if you don't know that God is for you, you can't trust him.

A lot of us, the way we've grown up, the way we've been hurt, we don't trust anybody. That's why we resort to control, which is fear-based, because all we got is ourselves. Unless we run into perfect love we're going to be full of fear. God knows that. God is going to work within the context of our pain, inside of it, in order to exchange, in a sense, including us into his life for climbing into our stuff and beginning to heal us from the inside.

JMF: Part and parcel of recognizing and receiving that has to do with being able to extend that to others, including those who are the perpetrators of the pain that you're struggling with.

WPY: Absolutely. That's why forgiveness becomes such a crucial issue in the context of the story. It's not an event. This forgiveness issue is a process. It goes deeply into Mackenzie's history, as well as it deals with what he's facing now and ultimately with himself. We can, a lot of times, even forgive God before we can forgive ourselves for the mistakes we've made and the ways we've hurt people, what we didn't even understand but acted out of. Forgiveness becomes a critical point.

One of the phrases that I used in the book (You have to remember, I'm not expecting anything from this book except 15 copies for my family

and friends. That's it. I've never published anything and didn't ever intend to.)... We all hear "God loves you. God loves you," which says something about God, but he loves everybody and he loves everything. But I used the phrase "I'm especially fond of you," which is a lot more about you. That phrase keeps cropping up as a manifestation of the certainty of God's relentless affection.

I'll give you a little story. I was up in Edmonton, Alberta, at a women's prison. I was speaking at the prison. When I'm done one of the inmates comes over and she just collapses into my arms and begins to sob. She's sobbing so hard that she can't even get words out and I can't understand what she's saying. Finally I get it. What she's saying is "Do you really think Papa's fond of me?" I said, "Honey he's especially fond of you." She says, "That's all I needed to know. That's all I needed to know." I'm thinking, "Honey, that's all any of us needs to know. We just don't know it!" It took me 50 years to get to the place where I could say with certainty, "Papa's especially fond of me." A lot of the reason I couldn't, is wrapped up in the paradigm of theology that I was raised in.

CBK: We all were.

WPY: Yeah!

CBK: Variations on the theme. One of my favorite Athanasius quotes – he wrote it when he was 21 years old – he said, "The God of all is good and supremely noble by nature. Therefore, he is the lover of the human race." When it's all said and done, the issue on the table is "Is God really good?" Is God for us or is there a "maybe" in his heart? If we feel that there's a maybe in his heart, there's no way we're going to be able to have any rest or any peace – certainly not love the Lord for any reason other than what we can get from him.

JMF: That is the way that virtually everybody thinks of God.

CBK: Fallen mind.

WPY: I met a girl named Jenny. Jenny lived in Atlanta, a preacher's kid, like me. She grew up in a home where she was basically told, "When bad things happen to you it's because you're bad. The scales of justice have to be balanced. Bad things happening is an evidence of your evil nature, etc." She was good girl, she performed well and all this, but in her early 40s was diagnosed with Stage IV colorectal cancer.

You can imagine, inside that paradigm, what that did to her. It dropped her into a pit of despair that nothing could reach. She was gone. Her husband John was trying, with no results. Friends brought over a copy of *The Shack*, because they felt the Holy Spirit nudge them to say, "Go read her some

of this.” She loves them, so she put up with it, with folded arms, sitting on the couch, while they read the first five chapters, first four, whatever that period was, up to the point where Papa comes through the door. Finally she just broke. She and John then spent the next two days reading the book.

The book (not the book, because words are words; they have no power to do anything), but the Holy Spirit used the story in the sense of manifesting a whole different paradigm of the nature and character of God that yanked her out of her pit. Just yanked her, right out of all this deep depression. She wrote me an email and she said two absolutely striking things.

The first one was “Paul, I wasn’t afraid to die. I was terrified of the look of disgust I would see on his face when we met.” That tapped deeply into the shame that a lot of us religious people have grown up with and feel. I identify with that.

The second thing is even more staggering as far as I’m concerned. She said, “When I was growing up I didn’t really know what the difference between God and Satan was. Except, with Satan I always knew where I stood. Which means with God I didn’t.” That’s that little shard of uncertainty.

CBK: Ambiguity on the face of Jesus’ Father.

WPY: Yep. You can’t trust him. If God’s character is not certain, we have no place to plant our feet. The world is uncertain; you can’t get God’s behavior to be certain. Where do we stand? I think that’s why the first conversation in Genesis about God is between the accuser and the children of God where the accuser is saying, “You can’t trust him! He’ll lie to you.” It’s a total attack against the character of God.

CBK: He’s holding back.

WPY: Yep.

CBK: It’s the beginning of all religion. In the end, if you can’t trust, if there’s ambiguity on the face of God, then you really don’t want to spend eternity with that being. You may want to avoid the furnace, the divine rotisserie, but if there’s ambiguity on the face of God, if he’s split between ... There’s two different parts of the Father’s face here, one of them may love me, the other one can’t stand me.

JMF: You have to pretend to love the ambiguity.

WPY: Religion will teach you to use the language.

CBK: Then you get 550 variations on what you do to pretend that. The point is, no one in that situation really wants to be with Jesus’ Father. We’re just avoiding the punishment of going to the other place.

JMF: That’s what preaching is, so much of it, you’re going to go to hell so...

WPY: Fire insurance.

JMF: Yeah. It's to save yourself.

CBK: What *The Shack* is about, what I see there, it's talking about moving to the place to where you want to be with this Father. To me, the work of the Holy Spirit (and it's a Herculean task, it's an impossible task) is to bring us to the place where we so know how much Jesus' Father loves us that we throw ourselves at him and say, "Would you please judge me to the core of my being. I don't want anything in me or my way of thinking, or my way of being, that's going to keep me from sharing in the life that you have with your Father and the Son and the Spirit. That will keep me from not being able to participate in that."

JMF: You're talking about coming to where that isn't just a platitude. You hear that, it's a platitude all the time, but as a real...

CBK: You want to be there. You really want to be with him. You want to know him, you want to be known by him. You want to know life in his house. It's not fire insurance.

JMF: There's no fear in that relationship.

WPY: No. Fear is always connected to punishment, right?

JMF: Its complete trust. You don't just work that up.

CBK: It's rooted in the way that God really is from all eternity, which is revealed to us in Jesus. It doesn't square with our fallen minds. Repentance doesn't bring us to the place where we accept his love and forgiveness. Repentance is our coming to know it so we can begin to trust and walk in it.

JMF: Coming to know what is already the truth, the fact.

CBK: That he's *for* us. That's why I love the scene where they're already in the shack. What the whole story's about is the Father, Son, and Spirit are, as it were, scratching their head thinking, "How are we going to convince Mackenzie that we're good and we love him? How are we going to find a way to reach him? How are we actually going to get there where we can help him to know who we really are?"

WPY: Mackenzie's got all this damage, that already have all these lies embedded in them. God can't just go in there and surgically remove those things without tampering with Mackenzie's humanity at the core. God won't do that.

CBK: Personhood.

WPY: Personhood. God has so much greater respect for human beings than we do. We would think that he would be like us and would go in and tamper with the bad stuff, right? No, there's a respect there. There is a

movement, a relational movement. As soon as you've got relationship like that, you've got mystery, you've got a loss of control, you've got things that truly matter coming to the surface. That's the journey. It's three quarters of the book before Papa finally says to Mackenzie, "Mackenzie, you don't even believe that I'm good." Finally he admits, "You're right, I don't." It takes all this process before he's at the place where he can even admit that.

JMF: Let's get together again and talk about this some more.

62. NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

J. Michael Feazell: Great to have you guys with us.

William Paul Young: It's an honor to be here.

C. Baxter Kruger: Good to be back, Mike.

JMF: You've been traveling together in Australia and other places, talking about *The Shack*, talking about your personal story, Paul, and talking about the theology of *The Shack*, Baxter. After you tell your story, people line up. Baxter, you mentioned long lines of people who want to talk. What's on their mind? What is it that you said that has touched them, and what is it they want to talk about?

WPY: It's not just the lines. I've received more than 100,000 emails from all over the world. A few years ago, I was shipping out soldering tips and cleaning toilets. People ask me what I do now, and I tell them I get to hang around burning bushes all day. It's because I get invited into people's stories. There's so much that unites us, that religion has divided us over, and one of them is authenticity – what people hear in my story, because I'm no different than anybody else.

I've got great sadness in my history. I had a very difficult relationship with my father. I have sexual abuse in my history, not from family but from the tribe that I grew up in. I went to boarding school when I was six, and abuse took place there. All those things tend to destroy the house on the inside, the shack. It's a shack, not a really habitable place.

That becomes the place where you hide all your addictions and you store your secrets, and it's the place of shame. You don't want anything to do with it. You hate yourself. You hate this place, which is your own soul. Then religion comes along and tells you that God also hates it, and God wants a nice building. You don't know what to do with the shack, so you build a façade outside – a little quarter-inch piece of plywood you can paint, as fast as you can pick up people's expectations, and you begin to perform. Religion is about performance.

I can't tell you how many times I've rededicated my life to the Lord, and prayed all night, and fasted, and on and on the list goes. I'm trying to earn my way into the affection and approval of God. Because God was largely like my dad, someone whose acceptance I couldn't ever quite win, and whose approval I never won.

It took me 50 years to wipe the face of my father completely off the face of God. It was a process that went into the inside world of the façade I had created, the façade that I presented to everybody, known as the spiritual man.

The person who “had it together” was the façade, and God doesn’t love the façade. He loves the shack, which I didn’t know. I thought he hated it. I hated it. It seemed like my dad hated it. Why would I ever think that he would love that?

I performed well. It wasn’t until my façade came crashing down, and that’s what I talked about, in part – this struggle, and the damage that the religious paradigm of performance (of trying to please God) brought into my life.

To find out it’s not about pleasing God, it’s about learning to trust God, that’s like, “that can’t be right.” That would mean that God would have to be of such a character that I could actually trust God. Let’s go back to pleasing God, because then that’s about me, and how good I’m performing. Every religion is about pleasing God – it’s just the rules are different, or the criteria are different. But as soon as you have it, you know how to compare your criteria against somebody else’s and how good your performance is, and how you can be self-righteous because you’re better than somebody.

You get a false sense of value, and a false sense of worth and significance, and all these things that you think are righteous and biblical. You say, “Yeah, I trust God.” Yeah, because religion taught me to use that language. Do I really trust him? No. Just let the economy go sideways and I’ll start screaming. Because, fundamentally, I don’t trust anybody.

McKenzie, in the book, spends a weekend in the shack, which is the dismantling of his entire existence and the reforming of it within the truth. That weekend represents eleven years for me. When I talk to people, a lot of us grew up in the religious community. We didn’t even know that people could come to healing. Because anytime their crap showed up, we kicked them out – which meant the rest of us didn’t want to be transparent and honest about our stuff. We got this performance orientation. We’re hidden. We’re not authentic.

When I talk, people hear a couple things. God loves the shack. A lot of people don’t know that. He crawled inside of it. He’s there already, knowing everything there is to know about me. Authenticity, this drive I have to be real, is there, because that’s the way I was created to be, and healing is possible. The healing of the soul, the shack, rather than this performance.

God doesn’t care about the performance, and the façade has to come crashing down at some point, so that real healing comes to me. But we will hold on to that façade because that’s what we’ve been told that real righteousness, real spirituality, is. It’s a lie, but it’s all based on the fact that you don’t believe God is good. I didn’t, but I knew the language. I can *tell* you that I did believe that God is good. But I didn’t even know that I didn’t

trust anybody else except myself. That's because I had no reason to know it.

When people come and they talk, they tell me their stories. They tell me how the book (*The Shack*) has landed in the middle of their great sadnesses of one sort or another. They tell me about their histories and their abuse and the fact that maybe this is the first time that they have hope. Some of them tell me they're terrified, that if they take some little incremental steps of trust, that the God that I'm telling them about may not turn out to be the one that's really there.

Why should they take that risk? Faith is about that risk. It's about beginning to believe in the certainty of his character, to believe that God is love, that there is no deeper reality than the character and nature of God, of love and relationship. And that God, by nature, is not able to act in any other way than the deepest way that we would sense love is.

That's the way I love my kids. That's the touch point for me. As a father, I would die for my kids. If God isn't at least that good, then what kind of a God do we have? A lot of times, we think we know how to love our kids better than God knows how to love his. I mean, he's asking us to forgive in a way that *he* can't forgive.

That either means that I'm wrong, or the character of God is wrong, so why then should I trust him? The question goes back to, Who is this God? He is, in essence, good and loving all the time. That means that judgment and wrath and all these words, hell and all this stuff, have got to be understood within this commitment to his goodness and love. Everything else is defined out of that, not from us out here.

CBK: Goodness and love is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. If you've got a single isolated deity from all eternity, then that deity is alone, and is self-centered, because there's no "other" to be centered on. It's unapproachable. It's impersonal. It's not good, because *good* is a relational word. It cannot be love, because there's no other object to be loved, unless it loves itself, and that's self-centered love, a long way from *agape*. One of the reasons that the Trinity is so important is that it grounds the relation out – it says that the core of God's being from all eternity, his fellowship, his other-centeredness, his approachability, his communion, is giving and self-sacrifice before the other.

What is so foundational when it comes to trust (I'm not an expert on it, but I see it and I'm beginning to feel it) is that I can begin to trust the Father, Son and Spirit because the only way they know how to be is the way they have been toward one another from all eternity. That's the way they relate to me. If the Holy Spirit has doubts about the Father's heart, if the Father has

doubts about Jesus or the Holy Spirit, then that introduces some kind of reason for me to not trust them.

But when you see that the way the Father-Son-Spirit love one another, as is portrayed for us in the New Testament (the Father loves the Son, Jesus says that it shows in all things that he is doing, and the Son can do nothing except what he sees the Father doing), this is other-centered, and it's beautiful and good. That's the way they relate to all of us.

Now we have a basis, within the being of God, of knowing that he's trustworthy and good, and is just towards us. The God of all is good – Athanasius said he is “supremely noble by nature,” because that's the way God is. When Athanasius says that, he's not talking about a solitary isolated person – he's talking about the Trinity.

The God of all is good and supremely noble by nature. Therefore, this God is the lover of the human race. That's the only way we'll ever have trust. If somebody's introducing doubt into that (which is what we do 24-7 many times in the Christian church and in the way we practice the gospel), you can't trust that God.

When I get the chance to travel with Paul, I'm watching the people. They're feeling, “You mean I may not be totally disgusting to God? He may like me? And stuff comes up and I cannot talk to him.” Then they begin to have that meeting and hope that “maybe I can be loved like McKenzie was loved. Maybe I can be included like Paul is included.” It's evangelistic. It is beautiful.

WPY: Before there's any time and space and matter, what is there? What is there before time and space and matter, is what all time and space and matter is inside of. So what do you find before time and space and matter? You have a relationship of other-centered love, that's all you have. That's everything, and everything that is created is created inside of that and an expression of that. God hasn't changed. We are not powerful enough as human beings to change the nature of God. Religion tells us we are. Religion says that we can make God not like us, we can make God hate us, we can do all kinds of things and then change the nature of the way God relates to us.

CBK: It's windshield-wiper theology. It's just that we have the power. God's our judge, he's our Father, he's our judge, he's our Father. Back and forth. If the windshield wiper is going, you can't have any peace. What I say is: God is our Father, therefore he will judge us to the core of our being, because he loves us so much.

One of [George] MacDonald's great lines is, “He's not about to allow us into heaven with a little bit of Satan in our pocket.” That is not for his benefit,

but because it keeps us from being able to be free to have the run of the house. It keeps us from being able to be free to know him and to live towards one another in and out of that love. It's all rooted in that very simple thing about the goodness of God and the love, and whether the Trinity is the eternal truth of God's being. That's where we went off in Western theology: we split the being of God away from the Trinity – that's another subject.

WPY: A lot of times, we will define our religious language not based in this relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but based in the projection of our own pain. For example, we'll take a word like *holiness*, which is an important word, and we'll define it in respect to sin. That's our fundamental definition. Guess what? God was holy before there was any sin. So holiness has to be defined in a way that has nothing to do with sin, because God was holy before there was any sin. But again, we want to define our terms over here, in the midst of our pain, our loss, our great sadness.

Baxter and Athanasius and Irenaeus and MacDonald are saying, "This is where the action is. We have to begin here." The first part of our systematic theology is to say, "What is the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?"

Jesus says, "Nobody knows the Father." He says that right before he says, "So come to me, all of you who are weary and heavy-laden." We were talking about the impact of religion and how it generally drives us into the ground. The basis of Jesus saying that, is that you don't know the Father, but if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. You've seen me playing with the kids; you've seen the Father. You've seen me with the woman at the well, or the woman caught in adultery.

CBK: Or seen me, outstretched arms, being crucified and beaten by the human race. You're looking at the Father. That's his character, exactly pictured for us in Jesus.

JMF: He said, "And this is eternal life, that you may know the Father, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent. Having to do with knowing, is the definition of eternal life.

CBK: When you know that you are that loved, by that Father, it baptizes your soul with what the New Testament calls *parrësia* – unearthly assurance, freedom, boldness, confidence. When that is going on inside of our soul, real healing, we can be honest and we can be real with our Father in heaven. Real healing begins to happen. That gives us, maybe for the first time, freedom from our self-centeredness long enough to begin to notice people around us. We notice that other people around us don't necessarily know anything about it.

To know the Father is to be put to peace, and to be put to peace in our inner world means that striving and churning (as Papa talks to McKenzie about it) begins to go away, which means that I now can begin to notice others, and I'm free to give myself to their benefit, which creates fellowship. That's life. Eternal life is the life that the Father, Son and Spirit live together. It's God's life. It's other-centered. As we know the Father, then it works its way through us in community, in relationships.

WPY: That only makes sense, because the healthier you become as a human being, the more other-centered you become – the better father you become, the better spouse you become, the better wife you become. In terms of other-centeredness, if God was this lone solitary being who then defines the universe based on that aloneness, then the healthier you got, the more self-centered you'd become, because that would be the character and nature of God.

CBK: Which seems to be what some people are trying to say – for God to be self-centered.

JMF: If he does some of the things that people say he does, he would have to be awfully self-centered, wouldn't he?

WPY: Yeah, and he would be acting out of *need* of some sort. We're saying that everything that God would *need* is inside the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is totally fulfilled within himself, and now creates in order to share that life and include us in that life.

CBK: [C.S.] Lewis is saying that in this circle there's no emptiness, but a plentiousness, that creates us for one reason, and that is to lavish us with love so that we could share in that life. There's no list-keeping to see if we make the cut so we can get into this place called heaven. The Trinitarian life is being shared with us so that we can share in it. It's for our benefit, that's the way God loves us.

WPY: That goes to what Baxter says all the time. This is not about asking Jesus to come into our life. It's about Jesus including us into his – his life of the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A lot of times we believe in a distant God, and so everything becomes transactional. It's about us asking this God to come into our lives and then proving by our righteousness that he can stay there – rather than understanding (as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes) what Father, Son and Holy Spirit have already included us into.

CBK: That means that the question of the Christian life is, "Who is this Jesus who has included me? What is his life about, and how do I go about participating in being a part of his? I'm included in that family. What are the dynamics? How does this work? Somebody show me." Jesus says, "I'll show

you. Here's how it works: Abide in my love. Let me love you."

JMF: Trust. He speaks of trust, belief, constantly. We want to say that he speaks of obedience, or law keeping, but in fact he talks about "Believe me, trust me. Trust the Father who sent me." He uses that kind of language constantly.

WPY: A surprising chapter where trust comes up over and over is Psalm 22, which starts off with, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You read that psalm and it says, "trust, trust, trust." At one point it says, "Because I know you will not turn your face from me." We've come up with a theology where you can't trust God, he's turned his face, he can't look on sin. He's gone somewhere and he's abandoned his son. Like every father would abandon his son. Come on. I'm a father. There's no way.

JMF: He's so righteous [in that erroneous view] that he abandons.

CBK: Unlike his own Son, because his Son doesn't abandon us...

JMF: There's something wrong with our definition of righteousness.

CBK: [In that view], there's a split between the character of the Father and the Son, because the Father can't even look at us. He's disgusted. Jesus can not only look at us – he can enter our world and become one of us. The apostle Paul says, "He who knew no sin became sin." [2 Corinthians 5:21] You have two fundamentally different kind of characters in the Father and the Son, and who knows what the Holy Spirit's doing in there – torn between two lovers or something? Where does the Holy Spirit come down on this? The Father can't look at us; Jesus enters into our world. So where does the Holy Spirit fit into that?

JMF: Shuttle diplomacy.

CBK: Back to the windshield wiper. I'm with Jesus today, but I'm going back over.

WPY: To even make matters worse, ultimately then, Jesus becomes the one who protects us from the Father.

JMF: Shields us from the angry Father.

CBK: That's like living in a house where the father's a drunk. The boy wakes up in the morning and doesn't know which dad's coming out the door. The mother's standing there on the side thinking, am I going to have to defend my son, or is this going to be a good day? That doesn't create relationships...

JMF: Or the older sibling protecting the younger.

CBK: It's remarkably sad in a sick framework. That doesn't mean everybody's propagating this idea is therefore nuts, that's not the point – we're part of a family conversation. But we've been brought in this family

conversation to a place where we can see this is sad and broken and sick, and we don't have to hand it over to the next generation. That's not disparaging to our fathers in the faith, or our modern brothers and sisters in the faith – this is just saying we don't have to pass along the family dysfunction this time. We can stop this here and move forward.

You never have trust if that trust is not rooted in the character of God. When you've got the being of God ripped apart at that moment in two different characters, and a third character that's kind of in-between, there's nothing there to trust.

Hell

JMF: Recently, the two of you gave an interview about the nature of hell. Can you talk about...

CBK: With John McMurray – the three of us. The documentary called *Hellbound?* They've been interviewing a lot of folks.

JMF: Who's doing it?

WPY: There's a group of 20s-30s out of Vancouver, British Columbia. It's funded by a B.C. guy. He felt like we need to get all the different looks at this on the table. A lot of people within the religious community, the Christian community, think that there's just one view, which is Dante's *Inferno* – or as you called it, the giant rotisserie. That's infernalism, that's the view that is the traditional view, which it's not, but it's the one that most of us are familiar with. So they're trying to ask the question, "What's this conversation about? What does it need to be about, and what frames this conversation?"

CBK: Where we started, and this is really beautiful, is that in any given part of theology, but especially when you're talking about judgment, suffering and hell, the real question is: What is the nature of the character of God? For me, I think Athanasius in early church answered that the nature and character of God is Father-Son-Spirit relationship, and the purpose of this God in creating is to include us in that life. Now that we've been included in it through Jesus, the Holy Spirit's task is to bring us to the place where there's no darkness in us, where we want to participate in that life with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

To bring us to that place is what judgment is. It's the grace of God saying, "I will divide here. I will penetrate down into the core of your being and help begin to divide out the darkness and the sin and the evil (because that's not going to be able to participate) from the real Baxter, or the real Mike or the real Paul." That's the way I would pull it through. I would see hell as a fiery metaphor for the purification, whatever form that may take.

I think that not everybody gets the same kind of fire. There's some real differences. People who gave themselves to participate in Jesus their whole lives, and are not in a different place [24:35, undecipherable], they've been giving themselves, they've been working through this, they've been in the process of judgment and liberation all along. People who have resisted it their whole lives, maybe a couple million people winning in the process, there's a lot of refinement and transformation that has to happen for that. But we're not in a position to call those shots. Jesus is in charge of that.

WPY: It's like the concept of wrath. You can put it inside the G-O-D model, of the distant omni-being God.

JMF: And by G-O-D, you mean the traditional understanding of God?

CBK: No, no, no.

WPY: Not the traditional – it's the modern understanding of God.

CBK: It's the faceless, nameless, omni-being who watches us from the infinite distance of a disapproving heart.

JMF: And that's how people traditionally tend to look at God.

CBK: That's not how they saw him in the early church.

JMF: Yes.

WPY: We would say, the early church people were traditional.

JMF: So we're talking about definitions of "traditional." Traditionalists...

CBK: And traditionalism. Traditionalism is the...

JMF: The popular view.

WPY: The current popular view in Western culture [**CBK:** In North America.] is G-O-D. If you have that, then you've got the distant God who needs to be appeased, which sounds like the Old Testament Baal or anybody else.

JMF: Or the volcano.

WPY: Or the volcano god or whoever that has to be appeased, and so he is going to have this sense of separation.

When you deal with wrath, is that God acting in retribution? But if you put wrath inside of this relationship of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, does God do anything that is not motivated by love? Anything? The answer is no, because love is the nature of God's being. Love, light, spirit. Everything God does is motivated by love, which would include wrath. Now you have the wrath of God couched in an absolutely different framework.

I have a friend whose oldest son was a methamphetamine addict. My friend would have died for him. In loving his son, if he had the power, he'd have gone after every piece of that addiction that was damaging, hurting and keeping his son from being free, keeping his son from experiencing life,

keeping his son from being authentic. If you were a father, you would go after that. You would want to be this fire that would burn out every piece of that. I believe that that is the fire of God's love, that wrath is an expression of love, not this retribution, this distant volcano god that requires certain sacrifices in order to be appeased.

CBK: This is a quote from George MacDonald again – it figures into the basic perspective Paul and I are talking about. He says “Therefore [given who God really is, and the character of God as Father, Son and Spirit and their love for us, therefore, because that’s who they are], all that is not beautiful in the beloved [that’s us – we are the beloved], all that comes between and is not of love’s kind, must be destroyed.”

That destruction is not the destruction of our being – it’s the destruction of the darkness in which we’re participating in, and it’s not fun. It’s not fun now, and it’s not fun for however long it has to happen. All that is not of love, all that is not of love’s kind, all that comes between us (that is, the Father’s heart in us) has to be removed. That to me is what judgment is. It’s redemptive.

WPY: If you know God loves you.... If I know that, I will run and say, “Please, do what you need to do to get the crap out of me. Because I don’t want it. I don’t want how I hurt people because of it. I don’t want what it does to me. I don’t like what it does to this world. So please, do what you need to do, because I want to be free. I want to be whole.” I’m saying, “Come on.”

CBK: The Lord will never be satisfied with anything less than that from us. He’s not satisfied by legal satisfaction of some law. He is satisfied by having us full participants because we are sons and daughters of God. We must become that in our experience, and that’s what he’s talking about.

JMF: It’s something like going to the physician for cancer, isn’t it, a little bit? Let’s pretend you’re going to the best cancer physician in the world. You want to get rid of the cancer. You want to be free of it.

CBK: Because you know it’s going to kill you, and you’re not going to get to participate in life anymore if this is not excised and discerned – the fundamental meaning of judgment is to discern, to see into, to divide.

JMF: The process may be difficult.

WPY: It can be hell.

JMF: But it’s better than the end product. Of course, it’s a physical analogy.

CBK: You have two different doctrines of God at work there. In one, there is this idea that God has to have someone hurt. Someone has to pay.

JMF: A blood sacrifice.

CBK: A blood sacrifice. That to me is just paganism. What our Father is after is how in the world we're going to reach them. How in the world we are going to reach Mike, and how we are going to reach people who are so broken and so damaged and so hurt, they think we're like that? In order to bring them to be able to enjoy life in our house, how are we going to do this? There's a lot of tenderness in the Holy Spirit's work with people.

That's why I said there's differences. I don't think everybody needs to be hit in the head with a 2x4 board. Some people just need to be held for about 15 years and know "it's okay, this is good, I can trust this," to come through their pain into liberation. It's always about coming to see the Father's heart. He loves us forever.

When we finally get to there, we will not need laws, we will not need barbed-wire fences (my friend Ken Courtney says), because we will love anything that is alien to the life and other-centered care of the Father, Son and Spirit. We would do anything for one another to better their lives. It's so much more than fulfilling a law. It's actually sharing in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit. But we're so blind and so broken, we don't even know how to discern life from death, light from darkness, heaven and hell, right now. We keep reaching, and we've got to be educated, properly understood educated, and brought to the place to where we can discern those things and learn them.

The Holy Spirit's not going to violate our personhood and just flip a switch and say, "That's it. Now you got enlightenment." One of the things I love about *The Shack* is that there must be ten or fifteen places where he makes the point, "without violating your will, without violating your will," because God wants us in our hearts. If he'd just wave the wand, then we'd cease to be real people. We'd be "computers with Jesus software," and that's not why he created us.

WPY: No. It's not a relationship.

CBK: There's a huge patience of God in this. I love this part of *The Shack*, as this figures into the discussion: when Papa's talking about not ever being disappointed. Who in the world doesn't think they're a disappointment to God? But Papa's saying, "Well, it's going to take you 175 times, or events or situations or traumas or things, before you're finally going to begin to see who I am. So I'm not disappointed on the first two. We've only got this much more to go."

Paul and I were talking about this on the plane, about our children, and what father is not thrilled the first time their child stands up to try to walk,

even when they fall? They fall and that's number one, so you're not disappointed that they fail. You're thrilled that they took the step. What father's ever going to be content to leave it there, until they can run?

That disappointed sense comes from that value with that judge that's watching, keeping the list and said "oops, cross off, sorry." They created us out of nothing. They formed us out of the dirt in the ground, and their goal is to bring us to be at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, anointed with the Holy Spirit. You don't think the Father, Son, and Spirit know that we're going to botch this up in the long run? They see the larger picture. I think that's beautiful. I love that. That's one of my favorite things in this chapter. Three different times he brings that up – once with each of the three persons in the Trinity. It's beautiful.

JMF: Baxter, you've done some work on a book, *The Shack Revisited*, which is in the final manuscript form. We need to get together and talk about that and we can do theology.

CBK: Love to. You got three days?

JMF: Let's get together and do that.

CBK: That'd be great. Fantastic.

JMF: Thanks for being here.

WPY: Great to be here.

63. *THE SHACK* REVISITED

Dr. C. Baxter Kruger, theologian and author, and [William] Paul Young talk with us about Dr. Kruger's book, *The Shack Revisited*, and the theology embedded in Young's original narrative.

JMF: We want to talk about your book this time: *The Shack Revisited*. This is an endeavor that you guys have been working on in tandem. Paul's got the foreword here, and Baxter's been doing theology that supports *The Shack*. Can you tell us how you got into this, what happened, how it came to be, and where you are with it?

CBK: The short version is that Paul and I had become great friends over the last several years and went to several conferences and things like that together, and then I started getting ready to do things like "Theology of *The Shack*" at conferences. We bumped into each other in Toronto at a conference and ended up having an afternoon to spend together, so I showed him some scribbled notes that I had, and he said, "Maybe you would write that into a book, and we'll see." So I went basically off the grid for eight months.

I wanted to show how the core vision of *The Shack*, which is done in drama in a very right-brained way, is the early church and is the main line coming all the way through. There's a number of reasons for that. One is that when I read *The Shack*, I'm thinking I'm reading Athanasius, I'm reading J.B. Torrance, I'm reading George McDonald. This is so beautiful, and it's in a form that people can understand.

But I felt that there were many people who said, "Okay, somebody grab me by the hand and help me go to the next step. Help me see this. Is this biblical, is this work historically accurate? What is going on here?" So I'm trying to unpack all the nuances that are embedded into the narrative of *The Shack*.

WPY: For some people, their heart just leaped, and they were touched deeply by *The Shack*. Baxter comes along and says, "I want to encourage and affirm that this is not new theology. This is something that is actually traditional." And then for those whose paradigms were tampered by *The Shack*, who were a little upset, this is to come along and say, "You need to think about these questions, because this is why you're bothered." Those are some of the implications of doing a book like this. I'm very excited. Baxter writes in a very accessible way. It's not a high-brow theological treatise, but it's very supported, for those who like that sort of thing, and yet it's very much a story itself, very accessible.

JMF: Let's talk about some of the things you said in here, and let's get into it a little bit. Let me read this...and then a section from *The Shack*, and then if I could get both of you to comment:

This is one of the many reasons that the Trinity is so critical. For if God were alone and solitary from eternity, then there is nothing for God to love until he creates. So the solitary God can only *become* a lover, for he is not one by nature. And this love can only be a love that grows out of his alone-ness and self-interest. And it's more than possible that whatever it was that caused the single-person God to create and become a lover could change, and the solitary God could then go back to his essential non-loving nature. The love of this God is caused by something outside of his being, and is this not what we all fear? That something outside of the being of God causes him to love us? That his love is conditioned by something other than his nature, and thus that we're the ones who must get it right, trip the love wire, make God's love happen, and keep it happening? No wonder we're so exhausted and unhappy.

And then the quotation from *The Shack*. Mackenzie is talking to Jesus:

"Why do you love us humans? I suppose I..." As he spoke he realized he hadn't formed his question very well. "I guess what I want to ask is why do you love me when I have nothing to offer you?" "If you think about it, Mac," Jesus answered, "it should be very freeing to know that you can offer us nothing. At least not anything that can add or take away from who we are. That should alleviate any pressure to perform." (From page 202)

Let's talk about that. It's very common to think of God (I still do it...) as a solitary figure sitting up in heaven somewhere on a throne. He's probably got a white beard, and he's very wise and kind and loving most of the time... I hope he is, and I hope he listens when I'm begging him to help me get a home run or something like that.

WPY: Like Gandolf with an attitude.

JMF: Yeah, there we are.

WPY: That's why I went such a different direction in the story. That's why Papa is about as far away from Gandolf with an attitude as...

JMF: Or Santa Claus.

WPY: Or Santa Claus who's got a list and is checking it twice...and look

out, because he's coming to town.

JMF: Right. A very unfortunate song that does great disservice to Santa Claus...

WPY: Part of this, as you were reading it, struck me again that if perfect love casts out fear and if God is perfect love, what kind of image of God do we have... **JMF:** Why are we afraid?] where we have fear and love co-mingled in the relationship? If perfect love casts out fear, and I look to the God that I fear (in that negative phobia kind of sense where I'm afraid in the worst kind of way, judgment and even worse than that, disappointment. I'm afraid that I'm a disappointment. The things that I would fear most in my relationship with my own father, for example.)

If that's supposed to be the source of my freedom and the source of where I have to go to get away from that fear, and yet it is the source of that fear, I'm stuck. I have a major problem here, and I don't know where to go. Where do I turn to in terms of trying to deal with that?

JMF: Fear God and keep his commandments. That's what we hear preached.

CBK: Well, revere and...

WPY: Reverence.

CBK: Reverence and awe. You can be awed by God's beauty and goodness and glory.

JMF: So "fear" is an unfortunate translation.

CBK: It is a translation. This paragraph that you read puts its finger on what I would reckon (I think Paul would agree) is the number one human and pastoral issue we have. It's that Does God really love me? If God is not eternally Father, Son, and Spirit...if there is a G-O-D, a single person behind that, that when one day he decided we were going to have community, then the God behind the Father, Son, and Spirit is the will of God. A single-person God is not other-centered, not approachable, not interested in fellowship, it does not love out of its nature.

JMF: And it doesn't need.

CBK: It does not create out of other-centeredness. This is one of the reasons the Trinity is so critical, because the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Athanasius said, "The Holy Trinity is no created thing. God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit." The only way they know to be is as Father, Son, and Spirit. That's who they are, that's who God is in that communion of love. That's the way they relate to everything in their creation.

The reason God loves us is not because his blood sugar happened to be up one day and he decided to create the universe. The reason he loves us is

because that's what the Father, Son, and Spirit do. I can count on that. That doesn't mean I can go do anything I want, and there are consequences for that. But one thing I know is that no matter what happens in life, I am loved forever. Loved forever means that he, the Father, Son, and Spirit, are loving me constantly to set me free to live in that love.

That's something you can hold onto, because what I hear being preached all the time is this model where God is essentially your Judge, and can become your Father *if* you repent and believe. It's the windshield wiper thing to me.

I remember the first time I was consciously aware of repenting and believing. Two years later, I had another experience. Three years later, I had another experience. So how much did I really repent and believe, and who in the equation of the Christian church can really raise their hand and say, "I have never graduated from 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief.'" That means that God's being is sitting there flipping back and forth between being our judge and being our father.

What the early church understood was that fatherhood is first and eternal, and out of that relationship we are created and we love. That's what we believe, that's what we count on, that's what we struggle to understand. And that's his nature. God's love for me is not depending upon me getting something right. I can't change it! I'm not so powerful as to tamper with the being of the Father, Son, and Spirit. They love. That's good news. Now let's walk together in that.

WPY: That's great news. Another piece of this is that to the degree that fear exists in my life (because if perfect love casts out fear, and the one who fears is not perfected in love – that's not a value statement, it's just an observation) ...if that's true, then the degree that there's fear in my life, to that degree I don't understand the love of God for me. Because you either have one or the other. That helps me, because then I can recognize I've got something wrong in my paradigm about the character and nature of God.

We live in an uncertain world, as everybody knows. There's a lot of things that we just can't count on. Where are we going to plant our feet? It's got to be in the certainty of the character of God. But if we're caught in betwixt two temperaments (where love is a temperament and justice is a temperament or judging is a temperament and it's based on my performance), I'm sorry, I'm too broken and my history is too shattered to compete in the environment of performance. It's not going to happen.

CBK: Even if you weren't broken, even if you were good, you still couldn't trust it, because you've got this whole dimension of judgment that's not integrated... Of course the Father's going to judge us. Because he loves

us, he will judge us to the roots of our souls, and separate all darkness from us so we get to live in the place where there's only light. Of course he will judge. He's not going to let any of us off the hook with anything, because he loves us, because it's his character to love us. That's just the most liberating and freeing thing to me. I'm glad you pointed that out. That's the very center of the book...

JMF: Aren't we afraid not to be afraid? We don't want to be afraid... You can read *The Shack*, you can read a book like this that gets into the theology that is behind and under and through *The Shack* about who God is for us, but you're afraid to not be afraid.

WPY: We think intimacy is devalued if we're not afraid, which is crazy. In our relationships, in a healthy relationship between a mother and a daughter and a mother and a son or a father and a daughter, intimacy creates a great degree of respect. And we have a paradigm that says intimacy is an eradication of respect.

CBK: Familiarity breeds contempt.

WPY: Right. My point, and I think Baxter would agree, is that intimacy creates a higher degree of respect, because you get to know the person deeper and deeper, and you have an expanded view of what that is, and love surrounds that.

JMF: You're not taking sin seriously, or you're just kidding yourself.

CBK: What you're actually taking seriously is the beauty of the love of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The question is: is there anything in this universe better, more beautiful, more life-giving, more blessed, than the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit? Is there anything? From where we're sitting, this seems like a lot of options. But from where the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are sitting, that's the best thing ever.

How long is it going to take us to work through all the things that we think we've got to do before we come to see that [the love of the Father, Son and Spirit] is what I want, I want to be in the middle of that? The Christian community is trying to find a way to keep these people on these paths by using fear, and they're not able to move. They're just living in fear, they're not getting to know that they're loved.

The Father, Son, and Spirit are prepared and have run a huge risk in creating human beings and giving us freedom. But they know something. They know that they're not going to find anything in the cosmos that is anywhere close to the love and the life that they share together that we're included in. How long is it going to take us [to realize that]?

Is the point here that the Christian church is to have everybody so afraid

we just do right all the time? That's like having a child that you're raising and you want them to be free, but at ten years old they get frozen into doing right so they never get to grow up and they never get to experience love in the house. Is that what the Father, Son, and Spirit...is that what this creation is about?

They want us to come to the place where we look at them and say, "I'm in, my whole heart. I want to be a part of this. This is the best thing." That's what Jesus said to Peter, and Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, what are we going to do? We've got the best thing there is." [cf. John 6:68]

WPY: What is it about us that is so twisted up that we need an angry, vengeful, vindictive God?

JMF: We want people we don't like...

WPY: To suffer the consequences.

CBK: Somebody's going to have to pay.

WPY: In *The Shack*, Papa doesn't let Mackenzie off on anything. But Papa doesn't walk around with a big stick with a nail on it to prove a point. It's love that pushes Mackenzie into dealing with these things. The kindness of God leads us to repentance, right? And we think it's the anger, the fury, or whatever.

It's not that God is not angry or furious against everything that is damaging his creation, including the things that are damaging me, his child. We're for that. The more we see of the goodness of God, the more we're for him burning out of my life everything that keeps me from being free and causes me to damage relationships and my family and on and on. That just goes. We want to be judged in that sense, because we trust his goodness in that judgment, not in some behind-the-scenes vindictiveness where behind the love of God there is really another agenda, or the Father has a different agenda.

People say silly things, like the intimacy that exists between Papa and Mackenzie, as if that's an affront to the character of God. That's what they got mad at Jesus for – his intimacy with the Father. What we don't understand is, we got included into that intimacy. That's the whole point – everything is by, for, through, and in Jesus, and we exist in that relationship with the Father because we're carried in him. We're created in him.

Then Jesus is talking about God as *Abba* when the entire Old Testament never even conceived of the idea of intimacy, and yet here's Jesus talking in the most familial, deepest kind of senses that we understand as human beings in relationship to our kids, but we couldn't understand that in relationship to God. Jesus models that right smack in front of us, and it is such an affront

that he ends up getting killed for it.

JMF: If you go on Youtube and look for “God loves everyone,” there are a number of voices that absolutely are furious about the idea of anyone saying such a thing. [They say] What a damnable lie that is.

CBK: That God loves everyone.

JMF: They go to the passage that says, “Esau I hated, Jacob I loved.” If God hates Esau, then he hates someone, then he doesn’t love everyone, and so therefore you better straighten up and live right because God does not love everybody, it’s a damnable lie that he loves everyone.

CBK: Are they afraid that someone is going to show up at the gates of heaven and be accepted in who’s not supposed to be there?

JMF: Certainly not Esau.

WPY: People who bring up that story obviously don’t understand their scripture very well, because you go back to the Old Testament story, and there was a blessing on both those boys from the beginning. Yes, Esau and Jacob, there was a distinction in terms of the redemptive plan, and that’s what that term [hate] is. It’s not a psychological hate that’s here – it’s a separation saying the plan includes this boy, but not this boy. Read this story: there is total reconciliation between Jacob and Esau inside the love of the father in that story. There’s a lot more going on with that story than we see at first glance.

That’s part of the question. Mackenzie faces it in the judgment scene, where he is sitting in the seat of judgment, where he is to judge God and the entire human race. He realizes that is exactly what he’s done. He’s billed the character and nature of God that is not love, and therefore not trustworthy and not good, and then everything else flows from that. If we believe in a God who is that over-distant Omni-being, then we will read the Jacob-Esau section of Romans (or wherever) through that lens. It’s a paradigm. You’re going to hear the kind of God that you believe in. The sad thing is that people...

JMF: And you’re going to pull that verse right out of its context in order to prove your point.

WPY: And people become “there you go”...people become like the God they believe in.

CBK: [after putting on odd eyeglasses] You look very different to me right now, Mike.

JMF: So do you.

CBK: Yeah? Now [he takes them off]...

JMF: Now you look like Baxter.

WPY: We see through the lens of our own paradigms and we become like the God that we worship.

CBK: Athanasius says that “the God of all is good and supremely noble by nature, therefore he is the love of the human race.” That’s what the early church came to see. I don’t think we can overestimate the goodness of God and the love of God.

Some people hear me say that and say I’m just saying everybody can do whatever they want to do. I’m saying that he is so good and he loves us so much he is going to bring us to the place to where we want to participate in this life with all our hearts, and that we’re not going to need barbed wire in heaven, because we will hate everything that is dark and is hurtful to us and to others. We only want to be sharing in that life. That’s a very different thing than “we’re going to go to heaven because we don’t want to go to hell,” and we’re actually hoping that we can be in heaven, but not ever have to run into the God that we fear.

JMF: And also the people that we don’t like.

WPY: A lot of times when people bring up the issue of “you’re being soft on sin,” they often have an attraction to sin that they’re trying to avoid. We don’t want that attraction in our lives at all. We’re not being soft on sin at all. We’re not saying, “I’m just going to do anything because it doesn’t matter.” It all matters. We’re saying, “It matters because these things are devastating in our lives.”

CBK: Here’s the dynamic. We are included in this circle of other-centered life and love. That’s who we are, that’s our nature. We’re free to do whatever we want, but when we violate that way of being, it hurts like hell. There’s no escape from it. You’re free to go live in any darkness you want, but it hurts like hell, because this is who we are. There’s an education process so we can come to see that.

JMF: It’s a journey, isn’t it?

CBK: It is a journey.

JMF: You’re on a journey toward Christ...

CBK: An incremental process.

JMF:...and that journey can have some pretty bad places in it if you want to make some bad choices. There are consequences.

WPY: And sometimes not choices you make for yourself.

JMF: Often you cause things on other people that they didn’t make for themselves.

WPY: That’s part of why we’re so opposed to the darkness and we’re opposed to the sin, because we’ve seen what it’s done to the people we cared

for and we loved. The darkness that I hold onto, I don't just keep to myself.

CBK: That's a great point. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, we share it with others.

JMF: One other portion of the book I wanted to get to before we finished is "The Wonderful Exchange." It's a quote from the apostle Paul at the beginning, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet though he was rich, but for your sake he became poor that you, through his poverty, might become rich." You go on to expound on this concept of the wonderful exchange that Mackenzie learns about.

CBK: In that chapter, what I'm trying to show is that one of the themes in *The Shack* is that what Mackenzie is getting in this relationship is not simply forgiveness. He's getting to share in all that the Father, Son, and Spirit have together. That's the ancient gospel. I quoted Paul first, and Irenaeus there: "Our Lord who became what we are to bring us to be what he is."

We're so locked in the West to the guilt-and-sin thing that we don't see much more than forgiveness going on in Jesus and the cross. Irenaeus, the ancient father, said, "Our Lord Jesus became what we are in order to bring us to be what he is" in his relation with the Father... Calvin, the same way, I quote Calvin on that, he's beautiful. And then J.B. Torrance, he says, "The Incarnation, the prime purpose of the coming of Jesus in the love of God is to bring us to be included in this communion that we may participate in the Trinitarian life of God."

What is given to us in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is not simply forgiveness. Jesus reaches in and takes our darkness and our hell and takes it into himself so that he can pitch his tent, as it were, in the midst of our darkness and pain, so everything that he is in his experience with the Father and the Holy Spirit and as Lord of Creation then becomes ours. That's the point: we're going to be brought to participate in Jesus' relation with his Father, and in his anointing in the Holy Spirit, and in his relationship with everything in the entire cosmos.

WPY: Because he remains the creator.

CBK: That's because of who he is, and he's bringing us to do that.

JMF: And he remains one of us.

WPY: Yeah. Part of this exchange is that not only have we been included into this life (Whether we know it or not, or even want it or not at this point, we've been included. That was the plan and purpose of adoption from before the foundation of the world.) ...not only has that happened, but in exchange, also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 14, 15, 16, 17) come and climb inside of our shacks, the places of our darkness, and meet us, regardless of whether

we've yet repented or not. There is a process in which God is working in the heart of every human being to restore them to the desire that he has for them, which is everything that they were intended to be.

CBK: There's a whole atonement theory of theology wound up in *The Shack*, and this is part of what I'm talking about with "The Wonderful Exchange" is the way that Papa and Jesus and Sarayu get inside of Mackenzie's shack, which is his soul, which in particular is the brokenness. They're there before he even knows them or who they are. The Father, Son, and Spirit have pitched their tent inside human darkness, and sin, and treachery, and betrayal. And they got there by Jesus submitting himself to suffer from us.

Jesus says, "I'm going to let you make me the scapegoat, and you're going to pour your wrath out on me." It's not the Father's wrath being poured out on Jesus – it's our wrath. It's our rage, it's our curse. We damned him, we beat him, we crucified him, and we mocked him. And he said, "I'm going to take this, because as you do this to me and as I accept this, I am entering into a relationship with you in the very pit of our darkness and confusion and brokenness. I'm bringing my Father, and I'm bringing the Holy Spirit with me. We're not going away, because you can't kill me again."

WPY: This idea of this distant God, it's not a new thing. Isaiah writes about the atonement: "We (human beings) esteemed him (Jesus) stricken by God." That's how we looked at it. We think of God in such a light that we esteemed Jesus stricken by God.

CBK: "Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself." [Heb. 12:3] Focus on what he endured in order to meet us. So he who is rich becomes poor, that he may meet us in our poverty with his wealth. The redeeming genius of the Father, Son, and Spirit is they're going to establish the new covenant with Israel and with the human race, and here's how. They're going to establish it by taking our worst treachery, by allowing us to betray them and murder them. They're going to pitch the tent of the new covenant relationship in the tent of our betrayal. If that's not genius... That's the secret, that's the mystery, that's been done, that's real, we're all included, we're already in the journey of understanding, and we've got a long way to go yet.

JMF: In *The Shack*, Jesus says to Mackenzie, "We want you to join us in our circle of fellowship. I don't want slaves to do my will, I want brothers and sisters who want to share life with me."

CBK: Yeah. They don't want Christian robots who are doing everything right but have no heart. Jesus wants Mackenzie on the dock, but Mackenzie's

crying to him, “Jesus, I feel lost.” That’s what he really feels. “I feel lost.” Jesus holds his hand and says, “I know how you feel, Mackenzie, but I’m with you, and I’m not lost. I’m sorry you feel that way, but hear me, you’re not lost, because I have a hold of you.”

When Mackenzie begins to hear that in his pain, he’s beginning to discover who had met him in his hell. That’s a relationship of acceptance and love that can rekindle a man’s dignity and life and give him some hope that he’s a part of something way bigger than just him or just his religious obedience.

WPY: It’s a beautiful thing.

JMF: Thanks for coming.

CBK: What a great day.

JMF: And great conversations.

WPY: I’m again honored. Thank you.

64. THE TRINITY AND EVANGELISM

JMF: This time we want to talk about something a little bit different. Evangelism is the big word in Western Christianity. Everything revolves around evangelism and what are you doing to share the gospel. It's like the eleventh commandment in the Old Testament and it's the...

WPY: It's the fundraising arm of religious Christianity.

CBK: I grew up in the Presbyterian church. I didn't know what evangelism was until I went to seminary.

JMF: We want to share the gospel, but how is that done? How does Trinitarian theology affect evangelism? What are the implications? What is the impact? How are we to see evangelism and think about it? Let's talk about that.

WPY: It's a great question. Go ahead, Baxter.

CBK: You start off with the Father, Son, and Spirit—you have relationship, and they love one another in complete other-oneness. Their dream for us is to draw us into their relationship so that it can become as much ours as it is theirs. So the message of the gospel, the good news, is that you're included. That's what we're supposed to share with people. The best way to share it with them is to let the Father, Son, and Spirit share it with us, which is as persons in relationship. So in terms of having a program where we're trying to knock on doors or we're doing different things, to me it's about...

This city here [Los Angeles] is about 20 million people who are included in the life of Jesus. They probably have not much of a clue about that. The way we do that is one person at a time in relationship, getting to know people, inviting them over, talking with them. Underneath that is a freeing aspect for a normal Christian person: the more they grow in the knowledge and understanding and intimacy that we're loved and that we're cared for, then the more free and natural it is to share. You have more confidence because this is good – “this has really helped my life. I want you to see this. How can I come alongside and share this with you?” Sometimes it's information, sometimes it may just be befriending them.

WPY: Don't you think a lot of times evangelism is a segment of spirituality in terms of how it's presented? The idea of evangelism is to get somebody from point A to point somewhere else.

CBK: From outside to inside.

WPY: From the outside to the inside, across the line, across the bridge, whatever. That's not what you're talking about at all.

CBK: Jesus has crossed the line and crossed the bridge and found the human race, and that's what true. He's called us as Christians to go and share that with the world so they can know that they're included, too. Then we can walk together and begin to figure out what this life means. How do we live this way? How do we participate in the Trinitarian life?

At this point in history, I think the most important part in the discussion of evangelism is not the method, but the message. The message that I'm hearing [from others] is that there's this huge chasm between God and us, and that there's all these different ways that we can get across over to God, and once we get across that big chasm (in Jesus by faith or penitence, maybe by baptism or by sacraments), there are all these different things we've got to do. Once we cross that, *then* we're loved, then we're accepted, then we're reconciled, then we're saved, then we're sanctified, then I'll be adopted.

I'm saying the message to be proclaimed is that yes, there is a huge chasm. Adam and Eve, in their disobedience, plunged into the darkness, there was a huge chasm. But then there's this thing called the Incarnation, where the Father and Son came across the chasm to find us in the far country, put us on his shoulders, and brought us back to his Father. *That's* when we were loved and saved and reconciled. But we're still in the dark and have no clue as to who we are, living out of our darkness, and it's fear, and insecurity, and pain, and meaninglessness.

We belong to the Father, Son, and Spirit. I package it this way sometimes just to make the point very stark in contrast to what I have heard all my life on radio and television. The gospel is not the news that we can receive Jesus into our lives. The gospel is the news that *Jesus has received us into his life*. He has made us part of his world, part of his relationship with the Father, the Holy Spirit, and his relationship with all creation. That's the good news.

We've got to get the message worked out, and I think the Holy Spirit is doing that right now. The last 30 years it's been like turning up the heat on this, and it's beautiful. People are beginning to wrestle with it. "You're telling me that that guy sitting on the park bench is included?" That's exactly what I'm telling you. He wouldn't have been able to come inside of God's creation apart from being included. Does he know that? Heck no, he doesn't know it, and because he doesn't know, he's scared to death. He doesn't know where his next meal is going to come from. He doesn't know what to do with his life, he's so precarious. He's frozen in fear.

When we see that, we can begin to feel with him who he is because of who Jesus is. That may mean befriending him. It may mean giving him a place to live, it may mean helping him out, or it may just mean sharing one word

with him in that particular moment. I don't want to formulate the thing so that we've got this one package where we more or less go and puke on everybody with it whether they want to hear it or not; it's much more relational.

WPY: You're saying that there's no part of life that is not evangelism in that sense. We embody the good news, because when we are participating in the truth and the love and the grace that we already have come to know, even though we're not fully there yet, we're in process ourselves. Love becomes the centerpiece of this – the way that we love one another and the way that we love others, the way we love our enemies.

CBK: The sacred-secular dichotomy has to be dismantled in this, too, because if you throw your lot in 100 percent with the Father, Son, and Spirit and you surrender wholly to them, they're going to do a whole lot more for you than make you simply an evangelist. You're going to be a good human being. You're going to be a bass fisherman, and maybe you make lures. You're going to be into everything that they're into, and they're into everything in this cosmos.

The sacred-secular dichotomy goes away, so that the more we throw ourselves in with the Father, Son, and Spirit, the more their light begins to flow through us in an infinite variety of ways, and it may well be through joining a lure-making association that you meet three or four guys and you end up having a beer with them and talking, and they start sharing their lives with you right there. You begin to talk to them about what your experience has been and what's given you hope, and why you enjoy things like fishing. Their lives may begin to be revolutionized simply by discussion about fishing that's not rooted in the sacred- secular dichotomy, and not rooted in the "over God" who has got us afraid and trying to make us religious androids.

JMF: I've seen these kits where you'll go through the videotape and the lessons and all about relational evangelism, and it talks about how to go out and make friends with people. From the outset, the only reason you're making friends with these people when you've targeted them is because they need the gospel, so I'm going to befriend them so that I can keep working with them until the right point comes where I can present the gospel. To me that's artificial – at least this is how it strikes me. It's an artificial friendship, that you're making only because you think I need to get the gospel to them, therefore I'll make friends with them in order to get the opportunity to give them the gospel.

CBK: "Let's fake the relationship so I can maybe get Jesus to do something."

JMF: Exactly.

WPY: How many of us have been involved with somebody inviting us over to their house so that they can really tell us what the agenda is?

JMF: Exactly.

CBK: It's not fundraising this time – it's evangelism this time.

JMF: You're a project. It's like you're an insurance salesman. In order to survive and make enough money to get by, you always have to think of everybody as a potential sale. You always have that in the back of your mind.

CBK: Once you sell the insurance to them, that's the end of it. [But] the goal of evangelism is discipleship and inclusion in the community.

JMF: If people matter, if they are real and they matter, and having right relationships is the goal of life, then, as you were saying, Paul, everything is evangelism in that sense.

WPY: Absolutely.

JMF: Our very definition of evangelism...the end is the relationship. It's okay to have friends for the sake of friendships. It's okay to be friendly and be friends, because people matter. They're worth being friends with.

WPY: For their sake.

JMF: Peter said, "Be ready always to give an answer for the hope that lies within you."

CBK: That's when somebody asks you about the hope that lies in you.

JMF: Exactly. Live such a life so that people might even ask...

CBK: How often does that happen?

JMF: Do we have to make every friendship for the sake of...as though this person is going to go to hell if we don't get them saved? We've got to find a sneaky way to get the gospel. Can we trust God to be who he is for them and enjoy them as a person without having this constant thing in the back of my mind... "when can I work in the gospel? How am I going to work in..." Aren't we being Christ to them in the friendship itself?

CBK: That is the point. We are train stops in people's lives. With family, the train stops more often than not. We're free to love them and to be there for them. Jesus is the evangelist, and the Holy Spirit is the redeeming genius. We're called into what *they* are doing. They are the ones that are burdened for the whole world to come to see the truth. Not us. They're using us to be part of that process in people's lives. We get to be free to love a person for their sake.

I don't need to have a fully worked out agenda for the man on the park bench. I'm free to care for him in this moment. If it goes somewhere else, then I'll follow and see where it goes. But it's a good thing to care for

someone...so, okay, this man needs food. That's fantastic! Help him get food. It may be that the Lord wants me to do something a little bit more. I don't know! But the gift itself is for him. It's for his blessing, his benefit. The Holy Spirit can interpret that.

JMF: As we live out of other-centeredness, outside of ourselves (which we do maybe two or three seconds every day). During those two or three seconds when we're thinking in a non-self-centered way and Christ is living in us, isn't that the way we are? In other words, it's natural to care about somebody and to help where you can and be present for someone in their need as we're able.

WPY: Because of our union with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are by nature lovers of people. I think that's what is true about us. We just don't know it. And as a man thinks in his heart, so is he. If you think you're not, then you're going to function like you're not.

A lot of times our struggle with the methodologies of evangelism is because they're not natural to our nature, which is to love. How many classes did you take on being a father and loving your child, and making sure that the methodology was right? It's not that we don't get help along the way, but there is something that that child brings to us by virtue of who we are now. I am a father, they are my child. I do grow in that, but there's not a methodology about it that makes me more valuable to that son or daughter.

I love the idea that there is a God who has climbed into our inabilities and joined us in that with all of their ability to be present, to be kind. You look at the fruit of the Spirit; it's a description of God. It's not commodities that God has that he dispenses when you ask for them or need them. This is God. This is the fruit of the Spirit, and the Spirit is of the same nature and character as the Father and the Son – kindness, gentleness, you know? When have those things been a part of a methodology of evangelism?

CBK: Everybody wants to be known, and everybody wants to be cared for. When you know and care for someone, you're going to have conversations with them. When Katrina hit the Mississippi Gulf coast and just ripped our coast completely apart, we were all watching on TV in Jackson until our electricity went off. I remember driving to the Coliseum in Jackson, Mississippi... I don't know what I was doing, but I was driving by the Coliseum the day before Katrina hit. This is some 180 miles from the coast. There were 200 cherry picker trucks lined up in the parking lot from all over the country. People had taken their vacation time, the companies were donating the trucks, they were lined up two days before Katrina hit. The minute the storm was over, those guys were going straight down Route 49 to

our coast.

I was having a conversation during that same period about someone who was asking me what I thought about the emerging church. That was the same thing to me, when you said “what about evangelism.” I want to know, where does the origin for that kind of concern and that kind of camaraderie brotherhood come from? That’s not evil. That’s not coming from the devil. There are some people who drove as far as Oregon and some probably from Canada. Now our guys have done the same thing for them – it’s part of a tradition to help each other...

So you want to talk about evangelism, you want to talk about the emerging church? The first thing we need to do is to begin to identify the Jesus who is already everywhere anyway and already at work. Because I want to talk to those men, and I want to say thank you, as a son of Mississippi, thank you for taking your vacation time, thank your families for helping us out. Then I want to say to them, that’s beautiful, that’s sacrificial, that’s other-centered. That sounds just like the Father, Son, and Spirit.

I want to approach those guys in that honor and dignity. That opens up an entirely new world as opposed to “Okay, we’ve got 200 guys, they’re not going to be in Mississippi again, let’s go blitzkrieg and make sure that they pray a prayer so that they can get out of where they are into Jesus, and at least now they’re saved when they go home.” Who’s the joke on there? Who is blind there? What is really happening? We’ve got all these discussions about the emerging church, but if that’s not the emerging church, I don’t want to be a part of one.

WPY: You end up treating people like targets. You lose the value of their humanity.

JMF: Exactly.

WPY: How many funeral services have you been to – and unfortunately I’ve been to one recently for a young man who was my youngest son’s best friend, who was killed in a dirt bike accident just a couple weeks ago and who was a member of our family. We grieve him deeply. But well-meaning brothers and sisters in our family conversation, they want to use that time to evangelize people because they know that people’s hearts are sensitive. I’m thinking because their hearts are sensitive I want to treat them with a greater degree of respect and kindness than they’ve ever known. To turn this event into a marketing opportunity, into a commercial, I think is devastating and short-sighted.

Let’s enter into each other’s pain and sorrow. The young people, the generation that’s coming up, that was in the middle of this loss, they showed

up in a way that a lot of the adults didn't know how to, because they knew about the value of being in the middle of it with each other. That became why people would ask the question, "How come this is different? What is this about the celebration of someone's life? What is this hope that is not just so bent by grief?"

Then it becomes a part of the expression of our lives together, because we actually value those people because we know the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all over them to begin with, and values them. Evangelism is no longer a methodology or a part of our spirituality or anything like that. It becomes an expression. We get to treat people like we know they matter, because of the way we've been treated because we found out we mattered. Tell the story of the seminary student and the farmer. I think that has total application to the conversation at this point.

CBK: This happened to me years ago. I was going to speak somewhere in the Midwest. I remember that it was really, really flat. A seminary student picked me up at the airport, and we get into the car, and we go into the university, and there are farmers everywhere. I said, "What are you going to do, are you a junior or a senior?"

He said, "I'm a senior."

I said, "What are you going to do when you graduate?"

He says, "I'm going to go to seminary."

So I said, "Are you going to be a missionary or a pastor?"

He said, "No, not a missionary, I'll probably be a pastor."

Just about that time a huge John Deere tractor made a turn in the field right by the road and went back out. I said, "Well, you see this man on the tractor. Have you ever thought about how Jesus relates to him in his farming? He spends 60 or 70 hours a week on the tractor, so the whole family network is all about farming."

He said, "I never thought about that." I will never forget the look on his face, because he looked at me like I had that third eye going, "Where did you come from? What kind of question is that?"

I said, "This is an important question. More than likely you're going to have a whole church full of farmers and their families who give their entire lives to farming. So the important question is how does Jesus relate to the farmer?"

He said, "I just don't know, I never thought about it."

I said, "When you get home tonight and you get ready to eat your supper, what do you do before you take your first bite?"

He said, "I thank the Lord for the food."

I said, “Why are you thanking the Lord for the food that the farmer grew?”

He said, “You’re not saying I’m not supposed to thank the Lord?”

I said, “No, thank the Lord. What I’m trying to help you see is that your prayer already knows how Jesus relates to the farmer; you just don’t have a theology that will allow you to see that your prayer already knows.”

He says, “I think I’m getting it...”

I said, “In thanking God for the farmer, thanking God for the food that the farmer grew, you’re saying the farmer is participating in a provision that’s coming from the Father, Son, and Spirit to you. You are recognizing in your prayer that that man is included as a participant. But you don’t have a theology that will allow you to approach him in that way.”

Now to take that story and extend it to this conversation, he’s going to go knock on his door and pretend that he’s outside and trying to get him to jump through the hoops to get inside. Once he gets inside, because of the sacred-secular dichotomy, he’s going to try to get him to be less of a farmer and more of a Christian who is doing these things over in the “sacred” world.

No wonder nobody wants to be in the middle of that. We don’t even see who the farmer really is. We can’t treat him with the proper dignity or his family. If we did, he’d probably knock the door down to come learn more about this, because nobody else is telling me a thing about that. Everybody else is treating me like I’m just a farmer. These are huge questions beyond that practical level. When we see who people really are and whose lives they’ve been included in and what life is coming out of them, or trying to, we begin to relate to them in that and with the light of Jesus. People want to know about that. The farmer wants to know.

I talk to Marines. I’ve had a chance to speak to Marines at one of the bases in the United States. We had a long discussion, and I said to them, “Before we get into a long discussion about this, I want to say one thing to you. You are concerned to protect, and you have a passion in your soul to protect and to create space for freedom for life. That comes from the Father, Son, and Spirit. I’m talking about the burden that you bear in your soul. What motivates you to work and to protect and to brave the seas and go into situations where you’re being moved by a love for freedom and life? I want you to know: that has its origin in the Father, Son, and Spirit.”

I’m sitting in the room with the Marines, telling the story, and they’re all crying. Not all of them, most of them (big guys), because they know I’ve spoken to what’s motivating their being. Now I’m trying to help them see who that is. You don’t think they want to be in the conversation? That

Sunday night they bring their wives and little boys to the church to have a conversation.

WPY: How different is that from me having a methodology of evangelism that's fundamentally, for a lot of us, motivated by guilt, fear that we're not going to be doing something [i.e., evangelism] that God required of us, guilt that we'd end up with somebody's blood on our hands because we didn't [evangelize], and then we treat everybody like a target – not because they're human beings who matter, but because we're still trying to deal with our criteria of what it means to be successful spiritually, and it's motivated by all the wrong things.

JMF: You can take that and make it artificial, if you turn it into a “here's what you say.” It needs to be real in order for it to...

CBK: This is where it forces us to be real, because what we're really doing in evangelism is we're saying, hey, come walk with us. We believe Jesus is leading us in life, so come walk with us and do this with us. We don't have it all worked out. It is what we do, see? Come walk with us.

If that's not what we're saying in the pulpit, preaching, teaching – evangelism is “come walk with us” – what are we saying? Come jump through a hoop and get through something? We're trying to walk with Jesus and understand him, broken as we are and blind as we are. We're trying to participate in that life. Come join us, come walk with us. We see it in you. We want to help, we want to encourage you. We're going to encourage you in broken ways. Just walk with us.

That's what Jesus says: “Come, walk with me. Follow me.” The disciples and John the Baptist come up behind him and say, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” He turns and says, “You want to know where I'm dwelling?” (That's the word used, I don't know why they translate “staying.”) Jesus says, “You want to know where I'm staying? Where I dwell? Walk with me and you will see.”

Evangelism, in its true sense, is nothing more than an invitation to come share life. This is it, come share life with us. Walk together. That is so much different, it is so very different than approaching a person [with the attitude of] “you are outside; I have to manipulate you to get you to jump through the hoops.” (I was taught they were going to change in two years, but I don't know that right now.) You've got to say it this way and jump through these hoops. I've got to figure out a way to get you to do that when you don't want to do that, and I don't even really want to do it, because I know you and we play golf together. But now I've got to treat you like we're not friends and I've got to get you to do this...

It's very artificial. But it comes down to, are we inviting people to walk with us in our lives?

WPY: The struggle that's involved is conversation, period. As soon as you start to talk about evangelism, you almost always have to go to methodology. As soon as you do that, it's no longer dynamic and organic and relational. It's no longer me in the midst of my world loving the people who are in it and allowing that love to generate whatever the conversations are. For a lot of believers, they don't even know who they are here. Therefore, having a methodology becomes the in-between step, to thinking that the methodology defines what a believer is supposed to do, right? Until they know that they're loved, this is not going to be a dynamic and organic and relational thing, either. It's like saying, well, now our new method of evangelism is to love somebody.

JMF: Exactly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had this great quote where he said, "Jesus himself did not try to convert the two thieves on the cross. He waited until one of them turned to him."

CBK: He knew that he was going to meet them on the other side in just a few minutes.

JMF: Meet both of them in just a few minutes.

CBK: They're both going to die. What's the other thief going to meet on the other side?

JMF: It's a lesson for us.

CBK: I've got several stories. I wish we had time to tell, maybe another time, but one I was in, I think I was in Kona... Some of the people I was teaching had done an evangelism class or something like that. The guy that was teaching, if I remember correctly, was from California, maybe Southern California. He had told them, "Here's what I want you to do." Or she had, "I want you to get together in groups of three and I want you to pray and ask the Lord, 'What do you want us to do?' Just pray. Lord, show us." If he doesn't say anything, just get back together and pray. There's no pressure, do whatever.

In this one story that I heard, they got together and prayed, and they said one of them saw a girl standing behind a counter with a blue shirt on, another one said her name was Sarah, and that was about it. The other one said something about finances, the finances are going to be okay. That's all they knew. They didn't even know where she was or anything. So they decided to go for a coffee down in the town, and they were walking around in the shops or whatever and there's a girl standing behind the counter with a blue shirt on with her nametag of Sarah.

They're like, wow...they were tripped out a little bit. (I'm sure I'm getting some of this story wrong, because it's been awhile, but the heart of it was there.) They walked over, and they said, "Are you Sarah?" She said, "Yes." They said, "We were praying for you this morning, and the Lord told us to tell you that your finances are going to be okay." That's all they said. I don't even know what happened next.

But I know if that happened to me, I would want to know, okay, are you all going to be praying again tomorrow? I've got a whole checkbook here. That drew her into their shared life. That's what evangelism is. It's not making somebody jump through a hoop; it's helping them be drawn into this life with us when we ourselves are struggling to live. That's very much more relational and dynamic. It means it can have faces...it's an infinite variety of ways it can happen in any given day. If we're walking with Jesus and we're saying we want to participate, then we're just drawing people into that.

WPY: The greatest evangelist ever was Jesus. He says, "I don't do anything but what I see the Father do," and sometimes that means walking away and sometimes that means saying, "What do I have to do with you? I came for Israel." Sometimes it means saying a word. It happens within the context of real life.

JMF: And the real life that comes to you...the people you cross paths with.

WPY: Absolutely. It is a part of our relationships. It's like, "okay, so now we've got to come up with small groups of relationships in order to validate the idea of relationships, right?"

You know what? We're in them. Just look around in your life. They're all over. Love the people who are in your world. Allow the questions and everything to come up in the context of that. Know who you are inside of our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and express that life. Let the Holy Spirit enter this adventure and allow you to participate with what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are trying to do in their love for the people that you love because they care about the things you care about.

JMF: Well, thanks again for being here.

CBK: Good to be back, good to see you.

WPY: Always a pleasure.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Ray S. Anderson (1925-2009) was professor of theology and ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Anderson studied for his PhD under Thomas F. Torrance at Edinburgh University. Dr. Anderson is the author of numerous books:

- *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*
- *Christians Who Counsel: The Vocation of Wholistic Therapy*
- *Dancing With Wolves While Feeding The Sheep: Musings of a Maverick Theologian*
- *Don't Give Up On Me – I'm Not Finished Yet! A Beginner's Guide to Self Recovery*
- *Evangelical Theology: Heirs of Protestant Orthodoxy*
- *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned From My Father*
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- *A Theological Perspective on Human Personhood*
- *Theology, Death, and Dying*
- *Unspoken Wisdom: Truths My Father Taught Me*

Elmer Colyer is professor of systematic theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and pastor of a Methodist congregation. Dr. Colyer received his Ph.D. from Boston College/Andover Newton in 1992. He is editor of

- *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*
 - *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*
- He is author of
- *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology*
 - *The Nature of Doctrine in T. F. Torrance's Theology*

Gerrit Scott Dawson is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He received his D.Min. degree in 2002 from Reformed Theological Seminary. He is the author of:

- *Called By A New Name: Becoming What God Has Promised*
- *Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God*
- *Given and Sent in One Love: The True Church of Jesus Christ*
- *Heartfelt: Finding Our Way Back to God*
- *I Am With You Always: Meeting Jesus in Every Season of Life*
- *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour* (editor)
- *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation*
- *Responding to Our Call, Participants Book, Vol. 4*
- *Writing on the Heart: Inviting Scripture to Shape Daily Life*

Gary W. Deddo was, at the time of the interviews, a senior editor at InterVarsity Press. He is now an employee of Grace Communion International, and President of Grace Communion Seminary. Dr. Deddo earned his PhD at the University of Aberdeen in Aberdeen, Scotland, under Professor James Torrance. He helped begin the T.F. Torrance Theological

Fellowship. He is author of numerous articles and books, including

- *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations and*
- *George McDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writing* (with Cathy Deddo)
- *God, the Bible, and the Shack* (with Cathy Deddo)

Christian Kettler is professor of religion at Friends University in Kansas. He received his PhD in 1986 from Fuller Theological Seminary, working with the late Dr. Ray Anderson. He is the author of:

- *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*
- *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*
- *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*
- *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry—Ministry as Theology* (editor)
- *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family: Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson* (editor)

C. Baxter Kruger earned his PhD in 1989 from Kings College, University of Aberdeen, studying under James B. Torrance. He is now president of Perichoresis, a non-profit ministry.

Dr. Kruger is the author of the following books:

- *Across All Worlds: Jesus Inside Our Darkness*
- *God Is For Us*
- *The Great Dance: The Christian Vision Revisited*
- *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*
- *Parable of the Dancing God*
- *Patmos: Three Days, Two Men, One Extraordinary Conversation*
- *The Shack Revisited: There Is More Going On Here Than You Ever Dared to Dream*

John E. McKenna, at the time of the interview, was adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at Azusa Pacific Seminary, and doctrinal adviser for Grace Communion International. He died in 2018. He studied under Thomas F. Torrance at the University of Edinburgh and received his PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of

- *The Setting in Life for 'The Arbiter' of John Philoponus, 6th Century Alexandrian Scientist*
- *The Great AMEN of the Great I-AM: God in Covenant With His People in His Creation.*
- *An Ear for His Word*
- *The Burning Green*

Jeff McSwain is the founder of Reality Ministries of Durham, North Carolina. Jeff earned his doctorate in 2015 studying with Alan Torrance at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He is the author of *Movements of Grace: The Dynamic Christo-Realism of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the Torrances*.

Paul Louis Metzger is Professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at King's Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. He received his PhD in 1999 from College in London. He is author of

- *Beatitudes, Not Platitudes: Jesus' Invitation to the Good Life*
- *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*
- *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*
- *Evangelical Zen: A Christian's Spiritual Travels With a Buddhist Friend* (co-authored with Kyogen Carlson)
- *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (co-authored with Brad Harper)
- *The Gospel of John: When Love Comes to Town*
- *New Wine Tastings: Theological Essays of Cultural Engagement*
- *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (editor)
- *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth*

Roger J. Newell is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at George Fox University. Dr. Newell completed his doctoral studies under Professor James Torrance in Aberdeen, Scotland, then served for eight years as a pastor in Durham, England, followed by five years as a pastor of Lake Grove Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon. He assumed his current post at George Fox University in 1997. He is author of

- *Keine Gewalt! No Violence!: How the Church Gave Birth to Germany's Only Peaceful Revolution*
- *Passion's Progress: The Meanings of Love and*
- *The Feeling Intellect: Reading the Bible With C. S. Lewis*.

Andrew Root, Chair of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, received a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 2005. He is author of

- *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together*
- *Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*
- *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*

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- *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*

William Paul Young is author of

- *Cross Roads*
- *Eve: A Novel*
- *The Shack*

In most cases, the interviewer was **J. Michael Feazell** (D.Min., Azusa Pacific Seminary, 2000), who was then vice president of Grace Communion International. A few interviews were conducted by **Michael D. Morrison** (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2006), Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary and editor of this volume.

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3120 Whitehall Park Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28273
800-423-4444

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Michael Jenkins, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary
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Paul Molnar, St. John's University
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Robin Parry, Wipf & Stock
Andrew Purves, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Stephen Seamands, Asbury Theological Seminary
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
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